Performance and Place-Making at Sarawak Cultural Village

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Cultural villages occupy a unique place in the contemporary mapping of Southeast Asia. Tracing their origins back to the nineteenth-century Scandinavian “folk-life museum,”¹ they have become increasingly popular in this part of the world as “living museums,” places where such components of local cultures as music, cooking, the crafts, may be “performed,” to the delight of visitors. Their performance aspect also enables them to operate as virtual laboratories for redrawing identities – for positing new boundaries and connections between local ethnic and religious groups; for projecting regional histories and identities onto emerging global communities and developing global concerns.²

Malaysia today operates a minimum of fifteen cultural villages, to showcase the heterogeneity of its ethnic communities.³ Although possible to differentiate from one another in terms of their focus (often a function of location), they share such elements as replica houses that depict varieties of local architectural styles; local cooking

² Note that some of this background material concerning Sarawak Cultural Village appears in a forthcoming article in TDR entitled “Exotic Dancing: Performing Tribal and Regional Identities in East Malaysia’s Cultural Villages.”

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openly demonstrated and served up by costumed natives to visitors in exchange for a fee; colorful displays of local artifacts; demonstrations of interesting, unusual skills; cultural shows; souvenir items; a gift shop. They involve, as such, museum curation, performance, and entertainment, played out in accordance with particular local needs and the specific resources at their disposal. In *Liberating Culture*, Christina Kreps likens each of them to an indigenous museum “express[ive of] the unique cultural identity of its community and its own ways of curating, interpreting, representing, and preserving its culture.”  

For all their attention to localization, however, they remain imbedded in a complex web of interconnections between cultural villages, regional groups, local organizations, government bodies, and international tourism. They provide, for one thing, something of a vast and complicated stage on which fictionalized, theatricalized productions of culture are mounted, for the benefit of a viewing public. While this public may invest these presentations with a presumption of authenticity, it realizes at the same time that they could never be expected to present the whole, unvarnished truth about a culture, but only partial truths about it. They know to expect superficial renditions of culture in return for the convenience of “one-stop shopping.”

Cultural villages operate, therefore, with a great deal of flexibility in representing their respective cultures. The concept of the “subjunctive reality,” deployed by anthropologist Victor Turner in his discussion of the theory of liminality in relation to theatre, interposes itself here. Following Turner, one could speak of “the ‘subjunctive mood’ of culture, the mood of maybe, might-be, as-if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire.” Cultural villages as theaters operate on this subjunctive level. In the guise of subjunctivity, they map and re-map the shifting alliances between different groups (ethnic, political, economic), and propose new alliances and identities. They serve in that sense as identity laboratories, with a certain tie-up to real-world consequences. Tied as they are to government agencies, cultural villages have become those places where nations can experiment with new identities and alliances,

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short of articulating official policy or formally committing resources. Sarawak Cultural Village [henceforth, SCV], one of Malaysia's premiere cultural villages, employs this sort of subjunctivity in its deliberate mapping of ethnic groups. Located thirty five kilometers from Sarawak's capital city of Kuching (pop: 2M) at the foot of Mount Santubong on the Damai Peninsula, this seventeen-acre site is a government-designated "tourism zone," with a number of first-class resorts located in it. Now the very term, "tourist zone," would appear to be shot through with liminality, for to enter such a zone, tourists would have to leave their homes, yet, in it, they remain strangely isolated. They maintain one foot in each world, so to speak. As others (notably MacCannell)\(^6\) do point out, tourists may desire to experience difference, but will not put up with any encounter with real danger. They want to experience a simulacrum of native life, but without its dirt or inconvenience.

![Map of Sarawak Cultural Village](image)

Figure 1

As one can tell from the map [Figure 1], seven replica houses rise on the perimeter of SCV's manmade lake. Each house's mandate is to showcase the culture of the ethnic group assigned to it. About fifty individuals, specialists in the representation of these cultures, reside in them. The clear intent of these houses is to maintain a balance between cultural diversity and a kind of general equality. The lake on whose edges the houses have been built, being round in shape, ensures that

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no single ethnic group is unfairly favored over any other. They may be different from one another, but they are equal to one another. SCV’s motto, “Unity in Diversity,” is not only etched throughout the Village, but is replicated as well in newspapers, tourist brochures, and other government-sponsored media, in Sarawak and elsewhere in Malaysia. It recurs as well in the Village’s twice-daily cultural show at which the Master of Ceremonies calls out a representative dance number from each group. After all seven groups have performed, the program concludes with a number celebrating Sarawak’s diversity, its “potpourri of cultures” – a crucially important element in Malaysia’s build-up of itself as an exotic tourist destination.

