

Theologies of Mission and the Fruits of Ministry in Malaysian Borneo

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David Goodhew and colleagues are providing a wide ranging overview of contemporary Anglicanism around the world, identifying places of significant growth which include some Anglo-Catholic dioceses.¹ One such is the diocese of Kuching, which includes the Malaysian state of Sarawak in Borneo, where my own engagement with Anglicans began in 1958 and has continued to the present day. As I began reading the archives held by USPG the frustrations of the long history were all too apparent. In 1968, while researching with a base at LSE and serving as a priest in Kuching, it seemed unlikely that any significant turning to Christianity would be seen.

What was unexpected was the explosive growth in the Anglican Church in Borneo experienced during the last decades of the twentieth century and continuing today. Participating in Anglo-Catholic forms of worship provides an experience which resonates with traditional rituals, and sometimes includes adaptations of them. The censuses taken between 1947 and 2010 indicate that the indigenous population of Sarawak almost quadrupled but the number identifying themselves as Christian increased by more than 20 times, from 3.7 per cent to 76.3 per cent.² Today the majority of indigenous people identify themselves as Christian making Sarawak's 43% the second highest proportion of Christians of any state in Asia.³ Key factors have been the valuing of Christian identity and the work of local people, firstly as catechists and teachers and then as bishops and church leaders, along with self-support and self-propagation.

There are commonalities with church life in the UK but also some remarkable differences from most parishes here. 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-west has an area of 124,450 sq. km., its population scattered in small villages and four major towns. In one of these towns a significant act of witness is

¹ David Goodhew, A Story of Growth and Decline, *Church Times*, 6 Jan 2017, pp.20-22.

² Malaysia, *Population & Housing Census 2010* (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Statistics, 2012). <http://www.statistics.gov.my>.

³ The estimate given by the Pew Research Centre for 2010 was 86 per cent in the Philippines has 93.1 per cent and 29.3 per cent in South Korea. <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/table-christian-population-as-percentages-of-total-population-by-country/> (17 Jan 2017).

the annual Christmas parade held in Miri. Anglicans were one of fifteen congregations taking part in the parade in 2016, the crowd was estimated at 45,000, the Anglican Deputy Chief Minister was present, and the theme was ‘peace on earth’. Christmas processions start with worship in a stadium and then a parade of floats through the town. Although Malaysia is predominantly a Moslem country the parade shows how Christianity is valued, expressed and witnessed to.

My research has focused on the interface between the Christianity introduced by Anglican missionaries and the culture of the Iban, the largest indigenous group, since Anglican work began in 1848.⁴ In the contexts of rule by an English dynasty and encounter with missionary activity the Iban became conscious of their place in the wider world, and eventually of modernity and globalisation. This article is based on recent research which has examined how traditional religious belief and practice are continued or superseded by Christians in Kuching, Sarawak’s capital city. Specifically, it looks at eschatology, how Iban Christians have made their own *modus vivendi*, accommodating elements of traditional funeral practice and afterlife beliefs, and how traditional customs have been adapted and changed.⁵

2 Theologies of Mission

Theology of Empire

Christian missions and the British Empire played related parts in the spread of modernization, globalization and Western culture to Borneo. By the seventeenth century the missionary movement from Roman Catholic Europe had interacted with the cultures of China, India, Japan and South East Asia. The expansion of Christianity during the nineteenth century was ‘one of the most remarkable cultural transformations in the history of mankind’.⁶ The goals of mission and empire were in tension as much as they sometimes coincided.⁷ Protestants produced a theology which pointed to the growth of the British Empire as intended by God for the conversion of the world, just as British politicians were convinced that religion was essential for commerce and civilisation. The historian Andrew Porter concluded:

Although missions could not avoid empire, they were determined to put it in its place. The extent of their determination, the universal sweep of their

⁴ My historical research for the period 1848-1968 is included in: Peter Varney, *Iban Anglicans: The Anglican Mission in Sarawak 1848-1968* (Singapore: Trinity Theological College Singapore, 2013); and *From Longhouse to Modernity: The Encounter between the Iban of Sarawak and the Anglican Mission* (Amazon EBook. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/FROM-LONGHOUSE-TO-MODERNITY-Encounter-ebook/dp/B00K76UXE0>, 2014).

