

**Borneo again: media, social life and nation-building
among the Iban of Malaysian Borneo**

Ph.D. Social Anthropology

200

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Abstract

This study examines the social and political significance of media among the Iban of Sarawak, in Malaysian Borneo. It is intended to contribute both to the ethnographic literature on the Iban and to a neglected field of inquiry of key theoretical and practical importance: the anthropological study of media. The thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter introduces the problem by critically reviewing the relevant literature from social anthropology and media studies. The second chapter deals with the production side of modern media from an historical perspective. The production of a modern Iban identity through radio and print media in the 1960s was superseded in the 1970s by a more vigorous rival project supported through television and textbooks: the creation of a Malaysian national culture. The third chapter explores the 'social life and afterlife' of television sets in the Saribas region as they enter into the gift and exchange systems that bind the living and the dead, including burial rites at which television sets are destroyed. This approach reveals growing wealth disparities in rural Sarawak as well as culture-specific ways in which media artefacts are appropriated and disposed of. Chapter Four analyses the critical role of radio, television, public-address systems and other media in the organisation of social time and space in Saribas longhouse communities. I argue that these media help local people to routinely naturalize clock and calendar time both in their daily and festive lives. Chapter Five focuses on the relationship between media practices and the local Saribas ideology, or 'ideolect'. A close examination of school essays, public-address speeches and television commentary reveals a consistent set of developmentalist ideas cutting across these diverse practices. Chapter Six compares and contrasts the findings from the Saribas area (chapters 3-5) with those from a more remote region, the Skrang. I stress the importance of indigenised Christian prayer books in providing recent converts with tools with which to make sense of troubling reports from television and radio, notably news of war, famine and the spread of infectious diseases. Chapter Seven is a summary and conclusion.

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Abbreviations

BLB	Borneo Literature Bureau
CATS	Communicating Aspiration Throughout Sarawak (commercial radio station)
DPB	Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Language Planning and Development Agency)
ICT	Information and communication technology
JKR	Jabatan Kerja Raya (formerly Public Works Department)
PAS	1. Public-address system. 2. Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (Party Islam SeMalaysia)
PBB	Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu
PBS	Parti Bersatu Sabah
PBDS	Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak
PESAKA	Parti Pesaka Anak Sarawak
RASCOM	Rajang Security Command
RM	Malaysian ringgit (see note below)
RMS	Radio Malaysia Sarawak
RTM	Radio Televisyen Malaysia
SED	Sarawak Education Department
SNAP	Sarawak National Party
STC	Sarawak Transport Company
TBC	Tiew Brothers Company (pop music, esp. Iban)
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation (West Malaysia)

Note on currency

The Malaysian ringgit (RM) was pegged at RM3: US\$1 before the 1970s. Since the adoption of flexible exchange rates in the early 1970s, it fluctuated within the range of RM 2.4-2.7 to the US dollar (Gomez and Jomo 1997: xiv) until the sharp devaluation of September 1997. At the time of writing (9 December 1999) the rate was RM 3.8 to the US dollar and RM 6.17 to sterling.

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Map 1: Location of Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia within Southeast Asia. From Taylor (1994).

Chapter 1

Introduction: notes towards an integrated anthropology of the media

This PhD thesis is an anthropological investigation into the social and historical significance of modern media among the Iban of Sarawak, in Malaysian Borneo. By 'modern media' I mean those information and communication technologies (or ICTs) that rely on a modern industrial economy for their production and distribution. In the case of late twentieth-century Iban society, these ICTs include radio, television, videos, audiocassettes, the print media, time devices (e.g. wristwatches), telephones and public-address systems.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section provides a background to the Iban of Sarawak and to anthropological studies of this society. I argue that the twin problems of social time and social space, central to the study of social change and the media, have not been adequately problematised in this field of research. The second section is a review of the key works in US mass communications research and British media studies, including a subsection on media research in Malaysia. This section also delineates some of the contemporary trends in the fledgling, yet diverse, area of 'media anthropology' in order to situate this study in relation to them. Finally, I describe the field sites and methods on which this study is based.

1. Background to the Iban

The Iban, formerly known as 'Sea Dyaks', are

a vigorous, outwardly expansive people of West-Central Borneo who number some 400 000 in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak. Despite increasing urban migration, the great majority live in longhouse settlements along the main rivers and smaller streams of the interior and subcoastal districts. Here most subsist by shifting hill-rice agriculture, supplemented by the cultivation of perennial cash crops, most notably rubber (Sather 1994: 66).

The Iban originate from Sumatra or the Malayan Peninsula. Recorded genealogies indicate that they have lived in Sarawak for up to 15 generations (Jensen 1974: 18). At some stage before the 13th century arrival of Islam in Southeast Asia they must have migrated to Borneo, tracing descent today to the Kapuas region in West Kalimantan, Indonesia (King 1993:49). Until the end of the 14th century Borneo was under the Hindu-Javanese Empire of Majahapit. In 1478 much of the region came under the nominal rule of the Islamic Sultanate of Brunei. In 1841 the English adventurer James Brooke became the first Rajah and Governor of Sarawak. His successor, Charles Brooke, expanded the territory twentifold via cession, annexation and purchase until his death in 1917. The Brooke state

does not fit squarely into the normal typology of colonial regimes. Most important in this respect is the fact that Sarawak was not a part of any great imperial whole...It was an autonomous state, with the Brooke Rajahs being almost absolute rulers who ran the state on a largely personal basis...Sarawak remained practically closed to capitalistic development throughout the period of the Brooke regime [1841-1941], to such a degree that it gained a rather sarcastic reputation of being an 'anthropological zoo' (Uchibori 1988: 252).

As a result of the policies of the Brooke state, in some areas much of the Iban way of life was preserved until the Japanese occupation in the early 1940s, including occasional headhunting expeditions against old enemies. Partly as a way of eluding European control, Iban communities continued to migrate throughout the Brooke era. Thus the Rejang valley was colonised in the mid-19th century, the Baleh some decades later. Late pioneers had renewed conflicts with other ethnic groups such as the Seru and Bukitan in the Saribas, or the Kayan and Kenyah in the Upper Rejang. In the 19th century some Iban groups moved into the deltaic plains to cultivate wet rice, rubber, pepper and to earn wages in the towns of Sarawak. The great Brooke expedition of 1863, with 12,000 men, most of them Iban, was launched to 'pacify' the Kayan in the Upper Rejang. From there the Iban moved to the Baram River. Today, Iban communities can also be found across the border in Sabah (East Malaysia) and Brunei.

Sarawak has three ecological regions: swampy plains, rolling hills and mountains. The rivers are treacherous nearer to their source and sluggish, meandering in lowland areas, forming huge swampy plains. Rolling hills are said to be the Iban heartland, where its inhabitants cultivate dry rice. Their 'slash and burn' method of cultivation required periodic migration. Once settled, they could stay on by recultivating land from generation to generation, as farmland was allowed to revert to secondary forest to regain its fertility (Sather 1994: 3).

The following account of 'Iban society' is largely based on existing anthropological writings. A word of warning is called for at this point. As I argue in the next section, most of these texts have leant heavily on the 'ethnographic present' in order to construct models of what Freeman (1980: 7) has called 'pristine Iban society', a society untouched by the forces of migrant labour, administration, schooling and modern media.

The longhouse is the centre of traditional Iban society. It consists of a communal gallery (*ruai*) and a series of collateral family rooms or apartments known as *bilik*. Freeman (1970: 129) has defined the longhouse not as 'a communal pavilion', as some have suggested, but rather as 'a street of privately owned, semi-detached houses'. A later scholar, Sather (1994: 65) has offered an alternative model to what he sees as Freeman's 'fixed, physical matrix'. To him the longhouse is a 'ritually constituted structure' in which ritual 'orders' persons and artefacts in time and space. In chapter 4, I argue for a more comprehensive model which captures the social and technological changes that are transforming Iban society. I see the longhouse as a fixed, physical matrix during most of everyday life, as an organisation that subordinates *bilik*-family interests to those of the community during ritual periods, and as a modern organisation dependent upon the demands of an inflexible labour market and school system.

The Iban have a cognatic social system, and a corresponding bilateral system of kinship nomenclature whereby one's relations (*kaban*) are traced through both the male and female line. The *pun bilik* is the most senior member of the family. From this person stem the rights of ownership and inheritance of other family members. Recruitment is by marriage, adoption or incorporation -- there is no difference in terms of rights. Residence is the primary qualification of membership (Freeman 1992 [1955]: 28). The *bilik* is economically self-sufficient, although occasionally families will engage in *bedurok*, a system of labour-exchange among relatives (Richards 1981: 76). *Bilik*-families own treasured heirlooms (*pesaka*), such as jewellery, gongs, ceramics, gold and silver ornaments. Jensen (1974:41) calls these heirlooms 'prestige property', with their acquisition often linked to feats of war or trade in remote lands (but see chapter 3 on the acquisition of television sets). Ritual property cannot be sold, each *bilik* being a discrete ritual unit with its own magical charms (*pengaruh*), head trophies (*antu pala*) and sacred rice (*padi pun*).