One of Malaysia’s thirteen states from the time of the country’s founding in 1963, Sarawak appears anomalously positioned in modern Malaysia in that it operates separate immigration controls. Sarawak’s wealth of natural resources, which includes petroleum, natural gas, and timber, make it essential to the country’s economy, yet in some ways Sarawakians perceive themselves as perpetually marginalized from the more politically powerful peninsular Malaysia (akin to the antipathy towards themselves that oil-rich Sumatrans in neighboring Indonesia ascribe to those whom they accuse of promoting “Java-centricism”). Perhaps even more than other parts of Malaysia, Sarawak is astonishingly multicultural and, as in other parts of Southeast Asia, a great deal of governmental attention is devoted to seeing to it that these various groups get along. In keeping with this philosophy, each major ethnic group is given its own official holiday. “Unite to reach goals: leaders advised not to compete with one another to see which race is more superior,” ran the lead article in the Borneo Post during the festival Gawai in 2005. That same week, a front-page photo of the finalists at the Miss Fair and Lovely Ethnic Beauty Contest was titled “Unity in Diversity” – a reference to the contestants’ heterogeneous ethnicities.

Thus in its physical structure and its activities, SCV embodies and

\(^\text{7}\text{Craig Latrell, “Exotic Dancing: Performing Tribal and Regional Identities in East Malaysia’s Cultural Villages,” in The Drama Review, Vol. 52, No. 4, 2008, pp. 41-63.}\)

\(^\text{8}\text{http://www.malasiatrulyasia.co.uk.}\)

\(^\text{9}\text{See Latrell, “Exotic Dancing” for a more complete discussion of cultural shows.}\)

\(^\text{10}\text{Borneo Post, June 1, 2005, p.1.}\)

\(^\text{11}\text{Sunday Tribune, May 29, 2005, p.1.}\)
theatricalizes the credo of unity in diversity. Yet as mentioned earlier, the site also functions as a laboratory for redrawing and revising Sarawakian identity. The Iban, for example, who mostly inhabit Sarawak’s Kuching region, and are its largest ethnic group, constituting slightly over 30% of the population, observe a harvest festival called Gawai. While the Iban could claim cultural ownership of it (a “palimpsest event,” in view of the fact that several layers of meaning are possible to discern in it), Gawai has, in point of fact, taken on new meanings and mapped out new alliances and identities, even as it allows prior meanings to persist. It has been reinvented and repackaged multiple times, morphed from indigenous festival to state holiday to cultural village tourist event to regional cultural festival, reflecting in turn local, state, national, and regional agendas. Originally celebrated by the Iban and Bidayuh tribes as Gawai Padi, it was the last of a series of rituals for marking rice harvest seasons and for expressing gratitude to higher forces for an abundant harvest.\textsuperscript{12} The British declined to recognize the holiday, but in 1964 the new Malaysian government formalized it (the British term for this is “gazetted”), calling it Gawai Dayak. On the first day of June each year, Gawai Dayak is celebrated in Sarawak as an ethnic holiday – as the Iban equivalent of Chinese New Year, Hari Raya, or Deepavali. In keeping with it, schoolchildren receive several days off. In other words, the state took an event characterized by an informal set of ritual behaviors, and regularized it; very much in the tradition of Hobsbawm’s notion of “invented tradition.” These days, people in Sarawak think of Gawai Dayak as “always” having been around, and there are increasing calls (at least within Sarawak) for the Malaysian government to recognize it as a national, not just state, holiday. In this configuration, Gawai functions at both village and state levels, validating the political importance of indigenous tribes. Although it retains some of its ritual significance, Gawai has become less a ritual holiday than an occasion for homecoming and feasting. Indeed, I have heard Iban elders complain that Gawai is the only time their children ever return to the longhouse.