⁵ I was based at St John’s College, Durham and later in the School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, while undertaking this and further research which is included in: Peter Varney, ‘The Modernization of Iban Eschatology: Iban Burial Ritual and Afterlife Beliefs in Contemporary Kuching’, *Borneo Research Bulletin*, 43 (2012), pp.134-161.

⁶ Norman Etherington (ed.), *Missions and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.1.

⁷ Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Trowbridge: Apollos, 1990).

theology, the global extent of their contacts and their consciousness, deserve more acknowledgement than they have generally received.⁸

Within the British sphere of influence resistance to Christianity was particularly strong in South and South East Asia, where the arrival of missionaries led to religious revival among Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims. Where these religions were deeply rooted, as in Malaya, imperial authority did little to support Christian missions and missionaries felt alienated from government. The British authorities assumed the role of protector of the Malay Sultans and their Muslim subjects. This approach was carefully modified by the Brooke dynasty during their rule in Sarawak from 1841-1946. Here most of the population did not belong to major world religions and the government encouraged missions and became dependent on their educational, medical and other practical work.

Theologies of Mission Societies

The organization of mission societies in the nineteenth century reflects the change of focus from supplying the religious needs of colonies to a theological response to the 'Great Commission': 'Go into the entire world, and preach the gospel to every creature' (Mk. 16.5). Added to this was the eschatological dimension: 'this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the entire world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come' (Mt. 24.14). Those who believed the last days were imminent wanted to take Christianity to the greatest number in the shortest possible time.

The theologies of Low and High Church Anglicans were reflected in these two main mission societies. The mission strategy of Henry Venn, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Secretary, promoted self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating indigenous churches. In 1852 Venn sought to have native bishops heading the new Churches and in 1864 the freed Yoruba slave, Samuel Crowther, became Bishop of the Niger.

The older Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) had focused on the needs of British settlers in North America and the West Indies, but then extended its activities, raising funds for education in India and elsewhere.⁹ SPG attracted moderate and High Churchmen who deferred to episcopal authority as representing the universal catholic church of which they were part.

At the end of the nineteenth century scepticism about Western civilisation, and greater respect for indigenous cultures, made British missions less nationalist and chauvinistic. The theological basis changed and allowed experimentation and adaptation to local conditions in language, liturgy, and church organization. The

⁸ Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p.330.

⁹ Andrew Porter, ed. 1999, *The Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 3, *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.223-231; Porter, *Religion versus Empire?*; Terence Ranger, 'Christian Missions, Capitalism and Empire: The State of the Debate', Paper presented at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies Conference 21 June 2005. http://www.ocms.ac.uk/docs/Ranger_20050621.pdf.

freedom that missions had to respond to local needs or to introduce ritual in worship was either unavailable or had been achieved with great difficulty in Britain. At first the missionaries who came to Sarawak were Broad Church men and women. When High Church ritualists arrived later in the nineteenth century they were free of the scrutiny experienced at home.¹⁰ A theology of understanding rather than condemnation of indigenous customs emerged, along with the growth of mutual respect between missionaries and the Brooke government.¹¹

By the middle of the twentieth century the theologies of mission which focused primarily on soteriology, saving individuals from eternal damnation, or in cultural terms as introducing people to the blessings of the Christian West, were being questioned. The 1952 Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council reflected this.¹² There was a new emphasis on 'Missio Dei', mission as the initiative of God, a movement from God to the world, which went beyond the frontiers of empire or of organised Christianity.¹³ At the same time in many parts of the old empire indigenous clergy re-evaluated traditional religion. In Nigeria Bolaji Idowu, Professor of Theology at Ibadan University, equated the Yoruba belief in a supreme being with Yahweh.¹⁴ In Sarawak Dean Michael Buma affirmed the long-standing approach of the missionaries to inculturation, which had accepted aspects of Iban cosmology.¹⁵