Iban social ideology is egalitarian. Some differentiation exists in terms of wealth and influence, although there is no institutionalised subordination. Freeman (1970:129) writes: 'Iban society is classless and egalitarian -- and its members, individualists, aggressive and proud in demeanour, lacking any taste of obeisance'. This egalitarianism stands in stark contrast to other Bornean societies such as the Kayan -- a fact the Iban themselves are always keen to point out. As an Iban elder commented: 'Among the Iban everyone paddles; Kayan chiefs just sit in their canoes' (Freeman 1981: 30)

Historically, the highly competitive ethos of traditional Iban society forced each new generation to prove its worth -- social status was not inherited. Prior to the Brooke Raj, there was no formal Iban leadership. Leaders were chosen for a particular purpose, such as wandering in search of heirlooms (*bejalai*), or headhunting (*kayau*). The elders (*tuañ*) were chosen for their knowledge of the customary law

(*adat*) and their rhetorical prowess (cf. present-day decline in oratory, chapter 5). In this respect the *adat* can be seen as a means of social regulation in the absence of political authority. The Brookes created the office of longhouse headman (*tuai rumah*), who was appointed by the governor or district officer, this being a departure from pre-contact Iban ways. Attempts to create a chieftainship by the Rajahs were however firmly resisted by the Iban. Eventually, the office of 'native chief' (*penghulu*) was created in 1883. This male role consisted, amongst other things, in running the administration, collecting taxes, and disseminating information. He was appointed by the administration and was responsible for a number of headmen. From 1949, Iban headmen have been democratically elected by longhouse residents, although district officers can still reject headmen and withhold their annual allowances. In practice, headmen have no power to command but through a 'subtle mixture of persuasion and admonition' (Freeman 1970: 113). In Davison's (1987:108) summary, the Iban longhouse is an

acephalous meritocracy, bound together as a ritual community, but otherwise fragmented into autonomous *bilek*-families which interact with one another in an egalitarian but highly competitive social milieu

The place of women in Iban society is not greatly discussed in the ethnographic literature (see Davison and Sutlive 1991). This 'egalitarian society', e.g. in its utrolateral residence pattern, excluded women from the core avenues to prestige and status, namely headhunting and 'wandering' (*be'jala*). Two quintessentially female activities were weaving and dyeing. Surviving ritual and oral literature demonstrates however that skilled weavers were in fact highly regarded.

Until recently, the Iban were first and foremost, swidden agriculturalists. To them 'rice cultivation is not merely a technique for acquiring food but a total way of life that is supported by and in turn reinforces Iban theology, cosmology and eschatology' (Sutlive 1978:63). Rice farming is both a ritual activity and an agricultural technique (Sather 1992: 107). They believe that rice has a 'spirit', or *semangat padi*,

associated with a sacred strain of rice (*padi pun*) owned by the family. It is planted every season to act as a focal point for the annual cycle (Davison and Sutlive 1991:161) The Borneo environment is not so much harsh as it is unpredictable. Elaborate agricultural rites are adapted to the vagaries of nature in an activity where timing is of the essence (Jensen 1974: 209, Sather 1992: 110).

To the Iban, humans also have a *semengat*, better understood as a 'spirit' than as a 'soul', for the latter term carries an anthropocentric bias of western origin. Indeed, all matter, inanimate and animate, possesses a spirit or counterpart (Richards 1981:336). It can be defined as a latent identity, or as a vital essence and animating principle. A person's *semengat* is distinguished from the body (*tuboh*) but is not entirely independent from it, for his or her health and well-being depend on it. This *semengat* has a volition of its own, so it can be held responsible for the deeds of a person. When a person dies, his or her spirit migrates to the Afterworld, or *Sebayan* (see chapter 3). The continuity between the two worlds, it is often said, is as thin as the skin of a brinjal (*terong*) fruit. Unlike the Christian soul, the *semengat* is not eternal: it dissolves into dew absorbed by rice, thus completing a cycle. Ultimately it dissolves into nothingness.

Recent political changes

Sarawak achieved its independence from Britain within the Malaysian Federation in 1963. Today the Iban are the most numerous ethnic group in Sarawak, making up approximately 30 % of the population, followed by the Chinese (29%) and Malays (21%). The other Dayaks represent the remaining 20% (Jawan 1994: 24). The first two Chief Ministers of Sarawak were Iban, although political pre-eminence was soon hindered by factionalism, and power today firmly resides with the Melanau and Malay Muslims, backed by the Malay leadership in Kuala Lumpur (see chapter 2 and Jawan 1993, 1994). The past three decades have seen a sustained expansion

of the Malaysian state with the spread of large-scale farming, education (Seymour 1974, 1977), urbanisation (Sutlive 1972, 1978), migration (Kedit 1993) and the media. The Iban are now an ethnic group scattered across three Bornean nation-states (Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei) with the same official language (Malay) but unique national culture projects.

Iban studies

In a recently compiled checklist of materials on the Iban and related peoples, V.T. King (n.d. ii-iv), a veteran student of Borneo who considers himself 'rather marginal to Iban studies', looks with 'both envy and admiration at the amount of material which is available on the Ibans in comparison with that for other indigenous groups of Borneo'. In his view, this abundance results from a number of historical circumstances. First, from the demographic importance achieved throughout northern Borneo by the Iban as they 'assimilated, subjugated or drove out other indigenous peoples' (see Sather 1994 and Sandin 1994). Second, from the 'Iban resilience in the face of Western imperialism' which led the Brooke Raj in Sarawak to commission a number of studies on them, a tradition continued by the British colonial government after the Japanese Occupation. Third, from the work of 'several very active scholars'. Among these, he singles out Derek Freeman who ensured that the Iban became 'a most important case study in anthropological debates about cognatic social organisation, shifting agriculture, and various ritual matters including headhunting and shamanism'. But he also notes the contribution of indigenous Iban scholars, especially that of Benedict Sandin, an ethnohistorian and folklorist, and James Masing (1981), a former student of Freeman's who studied bardic lore. Finally, he singles out two prominent 'post-Freeman' anthropologists: Vinson Sutlive and Clifford Sather. In addition, I would add one more scholar, Anthony Richards, whose thoroughly researched *Iban-English Dictionary* (1981) remains an indispensable research tool in Iban lands.

The earliest writings about the Iban, formerly Sea Dyaks, date back to the times of James Brooke, the first White Rajah of Sarawak, whose reign began in 1841. They consist largely of private correspondence, government reports, personal memoirs, and at a later stage, of accounts by European travellers, scientists and missionaries. Before the establishment of European rule, the past was the exclusive domain of indigenous genealogists (*tukang tusuf*), bards (*lemambang*) (Jawan 1994: 21, King n.d. iii), and storytellers. With the creation of the Borneo Literature Bureau in 1960 (see chapter 2), Iban authors, most of them rural school teachers, began to make great efforts to record an oral tradition that was swiftly vanishing. Sandin was the most accomplished among them. Apart from pursuing his own research interests, Sandin collaborated with Robert Pringle, a Cornell historian, on the latter's masterly *Rajahs and Rebels* (1970). In the 1970s, university-trained researchers carried out further specialised studies on the Iban. In Jawan's (1994: 22) useful summary, these included work on migration and socio-economic change by Austin (1977) and Padoch (1978), urbanisation and modernisation by Sutlive (1972) and Kedit (1980a), pre-Christian religious beliefs by Jensen (1974), Uchibori (1978) and Masing (1981), and Iban custom (*adaŋ*) by Heppell (1975) – the latter three being students of Freeman's from the Australian National University (ANU).

According to King (n.d. vii) Iban society has been well documented in the areas of 'social organisation, agriculture, religion and oral tradition'. However,

an enormous amount of research needs to be done in oral tradition and literature, in local historical detail, *in processes of modernisation* and the structure of political activity, analyses of ritual performances, and in aspects of material culture such as textiles; finally, the Iban-related peoples of West Kalimantan, [in Indonesia], are still very much a *terra incognita* and basic ethnographies are still required of various of the groups there (King n.d. vii, emphasis added).

The problem of Iban space

George Marcus (1992: 309-315) contrasts what he calls 'realist' and 'modernist' ethnographies. The former saw their zenith in the 1950s and 1960s. Practitioners of this model assumed the existence of timeless, homogenous communities and adopted an objectivist stance derived from the natural sciences¹. Modernists, whose ranks have swelled since the 1980s, challenge realist categories and favour alternative modes of representation that address issues of power, knowledge and economy, often by questioning their own fieldwork and rhetorical strategies.

Marcus argues that realist anthropologists of the old 1950s and 1960s school, were anchored in a classic sense of community with shared values and a shared identity. To modernists, by way of contrast, identity 'is produced simultaneously in many different locales of activity by many different agents for many different purposes'. To capture (multiple) identity formation one has to recognise, says Marcus, the 'powerful integrating (rationalizing) drives of the state and economy in modernity' (1992:315). In this day and age of electronic media, he adds that ethnographers must study the articulation of the local and the global if they wish to overcome the limitations of realist anthropology. How? By relying more on biography and memory rather than on any presupposition of collective knowledge.

Unfortunately, Marcus does not provide any examples of how this may work in actual ethnographic practice. Moreover his global-local articulation is too vague and dispenses with key realms such as area, valley, ethnic group, nation-state and culture area. Thus Carrier (1992:4-7) argues that a manner of 'Orientalism' (Said 1978) has been at work in the construction of Melanesia by early professional anthropologists and many of their followers. This culture area, he says, has been

¹Derek Freeman, the founding father of professional Iban anthropology, is an influential exponent of the structural-functionalist school of realism.

constructed as an essentially primitive region remote from the West in time and space.

