

VULNERABLE MISSION: THE USE OF LOCAL LANGUAGE AND RESOURCES, IN THE WORK OF THE ANGLICAN MISSION IN BORNEO

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Abstract

The response to Christianity of the Iban of Sarawak shows the interaction of missionaries with local language and customs, and how the Christian faith was spread by indigenous church leaders. The relationship of the mission with the Iban is necessarily seen through missionary eyes, based on their regular reports. From the beginning the work was carried out using local languages and local resources.

Some Contexts

This paper describes the response to Christianity of the Iban of Sarawak, now a Malaysian State on the island of Borneo. The Iban are the biggest people group in Sarawak and the characteristics of their traditional society have been widely studied by social scientists. My research focus is the dynamics of interaction between local customs, Christian faith, and indigenous church leaders. The interaction of the mission and the Iban is necessarily seen through missionary eyes, based on their regular reports to mission publications.

The story starts with the arrival of the first missionary, Francis McDougall, a doctor and curate in Norwich, in 1848. For the many decades following, the Anglican mission could be seen as a vulnerable mission, there were few staff and they came with few resources so that it was the local catechists and teachers who brought Christianity to their own people and in their own language. Against the background of empire and mission, the Iban became conscious of modernity, and mission education assisted Iban adaptation to the changed world around them. After independence in 1963 the Anglican Church was led by a local bishop, and rapid expansion was beginning. Christians in Sarawak now make up 43% of the population (Varney, 2013).

Existing studies of Iban religious belief have focused on places where traditional practice has (at least until recently) continued. Motomitsu Uchibori (1978), Peter Metcalf (1975), and

Cliff Sather (2003, 2012) have provided ethnographers with some of the fullest accounts available of the ways in which the Iban deal with the challenges of life and death.

My research over the last four years has focused on the interface between Iban culture and modernity, and examines how urbanization and globalization are contextualized in modern Kuching. Specifically, it looks at how Ibans who received education in their own language have made their own *modus vivendi*, accommodating elements of traditional practice and beliefs in their Christian identity, and how traditional customs have been adapted and changed.

Geography and the Brooke Rajahs

Borneo is the world's third largest island and located across the equator. Until recent deforestation, through timber logging and palm oil plantations, it was largely covered in primary jungle. Sarawak in the north-western part of the island has an area of 124,450 sq. km., its population scattered in small villages and four major towns.

The original territory around Kuching was conferred on James Brooke in 1841 by the Sultan of Brunei. It was extended until it reached its present extent in 1905. Later Sarawak was ceded to Britain by Vyner Brooke, the Third Rajah, in 1946. It was a British crown colony until 1963 when it joined with the Federation of Malaya, North Borneo, and briefly Singapore, to form the Federation of Malaysia.

Population

The 2010 Malaysian census (Malaysia, 2012) gives Sarawak's population as 2,471,140. 681,901 people, 28% of the State's population, live in the Kuching area. Most Iban are now Christians, 76.3% in the 2010 census, an increase from 70% in the 2000 census. Of Sarawak's population, 43% are Christian, giving it the second highest proportion of Christians of any state in Asia, after the Philippines.

Iban Traditional Religion

The Iban have been described as among the most religious people in the world. The cosmos was divided into the overlapping categories of *mensia* (humans) and *antu* and *petara* (spirits). Interaction between them occurred constantly, for example in *piring* (offerings and sacrificial acts), *mimpi* (dreams) and *burong* (bird augury). The Iban were headhunters. The heads often remain, and are believed still to be inhabited by the spirits of the dead people.

The Iban believed that the relationship between them and the spirit world was one of reciprocity, and the spirits had a positive desire to help mankind. However, forces of nature were feared: a storm might be the result of neglecting an omen. To restore the balance and maintain equilibrium, a chicken or pig would be killed as an offering to the spirit world. *Piring* might also be made when people sought help from the spirits. If helpful guidance was received through a dream or omen, then *piring* might be offered as an assurance that harmonious relationships would be maintained by mankind.

After the ritual balance had been broken, for example in the case of incest, a major offering was required, and a pig was speared as a blood sacrifice in place of the death penalty. If the balance was not promptly restored it was feared that the whole community would suffer a tragedy of major proportions, such as storm and flood with great loss of life and property.