Fulfilment Theology

Many missionaries created their own theology of mission by becoming experts in indigenous culture and identifying aspects of indigenous belief which could offer openings for Christianity. This was also expressed in fulfilment theology developed by J. N. Farquhar in India, which related Christianity to the realisation of fundamental aspirations and potential in Hinduism.¹⁶

There is a consistent thread of Iban agency which enabled them to consider both religious conversion and major change in their agricultural economy without loss of identity. Cramb shows this in his study of Iban agriculture and Boulanger and Chua show this in their studies of Christianity.¹⁷ My research finds examples

¹⁰ Porter, *The 19th Century*, 460-64.

¹¹ Robert Pringle, 1970. *Rajahs and Rebels: The Iban of Sarawak under Brooke Rule, 1841–1941*. (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp.139-140.

¹² Paul Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission*. (London: T&T Clark, 2005) p.5

¹³ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991) p.391.

¹⁴ Idowu's lectures at Ibadan 1963-64 where I was a research student. He qualifies this in E. Bolaji Idowu, *God in Yoruba Belief*. (London: Longmans, 1962). A more nuanced approach to the variety within Yoruba religion is given in J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) pp.116-22.

¹⁵ [Michael Buma Galani], 'Towards Inculturation: A Study on the Ongoing Process of Inculturation in the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Kuching' (MPhil diss., University of Birmingham, 2004).

¹⁶ J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (London, New York: H. Milford: Oxford University Press, 1920).

¹⁷ Clare L. Boulanger, *A Sleeping Tiger: Ethnicity, Class and New Dayak Dreams in Sarawak* (Lanham: University of America Press, 2009); Liana Chua, *The Christianity of Culture: Conversion, Ethnic Citizenship, and the Matter of Religion in Malaysian Borneo*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012);

of Iban agency leading to conversion but within a largely Iban world view. Conversion provided a new religious framework which was to co-exist with indigenous systems of belief. Although wholehearted Christian conversion cut some off from their roots it brought freedom from the fear of the spirit world and opportunities for advancement otherwise unobtainable.

One development in missionary thinking was not supported by Sarawak Anglicans. The growth of international mission work and reflection led to the World Missionary Conference, held in Edinburgh in 1910. SPG missionaries did not attend, feeling that their 'catholic' Anglican identity could be lost in 'a sea of Protestantism'.¹⁸

Missionaries as agents of change

Christian missions have been critiqued as a form of cultural imperialism. John and Jean Comaroff see missionaries as influenced by post-Enlightenment modernity, as agents of a first wave of globalization, and linked to a phase of colonialism which sought to remake the world of colonial peoples.¹⁹ Few would use these arguments in Sarawak to criticise what they see as a largely benevolent Brooke rule. The Comaroffs present missionaries as powerful figures who were able to change the consciousness of local people during a 'long conversation'. Liana Chua describes a series of 'long conversations' between indigenous people and Anglican and Roman Catholic missionaries in Sarawak during the lengthy period up to the 1960s.²⁰

The encounter between missionaries and the Tswana described by the Comaroffs resulted in a separate reified Tswana entity with a specific set of customs. To some extent the work of the Anglican mission with the Ibans had a similar response, with *adat*, a word which embraces the totality of their social system and religion, being slowly codified.²¹ The Comaroffs' argument that missions changed far more than religious allegiance, acting as emissaries of modernity and economic transformation, may be questioned in the Sarawak context. Here Christianity was never fully in the control of the European missionaries. It was local people, in Sarawak as elsewhere, who were the most successful agents of conversion and who also reinterpreted Christianity.