'Southeast Asia' is the name of another ongoing battle. The origins of this scholarly dispute can be traced to Heine-Geldern's classic paper 'Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia' (1942), in which he described similar Hindu-Buddhistic elements across the whole region. He concluded that Southeast Asia is a receptacle of influences from neighbouring regions -- her people originating from Melanesia and Northeast Asia, and her high culture from India. Forty years later this idea was challenged by W. Solheim (1985), a palaeo-anthropologist. He was replying to Emmerson (1984), a political scientist who had traced the academic, military and political etymology of the term 'Southeast Asia' and had found that these strands are intimately related. The US Navy, says Emmerson, used the new term to coordinate its operations in the regional theatre during the Pacific War. Solheim retorts that the political scientist disregards archaeological evidence which proves that Southeast Asia existed as a 'true region' long before India or China -- let alone America -- began to exert an influence. It was in fact here, not in Northeast Asia, he claims, that rice was domesticated.

Now to a more localised arena of scholarly struggle: the village. Kemp (1989) writes about the search for a Southeast Asian 'village society' prevalent until recently among regional specialists. He argues that the hunt was in vain for the village turns out to be a 'seductive mirage', the product of colonial administration and scholarly fashion. In anthropology, he explains, village studies derive from Redfield's (1934) Mexican folk-urban continuum and Tonnies' (1957) *Gesellschaft* versus *Gemeinschaft* dichotomy. Kemp's own research in rural Thailand shows just how difficult it can be to apply the term. He found that in his own 'village' there was no temple, much of the land was owned by outsiders, and kinship was by no means confined to the 'village'. Fellow fieldworkers throughout the region have encountered

similar difficulties. For instance in Malay and Indonesian there are a number of words which can be translated as 'village', none of which is an exact synonym².

These two debates -- over region and village -- are illuminating in that they show not only rival disciplinary approaches to time and space, but also the strengthening in the 1980s and 1990s of a critical questioning of received spatial categories, such as ethnographic region, culture area, nation, society, culture, tribe, ethnic group, etc. A shift appears to be taking place from a previous paradigm in which there was a pristine native space 'out there', to an idea of reality as an often dubious, always power-laden construct. In Marcusean terms, there has been a shift 'from a self-confident realism to a self-conscious modernism' (1992: 326). In this study I have chosen to adopt a hybrid realist-modernist approach, that is a search for empirical realities 'in the field' informed by critical discussions on the nature of anthropological knowledge (e.g. Moeran 1985, Clifford & Marcus 1986, Geertz 1988, Lavie 1990).

With some exceptions (e.g. Sutlive 1972, Kedit 1980a), Iban anthropologists have worked within the realist paradigm in search of Freeman's (1981:7) 'pristine Iban society'. Freeman clearly distinguishes between the 'pagan' Baleh Iban and the 'acculturated' Saribas Iban, finding the former more appropriate as anthropological subjects. More recently, Davison's (1987:80) way of dispensing with inter-regional diversity exemplifies a widespread approach:

Clearly the problem of the 'Saribas' Iban is a somewhat controversial one. It need not concern us unduly, just so long as one is aware of the possibility that we may be dealing with a certain degree of acculturation when examining material from this region.

Similarly, Sather (1985, 1992, 1993, 1996) who, interestingly, has worked exclusively in the Paku (Saribas) area, has paid little attention to 'acculturation' and

² The contributors to King's (1994:3) comparative volume, also run into trouble when they try to apply the term to the various indigenous groups of Borneo. Some interesting differences emerge nevertheless, e.g. in some groups two or three longhouses form/formed a kind of 'village'. In others, including the Iban, the longhouse is/was usually a self-contained entity.

social change and concentrated instead on 'traditional' aspects of Iban culture such as agricultural augury, ritual and oral literature. While acknowledging the importance of these contributions (e.g. see my use of Sather 1993 in chapter 4 and Sather 1985 in chapter 6) there are six reasons why I cannot subscribe to this lack of concern with geographical diversity. First, 'Iban society', 'Iban culture', 'Iban religion' and similar combinations are useful blanket terms that conceal inner diversity. One need only read accounts by political scientists writing on Sarawak's electoral map (e.g. Searle 1983:56-66) to realise that there is more ethnic diversity than may meet the anthropologist's eye. The Iban are not cut off from the rest of Sarawak. Many live in close contact with other ethnic groups. Iban-Chinese relations in the then Second Division, for instance, were reportedly harmonious in the late 1960s, whereas in the then Third Division they were tense (Pringle 1970, Fidler 1978). In the former, the Brookes encouraged Hokkien, Hakka and Teochew migration, i.e. Chinese groups chiefly dedicated to trade. In the latter, they introduced Foochow agriculturalists who clashed violently with Iban in 1925 and 1945 (Searle 1983: 58). As a result, local Iban turned to PESAKA, a now defunct political party devoted to the protection of native land (Jawan 1994: 29). It is significant that Edmund Leach (1950:27) who undertook a pioneering survey of Sarawak and first suggested to Freeman that he study the Iban, considered the Baleh Iban to be atypical for they had long been influenced by the Kayan (see Rousseau 1980).

Second, even though most Iban (some 450,000) live in Sarawak, there are Iban communities in all three Bornean territories, namely in West Kalimantan (Indonesia), Sarawak and Sabah (East Malaysia) and Brunei. As noted above, non-Sarawakian Iban have been thoroughly under-researched (King n.d. viii).

Third, the allied phenomena of rural-urban migration and urbanisation appear to be altering Iban ideas and practices related to geography and social space. For many single-house dwellers in Kuching and other towns, the longhouse is no longer the

centre of their social and ritual universe (Sutlive 1972, 1988). In the mid-1960s it was already estimated that less than 10% of Iban remained fully semi-nomadic subsistence farmers (Jensen 1966: 30). Moreover, in many areas where swidden agriculture is still practised, farmers are at loggerheads with the timber industry over the use of space (Cleary and Eaton 1995: 175-189). Some anthropologists have taken up these kinds of issues (see Sutlive 1988 and Kedit 1980a), whilst others continue to ignore them (e.g. Barrett and Lucas as recently as 1993).

Fourth, virtually all Iban children are now part of a national school system integrated into a huge nation-building effort currently being carried out by rural teachers who use mass-produced textbooks, most of them in the Malay language. Children learn that they live in a perfectly bounded geographical and cultural entity with deep historical roots called 'Malaysia'. This is, to paraphrase Marcus, an instance of 'para-ethnographic realism' common to most postcolonial states (see chapter 5).

Fifth, new roads have in many areas replaced the rivers as the chief medium of transport (see Wadley 1998). Most Saribas Iban (chapters 3-5) rely today on road transport to commute to work and school, while most Skrang Iban (chapter 6) remain dependant on their longboats and are severely constrained in their choice of local employment.

Finally, various indigenous Iban notions of space and place (including indigenised imports) have not been adequately explored. The subjective experience of space and movement can in fact vary greatly across cultures and historical periods (Tilley 1994: 20-21, Hirsch 1995: 16-23). For instance, Freeman's clear-cut divide between public and private spaces within the longhouse (his contention being that the longhouse gallery resembles an English street) has been questioned by Helliwell (1993) who finds no vernacular equivalents among the Gerai Dayaks (see chapter 4). For his part, Sandin (1967), the Saribas Iban ethnohistorian, gives evidence of

the centrality of geographical knowledge in what one might term the 'magic realism' of Iban storytelling.

Given all the above changes, in what ways are the media altering Iban experiences of physical, spiritual, and social space? Do Iban audiences now feel that they belong to what Anderson (1983) calls 'imagined communities' -- to Sarawak, Malaysia, Southeast Asia? To what extent is their sense of locality, of living in this town, or in that longhouse, a product of new media? These issues are addressed in chapter 4 and, to a lesser extent, in chapters 5 and 6.

The problem of Iban time

Time and space are twin social resources and constraints. I am following Marcus (1992) in separating them for analytical purposes, but they are inextricably bound up together throughout this thesis (see chapter 4). My next point is that there is a widespread 'denial of coevalness' (Fabian 1983) at work in the existing anthropological literature on the Iban. In other words, the Iban have often been portrayed as inhabiting a pre-modern world.

In his *Reflections* (1981), Derek Freeman makes use of many precise dates and times to show that he was There, in the field, to gather his empirical data. One could read this as a rhetorical strategy aimed at the assertion of his authority (Geertz 1988: 23). In this guise he can, among other things, attack the work of Sandin. In Freeman's view, the Saribas Iban scholar is a mere 'ahistorical collector of folklore' (1981: 13) who mixes fact with fantasy, always placing 'full credence in the major tenets of Iban belief' (1981: 54). What Freeman fails to mention is that he, Freeman, is a social anthropologist, *not a historian*, criticising the work of an (ethno)historian as if they were both working within the same discipline. In his own works, Freeman

mainly writes in the ethnographic present and exhibits little interest in historical change.

The impact of colonialism in shaping both 'indigenous societies' and the way in which they are represented is now being recognised in neighbouring Melanesia. Carrier (1992: 13) maintains that Fabian's 'denial of coevalness' has shaped anthropological writings in that region. 'They' are at an earlier stage in their development than 'Us'. In his opinion, the separate histories of the various Pacific societies under colonialism, e.g. Fiji and Vanuatu, provide clues, not causal links, to contemporary issues of identity. Yet issues of history and identity in Melanesia cannot be explained, insists Carrier, by reference to pristine 'indigenous categories' alone -- the complex role of external forces must also be reckoned with.