The missionaries who arrived after 1848 would have known something of the Jerusalem temple cult from their Old Testament studies, but found themselves immediately surrounded by people killing chickens and pigs to appease the spirit world. Did they contextualise their teaching about Christ's sacrifice, and make the meaning of the offering of his blood understandable? Doubtless the early converts would have made the link, as they were sent by the missionaries to teach in schools or longhouse communities surrounded by the shrieking of slaughtered animals. A chicken's blood is still required for burial ritual, even in the modern city of Kuching. What are contemporary Iban church leaders teaching? Raising the question indicates there is much more to explore than this initial study.

How Vulnerable Mission Worked in Sarawak

James Brooke was brought up an Anglican, and began to think deeply about his faith after meeting an American missionary while sick in Hong Kong. For Brooke, Sarawak presented "an extended field for Christianity and commerce," seen as the two agents of civilisation. Brooke wrote to his mother in 1842 giving the clearest picture of the kind of Christian mission he had in mind, perhaps prophetically in view of recent writing about the context of vulnerable mission:

There are two sorts of Christian missions, the one of unmixed good, the other, somewhat dangerous. Some missionaries begin at the wrong end, by preaching Christianity, and running down Mohammedanism, or any other received belief....Such a mission will never succeed in any Malay country, and probably not among the Dyaks. The other sort of mission is the American, who live quietly, practise medicine, relieve the distressed, do not dispute or argue, and aim to educate the children. (Templer 1853, 229–230)

The first missionaries, Francis McDougall, William Wright and their families, arrived in Sarawak's capital Kuching on 30th June 1848. They quickly moved to build a church and school, held Sunday and weekday services, and set up a dispensary where as a medical doctor as well as a priest McDougall worked several hours each day.

McDougall's early letters are full of great optimism. He saw the church at Kuching as a centre for a mission amongst the inhabitants of Borneo and neighbouring islands, and wrote: "the ultimate mission is to transmit a succession of native churches and pastors." Missions would be founded on each river, and children sent out from mission schools to convert their fellow countrymen. From the beginning, the work was carried out using local languages and local resources. Although Christian conversion cut some off from their roots, it brought freedom from the fear of the spirit world, and also opportunities for advancement otherwise unobtainable.

The first missionaries lived alongside indigenous people, and translated the gospels, liturgy and teaching materials for use in schools. School children, school teachers, catechists and ordained local people were the main agents of mission. It soon became clear that 'vulnerable mission practices' were to be the basis of Anglican work because western missionaries would never be present in sufficient numbers to carry out the work of evangelism.

Christian Attitudes to Iban Eschatology (Varney, 2012)

William Howell, a Eurasian priest, worked with the Ibans for 50 years and wrote for government as well as missionary publications (Howell, 1911, 1963). He should be included in the list of those who used vulnerable mission practices although locally born. Howell described a situation in 1880 which can also be found today. Christian burials had to be conducted in the intervals left by the professional mourners, or *sabak* singers (Howell, 1880). He unsuccessfully attempted to stop Christians employing them, believing the dirge conflicted with Christian teaching. Other clergy encouraged a Christian form of the *sabak*, and several examples were described in the 1930s (Anon., 1936).

The incorporation of Christian beliefs about the afterlife by *sabak* singers, as they described the journey into the next world, and without prompting by missionaries, was reported by missionaries working in the Saribas before the Japanese occupation. Two Anglican priests, Wilfred Linton and Jack Sparrow, served in Betong. There are several examples of children being named after Linton, and "Jalai Linton" is still the address of St. Augustine's school in

Betong. Linton and Sparrow remained in people's memories long after their return to England, and they were incorporated into some versions of the *sabak*. Later, Frederick Rajit, an Anglican priest from Betong, learned the *sabak* dirge from his mother. It included adaptations used for a Christian funeral, with the journey continuing beyond *sebayan* and past churches to a more heaven-like conclusion (Rajit 1969).

Richards' 1981 Iban-English dictionary gives an example of a *sabak* adaptation from an informant, Minda of Julau, a location close to the Krian and Saribas (Richards 1981:318).

Versions are brought up to date, e.g., by use of outboard engines on the *Mandai*.

