

## **Speaking of Continuity... Religious Change and Moral Dilemmas Among Christian Bidayuhs in Malaysian Borneo**

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### **Abstract**

This article responds to the tendency within the nascent anthropology of Christianity to highlight discontinuity and rupture as central to conversion. Through a thick ethnography of the shifting moral and religious topography of a Bidayuh village in which three churches and a few elderly animist practitioners coexist, it reveals how conversion has also fostered modes of thinking and speaking about continuity between Christianity and ‘the old ways.’ I argue that such discourses and practices shed light on the multifarious and sometimes contradictory nature of Christianization, while also fostering an understanding of conversion as a temporal and relational *positioning* that encompasses both converts and non-converts.

(anthropology of Christianity; Sarawak; conversion; ‘continuity thinking’; morality; ritual)

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While conducting fieldwork in a rural Bidayuh village in 2008, I ran into an elderly acquaintance—one of the few people who still practiced the old animist rituals, *adat gawai*. Her familiar betel juice-stained grin had been replaced with a scowl, for reasons which soon became clear. She said that her daughter, a committed member of the local evangelical church, had been at it again—telling her how those terrible old ways only brought bad spirits to the village. Bristling at the accusation, the old lady snapped,

Of course we call bad spirits during rituals. But we call them here so that we can throw them away, and get rid of illness, dangers to our rice and other bad things! Besides, we call good spirits at the same time. Christians do the same thing, calling God and throwing away Satan—I'm not lying, am I?

This heated response was neither novel nor confined to *adat gawai* practitioners, for it echoed sentiments that I have heard regularly among both Christian and non-Christian Bidayuhs. Like the elderly lady, they largely portray the relationship between the old rituals and Christianity—which is followed by most Bidayuhs today—as one of sameness, or at least compatibility. Yet their assertions are not unproblematic. While only existing in a few villages today, their persistence raises complicated questions about change, continuity, religiosity, and morality: questions which are asked not only by the evangelical minority but also by the Anglican and Catholic majorities.

Such concerns form the thematic focus of my article, which puts Bidayuhs' discourses on Christianization and change in dialogue with recent scholarly (re)conceptualizations of the nature and scope of religious conversion—that notoriously

slippery concept which has troubled and excited anthropologists in equal measure. Over the last decade, it has been given new vitality by advocates of the self-styled anthropology of Christianity—particularly through the work of Joel Robbins (2001, 2003, 2004, 2007), whose article, ‘Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture’ (2007), has been instrumental in encouraging anthropologists to treat conversion as a form of rupture from the past. Robbins’ piece serves as the springboard to my exploration of a complex situation in which three Christian churches coexist alongside a shrinking group of elderly *adat gawai* followers within a single village. Thinking through both Christian-*gawai* and intra-Christian relations, this article reveals how the old rituals have become sites at which the moral shifts—and fissures—precipitated by conversion are briefly made visible. What is interesting, however, is how different Christians respond to these situations, with Anglicans and Catholics reaffirming their connections with *adat gawai*, and the evangelicals doing the opposite.

How do we account for such divergent attitudes towards the old ways? This thick ethnography of Bidayuh conversion explores how both the circumstances of Christianization and Christian thought and practice have combined to create a dominant discourse of *continuity* between Christianity and *adat gawai*: one to which nearly all Anglicans and Catholics subscribe. Their efforts, however, are not free of unease and controversy, particularly under the disapproving gaze of their evangelical neighbors. The resultant moral dilemmas reveal a picture of conversion as both a process and a positioning: an undertaking that does not simply entail a move from one state to another, but also a series of temporal and relational negotiations by converts and non-converts alike.

On one level, then, this article constitutes an ethnographic contribution to the ever-expanding literature on the anthropology of Christianity. At the same time, it seeks to challenge and augment this new subfield by foregrounding the importance of our *subjects'* own discourses and practices of continuity. In brief, I shall argue that rather than dismissing continuity speaking as the offshoot of an outdated analytical model, anthropologists need to interrogate and complicate it in the same way that they have recently interrogated and complicated discontinuity. Doing so fosters a more nuanced appreciation of the processes of religious change and conversion, as well as the equally complex, and equally contentious, relational re-workings that occur at the same time. I shall return to this point later in the article. To begin, however, let us briefly examine the theoretical puzzle that will lurk in the background of this article: the question of 'continuity thinking'.

#### 'Continuity thinking' and the anthropology of Christianity

Over the last decade, the anthropology of Christianity has come into its own as a distinctive field of comparative enquiry<sup>i</sup> closely engaged with core disciplinary concerns such as temporality, personhood, meaning, and cultural change. According to its proponents, its defining characteristic is its 'self-conscious engagement with Christianity as a cultural logic' (Tomlinson and Engelke 2006:19) and mode of social and conceptual organization. Rather than 'hitch[ing] the study of local Christianity to larger narratives of colonialism and the spread of world religions' (Barker 2008:377), as they charge earlier

ethnographies with doing, this new subfield takes Christianity itself as its object—as a recognizable ‘culture’ that can enact fundamental transformations in its converts’ lives.

Key to this project has been a growing emphasis on Christianity’s inherent theological and praxiological models of discontinuity. Contributors to the anthropology of Christianity point out that far from being a purely analytical concern, change is a topic of interest for Christians themselves—particularly those grappling with the exigencies of conversion. On this count, much attention has recently been devoted to teasing out the complexities surrounding discourses and expectations of discontinuity (e.g. Engelke 2004, 2010; Harris 2006; Meyer 1998; 1999). One prominent example of this trend is Joel Robbins’ theorization of (dis)continuity in his article on ‘continuity thinking’ (2007), which forms the starting point of my exploration.

Robbins’ piece builds on the premise that a proper anthropology of Christianity has failed to emerge because of anthropologists’ own unwillingness to treat Christianity as a ‘system of meanings with a logic of its own’ (2007:7).<sup>ii</sup> He attributes this attitude to a ‘deep structure of anthropological theorizing’ (ibid.:9) which inclines analysts of non-Western convert societies to seek ‘some enduring cultural structure that persists underneath all the surface changes’ (ibid.:10). When studying Christian communities, they thus engage in the ‘object-dissolving’ (2003:193) exercise of

ignor[ing] or play[ing] down the Christian aspects of the places in which they do work by representing Christianity there as inconsistently and lightly held or merely a thin veneer overlying deeply meaningful traditional beliefs (2007:6).

Yoked as they are to this analytical model of continuity, most anthropologists remain cynical over ‘claims that previously non-Christian converts make about their lives’, particularly those related to ‘discontinuities in time and belief’ (ibid.:10).

As I understand Robbins’ argument, such cynicism generates a disjuncture between analysis and native exegesis, since

[i]n pursuing their doubts about what converts say on these matters, anthropologists often come to suspect that those who make these claims are not Christians at all or at least that they fail to live up to their own self-professed Christian ideals concerning discontinuity and change (ibid.).