In 1989, Sarawak Cultural Village instituted the Gawai Tourist Night, ostensibly to give tourists and non-Sarawakians a taste of Gawai.

\textsuperscript{12}http://www.geocities.com/ufloor/penom.html summarizes the different components and rituals of Gawai.
and the related custom of *ngabang* (holiday visits with relatives and friends). What emerged, however, was a truncated version of a village celebration without ritual significance, a night of drinking and dancing at the replica longhouses. It occurred during the week preceding the actual holiday, to give SCV employees a chance to return to their villages at the appropriate time. SCV, in effect, had redrawn Gawai as a tourist event, one with ties to its original purpose even as it established new lines of connection between Iban culture, the state, and mostly regional tourists. As much as Gawai Tourist Night has met with a modest success, it does not come close to the popular SCV Rainforest World Music Festival, whose 20,000 attendees from around the world put Borneo on the world music map. To produce the latter event, SCV took a music festival, which is a rather placeless (or, depending on one's viewpoint, multi-sited) cultural phenomenon, and found a way to reinsert it into the "place" produced by the conflation of Borneo, jungle, primitivism, and world music.

In 2005, Malaysia's Urban Development and Tourism Ministry, no doubt encouraged by the resounding success of Rainforest World Music Festival, directed the Sarawak Cultural Village to retool Gawai Tourist Night into a "World Harvest Festival" (inscribing yet another layer upon the palimpsest of Gawai). The "World Harvest Festival" would remap the state's identity in relation, both to its Southeast Asian neighbors, and to international tourists, and would carve out a place in all this for the rice harvest. An event of recent invention, namely the World Harvest Festival, would therefore not only be superimposed on Gawai, the quasi-invented event; both of them together would in turn be imposed upon a state holiday and an indigenous harvest celebration. "We would like to make it on equal footing with the World Rainforest Music Festival so that Sarawak will become one of the leading tourist destinations in this region," said the organizing chairman.\(^{13}\) The idea behind World Harvest Festival was to place Gawai within the larger context of "harvest," and to draw lines between harvest in Sarawak and harvest in other rice-growing countries, taking invisible, global communities and anchoring them in a recognizable (and readily accessible and marketable) place, just as it did with world music. As the Minister of Environment and Public Health put it: "We have

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\(^{13}\) *Sunday Tribune*, May 29, 2005, p.3.
something in common, which is the celebration of a bountiful harvest. So let us celebrate this special occasion and let us share it with others from the different communities.”

This invented celebration shows off the skill with which SCV’s producers are able to utilize the built-in liminality of the site: communities, identities, and alliances can be explored in a safe, nearly-hypothetical way. Behind all this, of course, lurks commerce. The audience for World Harvest Festival is clearly intended to be international – visitors from other Asian countries. From the point of view of commerce, Sarawak Tourism Board identified a potential market, and set about exploring it. The Tourism Ministry, clearly anxious to float the event, gave SCV’s administration only three months to turn the concept into reality. SCV, in turn, hired several consultants to help put the event together. What resulted in the first year was very much a hodgepodge of old and new elements. The producers retained several features of the former Gawai Tourist Night, including the above-mentioned practice of ngubang, as well as the repackaging of existing dance and music workshops. Additionally, they continued the eight-year tradition of presenting a “theme play” – written by one of the area’s ethnic groups and produced on the banks of the manmade lake in outdoor extravaganza style. As with Gawai Tourist Night, World Harvest Festival’s dates were (and continue to be) different than the actual Gawai holiday, occurring about a week earlier, in keeping with its invented nature.

Added to these carried-over elements were several new ones, including an “International Outdoor Concert,” described as follows in an article from Travel Times, published by The New Straits Times:

The two-day event was boosted by participants from rice-farming communities from Sabah, Indonesia, Thailand and The Philippines which share similar traditions, culture and heritage....

The article goes on to describe some additional activities:

While performances took the limelight, visitors were

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14 Sunday Tribune, May 29, 2005, p.3.

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treated with samples of herbal products and a feel of traditional massages. The favorite ones were the Indonesian herbal massage and Thai foot massage.