Cramb, Robert A., *Land and Longhouse: Agrarian Transformation in the Uplands of Sarawak*. (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 9, 18; Andrew Walls, 'The Great Commission 1910-2010'. Unpublished lecture at the 'Towards 2010' Conference on Commission 1, University of Edinburgh 2010. <http://towards2010.org/downloads/t2010paper01walls.pdf>.

¹⁹ Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991 and 1997).

²⁰ Chua, *The Christianity of Culture*, p.104.

²¹ Clifford Sather, 'Introduction' in *Iban Adat and Augury*, ed. Benedict Sandin (Penang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1980), xi, defines *adat* as 'all of the various customary norms, jural rules, ritual interdictions and injunctions that guide an individual's conduct, and the sanctions and forms of redress by which these norms and rules are upheld.'

Common themes emerge from the wider story of missions and empire are identified by Norman Etherington, including the role of indigenous evangelists, language, gender, the creation of ethnic identity, and tensions between missions and government.²² All have their place in Sarawak.

3 Contexts: The Iban World

The organisation of Iban society

Iban *adat* was slowly comprehended by the Anglican missionaries who began work in 1848. The harmony and well-being of an Iban community living in accordance with *adat* was described as a tranquil or 'cool' spiritual state which contrasted with the 'heated' or 'feverish' state when *adat* was disturbed.²³

Iban communities of 200 or more people lived in individually-owned family sections of a longhouse with common living and working areas. The Iban were headhunters and the heads taken in earlier warfare and in more recent Japanese and Indonesian occupation, often remain and are believed still to be inhabited by the spirits of the dead people.

The strength of egalitarianism and autonomy affected the diversity of Iban response to Christianity and its expression. Over the 170 years of Anglican work Ibans have made their own *modus vivendi* with Christianity, accommodating elements of traditional beliefs and practice in varying degrees. Meanwhile Anglican authorities attempted to control the use of Iban rituals but the extent to which beliefs were retained by those who became Christians was either unknown or ignored.

Iban Traditional Religion

The Iban cosmos was divided into overlapping categories of humans and spirits with constant inter-action between them, for example in sacrificial acts, dreams and augury. The Iban also saw hill rice (*padi*) cultivation as essential to their identity; it distinguished them from animals and from other groups. Rice cultivation was the core of their religious system, the rice plant a reincarnation of their ancestral spirits who return from the Land of the Dead.²⁴

The dynamic nature of the Iban world became more apparent when the Colonial Office employed social scientists to carry out research studies of Sarawak's main ethnic groups.

The studies provide a base against which to measure the subsequent effects of religious conversion, political and economic change, modernity and globalisation. Freeman's report on the Iban was part of this research.²⁵

²² Etherington, *Missions and Empire*.

²³ Erik Jensen, Erik, *The Iban and Their Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp.114-115.

²⁴ Motomitsu Uchibori, 'The Leaving of This Transient World: A Study of Iban Eschatology and Mortuary Practices' (PhD thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, 1978), pp.151-2; Jensen, *The Iban and Their Religion*.

²⁵ J. Derek Freeman, *Iban Agriculture: A Report on the Shifting Cultivation of Hill Rice by the Iban of Sarawak* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1955).

The Iban believed that their relationship with the spirit world was one of reciprocity and the spirits had a positive desire to help mankind. To maintain equilibrium a sacrifice (*piring*) was offered, sometimes to seek help and sometimes in response to omens. The spirits were believed to express themselves through dreams and the behaviour of certain omen birds who often took the initiative in their relationship with mankind. Freeman concluded that augury was a system of divine guidance and beneficial to Iban community life.²⁶ If the ritual balance had been broken, for example in the case of incest, and not promptly restored it was feared the community would suffer a calamity. An animal was then killed as a blood sacrifice in place of the death penalty.²⁷

Ritual festivals and rites of passage

Most *gawai* (ritual festivals) were associated with the agricultural cycle. Each included a *piring* offering, with the waving of a cock and spattering of its blood, and ritual incantations inviting the spirits to attend and bless the proceedings. *Gawai batu*, the whetstone feast marked both the new farming year and was also a harvest thanksgiving.²⁸ It has largely been replaced by *Gawai Dayak*, introduced by the Sarawak government and now celebrated at the beginning of June by all the indigenous people of Sarawak.