Continuity thinking is thus both an analytical and a methodological problem, for in refusing to take Christianity itself seriously, anthropologists are by implication refusing to take their Christian informants seriously. By way of rectification, Robbins turns to the millenarian modes of Christianity followed by the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. These, he argues, clearly reveal Christianity’s intrinsic models of discontinuity, which provide for ‘the possibility, indeed the salvational necessity, of the creation of ruptures between the past, the present, and the future’ (ibid.:11). Such models strongly influence converts’ lives, shaping their sense of collective history as well as their thoughts, actions, and expectations in the present. Rather than ignoring such discourses, Robbins suggests, anthropologists should develop analytical ‘models of cultural discontinuity’ (ibid.:17) through which to deal with them. In this respect, he draws on his *ethnography* in order to remedy what he identifies as a long-standing *analytical* failure on the part of anthropologists to deal fully with religious change. He then explores the implications of

such a move on anthropological conceptualizations of time, belief and cultural and religious change.

While not the first to grapple with (dis)continuity, Robbins' article has placed the topic squarely at the center of the anthropology of Christianity—so much so that it is now viewed as a defining feature of this burgeoning subfield. In many respects, this has been a laudable step forward. Questions of discontinuity and rupture have revitalized and lent new shape to the study of Christianity and conversion, and encouraged new cross-disciplinary exchanges between anthropologists, theologians, and other scholars of religion (e.g. Engelke and Robbins ed. 2010). Robbins' agenda has also been productively extended by anthropologists working on various topics, including ideas of 'culture' among Australian Aboriginal Pentecostals (Akiko 2008), social change movements in Vanuatu (Eriksen 2009), and relations with the past in Pentecostal and African Independent Churches (Engelke 2010).

Most contributors to the field, including Robbins (2007:16-17), acknowledge that in reality, Christian conversion often involves elements of both continuity and discontinuity. However, the dominant trend within the literature has been to scrutinize languages, practices, and experiences of discontinuity while only perfunctorily dealing with continuity, treating it as a self-evident but less exceptional facet of conversion. If continuity was 'done' by earlier anthropological studies of Christianity, the challenge, it now seems, is to do justice to discontinuity while avoiding the mistakes of the past. The vigorous adoption of this agenda is evident not only in the surge of recent publications on the topic, but also at academic symposia, in new university courses, and in recent state-of-the-field reviews (e.g. Lampe 2010:79-80).

If Robbins' model of Christian conversion-as-rupture was groundbreaking in 2007, then, it has now become a prevailing orthodoxy in the anthropology of Christianity and religion. Without downplaying its significance, however, my point here is that this approach also risks occluding the discourses and enactments of *continuity* that may exist in our fieldsites. In saying this, my aim is not to add to the chorus of voices discussing the potentials, ramifications, and shortcomings of Robbins' arguments (e.g. Barker 2003, 2008; Coleman 2010; Hann 2007; Hann and Goltz 2010; McDougall 2009a and b; Scott 2005). Rather, I would like to pursue what I see as the methodological strength of his agenda—namely, its attempt to align anthropological analysis with native exegesis. This ambition is neatly realized in his solution to the problem of continuity thinking: a model of conversion which treats discontinuity as a theological, analytical, and discursive phenomenon (Robbins 2007:11, n.7). While this triple convergence works well in Robbins' fieldsite, however, it is less clear how it would fare in other ethnographic settings. Indeed, as Robbins himself explains, he emphasizes discontinuity through an ideal Protestant model precisely to redress the continuity-heavy bias in existing scholarship (2007:16-17).

My rejoinder to this qualification, then, is: what happens when ideas and practices of continuity form a central part of our informants' own Christian projects? How should we respond, in other words, when the people with whom we work reveal their own modes of continuity thinking and speaking?<sup>iii</sup> Anthropologists have now been suitably chastised for the analytical and theoretical sin of continuity thinking. Yet in our haste to remedy its wrongs, it is vital that we do not swing too far in the opposite direction. Instead, I would argue that if Robbins' ambition to align anthropological analysis and native exegesis is to



be followed through, then it behoves us to take those continuity-centered discourses as seriously as we do those on discontinuity. The following pages flesh out this idea through an ethnographic exploration of the shifting moral frameworks, impulses, and dilemmas at work in one rural village.

### Models and maneuvers: the shape of Bidayuh morality

Forming the second-largest indigenous group in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, Bidayuh have historically lived in the mountainous hinterlands of the state capital, Kuching. Until the 1970s, most Bidayuh were rice farmers and followers of *adat gawai*, the ritual complex mentioned earlier. Since then, however, a combination of urbanization and Christianization has greatly transformed their political, social and moral worlds, with most people eschewing subsistence agriculture for education and waged labor. Today, the vast majority of Bidayuh are Christians of different denominations, while *adat gawai* is practiced by a shrinking minority of elderly people in certain villages.

Although a direct Bidayuh equivalent of ‘morality’ does not exist, certain baseline moral questions and concerns can nevertheless be discerned in contemporary villages. Most of these revolve around the question of ‘correct’ thought, speech, and behavior, particularly in relation to *adat*, an Arabic term which has conventionally been translated as ‘customary law’. *Adat* was introduced to Southeast Asia during the spread of Islam in the fifteenth century as a means of codifying local beliefs and practices (Zainal Kling 1997:45). During and after colonial rule, it became increasingly formalized as a property

of indigenous groups, and is now deeply enmeshed in regional and national governance as a potent political, legal, and organizational resource (see, for example, Davidson and Henley 2007; Hooker 1972; Langub 1994).

For many small-scale communities in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, however, *adat* plays another, far more ‘suffusive’ (Schiller 1997:78) role.<sup>iv</sup> While not unaware of its politico-legal manifestations, groups such as the Bidayuh also treat it as an all-encompassing guide to life: a set of ‘rules and expectations’ governing ‘every aspect of existence’ (ibid.:77), from ‘table manners’ to ‘who may fish where, and who may wear what kind of beads, and how fruit trees are inherited’ (Metcalf 1991:4). Regardless of who or what it refers to—ethnic groups, spirits, or religious communities, for example—*adat* is widely depicted as the way the world should be, and a way of ‘being a person’ (Koepping 2006:60). In this holistic form, it encompasses the political, legal, religious and other aspects of life within an overarching project: the establishment and maintenance of social harmony, equilibrium, peace, and safety (Zainal Kling 1997).

In contemporary Bidayuh societies, this ideal state is often described as one of ‘coolness’ (*madud*), its most visible manifestation being a condition of social stability, peaceability, and contentment.<sup>v</sup> Within this social realm, *adat* effectively forms the basis of a moral framework, acting as a regulating force and yardstick of *patut*, or proper, behavior, speech, and action, through which ‘coolness’ in the community may be sustained. This does not suggest, however, that *adat* is sacrosanct, immutable, or even self-evident. As I have found over many discussions, Bidayuhs acknowledge that the relationship between models and reality can be extremely problematic.