Minda of Julau has altered her *sabak* so that it can be used either for Christians or non-Christians. The journey is made flying in a "boat" of cloth (*pua*) carried by the Wind: route and theme are the same but the flight passes beyond the furthest confines of *Mandai* with its demons and past the Gate of the Heavens (*Pintu Langit*). There the party meets stars (*bintang*) and moon (*bulan*), and a halt is made at the house of *Segadu* who presents the new soul with a magical flying coat. They go overland to the ancestors' house. From it (if non-Christian) they can see across the stream to the Christian house and beyond into the Christian Heaven, *Menoa Raja Tuan Pederi* [translated as: 'Home of the Leader of the Christian Clergy'] which is described in apocalyptic terms.

Contemporary *sabak* singers continue to change their chants, accepting the possibility of adaption as identified by Uchibori. In the Saribas, a *sabak* singer, Simba ak Gelau, who had devoted two years to learning the traditional dirge, said she used the traditional form or, although not herself a Christian, adapted it for Christians. Simba talked about her *sabak* performance at a Christian burial. She said her experience was like a meditation, and it included a visualization with a Christian content. Her understanding of this experience seemed to be more symbolic and less literal than the way the *sabak* has generally been described as the taking of the singer's soul to *sebayan*.

The journey included in Simba's chant described leaving the longhouse, seeing a butterfly, hearing other people in the next world, passing through doors and climbing steps, hearing and seeing *malikat* (angels), and then taking the soul of the dead person to the Christian *sebayan*. To reach this, she crossed the *titi lawan*, a narrow bridge between the world of the living and the world of the dead. She then continued, passing through the world of the dead where others lived, and then saw large churches in a place where *Alla Taala* was living. There were flowers, lights, houses, and people who were recognizable. I asked if she had seen Jesus there, "*bisi Isa?*" and she said "no." Simba's account is consistent with the understanding expressed by many Christian Ibans that after death their journey continues beyond *sebayan* to God's world or heaven.

Iban Eschatological Beliefs

Traditional Iban eschatology could be readily linked to some of the Anglican teaching about the afterlife. However Anglican teaching changed and developed, with the concept of purgatory being introduced in 1909, but now mostly abandoned. As a result Ibans, like Christians in other recently evangelized areas of the world, express considerable variations in their understanding of the meaning of heaven, hell, resurrection, and other beliefs about the afterlife. Perhaps Iban Christians may offer some new conceptualizations to other parts of the Christian world where traditional religions have encountered western Christianity.

The Iban believed that, after death, each person had a place in *sebayan*, the place of the dead, conditioned by the manner of death and other factors. Some claimed that there were stages within *sebayan* until reaching a state of rest and happiness in *mandai jenoh* (the quiet place). From here some Ibans said the *antu sebayan* might be absorbed by the “mists of the morning” and complete their cycle by being taken up by the growing rice and consumed by the living members of the *bilik* family.

From the beginning of their work in 1848, Anglican missionaries used only the Iban language in the work, and based much of their teaching on the Iban concept of *sebayan*. The word *sebayan* was sometimes translated as “paradise” and explained in catechisms as “the resting place of the faithful departed who await Christ’s Second Coming ... to judge the living and the dead” (*Catechism*, 1964: Questions 28 and 152). A missionary, Crossland, writing in 1866, gave a detailed description of the traditional understanding of *sebayan* in 1866 which shows new ideas entering the Iban’s own conceptualization at this early stage of the mission’s work. There were particular places for those who died in war or by their own hand, Crossland wrote, and one reason why the Iban tattooed their arms was so that they might be recognised by their friends in *sebayan*. Once the spirit of the dead person had arrived among its ancestors “everything was prepared for it” Crossland was told. An elderly Iban wanted to take the shirt and trousers given him by Crossland to *sebayan* so “that all his old friends might know he had been a friend of the Tuan Padre” (Crossland 1866).