Music and dance spread to the Rainforest concert stage where an outdoor concert was held before the highlight of the day took over in the evening.\textsuperscript{15}

The "highlight of the day" mentioned above was the "Grand Finale of Ethnic Beauty Pageant," the crowning of Miss Fair and Lovely in an event sponsored by Fair and Lovely beauty products. Although I am here describing the 2005 event, I would be remiss not to mention that, last year, an "iron man" strength competition was added, essentially balancing out the Miss Fair and Lovely pageant, gender-wise. The Iron Man competition featured such rice-based feats as running with 50 kilo gunnysacks of rice.

\begin{figure}[h]
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Each of these events is interesting in itself, and each speaks to the efficacy of performance in postulating and clarifying new ties among nations. As mentioned earlier, the "International Concert" featured performers from other rice-growing nations – Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, although the performers from the latter country

\textsuperscript{15}http://www.nst.com.my/Weekly/Travel/article Destinations/20050630101223/Article/
were apparently unable to attend due to visa issues. The second year included performers from China, Thailand and Indonesia. Equally important, the festival included Sarawakian groups from several different ethnic groups, including a group of elderly Kelabit women performing indigenous songs, and a world music group featuring performing on local instruments [Figure 2].

The mode of presentation, with a master of ceremonies introducing each group, leveled out differences among cultures for the purposes of finding similarities. The mixture of local and international performing groups (and the presentation of them on an equal footing) placed Sarawakian music within a larger Asian context, and set up direct alliances between Sarawak and other Asian countries in an extension of the unity-in-diversity ethic. "Rice-growing nations" was postulated as a new, non-political community in which all members participated on an equal footing. Sarawak Cultural Village affixed a place to this community, much as it did for World Music. World Harvest Festival recontextualizes Gawai Dayak in such a way as to make it seem emblematic, one of the world's many ways of recognizing rice harvests specifically, and the idea of harvest generally.\(^{16}\)

Promotional literature for the first year makes these linkages specific, saying:

Gawai Festival is the celebration of the end of the harvesting season and the start of new farming season. Nowadays, the Dayak community of Sarawak celebrates Gawai in their villages and urban homes with open invitation, sharing the finest of their hospitality with other communities.

This is the kind of celebration that we want to share with our neighboring friends such as Sabah, Kedah, Taiwan, Vietnam, The Philippines, Cambodia, Indonesia, Brunei, Japan, Burma, India, China, Thailand, and Laos along with the cultural troupes to this wonderful inaugural World Harvest Festival. In this region, paddy plays a significant role in our life and through this festival, it definitely will

\(^{16}\)The emphasis on an international rice-growing community may be weakening as non-tropical participants such as this year's guests include Lithuania and Uzbekistan.
create new height of creativity and innovation which will be beneficial to everybody.

World Harvest Festival will set the foundation and platform to the Dayak community, as the source of cultural pride and their need to reciprocate social hospitality to the world communities. Thus, it will provide the best opportunity for guests to understand and appreciate the different cultures and traditions from these various troupes.

Come! and join us together.17

The above description makes specific the layered nature of the holiday, referencing the original celebration as well as the “nowadays” version, and spinning it as an attraction for tourists from other nations on the basis of shared paddy culture. Thus, the International Concert served to introduce the new community to the attendees.

Figure 3

The next event, the “Miss Fair and Lovely Ethnic Beauty Pageant” [Figure 3], utilized a different mode of presentation, displaying Sarawak’s diversity before this subjunctive community instead of actively presenting the new community, as the music festival did. Fair and Lovely is a well-known brand of beauty products, owned by Unilever and marketed in thirty eight countries. The brand – perhaps not surprisingly – has come under attack in recent years for

perpetuating a discriminatory disposition based on lightness of skin, although the company’s Malaysian website states: “We believe in the economic empowerment of women to improve standards of living and contribute positively to the quality of life of all Malaysians.” Unilever’s sponsorship of “Miss Fair and Lovely” is a way of defining its corporate vision for Malaysian women. The winner receives RM3,000, a scholarship to study tourism business management, and “other prizes.” The contest serves, as such, as a mechanism for upward mobility, much as beauty contests do elsewhere. The 2007 World Harvest Festival website states the ideal winner’s qualifications as follows:

For this year’s pageant, the Organizing Committee is looking for a woman of quality and substance. She must have the grace and poise, articulate with a sound knowledge of Sarawak and its tourism-related subjects. Besides physical attractiveness, she must also posses a friendly disposition, charm and confidence.18

One of the most interesting aspects of the Miss Fair and Lovely contest is its billing as an “ethnic” beauty pageant. Rather than ignoring the issue of ethnicity, as is usually done in American beauty pageants, the ethnicity of the contestants is here clearly stated. Following are two actual descriptions, drawn from the beauty pageant’s website, of two of last year’s contestants:

Finalist 1
Name: Jacqueline Sim Ai Luan
Age: 19 Years Old
Race: Mixed Parentage of Chinese and Iban
Height: 5’6
Weight: 50 KG
Origin: Sri Aman
Occupation: 1st Year Student, Diploma in Hotel Management, INTI College Sarawak
Hobbies: Reading and Listening to Music
Ambition: To be a successful career woman in the hotel industry
Past Experiences: Active in Modeling & Catwalk,
Sri Aman

Name: Zanariah Bte Zulfandie Osman
Age: 21 Years Old
Race: Mixed Parentage of Malay & Iban
Height: 5’4
Weight: 50 KG
Origin: Kuching
Occupation: Final Year Student
Diploma in Office Management and Technology
UITM Samarahan
Hobbies: Reading & Dancing
Ambition: To be a successful career woman
Past Experiences: 2nd Runner-up, Miss Wedding
Dress, Borneo Cultural Festival 2006

Note that the contestants' ethnicity is treated as matter-of-factly as their other attributes, including weight and hobbies. On the one hand, this says that all ethnicities are equally beautiful. On the other, it presents ethnicity as something to be "judged," and taken into account, scored. Above all, the ethnic beauty pageant is another display of SCV's (and by extension, Sarawak's) insistence on Unity in Diversity, which in turn dovetails with Malaysia's overall tourist identity as a "potpourri
of cultures.” While the winning contestant may not be the fairest in the sense of having the lightest skin (Unilever’s statement about empowerment aside), she embodies Sarawak’s ethnic diversity and the fact that different ethnicities can directly compete on a level playing field.

The third element in World Harvest Festival’s creation of a new nonpolitical community is its “theme play.” This production is the crowning event of the entire festival, mounted in the evening of the festival’s second day. It is complicated and expensive both to produce and to attend, with tickets running up to RM100. For the past nine years, SCV has commissioned leaders from Sarawak’s indigenous groups to write scripts based on a local legend, historical event, or both. The script is then translated into the national language Bahasa Malaysia, and then partially into English.

The year 2005’s theme play, *Wek Jongan*, was written by members of the Selako subgroup of the Bidayuh tribe, and according to the administrators with whom I spoke, it is a true story provided by the Penghulu (elder) of the tribe. The tale centers on a young woman who is orphaned, and who mourns the loss of her parents to the point that she falls ill. One day, on a visit to her mother’s grave, she falls unconscious, and is visited by her mother’s spirit, who comforts her by singing and dancing. Upon awakening, she discovers she is cured of her overwhelming grief, and she returns to her village, where she teaches the villagers to sing and dance. In the version created and produced for World Harvest Festival, the scope has been substantially widened, to include the founding of a Selako village, the exhibiting of rituals and dances, a wedding, a funeral, and the foregrounding of certain significant themes. The production takes a simple story and inflates it with significance, incorporating portentous voiceovers (in English), massive sets and lighting, and a cast of over a hundred performers of both genders and all ages. The set is vast, taking up most of one side of the Village’s artificial lake, with various structures erected for the occasion, several playing areas, bonfires, etc. The lake itself is incorporated into the set, as characters flee, or are pursued, by boat.