A conversation that I had in 2005 with a young Anglican man in my adoptive village illustrates this point. ‘Andrew’ was telling me about how his cousin ‘Felicia’ had begun to act very strangely: talking to herself, laughing randomly, losing consciousness and wandering about the village late at night, her hair thrown over her face, waving her arms. Her family suspected that she had had a spell cast on her by her boss at the city hospital where she worked, in retaliation for her slapping him when he made sexually explicit comments to her face. While concurring that Felicia’s boss was in the wrong, Andrew regretfully admitted that she was also at fault. Instead of lashing out in front of everyone, she should have stayed calm and reported it to the police. Such behavior, the family acknowledged, was not *patut* because it aggravated social upheaval rather than assuaging it. Their sympathy was tempered by the uneasy sense that she acted in a way that she shouldn’t have. For them, Felicia’s fault was not how she responded to her boss’s comments, but what she did in relation to an *adat*-based exemplar of proper behavior.

Woven into Felicia’s story is a set of moral understandings that dwell at the interface between individuals, exemplars, and specific social circumstances. Here, persons are judged by their acts and choices within specific contexts. If there is a major guiding force behind these judgments, it is what Zainal Kling calls the ‘general altruistic principle’ of *adat*: ‘Good for others, good for me’ (1997:50). By this, I do not mean to depict Bidayuh society as a Durkheimian paradise in which everything social is, by definition, moral (Durkheim 1953). As William Geddes observed in the 1940s, Bidayuh villages are not places where ‘individuality is sunk in the affairs of the tribe’ (1961:20). Indeed, the pervasive awareness that people are autonomous, reflexive individuals rather than slavish followers of norms is crucial to the exercise of morality within them.

However, just as crucial is the pervasive understanding that individuals or corporate units live best when ‘the community’ (*kaum*) is ticking along smoothly and without upheaval.

This vague ideal of social harmony serves as both as a scaffold for moral activity and its gauge in practice. People do not only weigh up the repercussions of their actions against an imagined social whole, but also mull over whether those actions would be in concord with prevailing opinion. The impetus to behave well—to do what is *patut*—thus comes chiefly from lateral pressures, both real and anticipated, exerted by one’s social peers. In this sense, the relation between *adat* and the collective is (in ideal terms, at least) cyclical: if one of *adat*’s professed aims is to keep a vague notion of the social ‘cool’ and harmonious, a potent mechanism for ensuring that it does so is the social itself. The locus of moral action is less the individual qua individual than it is the individual as a social being.

This *adat*-based moral framework appears to have been fairly prevalent, if not uniformly or explicitly articulated, in pre-Christian Bidayuh society (e.g. Geddes 1954, 1961; see also Adat Bidayuh 1994; Richards 1964). Since then, it has remained a major guiding feature of village sociality, providing an arena in which ‘correct’ behavior can be identified, articulated, and debated. However, it is vital to note that it has not been static or untouched by the developments of the last few decades. As I now explain, widespread conversion to Christianity since the 1960s has had a sizeable impact on Bidayuh understandings of sociality, morality, and personhood.

### ‘Entering’ Christianity

In contrast to some other parts of Sarawak (e.g. Amster 1998; Lees 1979),<sup>vi</sup> Christianity in Bidayuh areas was never adopted as ‘a new culture whole’ (Robbins 2004:3); here, there was no collective epiphany or totalizing change in lifestyle. Indeed, the Anglicanism and Catholicism to which Bidayuhs converted could hardly be defined as coherent ‘cultures’, for they were more like *mélanges* of missionary practices, institutional dictates, and ad hoc measures—a reflection of their engagement from day one in complicated dialogues with the state, *adat gawai*, missionaries, and urban influences.

When large-scale Bidayuh conversion to Christianity began in the 1970s, Anglican, Catholic, and other missionaries had been active in Sarawak for over a century.<sup>vii</sup> Their initial presence was orchestrated and carefully controlled by the Brooke Raj, the private dynasty which ruled Sarawak from 1841 to 1946. Openly disdainful of proselytizing ‘zealots, intolerants and enthusiasts,’ the White Rajahs encouraged missionaries to ‘live quietly, practise medicine, relieved the distressed...and aim to educate the children’ (James Brooke, cited in Ooi 1991:284). This policy meant that Sarawakian Christianity was, from day one, both a ‘civilising’ and a ‘converting’ enterprise (Saunders 1992:6). The first Christian presences in rural areas were often schools and clinics which catered to all comers. Their staff would mix widely with local communities, growing familiar with their languages, social organization, rituals, and modes of thought (see, for example, Howes 1960; Kempton 2008; Sidaway 1969; Westerwoudt 2002), while simultaneously trying to spread their message. In this way, Christianity became a known presence in these areas well before most of their inhabitants considered ‘entering’ (*mūrūt*) it.

During this time, Christianity appears to have been viewed as one more *adat* alongside *gawai*, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, through which humans could pray to God and spirits (Geddes 1954:25). Apart from some small-scale and isolated missionary successes, however, most Bidayuh proved unwilling to follow it en masse. As I argue elsewhere (Chua 2012), this was due largely to the close entwinement of *adat gawai*, rice-planting, and village sociality. The old rituals regulated the full spectrum of Bidayuh's lives, from coming-of-age and healing rites, to large-scale ceremonies to mark various stages of the 'rice year'. While the former were generally confined to individual households, the latter were intensely public affairs, often encompassing the entire village community. Crucially, this often involved participation in strict post-ritual 'taboo' or 'prohibition' (*patang*) periods—the most major of which could apply to entire longhouses or communities—during which specific dietary practices, movements, planting, and construction could be suspended for several days. Disregarding them was tantamount to breaching a whole set of social norms and expectations, and offenders were liable to be fined heavily by the village head (Adat Bidayuh 1994:v-vii).

As long as the vast majority of Bidayuh remained subsistence farmers, missionaries would find it difficult to disentangle their 'worship' from their 'work' (Howes 1960:493). However, developments set in train from the 1960s—particularly after Sarawak's independence as part of Malaysia (1963)—gave Christian conversion a new and ultimately overwhelming momentum. The post-independence years saw the simultaneous growth of rural development, increasing outmigration from villages to urban areas, and the inexorable decline of subsistence agriculture. All these had a knock-on effect on *adat gawai*, which became harder to observe as villages' able-bodied

populations shrank and people began working to different tempos. Its dominance was further eroded by the efforts of young returnees who had encountered Christianity while living in town. Many of them found it a useful buffer against Islam—the religion of the politically-dominant Malay-Muslim majority (Chua 2007)—as well as a suitably flexible and effective *adat* for life in the ‘modern’ world. These young people later became Christianity’s most successful ambassadors, persuading friends and family in their villages to convert.