Missionary Innovations: Purgatory, Judgement, Serga, Neraka, Resurrection

The place of the *orang sebayan* in *sebayan* could not usually be altered by the acts of those still living, and the prospect of an inadequate afterlife, for example after the death of an infant, could therefore be particularly distressing. In such cases the Christian belief in purgatory, introduced by Anglo Catholic missionaries in the early 20th century, appeared to fit well with Iban beliefs about *sebayan* and also to give some hope of change in the afterlife. Bishop Mounsey then suggested that purgatory was a better translation of the word *sebayan*. This use of *sebayan* came into service books and hymnals. Purgatory is now rarely spoken of and the concept is not taught by contemporary Anglican leaders. As a result, the meaning of the word *sebayan*, which continues to be used in hymns and Anglican service books, has become uncertain and causes confusion. In its place two other words have been introduced, and are sometimes used in Anglican teaching and worship: the transliteration “*paradis*” and the Greek word “*hades*” to refer to a place of waiting.

Another early missionary, Chambers, described the difficulty he faced in connecting his understanding of Christian doctrine with traditional Iban beliefs. Because Iban eschatology lacked any idea of punishment or retribution, he reported it was difficult to instruct the Iban in the concept of sin. The Iban word used to translate judgement, *pechara*, referred to the decision made after a court case, and had no reference to the life eternal. Following their own *adat* and performing good works could not save the Iban, Chambers wrote. The Iban needed to understand the meaning of the cross and to be justified by faith in Christ (Crossland, 1866). The teaching given in the first 100 years of Anglican work also put the teaching about judgement into the context of the second coming of Jesus Christ and the end of the world.

There were no Iban words to translate “heaven” or “hell” and the Islamic terms *serga* and *neraka*, already used by the Sarawak Malays, were adopted at the beginning of Anglican work. *Sebayan* was then understood in a different sense from *serga*. Missionaries do report giving instruction about *serga* and *neraka* when the words were introduced. Recent Iban language burial services have used just the word *serga* for the Christian understanding of life in heaven, and not used the word *sebayan* at all. An Iban translation of the Church of England catechism was first published in 1921, and republished in 1964. It included clear teaching about hell: “wicked souls will have evil bodies and be lost forever in Hell” (*Catechism*, 1964: Questions 43 and 44). Few of today’s Iban Christians or church leaders use such language about hell today. Another

Christian innovation was teaching about the resurrection. The Anglican Catechism says “righteous souls will receive glorious bodies and live with God forever in heaven.”

The Eschatological Beliefs of Contemporary Iban Christians.

During the last 50 years, as overseas mission workers have withdrawn from Sarawak, there have been significant changes in the ideas held by Iban Christians about the afterlife. They have blended and incorporated Christian and traditional beliefs as they have created their own eschatological framework. Many Christian informants have no clear knowledge of what is Christian or traditional Iban belief. They might hold both together or believe neither. One senior Iban priest suggested many Iban Christians continue to hold traditional beliefs in spite of their Christian teaching. “Official Christian teaching has never been quite the same as what we Iban Christians believe.” It is clear that clergy in Borneo, like those in many other parts of the world, give little teaching about the afterlife.

My survey of the beliefs about the afterlife of contemporary Iban Anglicans conducted over the last four years, shows the results of the work of indigenous agents of mission and the use of indigenous languages in Christian teaching, leading to the incorporation of local culture into Christian beliefs.

Commentators, particularly outsiders, can take Iban belief too literally. However, the extensive number of Iban proverbs, which have been compared with the parables given by Jesus in the gospels, point to the many different ways Iban understand their traditional beliefs. The beliefs I have found amongst Christians in Borneo may be unexpected to some, but I believe they will have parallels around the world. I list them here with some of the information gathered from interviewees.

1. The Journey to Sebayan

Christian confidence in life after death is linked to the Iban custom of journeying, *bejalai*. “We Ibans *jalai* from one place to another on earth with confidence. As Christians our journey after death is assured because Jesus said ‘I am the way’.”

2. Existence in Sebayan

Christians think about existence in *sebayan* in different ways. One priest said:

The missionaries had to use a word for the place where people went after death, so they used the only available word, *sebayan*. *Sebayan* has a similar meaning to

hades in Greek, or *sheol* in Hebrew. The word is used for the spirits living in *sebayan* and the place itself. Nowadays if we use the word *sebayan* people immediately link it to the traditional belief in the other world.

“Our traditional belief is that the afterlife is quite similar to this one.” “We think of *sebayan* as the garden of heaven above, no one speaks about hell.” *Sebayan* is “a mixture of landscapes, it’s not totally good or bad.”