Birth and Adolescence

When a new Iban baby was named he was given a ritual bath in which the whole longhouse community joined. A chicken was sacrificed for the safety and success of the child.²⁹

Death, Burial and the Afterlife

Ibans believed that the *samengat* (the soul or spirit of the departed) continued its life in *sebayan* (the place of the dead). In *sebayan* existence was similar to that in this world, and people were buried with *baya'* (grave goods and objects that they would need in *sebayan*). The geographical location of *sebayan* was the Mandai River which had 'an invisible afterworld counterpart, the 'river of the dead' as well as 'a physical presence in this world'.³⁰

There was no clear idea of judgment, or a separate heaven or hell, although the bridge to *sebayan* was a test; those who fell from it did not reach the state of happiness beyond.

The *samengat* of the dead could help living members of their family, sometimes by providing charms to help their crops to increase. Poor crops meant family members had not reached *sebayan*. From *sebayan* the *samengat* turned into

²⁶ J. Derek Freeman 'Iban augury' *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 117 (1) (1961), pp.141-67.

²⁷ Freeman, 'Iban augury', pp.141-67.

²⁸ Jensen, *The Iban and Their Religion*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Clifford Sather 'Bukit Rabong in this world and the next', *Borneo Research Bulletin* 40 (2009), pp.312-19.

dew and was incorporated in the family's rice so that the essence of the ancestors was consumed. Sather likens this to 'transubstantiation'.³¹

At the end of the mourning period for the dead, *besarak bunga*, literally the 'separation of the flower', was performed. It reflected the belief that the family was a unity but that a member was now separated from the living, just as a flower cut off from its stem would also die. Until *besarak bunga* the living provided things for the use of the dead person, using a shelter placed on the grave.³²

The *antu* of the dead, were thought to continue to remain in the graveyard of the longhouse until the holding of *gawai antu*. This major ritual celebration might be held only once in each generation. The *antu* of the departed were welcomed, food offerings were given to the *antu* of all those who had died since the last *gawai antu* and a *sabak* (mourning dirge) was sung.³³

4 Contexts: Brooke Rule and the First Missionaries

A new era began with the arrival of James Brooke in Sarawak as a private adventurer. He sailed into Kuching in 1838 to find the settlement facing an uprising against the Sultan of Brunei. Brooke offered his aid to the Sultan and restored the local Malay ruler. In 1841 the Sultan conferred on Brooke the title of Rajah of Sarawak. Over the next century as James' nephew Charles succeeded him and then Charles' son, Vyner, the Brooke family established relative peace throughout Sarawak.³⁴ It remained a British protected but independent state under the Brookes until 1946 when it became as British colony. In 1963 when it joined with the Federation of Malaya, North Borneo, and briefly Singapore, to form the Federation of Malaysia.

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:

There are two sorts of Christian missions, the one of unmixed good, the other, and 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

³¹ Jensen *The Iban and Their Religion*; Clifford Sather, 'Transformations of self and community in Saribas Iban death rituals' in *Journeys of the Soul: Anthropological Studies of Death, Burial, and Reburial Practices in Borneo*, ed. W. D. Wilder (Phillips, Maine: Borneo Research Council, 2003).

³² Henry Gana Ngadi, *Iban rites of Passage* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1998).

³³ Ngadi, *Iban rites of Passage*.