Bidayuhs thus began ‘entering’ Christianity in large kin- or neighborhood-based groups from the late-1960s. The perceived differences between Anglicanism and Catholicism appear to have been minimal, with most people choosing to ‘follow’ the denominations of their friends, neighbors, or relatives (see also Harris 2001:169). Exclusivity, however, was not of prime importance. According to Father James Meehan, a Catholic priest who worked with Bidayuh from the 1960s to late-2000s, couples would sometimes ‘hedge their bets,’ with one following *adat gawai* and the other Christianity. Conversion also took place between different denominations on the basis of marriage or personal choice. Sometimes, people even de-converted, returning to *adat gawai* after briefly dabbling in Christianity. Meanwhile, *gawai* practitioners were not averse to inviting priests to join them in conducting ceremonies, while new Christians were known to shuttle between priest, clinic, and ritual healer in search of cures for their ailments (see also Sidaway 1969).

During this transitory phase, many Bidayuh communities and households would have consisted of shifting pastiches of *gawai*, Anglican, and Catholic followers, thus necessitating accommodation and improvisation. One of the first Anglicans in my

adoptive village recalled how the nascent congregation would skip Sunday prayer gatherings whenever there was a *gawai* prohibition on movement and travel in force. As the Christian population grew, however, the *gawai* practitioners had to ‘relax’ their rules to give the converts more flexibility. Such maneuvers, I suggest, may have been influenced by a shared *moral* impulse of the sort discussed earlier: to keep the peace and maintain social cohesion (or at least a sense of it) in the face of potentially disruptive divisions.<sup>viii</sup> Indeed, I would suggest that as the Christian population grew, more people converted precisely to ensure the maintenance of those social ties and routines.

The process by which Bidayuhs became Christian in the 1960s and 1970s can thus only be described as gradual and piecemeal rather than sudden and rupturous. This is reflected in my Anglican and Catholic acquaintances’ conversion narratives—or rather, their lack thereof. During fieldwork, I often had to work to extricate such blasé remarks as ‘I went along to my friends’ prayer meetings and decided to become Christian too,’ ‘I followed my son into Catholicism because he said that he wouldn’t know how to carry out *gawai* rites when I died,’ and ‘*Gawai* rituals were getting too difficult to follow, so I became Anglican.’ For most of my acquaintances, ‘becoming Christian’ appears to have been a noteworthy but not life-changing event which ultimately had little impact on how they worked, lived, and related to others.

In sum, this initial period of conversion cannot be said to have enacted a clear break from the past or the old ways. However, the story does not end there. The next section looks at what it was Bidayuhs were converting *to*—that is, at the content of their ‘ethno-theology’<sup>ix</sup>—particularly the moral understandings which they have cultivated in my fieldsite. While these constitute novel additions to Bidayuhs’ lives, I suggest that they



have also heightened many Christians' sense of their connectedness and obligations to *gawai* practitioners and their pre-Christian past. In the process, they have—for the most part, at least—elaborated and extended the *adat*-based moral framework which we examined earlier.

### Joining Jesus' household: moral shifts and dilemmas in contemporary Bidayuh Christianity

Although conversion took time, it has nevertheless wrought many fundamental social, relational, and conceptual changes in Bidayuh's lives. Rather than attempt to list all these transformations, I focus here on the new modes of morality and personhood that Christianity has engendered in the last few decades. These form part of a larger ethno-theological framework in which the notions of love (*rindu*) and sin (*dosa*) are inextricably intertwined. Like the *adat*-based model discussed earlier, this framework is implicit in people's actions and understandings rather than overtly articulated or prescribed. For illustrative purposes, I have pieced together the basic 'story' (*cerita/dundan*) of Christianity from different parts of a Catholic primer disseminated where I work.<sup>x</sup>

God created us so that we could know and love Him and do His work on earth, and later live happily with Him in Heaven. However, the first humans, Adam and Eve, fought with (*rawan*) God and chose not to believe in (*sabah*)<sup>xi</sup> Him. They had fallen under the influence of the demon called Satan, who, unhappy at seeing humans so close (*bimadis*; 'related to') to God, bewitched (*nyirasun*; lit.

‘poisoned’) them into following him (Aran Tuhan 2004:5). Their wrongdoing plunged their descendants into a state of wretchedness (*susah*). Later, God sent to earth his only son Jesus, who died because He loved us. This enabled humans to reinstate relations (*bimadis dinge*) with God and become part of His household (ibid.:8). Since then, humans have been able to enter God’s household through baptism (ibid.). When they sin, they repudiate relations with God—distance themselves from Him and His household (ibid.:14). Consequently, we must constantly pray, try to do good things and avoid sin in order to get to Heaven (*sorga*) when we die.

Embedded in this story, with which Anglicans, Catholics, and SIBs alike are familiar, is a set of ethno-theological understandings which have enacted a fundamental shift in Bidayuh’s moral universe. In the past, contravening *adat* by not doing the *patut* thing basically meant upsetting the social balance and ‘coolness’ of the world. Today, however, doing something wrong (i.e. sinning) *also* entails a betrayal of that relationship of love between humans and God. This moral understanding reflects the fact that Christianity has introduced a new set of characters and relations to Bidayuh’s lives. From being ‘horizontally’ responsible to their social peers (including the *adat gawai* spirits), Christian Bidayuh now also have to deal with a ‘vertical’ set of relations: with God on the one hand, and Satan on the other. Unlike the old spirits, who could be bargained with, cajoled, and berated, God and Satan cannot be tricked, manipulated, or scolded because they are absolutes of good (*kānà*) and evil (*arap*) respectively. Like *adat*, they serve as

ideal-types through which the morality of human behavior can be gauged. All Christians can do is navigate their way between them.

This love/sin framework, I suggest, has furnished Bidayuhs with a fundamentally different model of moral personhood to that prescribed by *adat*. While both center on the individual person as the core unit of action and responsibility, Bidayuh Christianity places greater emphasis on the cultivation of a conscious, reflexive *self* (Mauss 1985) that must serve as its own moral regulator. Unlike one's social peers, God, and to a lesser degree, Satan, are known to have access to people's unspoken ruminations and desires. With this in mind, Christians must not only look over their shoulders at the people around them, but must also constantly weigh up their thoughts and actions in relation to an omniscient, omnipresent God.