In the study of Borneo, many have followed Freeman and frozen the Iban into a timeless existence. A case in point is Jensen's *The Iban and their Religion* (1974: 1) in which the reader is promised an account which 'describes -- in the ethnographic present tense -- the situation, principally in the Second Division of Sarawak, as it was during the years 1959 to 1966'. Sadly the ethnographic present is not the best way to capture 'situations', as it tends to pave the way for abstract argument detached from the social worlds where these situations unfold. It is only at the very end that Jensen (1974: 213-214) mentions three factors that were already in the 1960s radically changing the Iban way of life: (1) the spread of rubber and a cash economy, (2) local authority schools and (3) a widespread conversion to Christianity. But this trinity is a mere afterthought, an appendage he never relates to his painstaking exegesis (see also Freeman's [1975] critique).

Was Jensen not sufficiently acquainted with these changes? He was indeed, for like his predecessor Freeman he carried out research for the government of Sarawak. It was in fact Jensen (1966) who reported on the applied aspects of Freeman's early

work on Iban agriculture. In the 1950s and 1960s, the vast majority of Iban, he argued, turned to cash crops and individual (rather than *bilik*-family) property.

As Jensen presents it, 'Iban Religion' refers exclusively to a bygone, primeval system of beliefs untouched by Christianity or secularisation. Seventeen years on, things seem to have changed little in this research area. Davison & Sutlive (1991:212) analyse Iban oral literature to arrive at the conclusion that Freeman was wrong in his thinking that headhunting is/was (the 'when' is irrelevant to their case) linked to a cult of phallic symbolism. To these writers, it is the idea of 'organic regeneration and vegetative growth' that provides the underlying model, or metaphor, for Iban headhunting. The authors, albeit admitting that headhunting was 'central to the Iban way of life as it existed up until the early decades of this century' (1991:213) disagree with Jensen (1974:6) when he argues/argued that headhunting had ceased to play an active role in 'Iban behaviour' following its suppression in the 1920s. This becomes problematic as our analysts fight their case picking and choosing from sources far from each other in time and place, reaching as far back as 1846 in their quest to dig out the 'underlying model' for Iban headhunting. One is reminded of Heine-Geldern's (1942) aforementioned, more ambitious hunt for an essential 'Southeast Asian cosmology'. In Melanesia, Carrier (1992:13) describes these debates over 'who got it right or wrong' as if nothing had changed 'synchronic essentialism'. The following questions were never asked: What did those Iban known to the authors in the late 1980s make of headhunting? How did its purported importance relate to actual practices other than rituals? What did Christian Iban have to say about it? Were there any regional variations? Where exactly? And in what ways?

We are not told. I suspect this silence has to do with a burning feeling of urgency, with the felt need to deploy 'salvage anthropology' in a swiftly disappearing world:

By the end of this century most of the indigenous societies of Borneo will lose their cultural heritage. There is an urgency, therefore, for research to record as much information as possible about these systems, their diverse and creative treatments of what it means to be human before they are gone and lost forever (Appell & Sutlive 1991:xxxv)

Even if the fate of Bornean cultures were as bleak as this – a point I shall not dispute – I would still have to ask the question: Is the search for a timeless, underlying world of ideas the best way to ‘record as much information as possible about these systems’? In chapters 5 and 6, I present instead the contemporary (late 1990s) ideologies of Saribas and Skrang Iban respectively, by tracing their formation to certain social, economic and technological changes that occurred in Sarawak in the 1950s and 1960s.

An added problem intimately related to both social time and space is ‘genre’. Besides the indigenous writings of Sandin and others, there is an illustrious tradition of European travel-writing on Bornean societies that has been neglected by social scientists. Over the decades, a barrier has been carefully built separating travel accounts from scholarly texts. King (1992:xvii) recently bolstered the generic wall in an introduction to his *The Best of Borneo Travel*, a compilation of English-language extracts. To King, travel writing should comprise

an attempt to stimulate the imagination, emotions and sensations so that, in some way, the reader experiences the events, has some sense of the place and the people described, and imaginatively participates in the adventure. In this regard, we are dealing with a personal record in which the reader should feel involved. Given this requirement we would not expect to include academic texts on the natural history or culture of Borneo...

In my view, creating ‘some sense of the place and the people described’ should not be the monopoly of travel writers who often (e.g. O’Hanlon 1994, Linklater 1990), spend only a short period of time in a particular area and do not speak the language. Ethnographers could not hope for a better way to back up their arguments than getting their readers to ‘feel involved’ with the ‘personal record’ kept in the field. Geertz (1988: 143) urges anthropologists ‘to convey in words what it is like to be somewhere specific in the lifeline of the world’. In this study I try to convey such

feelings without falling into the solipsism of certain post-modern anthropologists (e.g. Crapanzano 1980).

2. The anthropology of media

An effective gateway into a study of the 'anthropology of media' subfield is Spitulnik's (1993) survey, 'Anthropology and Mass Media'³. In this bibliographic *tour de force*, she notes that the media

are economically and politically driven, linked to developments in science and technology, and like most domains of human life, their existence is inextricably bound up with the use of language. Given these various modalities and spheres of operation, there are numerous angles for approaching mass media anthropologically: as institutions, as workplaces, as communicative practices, as cultural products, as social activities, as aesthetic forms, and as historical developments (1993: 293).

The mass media 'have touched most societies, and indeed pervade the entire fabric of many' yet they have been strangely neglected by anthropologists. An investigation into

just why and how anthropologists have managed to neglect the centrality of mass media in twentieth century life would be not only of historical interest, but also of potential use in illuminating certain conceptual gaps in contemporary anthropological theory (1993: 294).

In order to situate some of the recent attempts by anthropologists to enter this forgotten area, I will first give a brief account of the two main media research traditions influencing their work: 'mass communications' in the United States and 'cultural studies' in Britain. In addition, I will sketch out Malaysia's US-dominated mass communications field.

³ For a more recent survey (in German) of anthropological works on the media, see Drackle (1999).

Mass communications research in the US and Malaysia

Different versions are told of the history of mass communications audience research in America. Let us recount first the optimistic version. Lowery and De Fleur (1988) tell a story of vigorous scientific progress -- a 60 year-old road marked out by 13 milestones. Although there were some obstacles along the way, these milestones led to a growth of knowledge which helped to institutionalise the communications discipline in America (Lowery & De Fleur 1988:1) We can call this kind of story, following Stocking (1982), a liberal, 'Whig' version of history.

According to these authors, the first milestone was the Payne Fund Studies (1929-32) a combination of quantitative and qualitative investigations into the effects of the mass media. These studies confirmed among the American public the widespread belief in the negative effect of the media on children. In 1940 'The People's Choice', a study of voting patterns in Ohio, gave rise to the 'two-step flow of communication' hypothesis, i.e. the idea that information is mediated by 'opinion leaders'. In that same year, Harold Lasswell searched for the keys to persuasion at Yale, elaborating in the process a now famous model -- the five-point approach to interpreting the transmission and reception of messages: 'who says what, to whom, over what channel, with what effect'.

In the 1950s, the CIA-funded Project Revere explored how the rural population might spread information in the event of a Soviet missile attack. They discovered that even short messages in leaflets deteriorated when transmitted verbally -- an important finding for news diffusion. In the 1960s, The Task Force Report established a link between TV viewing and violence, while the Report to the Surgeon General (another milestone), blessed with massive public funds, was more cautious in its five-volume conclusion, arguing that TV was a contributing factor to

violence rather than a chief cause of it. In 1972, a study by McCombs and Shaw showed that the media set the political agenda, telling us all what we should talk about. Ten years later, 'Television and Social Behaviour' (1982), by Lowery and De Fleur the last milestone to date, demonstrated that television provides models both for good and bad behaviour. This study marked a shift to meaning-based studies, away from earlier individual-focused work.

A critical, left-leaning version of the same story is told by D. Morley (1992), a British scholar from the cultural studies tradition. For him the field of mass communications has been dominated since the War by two 'normative' orientations: *effects research*, a largely behaviourist approach (what the media do to people), and *uses research*, a structural-functionalist approach (what people do to the media). It all began when post-War American researchers rejected the Frankfurt School's gloomy view of mass society, a society in which (a) informal communication played a minor role, (b) the audience was seen as a mass of atomised individuals and (c) content was equated with effect. The Frankfurt School's 'pessimistic mass society thesis', says Morley (1992: 45), was a product of Nazism in Germany, where the mass propaganda of almighty leaders had left people atomised, denying them the awareness of contradictions in an artificial, one-dimensional world. This thesis had an in-built 'hypodermic' assumption: that the media can inject an ideology directly into the consciousness of the masses.

US scholars reacted to such pessimism with liberal doses of all-American optimism. In 1946 Merton published a seminal work whose leads, in Morley's view, have never been followed through – indeed it is not one of Lowery & De Fleur's (1988) milestones. To escape the prevalent content=effect trap, Merton argued in favour of analysing 'both the content of propaganda and the responses of the audience', paying heed to the cultural context of communication (Morley 1992:48). Interestingly, his critique led to a shift of research efforts into the reception end of communication

rather than into the *whole process* of persuasion, from message production to reception -- the comprehensive strategy that Merton advocated. In the 1950s, effects research became more and more quantitative, while content was neglected.