³⁴ Steven Runciman, *The White Rajahs: A History of Sarawak from 1841 to 1946*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

mission is the American, who live quietly, practise medicine, relieve the distressed, do not dispute or argue, and aim to educate the children.³⁵

The first missionaries, Francis McDougall, William Wright and their families, arrived in Kuching in 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.³⁶

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.'³⁷ 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.³⁸

For many decades the Anglican mission had few staff and they came with few resources. The first missionaries lived alongside indigenous people, and translated the gospels, liturgy and teaching materials for use in schools. School children, school teachers, local catechists were the main agents of mission, bringing Christianity to their own people and in their own language.³⁹

The Brookes encouraged a loyalty to Sarawak in all their subjects and their officials, and there was little overt expression of white racial superiority. The process of development included cultural encounter and exchange. Anglicanism played a significant role, both as a broker in this process and also as the provider of schooling and theological education which helped equip the Iban to make their own decisions about their evolving culture and religious identity, although there was resistance when it threatened local beliefs or authority.⁴⁰

5 Responses to Iban religion, with special reference to eschatology

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

³⁵ John C. Templer, ed, *The Private Letters of Sir James Brooke, K.C.B., Rajah of Sarawak, Narrating the Events of His Life from 1838 to the Present Time*. (London, 1853), pp.229–230.

³⁶ Peter Varney, 'The Anglican Church in Sarawak from 1848 to 1852', *Sarawak Museum Journal*, 16 (33) 1968, pp.377-406.

³⁷ McDougall's letters sent to SPG between 1848-1867 are held in *McDougall papers*, Reference 'MSS. Pac. s. 104,' at The Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Rhodes House, Oxford.

³⁸ Varney, 'Anglican Church 1848-1852'

³⁹ Peter Varney, *Iban Anglicans: The Anglican Mission in Sarawak 1848-1968* (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2013).

⁴⁰ Pringle, *Rajahs and Rebels*.

of heaven, hell, resurrection, and other beliefs about the afterlife. Iban Christians offer new conceptualizations to other parts of the Christian world where traditional religions have encountered western Christianity.⁴¹

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 jenuh* (the quiet place). From here some Ibans said the *antu sebayan* might be absorbed by the morning mists and complete their cycle by being taken up by the growing rice and consumed by the living members of the *bilik* family.⁴²

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'.⁴³

Sabak

William Howell, a Eurasian priest, worked with the Ibans for 50 years and wrote for government as well as missionary publications. He 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.⁴⁴ Howell unsuccessfully attempted to stop Christians employing them, believing the dirge conflicted with Christian teaching. Other clergy encouraged a Christian form of the *sabak*, and *sabak* singers themselves described the journey into the next world continuing beyond *sebayan* and past churches to a more heaven-like conclusion.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Two contemporary Iban Anglican writers are: [Michael Buma] Galani, 'Towards Inculturation: A Study on the Ongoing Process of Inculturation in the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Kuching' (MPhil diss., University of Birmingham, 2004); Denis Gimang, 'Iban Customs, Beliefs and Adat', paper presented at the Conference of Anglican Clergy, Kuching, Sarawak, September, 1997.

⁴² Sather, 'Transformations of self', pp.175-250.

⁴³ William Crossland, 'Report July 1865' in *Gospel Missionary* (March 1866), pp.38-43.

⁴⁴ Howell, William, MS Quarterly Report June 1880, Copies of letters received (CLR) in USPG Papers at the Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies, Rhodes House; 'A Sea Dyak dirge', *Sarawak Museum Journal* 1 (1911), 5-73; 'Dyak Burial Customs' and 'Berantu' in *The Sea Dyaks and Other Races of Sarawak* (Kuching: Borneo Literature Bureau, 1963).

⁴⁵ Frederick Rajit, *Sabak Kenang* (Kuching: Borneo Literature Bureau, 1969).

Contemporary *sabak* singers continue to accept the possibility of adaption and to change their chants.⁴⁶ In 2011 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 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*.⁴⁷

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. 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.⁴⁸

Missionary innovations: purgatory, heaven and hell

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 twentieth century, appeared to fit well with Iban beliefs about *sebayan* and also to give some hope of change in the afterlife.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰

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

⁴⁶ Uchibori, 'The Leaving of This Transient World'.