Accordingly, a good proportion of Christian practice in the village hinges on maintaining a healthy relationship with God by following the *adat* of Christianity and rejecting Satan's malign influence. Unlike *adat gawai*, in which only ritual leaders communicate with the spirits in ceremonial contexts, Bidayuh Christianity encourages its adherents to cultivate ongoing personal connections with God and other personages. While many of these are facilitated by priests and prayer leaders, ritual artifacts, the Bible, and sacraments, they nonetheless remain dyadic in focus. During prayer services, for example, congregations are often asked to reflect silently on their sins and failings, and to ask God for His mercy (*masi*) and forgiveness (*pingapun*). Outside church, these channels of communication and supplication remain open, with people speaking freely and directly to God, Jesus, Mary, and other tutelary beings through group and individual prayer. For many of my acquaintances, such interactions do not simply involve crudely

extracting things from divine personages, but eliciting feelings of love, pity, and fondness (*rindu*) in them, such that they will be inclined to ‘give’ (*ngyen*) humans what they need. At the same time, these are moments of genuine affective significance, whereby Christians reaffirm their commitment to the relationship of love with God.

In some ways, then, it could be argued that Bidayuh have undergone a quintessentially Weberian shift towards a (largely Protestant) model of Christian individualism—a process which anthropologists of Christianity have identified as particularly a salient feature of conversion worldwide (e.g. Bialecki, Haynes, and Robbins 2008:1146-7). However, while such individualist strains have pervaded my acquaintances’ lives, they have not displaced the model of *adat*-based morality which I described earlier. This is not because the latter possesses a self-evidently persistent character of the sort which Robbins charges anthropologists with privileging (2007). Instead, its persistence and evolution are also attributable to Christianity itself—or rather, to its particular manifestations in my fieldsite.

As mentioned earlier, Anglican and Catholic missionaries working in Bidayuh areas in the 1960s and 70s were often astute linguists and social scientists acquainted with local languages and sociality. Rather than conceptually bulldozing the new converts’ worlds, they found ways to exploit convergences, analogues, and overlaps between Christian and indigenous notions and practices. The powerful moral force of social ties did not escape their notice (e.g. Howes 1960; Sidaway 1969); indeed, many of them saw it as a positive trait which dovetailed with the tenets of Christianity. As Father Meehan put it, ‘from a morality point of view, we hardly taught them anything.’ He explained that the non-Christian Bidayuh he’d met decades earlier already understood Christianity’s

moral precepts—that they should not steal or kill, for example. In fact, he added, most ethnic groups in Sarawak had always been familiar with the Ten Commandments—all apart from those which dealt specifically with the worship of the Christian God. Accordingly, he often encouraged his catechumens to respect non-Christian village leaders and ritual chiefs, even if it meant following taboo periods and procedures. After all, he reflected, ‘what sort of Christians would they be if they couldn’t even respect the old ways?’

While teaching Bidayuhs to love God and reject sin, then, missionaries and later, native catechists, also appear to have nurtured certain elements of *adat*-based sociality as compatible with Christian teaching. As seen in the vernacular narrative outlined earlier, for example, Christians were depicted as one household (*rawang*)—the base unit of belonging, ownership, and obligation in Bidayuh society—and sinning and repenting as breaking off and reinstating kin relations with God. Perhaps the clearest manifestation of such rapprochement, however, can be found in many Anglicans’ and Catholics’ understanding of soteriology. Most of them agree that the *telos* of following Christianity is to get to Heaven—or at least to avoid becoming a lost soul with no place to go. Yet people achieve this goal not by acting on their own, but by acting as one household on earth and taking care of each other. Individuals may be the salvific units of Christianity (Robbins 2004:293), but salvation itself is seen as a collective project to be performed on earth. Conversely, it is striking that Hell barely registers in my acquaintances’ consciousness, while concepts such as original sin and Purgatory, which pivot on ideas of individual edification and redemption, are virtually unheard of.<sup>xiii</sup>

Far from being consumed by millennial concerns or thoughts of repentance, my acquaintances thus to structure their Christian lives around the here and now: around translating that loving relationship with God into love for the people around them. I first realized this while trying to explain the practice of ‘giving something up’ for Lent—say, meat, Coca-Cola, or new clothes—to a Catholic friend. This notion of self-denial, however, flummoxed her, and she kept asking, ‘you mean they give these things *to* poor or sick people?’ Why, she reasoned, should people refrain from certain things if it benefitted no one else? Her own understanding of Lent was shaped by local churches’ depiction of it—in keeping with earlier vernacularizing efforts—as a lengthy *patang* on *rami* (festive, celebratory, crowded) events such as birthday parties. Instead, Christians are encouraged to go out and perform good deeds in community, such as by visiting and feeding the poor and the sick.

It is here, I suggest, that we get to the gist of Christian morality in Bidayuh life. For most of my acquaintances, being a good Christian is synonymous with being a good social person: one who consistently does the *patut* thing, contributes to social well-being, and avoids the glare of collective disapproval that generates feelings of *mangŭh*. In some ways, this is a continuation of the pre-Christian *adat*-based model of morality discussed earlier. However, it has also been cultivated through the conversion process itself. Christianity may have introduced a model of moral personhood centered on love, sin, and individual responsibility—but somewhere along the line, it merged with one that drew inspiration from, dovetailed with, and ultimately elaborated existing notions of morality as a socially-grounded and socially-sanctioned sphere. To love God, one must also love one’s neighbor: a principle which missionaries themselves demonstrated through their

clinics and classes in rural areas. (Indeed, the first convert to Anglicanism in my fieldsite explained that he and his friends had been deeply impressed by the kindness and generosity of the staff at the nearby mission-run clinic, which in turn drew them to Christianity.) This sense of ‘horizontal’ embeddedness and responsibility appears to have lent Christianity some of its early resonance in Bidayuh villages, and has since remained one of its most appealing attributes.

In short, I suggest, conversion to Christianity has given Bidayuhs two intertwined models of moral personhood and action: one centered on the individual as a social being, the other on the individual as a self-regulating Godly being. Although each has a different locus, both share the same *outcome*: social cohesion, peace, and unity. On a day-to-day basis, the distinctions between them are elided, since being a responsible God-loving individual and a good social person often go hand-in-hand. Unlike Robbins’ Urapmin informants (2004), my acquaintances thus do not have to juggle two distinct, intact ‘cultures’ that co-exist side by side. In fact, the idea that different models of morality might exist hardly crosses their minds, because they are almost always occluded in daily life. However, there are certain moments during the year when those fissures are fleetingly revealed, precipitating anxieties over continuity, change, cohesion, and rupture. These revolve around the practice of *adat gawai*.

#### Moral dilemmas and the *gawai* question

Since the 1970s, *adat gawai* has been in steady decline, and is now followed by shrinking groups of elderly people in certain villages, including my fieldsite. A ritual complex

resigned to manage relations with a range of spirit entities—including ancestors, demons, local place spirits, and the rice spirit—*adat gawai* today is mostly observed through loud, lengthy, festive ceremonies that take place at the longhouse, the blessings of which extend to the entire community. Every event is labor-intensive, requiring the collection of jungle materials for the construction of ritual structures and objects, the preparation of large quantities of food offerings, and the playing of drums and gongs to accompany the practitioners' dances.