As a reaction to the effects project, 'uses' research emerged as the dominant orientation in the 1960s. The core idea was that people are not simply the passive victims of media 'effects'; they are actually selective in their viewing and listening choices. The framework was structural-functionalist. A later offshoot was 'uses and gratifications' theory, suggesting that the media satisfy certain needs in the recipient. Morley (1992:52) finds two grave limitations in this approach. First, it takes the message to be open to any interpretation, ignoring the closures inscribed by the sender. Second, it is unduly psychological, relying on the mental situation of autonomous individuals at the expense of a sociological explanation.

Now to a third, heretical, version. James Lull (1990) who trained in the 1970s at Michigan State University, a leading communications research centre at the time, describes his former lecturers as 'neutral', behaviourist, theory-poor and naive in their pursuit of Truth. There was a great deal of tinkering with methodology and an unhealthy obsession with statistics and representative samples. To this day, he says, the leading mass communications journals favour 'narrow, jargon-filled, scientific accounts that rarely relate their empirical findings to macro issues' (1990:15) -- that is to problems of power, economy and knowledge. In his view, funding has always gone to 'objective' approaches that help to sustain the dominant ideology. All along, the audience has remained elusive, as Ang (1991) has argued, and the old effect vs. use split is far from over (Lull 1990).

The three stories I have sketched -- hagiographic, critical and heretical -- give us a rough idea of the field's development in the United States. Upon reflection, the milestone metaphor proves to be a weak one, for progress was not unilinear.

Instead a number of concurrent, overlapping lines of investigation came and went and re-surfaced in intimate relationship with the vagaries of America's political-military life. Like the term 'Southeast Asia', both TV and its audience turn out to be, to a large extent, a product of post-War America. The second and third accounts are also illuminating in that they introduce us to how two currently influential, centre-left researchers situate their own work with regard to a 'dominant' (and to them ideologically suspect) research tradition. In this study I have adopted an eclectic, experimental attitude towards media concepts, whatever their ideological provenance. For example, in chapter 2, I apply a version of the 'two-step flow of communication' hypothesis to the study of media influences arriving in Sarawak from the West, especially the U.S., via West Malaysian cultural brokers – a mass process I call 'two-step westernisation'.

In Malaysia, media research, like the media themselves, has been strongly influenced by developments in America. Mhd. Handam (1990: 63-4) reports that 66 out of 74 faculty members surveyed were trained in the U.S., three each in the Philippines and Malaysia, and only one each in Britain and Indonesia. In 1987, Lent (1994: 74) found among Malaysian scholars 'enthusiasm and devotion' concerning their 'U.S. research 'gurus'', while a number of them 'were not willing to question the applicability or relevance of U.S. researchers' models, theories, or methodologies to Malaysia'. Over the years, a worthy attempt at publishing Malay-language textbooks has been made. However, in

almost all cases, textbook translations are from books from the U.S., and the methods of selecting books for translation seem to be based on concepts of old boy networks (favorite U.S. professors of Malaysian lecturers or those who meander through the region occasionally), important guru, or politically safe topics...No better example of these pitfalls exists than the book, *Four Theories of the Press*, translated and published in Malaysia in recent years [Siebert 1987]. Conceived and written in the Cold War mid-1950s, *Four Theories of the Press* sets up a dichotomy of good (U.S. and Western Europe) and bad (Soviet Union) press systems, ignores what has since become the Third World, and labels all Communist systems under Soviet Communist. Although the book has had a number of reprintings, not a word has been changed (1994: 78).

Besides the influence of mainstream, often dated, American works, governmental constraints on media research have stunted the growth of 'critical' media studies in Malaysia. Among the exceptions listed by Lent (1994: 84-7) are Mohd. Hamdan Andan's (1988, 1990) and Frith's (1987) study of mass communications and consumerism, Grjebine's (1988) case studies of prostitutes and the media, Banks' (1985) content analysis of women in Malay films, as well as other women-related studies by Rodrigues (1983-84), Nasri Adbullah (1983) and others. Lent himself has worked on the issue of freedom of expression (1979, 1984a, 1989) and the ownership of Malaysian media (1984b, 1987). Other, more recent, work that I have found useful (see chapter 2) includes Rahmah Hashim's (1995) chapter on television programming, Anuar and Kim's (1996) and Nain's (1996) discussion of media production, and Gomez's (1997) work on the privatisation of Malaysian television. One much neglected region is East Malaysia. As far as Sarawak is concerned, among the few exceptions are Reece's (1981) article on the first Malay newspaper in Sarawak, Lent's (1982) survey of mass media in East Malaysia and Brunei, Ngidang's (1993) critical article on the Bornean media's treatment of the land rights movement, and Amir and A.R. Awang Jaya's (1996) *Isu-Isu Media di Sarawak*, an uncritical study influenced by mainstream and dated American works, including *Four Theories of the Press*.

British Media Studies

Unlike America, Britain had in the 1970s a fairly integrated scholarly community with Birmingham as the cultural studies hub. Stuart Hall directed the research centre from 1968 to 1981, when it was greatly influential in Britain and overseas. Scholars at the centre kept their distance from mainstream research in America and were highly suspicious of empiricism. They had an explicitly leftist agenda: to fight capitalism, racism and patriarchy (Lull 1990). The original focus was on 'macro' factors such as power, ideology, and culture. Hall's frame of reference was Marxist,

although he was trying to replace the base/superstructure model of explanation with an emphasis on the ideological power of 'culture' in the broad sense (Collini 1996:15). Continental theories from a variety of fields (e.g. structural linguistics, semiotics, political economy, Althusserian structural Marxism, Foucauldian discursive practices, Lacanian psychoanalysis) were constantly studied and adapted to pursue issues in a very British setting (Lull 1990). Most practitioners, however, followed Hall in his rejection both of economic determinism and of the emphasis of structuralists on the autonomy of media discourses, i.e. the idea of texts as the sole producers of meaning. Instead they emphasized creativity and social experience, placing media and other practices within the 'complex expressive totality' of a society (Curran *et al* 1987: 76-77). Stefan Collini has given three recipes for doing cultural studies:

First recipe. Begin a career as a scholar of English Literature. Become dissatisfied. Seek to study wider range of contemporary and 'relevant' texts, and extend notion of 'text' to cover media, performance, ritual. Campaign to get this activity accepted as a recognized academic subject. Set up unit to study the tabloid press or soap operas or discourse analysis. Describe resulting work as 'Cultural Studies'.

Second recipe. Begin a career as an academic social scientist. Become dissatisfied. Reject misguided scientism, and pursue more phenomenological study of relations between public meanings and private experience. Campaign to get this accepted as a recognized academic subject. Set up unit to study football crowds or house-music parties or tupperware mornings. Describe resulting work as 'Cultural Studies'.

Third recipe. Identify your major grievance. Campaign to get the study of this grievance accepted as a recognized academic subject. Theorize the resistance to this campaign as part of a larger analysis of the repressive operation of power in society. Set up a unit to study the (mis-) representation of gays in the media or the imbrication of literary criticism in colonialist discourse or the prevalence of masculinist assumptions in assessments of career success. Describe resulting work as 'Cultural Studies' (1994:3, quoted in Hobart 1995:8)

David Morley, the most influential audience researcher to appear since the 1980s, followed the second route into the field. A trained sociologist, he has always felt uneasy about his literary colleagues' textual inclinations. In a recent collection of essays (Morley 1992) he distinguishes three phases in his career, from an original interest in the ideology behind factual TV through the decoding process and its relation to class (the *Nationwide* project in 1980) to his most recent relocation to gendered viewing within the family (starting with *Family Television* in 1986). With

these two 'ground-breaking empirical works' (Lull 1990) Morley was able to move away from earlier textualist analyses towards micro-social accounts of consumption at the domestic level. Some observers, however, have criticised Morley for his 'gendered essentialism', for assuming gender to be a fixed factor and disregarding the fuzziness of family dynamics (Ang & Hermes 1991) Others have said that *Family Television* shuns political issues. In his defence, Morley retorts that the sitting room *is* political, it is a site of everyday struggle. We have to investigate empirically, he concludes, precisely how gender, class, race, etc, operate in specific contexts -- without falling into the methodological individualism of positivist researchers in the US (Morley 1992: 168-69)

Morley has encouraged his colleagues to learn how to do 'ethnography' from accomplished anthropologists. More specifically, from Clifford Geertz's brand of interpretive anthropology, summed up in his famous (1973:6-7) definition of the object of ethnography. In this work, Geertz argues that, at the level of observed empirical data, it is impossible to distinguish between a 'wink', a 'twitch of the eye' and a 'fake/parody wink'. For him

the point is that between what Ryle calls the 'thin description' of what the person (parodist, winker, twitcher) is doing ('rapidly contracting his right eyelids') and the 'thick description' of what he is doing ('practising a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion') lies the object of ethnography: a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies and rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived and interpreted.