⁴⁷ Interview 12 March 2011 reported in Varney 'The Modernization of Iban Eschatology', p.139.

⁴⁸ Interview 12 March 2011.

⁴⁹ Mounsey, William. 'Letter to Editor', *Mission Field* (April 1909): p.102.

⁵⁰ Interviews in Kuching, June-July, 2012.

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.⁵¹ 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'.⁵² 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 of 1921 says 'righteous souls will receive glorious bodies and live with God forever in heaven.'

The eschatological beliefs of contemporary Iban Christians.

My Kuching based research of the beliefs about the afterlife of Iban Anglicans shows how, as overseas mission workers have withdrawn from Sarawak during the last 50 years, 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.⁵³

My investigation also finds that the results of the teaching of both missionaries and local church workers, and particularly the ways in which indigenous languages have been used in Christian teaching, have led to considerable confusion. In Borneo, and perhaps in most of the Anglican world, clergy give little teaching about the afterlife. Many Christian informants in Kuching 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.'⁵⁴

Commentators, particularly outsiders, can take the way Ibans express their belief too literally. The extensive number of Iban proverbs points to the many different ways Iban understands 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.

⁵¹ Crossland, Report July 1865.

⁵² Anon, *Catechism*, (Kuching: Anglican Diocese, 1964), Questions 43 and 44.

⁵³ Varney, 'The Modernization of Iban Eschatology'.

⁵⁴ Varney, 'The Modernization of Iban Eschatology', p.153.

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".'⁵⁵

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.'⁵⁶

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.'⁵⁷

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.⁵⁸

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*.'⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Varney, 'The Modernization of Iban Eschatology', 153.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.154.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.155.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

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.'⁶⁰

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?⁶¹

8 *Our souls or spirits live on after death.*

There is 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.⁶²

'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.'⁶³

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 indigenous and western Christian belief have interacted, may formulate their own understanding of the 'things which are eternal'.

⁶⁰ Varney, 'The Modernization of Iban Eschatology', p.156.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., pp.156-158.

⁶³ Ibid., p.158.

6 The fruits of ministry

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.⁶⁴

Since then the changes which globalisation and secularism have brought around the world have worked out differently in Sarawak where Christianity has spread rapidly.

Interviews conducted with Iban Anglicans in Sarawak and Brunei between 2010 and 2012 showed that they have retained a sense of the spiritual as permeating the whole of their life, understanding this in a traditional or Christian way, or blending the two. They have embraced modernity but have also deepened their commitment and the expression of their faith in their lives.

My research found that most parishes have home groups. Modern communication also plays its part, the Facebook pages of Anglican Church leaders have become popular places to explore and discuss Christianity. Anglicans, like other Christians, find their individual identity is enhanced by belonging to a wider church community, which connects them to others and to God. These markers of Borneo Anglican identity have been identified in my recent research:

- Christian life is marked by regular worship, for Anglicans this means at least a weekly Eucharist.
- Sunday is kept not only for worship but also for shared activities with other Christians.
- House group meetings for worship, study, and sharing meals are common.
- Religion is near the surface of people's lives. People readily ask one another to pray for them, for their work or their studies. The sick are prayed for before they go to hospital.
- Grace is said before meals and spontaneous Christian greetings are often heard when people meet.
- People talk about God's blessings on their lives.
- They are open to new ideas and not confined by a narrow theological framework.
- Their hospitality and the way they care for others are everyday expressions of their Christian identity, and make a significant contribution to the life of the wider community around them.

The identity of the Church can now be reconceptualised. There is accommodation to traditional culture and belief, and a moving away from western theologies. Its

⁶⁴ Benedict Sandin, *Tusun Pendiaun Iban* (Kuching: Borneo Literature Bureau, 1976) [Recompiled by Gregory Nyanggau Mawar, October 2007].

relationship to Anglican and other Churches in South East Asia and the wider Anglican Communion is dynamic. This is a part of global Anglicanism whose story has been but partly told in this article.

www.theologyandministry.org

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