Burdened by failing health and dwindling numbers, most of today's *gawai* practitioners can no longer fulfill these tasks on their own. Over the last two decades, they have thus come to rely on their (Christian) children, grandchildren, and neighbors for help to keep the rituals going. In my adoptive village, there even is a whole 'gawai committee' consisting of Anglican and Catholic volunteers who regularly help out at ceremonies, supported by village funds. Their participation, however, begs a number of questions. Chief among these is why, despite the time, expense, and physical difficulty required, and despite local churches' ambivalence about their actions, do these Christians keep getting involved? Why, for that matter, do the vast majority of Christians in the village maintain that supporting *gawai* is the right thing to do? To address these questions, it is worth looking briefly at how most Anglicans and Catholics in my fieldsite depict the relationship between Christianity and the old ways.

For a start, most helpers insist that they are all worshipping the same God, *Tăpa*—the name of the 'supreme being' (Geddes 1954:25) in *adat gawai* which is also the vernacular term for the Christian God—and that they are simply helping their elders pray to him in their own, 'original' (*asar*) way. 'Satan,' on the other hand, has become a



byword for all malignant spirit entities, and is used as such by both Christians and *gawai* people. Nomenclature aside, villagers also assert that both *adats* share the same basic objectives and mechanisms: to bring good things to the community and throw away the bad. This is often extended by the observation that Christians and *gawai* practitioners use and consume the same substances, notably ‘holy water’ (*piin kudus*), pork, and alcohol.

Beyond invoking an underlying sameness between Christianity and *gawai*, Anglicans and Catholics also use elements of each to explicate the other, thus crafting a two-way link between them. As we have already seen with Lent, for example, *patang* has now become part of Bidayuh Christianity as a generic term for prohibited things and practices. Meanwhile, Christian frameworks and ideas are also being used to elucidate the old ways. While documenting a *gawai* ritual, for example, I was told by a young Anglican helper that the wooden sculptures of the village’s chief guardian spirits, which had to be carved anew every year, were ‘just like communion’—constantly renewed material bodies for the same spirit presence. Similarly, Fiona Harris, who worked in another Bidayuh village, recalls how one of her informants summed up the place of sacrifice in both *gawai* and Christianity by explaining that “‘it’s all about the blood and the body’” (2001:175).

These examples, and others which I have documented elsewhere (Chua 2012), suggest that rather than disconnecting themselves from *adat gawai*, many Christian Bidayuh have found ways of maintaining and cultivating links between them. In some cases, this involves treating *gawai* and Christianity as homologues—as having a temporal or genealogical link—while in others, it entails depicting them as analogues, and thus contiguous or commensurable. What these disparate strategies share, however, is an

underlying conviction that there should be no rupture between the old ways and Christianity.

Why is this tendency toward continuity *speaking* so widespread in the village? Apart from the ethno-theological considerations examined earlier, there are various social, political, and economic factors on which I can only touch here (see Chua 2012). First, Bidayuh throughout Sarawak are increasingly viewing *adat gawai* as their unique ‘culture’ (*budaya*) which is worth preserving and maintaining. This perspective appears to have been fostered by two convergent influences: Christian ‘inculturation’ policies and Malaysian multiculturalism. Sanctioned by mainstream churches worldwide from about the mid-1970s, ‘inculturation’ lent institutional shape to the vernacularizing efforts which missionaries, such as those in Sarawak, had been undertaking for years. Premised on the assumption that ‘indigenous beliefs and ritual practices reflect and embody local and culturally particular religious expressions of ... universal Christian values’ (Orta 2006:173), it often involves the incorporation of local idioms, concepts, and artifacts into Christian protocol, with the hope that these will render its tenets legible to converts (see also Chupungco 1992, Schineller 1990, Shorter 1989, Tovey 2004). Consequently, rather than making converts discard their *adat gawai* paraphernalia, churches in Sarawak began redefining and valorizing them as ‘culture,’ incorporating them into prayer services and church décor (e.g. Mashman and Nayoi 2000). These efforts converged from the 1980s with those of the Malaysian government, which, in its bid to foster a sense of multicultural diversity and promote tourism, began isolating and packaging aspects of its many ethnic groups as ‘culture.’ Given its colorful, distinctively Bidayuh and eminently objectifiable nature, *adat gawai* once again came to fill this niche (see Chua 2012).

Allied to these developments is a third issue: the looming presence of Islam, which is followed by the politically dominant Malay majority in Malaysia. Islam is an unpalatable option for many Bidayuhs, who see it as enacting its own form of rupture, forcing converts to sever relations with their kin and neighbors and to stop consuming pork and alcohol, which are central to village-based sociality (see also Connolly 2009). Conversely, Christianity is said to allow Bidayuhs to ‘return to their own *adat*’ (Chua 2007:269); to eat, socialize, and live as they did prior to conversion. In addition, statist discourses generally portray non-monotheistic ritual practices such as *adat gawai* as ‘tribal’ or ‘folk’ religions (*agama suku kaum/folk*), which, as in Indonesia (Kipp and Rodgers 1987), are deemed backward and inferior if not translated into ‘cultural’ terms. To a certain extent, then, my acquaintances’ insistence on maintaining ties with the past may be construed as a plucky rebuff to the dominant discourse; a veiled critique of the ethno-religious politics which they greatly resent (Chua 2007). Such maneuvers highlight the crucial point, sometimes obscured by the recent focus on Christianity as a culture of discontinuity, that there are many historical, political, and economic factors which determine the shapes it takes in reality.<sup>xiii</sup>

While all these influence Christians’ attitudes towards *adat gawai*, however, they arguably pale in comparison to another consideration: the simple fact that those elderly practitioners are also their parents, relatives, and neighbors. They live as part of the village and are part of its social fabric. And to damage that fabric by refusing to help or criticizing their rituals on *religious* grounds would, I suggest, run contrary to a long-standing *moral* imperative—prevalent before conversion and further developed by it—to be good social beings. In other words, it would be viewed as both un-Christian and not

*patut* to upset the social balance by compromising relations with the *gawai* elders. As described earlier, Bidayuh Christianity has long had to negotiate with and accommodate *adat gawai*, from the start of large-scale conversion in the 1960s up to the present. In these largely Christian days, accommodation is no longer a necessity—but it certainly remains an ideal, heightened by the awareness of *adat gawai*'s imminent demise. For most of my Anglican and Catholic informants, it simply makes good moral and Christian sense to support the old ways.