The play’s first section focuses on the founding of the village. The village chief, troubled by the fact that the greed of some villagers is standing in the way of the founding of a “progressive” village, decides to perform a ritual. As the narrator intones, this is followed by a
cultural performance, an occasion to show off some Selako dances as interpreted by the resident choreographer and director Ramli Ali, who is also responsible for directing the cultural show. This is followed by the courtship and marriage of two young people, which is also elaborately staged. Finally we meet Wek Jongan and her family, who are guests at the wedding reception. The story then turns to Wek Jongan's death and her daughter's mourning, followed by her deceased mother's anguished late-night visitation. Following the visitation, her daughter runs off to a mountain (a large set piece, set at the base of an actual mountain, named Santubong) finally disappearing into it. The villagers decide not to let this sad episode interfere with the founding of what they keep calling a “progressive” village. The repeated use of “progressive” is, I believe, intended to state the Selako's enthusiasm for modernity, as opposed to resistance. The show ends with the villagers celebrating, and the voiceover making explicit the moral of the story, concerning (nor surprisingly) unity, cooperation, harmony, and filial piety.

Historical plays of the pageant variety frequently portray meetings between cultures, as do the Lost Colony of Roanoke play from North Carolina, or the famed Ramona Pageant in California, both of which portray meetings between settlers and natives. At SCV, however, theme plays have most often been used to introduce and validate the importance of Sarawak's different ethnic groups, and to display their customs and history. Interestingly, the Chinese have a replica house of their own, but appear not to figure in the theme play rotation. Could this be because they are not seen as indigenous? In any event, these plays, legends, and events are rewritten to foreground both the group and a morality consistent with the objectives of the state.

Like other outdoor historical plays, Wek Jongan uses bold visual staging, portentous voiceovers and interludes of singing and dancing. Such plays smooth out histories, creating narratives in which conflicts are invariably solved and current conditions are shown to be the direct outcome of past events in a causally direct way. Heroes are created, whose role is to negotiate difficult moments in history, or conflicts with outsiders. They embody the ideals, not of the originating culture, but of the audience. Local cultures are portrayed as colorful. People suffer, but triumph in the end.

In years past, visitors to Gawai Tourist Night tended largely to be
local or regional, with a smaller contingent of non-Malaysian tourists. Relative to them, the theme plays gave Sarawak's ethnic groups a chance to show off their customs in uncomplicated ways, and to make a simple-to-grasp statement about how their history fitted in with the overall narrative of Sarawak's history, and with the idea of unity in diversity. The more recently organized World Harvest Festival has prompted value-added packaging that keeps the product the same while giving it a new spin. The theme plays, within such a context, provide their auditors, who no longer are as local, not so much validation on a local level, but a bridge, a direct line of identification, between Sarawak's ethnic groups and tourists from other Southeast and East Asian nations. They tie individual ethnic groups to other nations, underscoring as they do the fact that their histories and rituals function much like those of other rice-growing countries. *Wek Jongan* actually ends with the invention of Gawai by the Selako, tying the whole thing back to the idea of harvest. It is the idea of similarity of customs, (or perhaps "comfortable difference"), that is being marketed to the audience here.

Is World Harvest Festival a successful event? Yes and no. The two years I attended, there seemed to be only a few international tourists, so from the point of view of redrawing alliances between Sarawak and other rice-growing nations, the event was only partially successful. Aside from a smattering of tourists, most of the audience was local, with the expensive seats filled by local and national government officials and their families. The first event felt (as I mentioned above) thrown together, and the second year only slightly more polished. Both felt more like a repackaging of pre-existing events than something created from scratch. As a whole, the event seemed to lack a clear focus, and the inclusion of international music and dance groups seemed merely confusing.

Yet as an example of the way that cultural villages attempt create and remap identities and repackage indigenous cultures in different ways, the event is both creative and instructive. The community of rice-growing nations is a rarely used construct, at least in the world of tourism. It is not the same community as The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which is frequently postulated as a community of countries with shared values and interests. And it dodges the issue of politics effectively, since all rice-growing nations
are equal by virtue of the fact that all grow rice. And while elements of all the past incarnations of Gawai continue to exist at SCV, this new layer extends the holiday beyond a local or regional market in a new and commercially viable direction, as an increasing number of tourists from other parts of Asia travel to Sarawak. As I said earlier, travelers want something both new and familiar, and by presenting Gawai in the context of the rice harvest, SCV downplays the localness of the tradition while emphasizing its broader context and appeal, turning something strange into something more familiar, and subjuunctively drawing a new community and identity.