3. *Spirits in Sebayan Communicate with the Living*

Ibans expect to communicate with the dead by having dreams. If Ibans, Christians or not, have a dream about a dead person, they follow it up, they go to the grave taking with them food, drink and other items [for the use of the spirit of that person]. This strengthens their belief in *sebayan*. “We aren’t supposed to believe in dreams, but we do think that through our prayer we are in contact with the dead.”

4. *Sebayan is for Everybody.*

Lay people frequently used *sebayan* rather than *serga* in speaking about the afterlife. They suggested that Christians and non-Christians alike go to *sebayan* when they die.

5. *Christians Believe in Heaven as an Alternative to Sebayan.*

“We believe that when someone dies they will surely go to heaven, so *sebayan* is out of the picture for us.” It’s very difficult when we consider the way we use the words *sebayan* and *serga*. It’s the same with the way we use the words soul and spirit, they are not clearly defined or differentiated. I usually only talk about *serga*, as it is used in the Iban version of the Bible. “The word *serga* is new to us, but the concept behind it is that it’s totally full of good things.” “*Serga* is not an Iban word; we prefer to continue using *sebayan*.”

6. *Sebayan is a Place of Transition*

“After death the *semengat* or soul goes to *mandai*, the place of the dead deep under the earth.” “We used to think of stages, with *sebayan* as the first stage, before we went up to *serga*. Some still pray for [someone] while waiting in *sebayan*.” “As an Iban I believe that we pass through *sebayan* on the way to *serga*.” “*Sebayan* could be compared to the transit lounge at an airport. People have to wait until they are called.” “The English word ‘paradise’ is also used because Jesus tells the thief he will be with him there. This has been put into Iban as *paradis* and is used in prayers and hymns.”

7. *After Death We wait for Judgement and for the Second Coming of Christ.*

“The Iban did not believe in a judgement day, but that their *semengat* lived in *sebayan* forever.” Thinking about judgement and the second coming I would rather accept a realized eschatology. My understanding is that the Old Testament promised Jesus would come, so eternal life begins here and now. Is there really a need for us to have a second coming and judgement day?

8. *Our Souls or Spirits Live on after Death*

The confusion and misunderstanding caused by the different Iban translations of the English words “soul” and “spirit.” The early missionaries and later indigenous church leaders gave little explanation. Questions about what makes up the human mind, consciousness or self-awareness, how this might relate to “soul” and be different from “spirit,” and how they connect to the afterlife are unanswered. The two New Testament Greek words *psyche* and *pneuma* are usually translated as “soul” and “spirit” respectively. Both are translated in the Iban Anglican Prayer Book by the same Iban word *semengat*. “Spirit” has also been translated by “*roh*”, derived from Hebrew and Arabic.

“The *semengat* separates from the body on death and you are really dead.” “When the *semengat* leaves the earthly body the *semengat* goes to *sebayan*. It lives its own existence in *sebayan*.” “When a priest says our *semengat* has gone to heaven, we think no, in our Iban tradition the *semengat* is in *sebayan*. For Christians, it’s the *roh* that goes to *serga*.” “My physical body is left behind in this world, but there is another me, a *roh*, a spirit, within us which will never die.”

As Iban Christians consider these different concepts about an afterlife and distinguish between them to develop their own clearer eschatology, this in turn may point to ways in which Christians in other places, where traditional, tribal and western Christian belief have interacted, may formulate their own understanding of the “things which are eternal”.

Conclusion

From slow beginnings the majority of Ibans have become Christian. In 1976, the Anglican Iban director of the Sarawak Museum, Benedict Sandin, suggested the need to include the essential role of the spiritual in the Iban way of life as it faced major changes. “What are the things that matter most for the people in this modern society? ... A society that is moving

forward without spiritual fulfilment is paving the way for self destruction and extinction” (in *Tusun Pendiau Iban*, Sandin, 1976).

Since then the changes which globalisation and secularism brought around the world have worked out differently in Sarawak where Christian belief has grown. Today’s Iban have retained a sense of the spiritual as permeating the whole of their life. They have embraced modernity, but have also deepened their Christian lives. The past ‘nominalism’ attributed to Anglicans has been replaced by a stronger kind of Christian life and commitment.

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