Yet their efforts to do so are not, as we have seen, devoid of anxiety. In these moments, I suggest, my Bidayuh acquaintances experience what Zigon calls a 'moral breakdown': a point at which 'morality, as both lived and embodied and discursively articulated, becomes a conscious question or dilemma' (2008:18). It is here that a distinction between Christian and *adat*-based moral registers arises—and is quickly quashed. The question of how to deal with *gawai* rituals presents my acquaintances with an unfamiliar moral dilemma: to act as good Christians or to act as good social beings? Given that the two are usually conflated, their brief divergence is, I suggest, troubling. On the whole, most Anglicans and Catholics seem to have overcome that problem by insisting on a contiguous relationship between *adat gawai* and Christianity. Yet in doing so, they cast themselves into a different dilemma, because this is not the stance that their *evangelical* kin and neighbors take on the matter.

We now come to the final player in the village's Christian landscape: the small but active congregation of the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB), or Borneo Evangelical Church. The successor to a multid denominational organization set up by Australian missionaries in 1928,<sup>xiv</sup> the SIB is one of the fastest-growing churches in Malaysia. Introduced to my

adoptive village in the early 1990s by two former Anglicans who had encountered it while living and working in Kuching, its congregation has grown slowly but not substantially to about twenty-five former Anglican households—a distinct minority in a village with over four hundred households.<sup>xv</sup> According to the SIBs with whom I have discussed this matter, their second ‘conversion’ took place because they felt dissatisfied with their lack of Bible knowledge and their vice-filled lifestyles—neither of which, they said, the Anglican church could deal with. By contrast, the SIB offers a robust, scripture-centric mode of Christianity, as well as a ‘clean’-living regime that discourages smoking, alcohol-consumption, gambling, and other behavior deemed wayward or immoral. Such modes of religiosity are understood to bring about a state of true repentance and knowledge of Christ, without which Christians will not be saved on Judgment Day.

The SIBs may thus be seen as having made a double break with the past—first, with *adat gawai* when they became Anglican, and second, with the Anglican church itself. However, while the latter is at least Christian (if reproachably lax), the former is an entirely different kettle of fish. Most SIBs depict the old rituals as relics of a sinful, ‘pagan’ past and the work of the devil, the mere proximity to which can threaten Christians’ spiritual development and relationship with God in the present. In an ideal world, *adat gawai* would have been consigned to the dust-heap of pre-Christian history; but in places like my fieldsite, the only real option for SIBs is to steer well clear of it. Consequently, they conspicuously avoid the several *gawai* ceremonies that take place each year, and bar the practitioners from their houses during the annual village-wide blessing (*nawar*)—a habit which other Christians, who are generally happy to participate in it, find off-putting. Moreover, as my opening anecdote revealed, SIB members in some

villages have actively sought to convert their *gawai* parents by rubbishing their rituals as evil and useless—something most Anglicans and Catholics would hardly dream of doing.

Like Pentecostalist and other fundamentalist churches worldwide, SIB Christianity thus ‘represent[s] the process of becoming Christian as ... a rupture in the time line of a person’s life that cleaves it into a before and after’ (Robbins 2007:11). This exclusivist model of Christianity admits no competition, contradictions, or dregs from the past. Neither does it leave room (in theory) for the persistence of the ‘wrong’ sort of social ties; at the end of the day, SIBs are very aware that ‘families, churches, denominations, and towns do not get saved, only individuals do’ (Robbins 2004:293). This sense of salvation as an individualist project suffuses their experience of Christianity. Sermons by church elders, for example, are riddled with terms such as ‘individual responsibility’ and ‘inner change,’ while services are characterized by spontaneous, individual eruptions of prayer which instantiate the speakers’ unmediated, personal relationship with God. Cumulatively, such concepts, practices, and modes of organization give rise to the conviction among SIBs that they are Christians who ‘owe their salvation to no one but themselves and God’ (Bialecki, Haynes and Robbins 2008:1147).

In reality, of course, social life in the village is less straightforward than this overview implies. Like Anglicans and Catholics, SIBs are aware of their responsibilities and obligations as members of the village’s moral community, and are keen subscribers to the ‘love thy neighbor’ ethos which took root during large-scale Christianization. On a day-to-day basis, SIBs thus do behave as good village residents, living and interacting quite normally with their *gawai*-following kin and neighbors. However, unlike the Anglicans and Catholics, they draw the line at actual *adat gawai* rituals. It is in those

moments, I suggest, that their sense of *communal* obligation gives way to their *religious* convictions; that their moral identity as social beings is eclipsed by their identity as conscientious, individual Christians.

Put differently, SIBs are not immune to the moral dilemmas faced by Anglicans and Catholics over the continued presence of *adat gawai* in the community. Their response to those quandaries, however, has been conspicuously different. Rather than aligning pre-Christian and Christian morality, the SIBs have pulled them apart by refusing to have anything to do with *adat gawai* rituals. In the process, they make uncomfortably visible the fissures between the different moral impulses, as well as the different modes of Christian religiosity at play in the community during this period of religious transition. And while all Christian Bidayuhs have had to grapple with those fissures at one point or another, it is through the *adat gawai* ‘question’ that they become most palpable—and most divisive.

## Conclusion

Writing about Zimbabwean apostolics in 2004, Matthew Engelke argued that ‘[w]e stand to gain from the language of breaks not because it replaces the language of continuity but because it compliments it’ (2004:106). Several years and an entire subfield on, we may perhaps revisit that statement and ask ourselves what taking seriously the language—and practices—of *continuity* implies for the anthropology of Christianity and conversion more broadly.

I have addressed this question by thinking through a situation of denominational pluralism in which Christianity has cultural import but cannot be said to form a singular, uncontested ‘culture.’ Like other studies of complex, internally-variegated Christian contexts (e.g. Barker 2003; Hemer 2011; Jebens 2011; Koepping 2006; McDonald 2001; McDougall 2009b; Ryle 2010), this ethnography is a reminder that Christianity itself is at the very least multifaceted, even if it is not completely multiple. This point is worth underscoring in relation to recent scholarly developments. Despite its advocates’ disclaimers, the new anthropology of Christianity is in practice dominated by rupture-oriented, all-engulfing forms of Protestantism, which can act almost as ‘synecdoche[s] for Christianity as a whole’ (Coleman 2010:799). By highlighting the tensions between three churches, I have shown how different strains of Christianity accentuate or downplay (dis)continuity in different ways. In this respect, the study of continuity speaking can shed light on the variations—but also similarities—*within* Christianity.