Contemporary trends in the anthropology of media

The 'ethnographic turn' taken by Morley and other media scholars has been criticised from a number of quarters, not least from within media studies (e.g. Radway 1988). As Hirsch (1998: 214) points out, the anthropologist's original notion and practice of 'ethnography', namely an 'endeavour to draw out from a particular field-site a set of unifying themes and perspectives' had been turned into 'a particular mode of securing and presenting data'. Ironically, at the same time as

Radway was calling for more anthropological approaches to media research, 'anthropologists were arguing about the contrived nature of ethnography' – what Thornton (1988, in Hirsch 1998: 214) calls 'the rhetoric of ethnographic holism'. Indeed Geertz himself has come under increasing attack within anthropology for overtaxing culture at the expense of social relations of power, knowledge and economy (Hobart in press). 'Ethnography' has become a buzzword in media studies. In practice, 'media ethnographers' often spend short periods of time in 'the field' and many base their research on interviews with little participant observation. Another problematic anthropological concept adopted into media studies – 'ritual' – has attracted less critical attention (see chapter 3).

At this point it is pertinent to assess the state of the subfield 'media anthropology'. Have anthropologists overcome these interpretive shortcomings? Have they applied their long-term approach to fieldwork to a nuanced understanding of contemporary media? Answering this question adequately would require a thesis in its own right, for practitioners exhibit a wide variety of ethnographic and theoretical interests. This diversity can be gathered from the research interests of the participants in a workshop on media anthropology held in Hamburg in September 1999. Thus, Spitulnik (1996) has studied how Zambian radio mediates a national public sphere, Hirsch (1998) consumption, ritual and national culture in London and Papua New Guinea, Harvey (1999) the new media industries across the public, private and voluntary sectors in Manchester, Pedelty (1997) journalists in El Salvador and popular culture in Mexico, T. Turner (1995) the appropriation of video by the Kayapo of Amazonia, Hamilton (1993) media, ethnicity, and cultural change in southern Thailand, Hakken (1999) the 'anthropology of cyberspace', Ginsburg (1993) Aboriginal media production in Australia, and so on. A number of key notions can be nevertheless teased out from the recent anthropological literature on the media.

These notions include:

- practices (social, discursive, mediated, ritual, performative, etc)
- agency (vs. structure, situated, complex, collective, etc)
- social relations (embedded, power-laden, ramifying, etc)
- sites (of resistance, of negotiation, of struggles, etc)
- flows (multidirectional, of ideas, of practices, of influences, etc)
- consumption (vs. production, as transformation, as form of agency, etc)

At this early stage in the development of the media subfield, anthropologists appear to be highly eclectic in their use of these and related keywords and approaches. This is probably partly a result of the subfield's uncertain disciplinary identity. One exception is Hobart (1995, 1999) who takes pains to distance himself from any notion of media 'flow' or 'consumption' which he deems Eurocentric concepts with no indigenous equivalents in his single field site -- a Balinese village. His preferred keyword is 'practice'. Rejecting Geertz's interpretive approach, he takes interpreting television programmes to be one practice among many others, including commenting, arguing, telling, playing and doing housework. 'Over the years', he concludes, 'endless elegant interpretations of mine have foundered on the rocks of Balinese viewing practices' (1995: 13).

Similarly, a former student of Hobart's, Hughes-Freeland (1998), subordinates the terms ritual, performance and media to the broader category 'situated social action'. Her aim is to privilege agency and creativity over constraint, in order to overcome the supposedly Western idea of a passive audience (1998: 9). Wishing to transcend Geertz's performance-as-text model, she defines ritual as 'something which emerges as participants bring together bits and pieces of knowledge in the performance' (1998: 15). *Pace* Turner (1969), she suggests that the ritual process cannot be divided into phases of structure and anti-structure. In chapter 3, I take issue with this blurring of categories (media, performance, ritual, time, space) through the analysis of an Iban secular festival. Here I wish to stress the fact that

this post-structuralist approach carries with it its own central presupposition: the idea of a universally active, engaged audience.

Scholars with a post-Marxist agenda make frequent use of the term 'site' in their studies of the media and popular culture. These 'sites' are where engaged audiences negotiate the meaning of media products. Rofel (1994: 700) is a case in point. She argues that soap operas in China are complex 'sites' in which national subjects are constituted; sites where viewers both resist and incorporate the national ideology. Likewise, Mankekar (1993: 556) maintains that underprivileged Indian viewers are able to enjoy developmentalist soap operas even when they can 'see through' to the official agenda behind the scripts. Another anthropologist, Abu-Lughod (1997: 127), studies television viewing in Egypt as an entry into 'particular configurations of power, education, and wealth in particular places'. In chapter 5 I criticise these authors' haste in elevating marginal viewers to the status of cosmopolitan viewers -- a well-meaning move which ironically downplays the growing discrepancies in access to literate knowledge and wealth that characterise Third World societies.

The metaphor of 'flows' of media influences has gained ascendancy thanks to the work of Appadurai and others on commodities (1986) and global 'mediascapes' (1990). In a mid-1990s article, Marcus (1995:95) examines 'the emergence of multi-sited ethnography' across the humanities and social sciences. By this phrase he is mapping a broad move from ethnography's

single-site location, contextualized by macro-constructions of a larger social order, such as the capitalist world system, to multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies such as the 'local' and the 'global,' the 'lifeworld' and the 'system'.

Unlike the two-step flow hypothesis mentioned earlier, most media anthropologists favour a world of 'multidirectional' influences. Thus Ginsburg (1993: 558) argues that Aboriginal media producers 'enter transnational mediascapes in complex and

multidirectional ways' . In a similar vein, Abu-Lughod (1997), following Marcus (1996), proposes a 'multisited ethnography' of television where one can 'follow the thing' like one follows the 'social life' of commodities (Appadurai 1986). In chapter 2, I suggest that most mass media flows in Sarawak are unidirectional and top-down rather than multidirectional and emerging from the grassroots.

Finally, a number of studies with an emphasis on the material culture and consumption-related aspects of media have been conducted in recent years. One notable contribution is the volume *Consuming Technologies* (Silverstone and Hirsch 1994) which greatly influenced the early stages of my doctoral programme. Most contributors, including Morley, examine TV and other media within specific domestic spaces and temporalities. Thus Hirsch, a social anthropologist, analyses in detail the 'moral economy' of a middle-class London family. In this study, the parents resist not the technology as such but an 'appropriation' of it which clashes with their long-term morality, so they carefully monitor their children's TV viewing, which they see as a passive form of activity. Hirsch (1994) deserves praise for achieving Morley's (1992: 168-169) stated aim of analysing how macro complexities -- consumption, discourse, gender, class -- precisely operate in specific (domestic) contexts, while steering clear of essentialism.

Another contributor, D. Miller (1994a), explores how Trinidadians appropriate an American soap opera, *The Young and the Restless*, in their songs, clothes, domestic life, work schedules and gossip. The soap provides these West Indian viewers with a safe domain to talk about 'key cultural problematics', such as the tension between long-term (domestic, Christian) and short-term (public, rebellious) forms of morality. Here in Trinidad as in London, audiences are far from being uniform: they appropriate and resist things (ideas, programmes, technologies) in a highly differential manner. Two worthy contributions to the material culture approach to media based on long-term fieldwork are Tacchi (1998) on the 'materiality' of radio

listening in England and Skuse (1999) on a BBC soap opera in Afghanistan.

Media and the 'total social fact' of modern Iban society

Having explored briefly some of the trends in the fledgling anthropology of media, I should now like to return to Spitulnik's (1993) survey. The reader may recall her view that the mass media are 'at once artefacts, experiences, practices and processes' amenable to anthropological analysis. She then adds:

But beyond approaching specific facets of mass media anthropologically, it seems that the greater challenge lies in integrating the study of mass media into the 'total social fact' of modern life. How, for example, do mass media represent and shape cultural values within a given society? What is their place in the formation of social relations and social identities? How might they structure people's senses of space and time? What are their roles in the construction of communities ranging from subcultures to nation-states, and in global processes of socio-economic and cultural change? (1993: 293).

This thesis attempts to take up Spitulnik's challenge and answer, however provisionally, all of these questions within a single account, within the 'total social fact' of Iban-Malaysian society. The question of how the media represent cultural values is addressed in chapter 2 -- a historical analysis of the relationship between Iban and West Malaysian media production. Spitulnik's last question (on media and subcultures, nation-states and globalisation) is inseparable from her first (on cultural values). Hence I also tackle it in chapter 2, although it inevitably re-emerges at other points of the discussion. Media and the formation of social relations and social identities is the subject matter of chapter 3, in which I examine the economics of television sets in the Saribas area. I argue that television is a much-valued commodity and gift which binds Iban separated by migration or death into a ramifying system of exchange. The problem of how the media 'structure people's senses of space and time' is the topic of chapter 4. In this chapter I sharpen the blunted edge of the term 'ritual practices' by distinguishing these practices from the media, festive and everyday practices of Saribas Iban. The more difficult question of how media *shape* cultural values is broached in chapters 5 and 6 with reference to

the local ideologies, or 'ideolects', of two rural Iban areas. One constant point of reference has been the ongoing project of building a Malaysian national culture and its relationship to local practices. Nation-building is, in my view, a far more significant process in the postcolonial states than the rather premature versions of 'globalisation' put forth by Hannerz (1987), Comaroff (1996) and other anthropologists.

Another way of looking at the thesis is by reference to the key notions and trends in the anthropology of media described above. Seen in this light, Chapter 2 makes use of two key notions, 'media flows' and 'practices', to uncover the history of Iban media production. A major historical shift took place in the 1970s, when new media from West Malaysia (notably television and school textbooks) relegated earlier Iban media products to an ancillary role within a vastly expanded polity. The aforementioned process of 'two-step westernisation', whereby influences from the US reach Sarawak via West Malaysia, has continued to this day. Chapter 3 also draws on the notion of 'flow', in this case as part of an analysis largely informed by material culture -- in particular Appadurai's (1986) and Kopytoff's (1986) social and biographical approach to artefacts. Chapter 4 questions the post-structuralist emphasis on creative agency by delineating the organisation of social time and space in Saribas Iban longhouses in relation to media technologies. The analysis shows that the everyday, ritual and pseudo-ritual activities of local people are now built around the demands of an inflexible labour market and school system rather than any 'embedded' non-Western time (cf. Gingrich 1994: 175). Chapter 5 looks at media practices again but from a very different angle: the local reproduction of the national and sub-national (i.e. Sarawakian) ideologies. In this chapter, I attempt to integrate into the analysis of television commentaries, school essays, public speeches and other media practices a genre often neglected in the media literature: school textbooks. Following Goody (1987), I investigate the spread of literacy and print media, and their role in separating out 'bright' from 'stupid' young peasants in

modernising societies. In turn, this separation is crucial to an understanding of how different rural viewers interpret television and other urban media. Finally, chapter 6 extends the analysis of ideology and media practices into a new field site, a Skrang longhouse whose residents have recently converted to Christianity.

3. Field sites and methods

This study is based on 17 months of field research in Sarawak. In June 1996 I carried out a pilot study which involved visiting some prospective field sites to gain a first impression of contemporary life in the state. Having established a good rapport with Iban in the Saribas basin, I decided to undertake the bulk of fieldwork in this area. A second field site would be Kuching, and the third site remained to be determined. The rationale behind working in three areas rather than one follows from the previous discussion: in a developing society with increased links -- created through electronic media, migration, schooling, etc -- there is an urgent need for ethnographies that explore such links. Such explorations can provide a good analytical shield against crude notions of 'the global' having an impact upon 'the local'. Indeed, one of the strengths of multi-sited ethnographies is that they can potentially generate nuanced intra-societal comparisons (Marcus 1996: 107). For instance, my frequent visits to Kuching from 'the field' -- that is, from the Saribas area, situated four hours away by coach -- alerted me to the similarities and differences in the ideas and media practices of Iban from both areas.

First field site: the Saribas

The Saribas has long had a reputation as an area that experienced early social and economic progress (Pringle 1970: 208). Iban from the Paku branch of this river, in particular, took advantage of a high world demand for rubber in the 1910s and 1920s to amass considerable fortunes. At the height of their success, 'as many as

one thousand Chinese, Iban and Malay labourers were employed by Paku Iban families' (Sather 1994: 71). Saribas Iban also demonstrated an 'early thirst for education', and many would travel considerable distances to acquire a mission education (Pringle 1970: 206). Interestingly, Saribas Iban are also widely regarded as taking great pride in the preservation of their cultural heritage. Indeed the rubber boom 'led to an elaboration of traditional ceremonial forms' and public speech-making 'developed into a major institution' (Sather 1994: 69). Today the Saribas Iban are no longer exceptional in their desire to 'develop' (*ngemansang*), but the cultural ideal of doing so while preserving their customs (*adañ*) is arguably a defining feature vis-à-vis Iban from other rivers (see chapters 2 and 3). Central to this study is the early involvement of Saribas Iban in the collective project of creating a 'modern' Iban culture through education, radio, print media and other state institutions. As Pringle (1970: 209) noted almost 30 years ago, Iban from the Saribas and the closely-related Krian river

probably make up no more than 15 per cent of the total Iban population. Yet the first man to serve as Chief Minister of Sarawak, Dato Stephen Kalong Ningkan, is a Saribas Iban. So are the first Sarawak-born State Secretary, Gerunsin Lembat, the first local Curator of the Sarawak Museum, Benedict Sandin, and the first Iban Resident of a Division, Peter Tinggom. The preponderance of Saribas-Krian staffing in certain departments of the State Government, such as Radio Sarawak, has from time to time generated mild resentment among Ibans from other areas. Nevertheless all would agree that had it not been for the Saribas community, the Ibans would have encountered far more difficulty...in assuming their fair share of power and responsibility in the new era.

The effects of this 'brain drain' to Kuching and other urban areas is today apparent across the Saribas. Goody's (1987: 146) remark on the impact of literacy upon rural West African communities applies equally well to the Saribas Iban. Those who have not 'learnt book' and have stayed behind, says Goody, 'begin to see themselves as inferior to those who have learnt book and gone away'. In chapter 5, I develop this point in the context of Saribas Iban media-related ideas and practices.

I undertook field research in the Saribas for a period of approximately 13 months during 1996-1997. My wife, Kyoko, accompanied me for some five months. We

were based at a longhouse I shall call 'Semak' (lb. nearby)⁴ for its proximity to the market town, some 15 minutes on foot. At the end of 1997, Semak had some 150 residents in 28 *bilik*-families led by a headman. Most men were earning regular wages working for a local construction firm, the Public Works Department (M. JKR or Jabatan Kerja Raya), the local bus company or the police. Most women alternated between wet paddy farming (*bumai tanjung*) and domestic chores. All local children attended school, while some teenagers had found local employment as labourers or shop assistants. Unlike some longhouses in the area, all *bilik*-families in Semak are now Christian. The last pagan families joined the Anglican Church in the late 1980s. Politically, the community has long been associated with PBB, the dominant party in the State coalition whose Saribas leader, Dr Alfred Jabu, is Sarawak's Deputy Chief Minister. The Semak ideology or 'ideolect' (see chapter 5) is a good example of the quintessentially Saribas search for a balance between development (*pemansang*) and tradition (*adaŋ*). Semak was the first longhouse in the area to have a telephone line installed and one of the first to be electrified, in 1987. It is served by a good road with a frequent bus service.

The main research methods employed in the Saribas area were:

- household survey
- semi-structured interviews
- follow-up conversations
- participant observation
- genealogies
- biographies of persons
- biographies of media artefacts
- school children's essays

The household survey covered 119 *bilik*-families in 6 Saribas longhouses. It was aimed at gathering (1) basic social and economic data, (2) information on the *bilik*-

⁴ The usage of pseudonyms for names of places and persons is common ethnographic practice. Given the politically delicate nature of this particular research topic, it is aimed at preserving the anonymity of informants.

families' material culture (esp. heirlooms and media artefacts) and values related to it, and (3) information on local media practices and preferences. Sir Edmund Leach, who carried out the first ethnographic survey of Sarawak, once argued that numerical social surveys count people as units, while the purpose of social anthropology is to 'understand people not as units but as integral parts of systems of relationships', and one can never count these (Ellen 1984: 258-259). The household survey was also good as an introduction to the local residents, and as a way of learning everyday Iban, and beginning to discern Leach's 'systems of relationships' (see chapter 3 and Appendix).

My occasional research assistant (a male university student from a Saribas longhouse) and I separately carried out and audio-taped three series of semi-structured interviews in Semak and, for comparative purposes, another two longhouses. Each series focussed on one major topic: everyday routines, radio, and television. Interviews were typically followed by 'off the record' conversations which often revealed more than the interview itself and helped to contextualise it.

Although based at Semak, I often visited other longhouses in the wider Saribas basin -- in particular those with close kinship ties to Semak Longhouse. I also accompanied Semak residents or the local Anglican priest to weddings, funerals and other gatherings at nearby longhouses. With the permission, and often encouragement, of the hosts, I partially videotaped many of these occasions, as well as many other everyday activities (some 55 hours in total). Unexpectedly, screening these videos at a Semak *bilik* became both a favourite local pastime and a research method in its own right. Ellen (1984: 217) considers the term 'participant observation' to be both an oxymoron and an 'anthropological mystery'. Willis (1992) has nonetheless rightly defended it, in spite of its wooliness, as the social scientist's best chance of being surprised. Throughout the entire period of field research, open-ended participant observation made me rethink cherished

assumptions (e.g. about the locals' oratorical prowess; see chapter 5), and re-assess some research priorities in the light of certain unexpected events (e.g. a 'traditional knowledge' quiz night prior to the *Gawai Dayak* festival; see chapter 4). Besides the longhouse gallery and family rooms, other important social settings in which I participated included the coffee-shops found in the market town, official functions, church gatherings, Iban pop and folk concerts, bus journeys, football matches, children's games, paddy farming, pepper gardening and fishing.

The genealogies collected were both a disappointment and helpful evidence of the decline of oral knowledge. Having read Sandin (1994) and Sather (1994), I expected my informants to be highly knowledgeable about their ancestors. Sandin argued that genealogical knowledge was most sophisticated among the Saribas Iban, whose experts (*tukang tusut*) could often trace descent up to 15 generations. In my experience, by contrast, I found that most contemporary Saribas Iban know little about their ancestors, to the extent that a good number of respondents could not even remember the names of one or two of their grandparents. Very few *tukang tusut* are still alive, and those who remain have been made largely redundant.

I also collected 'biographies of things'. Thanks to Kopytoff (1986:67) today we know that the biography of a car in Africa would yield

a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and of those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner's relation to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand and over the years, and in the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains. All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of a middle-class American, or Navajo, or French peasant car.