As we have seen, however, my acquaintances’ responses to the *adat gawai* question are not influenced solely by Christianity. This brings me to my second point: the fact that anthropologists can take Christianity’s distinctive characteristics seriously *without* necessarily treating it as a bounded, coherent culture, as Robbins has recently been criticized for doing (e.g. Englund 2007:482; McDougall 2009a; Scott 2005). This is not a radically new proposition. Although proponents of the anthropology of Christianity lament the lack of serious prior engagement with it (e.g. Bialecki, Haynes, and Robbins 2008:1140; Cannell 2006:8-14; Robbins 2003:193, 2007; Tomlinson and Engelke 2006:19-20), I would argue that many earlier studies did deal subtly with Christianity’s transformative and ‘monolithic characteristics’ (Whitehouse 2006:296).<sup>xvi</sup> A decade



before Robbins and others began calling for an anthropology of Christianity, for instance, John Barker was already critiquing scholars for ‘writ[ing Melanesian Christians] out of ethnographies’ (1992:145-46) and advocating that they ‘take Melanesian Christianity seriously as an ethnographic subject’ (ibid.:146). Closer to Borneo, Kathleen Adams (1993), Lorraine Aragon (1996, 2000), and Vincente Rafael (1993), among others, were also delving into the theological content of Christianity while grounding their analyses in historical, political, and social specificity.

Against this background, what I am arguing for is thus a renewed commitment to ethnographic thickness; to a ‘non-essentialising treatment of Christianity’ (Scott 2005:102) that embeds but does not engulf it within other socio-cultural, economic, and political networks. Such an approach steers us away from reifying continuity and discontinuity as clear-cut, diametrically opposed categories, and towards understanding the shades and degrees that they take in reality. As Engelke (2004, 2010) and Meyer (1998) have so convincingly shown, even the most committed fundamentalist Christians can struggle to achieve the ‘complete break with the past’ (Meyer 1998) demanded by their churches; ‘[r]upture’ in these instances is always ‘relative to person and place’ (Engelke 2010:191). In the same way, discourses and practices of continuity can reveal the entanglements, constraints, and possibilities that shape Christians’ lives—not all of which are directly related to Christian ‘culture’.

The corollary to this is that more than analyzing conversion as a temporal phenomenon, anthropologists must also pay more careful attention to its profound relationality. As will have been evident in this ethnography, continuity speaking among Bidayus is not only about the relationship between past and present, but also implies a

whole network of social, political, and moral relations with *gawai* practitioners and the rest of the world. The dilemmas faced by Bidayuh Christians arise not because temporality and relationality are routinely conflated (which they often are), but precisely because they can be differentiated, for the pre-Christian past, *adat gawai* rituals, and the elderly practitioners are simply not the same thing.

Rather than treating conversion primarily as a process, then, I suggest that anthropologists should also analyze and theorize it as a positioning: as a simultaneously temporal, relational, and shifting set of configurations that encompass both Christians and non-Christians in a shared world. More than asking what people convert from and to, such an approach also invites us to ask who converts, who doesn't, and when and how its various temporal and relational dimensions come into play or are suppressed. At a time of renewed scholarly interest in the topic of conversion, its limits, and its possibilities (e.g. Robbins 2007; Lindenfeld and Richardson 2011; Pelkmans 2009), such questions can only help to challenge and enrich the anthropology of Christianity and religion.

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup> Notable examples include Bialecki, Haynes, and Robbins 2008; Cannell 2005, 2006; Engelke and Tomlinson 2006; Keane 2007; Tomlinson 2009. For responses to this emerging trend, see Barker 2008; Coleman 2010; Hann 2007; Hann and Goltz 2010; Lampe 2010; McDougall 2009b.

<sup>ii</sup> This, I would argue, is an overstatement; as Chris Hann points out, ‘one finds that virtually every new paradigm in the anthropology of religion [over the last half-century] has been applied to Christianity’ (2007:404).

<sup>iii</sup> Among the small but growing number of ethnographies to deal with this theme are Amster 2009, Broz 2009, Hann and Goltz, ed. 2010, McDonald 2001, Ryle 2010, and Scott 2007.

<sup>iv</sup> While a comprehensive examination of *adat*’s many manifestations is beyond the scope of this article, discussions of its role in indigenous societies in the Malay world can be found in Hefner 1985, Metcalf 1991, and Schiller 1997.

<sup>v</sup> The codified version of Adat Bidayuh states that the aim of *adat* is to ensure peaceful and happy relations between people in the community and to preserve the well-being (‘settled life’) of the village (Adat Bidayuh 1994:i).

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<sup>vi</sup> Even in situations where conversion (or revival) has been strongly rupture-*oriented*, one often finds instances of continuity in both discourse and practice. Matthew Amster, for example, has shown how the largely evangelical Kelabit have ‘resacralise[d] local landscape in a Christian idiom’ (2009:318), rather than ‘purging their rural homelands of primordial elements’ (ibid.:313).

<sup>vii</sup> The first missionaries to arrive in Sarawak in 1847 were Anglican (SPG). They were joined by Catholic missionaries (1881) and later, American Methodists, Seventh-Day Adventists, and other groups. For details, see Kedit et al. 1998, Lees 1979, Rooney 1981, and Saunders 1992.

<sup>viii</sup> Not all communities, however, went down this route. Some Christians in Singai (Lindell 2000) and Sadong, for example, were forced to establish new settlements elsewhere to get round the problem of communal *patangs*. However, such fragmentation arguably reflected a similar moral imperative: to alleviate social tensions by avoiding them altogether.

<sup>ix</sup> I draw here on Michael Scott’s definition of ‘ethno-theology’ as ‘the indigenous theological speculations and constructions of both laypersons and clergy’ (2005:102).

<sup>x</sup> Sold by the parish church in the town nearest my fieldsite, this primer is read by literate villagers and church leaders and used in catechism classes. Along with other printed material such as the Bible, newsletters, and hymnals, sermons by priests and prayer leaders, and institutionally-prescribed observances such as Lent and Advent, it is an important node through which the content, morals, and practices of Christianity are disseminated throughout rural communities.

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<sup>xi</sup> Here, ‘believe in’ does not imply assent to a propositional statement, but rather a sense of trust in something and ‘a commitment to act in a certain way toward it’ (Robbins 2007:14).

<sup>xii</sup> While these concepts exist in the vernacular theology, they are not widely discussed. Joseph Goh, a former Franciscan friar who worked in the area, suggests that the closest Bidayuh equivalent to ‘Purgatory’ is *sibayan*—a pre-Christian concept meaning ‘the place of departed spirits’ (Nais 1988:534).

<sup>xiii</sup> For critical responses to this tendency, see Comaroff 2010:529; Hann 2007:402, Englund 2007:482, McDougall 2009a:1-3, Pelkmans 2010:12, and Scott 2005:106.

<sup>xiv</sup> For histories of the SIB, see Amster 1998 and Lees 1979.

<sup>xv</sup> Of these, just over a hundred households are Catholic, while the rest are mostly Anglican.

<sup>xvi</sup> A small selection includes Aragon 1996; Barker 1992, 2003; Christian 1989; Hefner 1993; Horton 1971; James and Johnson 1988; Peel 2000; Rafael 1993.

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