Marcus (1995:106-7) invites ethnographers to study artefacts in the 'speculative, open-ended spirit of tracing things in and through contexts'. In this spirit, I asked Saribas Iban about their radio and television sets: how they were acquired, for how much, by whom, and when. I analyse the results in chapter 3 by focussing on two

phases or crises in the 'social life' (Appadurai 1986) of Saribas media artefacts – their acquisition and disposal. This analysis sheds light on otherwise concealed processes of social and material valuation as well as on the partly ritualised exchange system that binds the dead and the living.

In addition, I collected a set of life histories of both men and women. Although initially I was hoping to achieve a 'balance' between the accounts of relatively high and low achievers (by local standards), it soon became apparent that successful men, particularly those with a proud military or civilian career behind them, had more detailed stories to tell than women farmers who felt they had little to contribute (cf Hoskins 1998). In chapter 5, however, I relate some episodes in the life of a generous informant: an articulate middle-aged woman.

Finally, I asked two Saribas teachers to set a number of optional essay questions to 63 secondary school pupils (see chapter 5). I take essays and exams to be special kinds of 'media practices' that help to spread and reproduce the national ideology across rural Sarawak.

Second field site: the Skrang

Tourists from as far afield as Iceland visit the Skrang in order to experience life in a remote Dayak longhouse. Ironically, the Skrang lacks that 'quality of community and continuity' that can be found in the economically more developed Saribas (Pringle 1970: 208). As I explain in some detail in chapter 6, a study of the local history and geography is needed to understand why. While the Saribas is sheltered by high hills from the formerly war-ridden Kanowit and Batang Lupar areas, the Skrang always had easy access to and from these rivers. For this reason, its communities were chronically disrupted well into the 20th century (1970: 207). Until the recent (1970s) upsurge in tourism and pepper cultivation, the Skrang had benefited little from the

wider economic developments found in Sarawak (Uchibori 1988). Literacy also arrived much later than in the Saribas, and many longhouses remain to this day resolutely 'pagan'.

I carried out a four-week comparative study in a longhouse I shall call 'Nanga Kandis' (or simply 'Kandis') and neighbouring communities, mostly during February 1998. Kandis is located some 40 minutes from the main road by longboat. There are no roads connecting this area to the rest of Sarawak's Sri Aman (formerly Second) Division. Kandis has a population of 92 people spread over 22 *bilik*-families. The economic mainstay of these households is currently pepper, supplemented by income from rubber cultivation, tourism, and in some cases remittances from migrant kin. All *bilik*-families here, except for one, converted to Anglicanism in 1993. Owing to this ongoing process of conversion, I found the various uses of an unexpected print medium -- the indigenised prayer book -- to be of special interest.

The methods I employed in the Skrang were a combination of participant observation, questionnaire-based interviews and open-ended conversations following the interviews. For purposes of comparison, the questionnaire was identical to the one I had used in the Saribas in previous months. I usually took notes during post-interview conversations, which I also often taped. In addition I videotaped a number of events, most of them connected to the building of a new longhouse and other daily activities. In order to gain further insights into local life, I taught English at the primary school.

Third field site: Kuching

In a sense, Kuching was an 'invisible' field site. For all foreign researchers working in Sarawak, Kuching is the point of entry and departure. It is here that contacts are made and renewed with the local administration and elite members of a given ethnic

group before and after working in 'the field', generally a remote upriver longhouse. Few anthropologists, however, have chosen Kuching as their field site⁵. In all I worked in Kuching for some three months, often for short periods of time to attend seminars or conferences. Worthy of special mention are the workshops or conferences on Iban-language broadcasting (April 1998), Iban-language textbooks (April 1997), the Iban arts (July 1997) and the impact of globalisation on Sarawak cultures (December 1997), as well as the presentation of Dr Masing's book on bardic lore (June 1997) and the official opening of the Centre for Dayak Studies at the University of Malaysia in Sarawak (March 1998). These occasions provided me with a good overview of contemporary official representations of Iban and Dayak culture (see chapter 2 and Winzeler 1997).

Additionally I interviewed radio producers on their professional life histories and current activities and sponsored an essay competition on the history of the Iban Section from the listeners' perspective. I also interacted with urban Iban, mostly from the small professional class. Unfortunately, owing to unforeseeable personal circumstances, I could not complete a comparative study on media practices among Kuching residents. With hindsight, this impediment had a positive side to it, as it sharpened the contrast between a majority of semi-literate or illiterate rural inhabitants and the highly literate urban elites (see chapter 5).

On the other hand, before leaving Sarawak I had access to a considerable body of publications in Iban produced by the former Borneo Literature Bureau (see chapter 2) and now part of private collections.

⁵ Winzeler's (1997) article on Bidayuh ethnicity contains materials from the Kuching area, including an analysis of Bidayuh architecture in the Sarawak Cultural Village, a manner of multiethnic theme park. Clare Boulanger has worked on Dayak identity in Kuching, whilst Kirsten Eddie Craig has undertaken research into cross-cultural healing practices in this town.

Chapter 2

An aborted ethnogenesis: the mediated production of a modern Iban high culture, 1954-1999

Introduction: the mediated production of ethnicity and nationalism

Among the recent deluge of anthropological writings on ethnicity (see Levine 1999) J. Comaroff's (1996) essay *Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Politics of Difference in an Age of Revolution* stands as a model of clarity and eloquence. Comaroff sets out to investigate the contemporary upsurge in the world's 'politics of identity'. Why are the politics of cultural identity back with a vengeance when modernity was supposed to erase all differences of origin? he asks. His answer is twofold. First, the theoretical discussions of the past two decades are no reliable guide to a proper inquiry. Ethnicity theorists are still caught up in a fruitless dichotomy: primordialism versus constructionism. Primordialists assert that all peoples have a 'primordial' attachment to place, kin and/or language (see Karlsson 1998: 186). 'How many more times', asks Comaroff (1996: 164), 'is it necessary to prove that all ethnic identities are historical creations before primordialism is consigned, finally, to the trash heap of ideas past?'. Most social anthropologists today reject this approach and opt for constructivism, yet to Comaroff (1996: 165) constructivism is not a theory but 'merely a broad assertion to the effect that social identities are products of human agency'. He argues that 'ethnic – indeed, all – identities are not things but relations; that their content is wrought in the particularities of their ongoing historical construction'. What is needed is studies which situate ethnicity and nationalism 'in the broader context of claims of class, race, gender, and generation'. There can be no theory of ethnicity and nationalism, 'only a theory of history capable of elucidating the empowered production of difference and identity' (1996: 166).

Second, Comaroff (1996: 168) believes we live in a new 'Age of Revolution'. Global communications have eroded nation-states' control over their own economies and information, giving rise to what Kurtzman calls a global 'electronics common'.

Following Hannerz, Comaroff (1996: 168-172) maintains that today's nations have very little say in the global cultural flow. Globalisation produces two major local reactions: (a) states try to reassert their sovereignty while (b) within their borders a 'dramatic assertion of difference' takes place in the form of an 'explosion of identity politics' (1996: 173). In the postcolonial world, he concludes, we have witnessed an 'increasing convergence of ethnic consciousness and nationalist assertion' leading to a spread of 'ethnonationalism'.

While concurring with much of Comaroff's argument, I have a number of objections to make. First, although it is necessary to study ethnicity in relation to other forms of identity formation from an historical perspective, we should not forget that ethnicity is 'that method of classifying people (both self and other) that uses origin (socially constructed) as its primary reference' (Levine 1999: 166). When gender, generation, sexual orientation, class, etc, take priority, then we are not dealing primarily with ethnicity.

Second, even though it may be obvious to Comaroff that primordialism should be discarded as an 'idea past', people around the world still make use of primordialist notions to advance political and economic causes. As anthropologists, we still need to try to understand and respect 'collective identities deeply and sincerely felt' (Hann 1994:22). This does not mean that historical and ethnographic findings ought to be bent to promote 'non-Western' historical agendas. Indeed, granted that all ethnic identities are 'historical creations', it is still imperative to determine to what extent historical evidence was falsified or discarded in order to pursue political objectives. For example, Peel (1989) maintains that the contemporary Yoruba identity is to a large extent a creation of the modern Nigerian state. Nevertheless, he argues, cultural distinctiveness was also crucial to that identity's consolidation, in particular the Yoruba language, which the foreign missionaries made into a written language (in Eriksen 1993: 92-94). In Sarawak, the ethnic categories 'Iban' and 'Bidayuh' only replaced 'Sea Dayak' and 'Land Dayak' respectively in the 1950s. Yet the Iban,

despite being far more numerous and widely scattered than the Bidayuh, share a common language with minor dialectal variations and, until recently, a fairly homogenous lifestyle. By contrast, the heterogeneous Bidayuh, who speak at least four distinct languages, were 'lumped together under the colonial rubric of Land Dayak' (Winzeler 1997: 222). One would therefore expect the Bidayuh leaders to face more of an uphill struggle to fill in a 'hollow category' (cf Levine 1999 on Papua New Guinea) with convincing cultural materials. This has indeed been the case since independence (see Winzeler 1997). An even more dubious ethnic category, 'the Dayaks', has gained increasing recognition in recent decades across Sarawak (see below), based on the claim of a common Dayak origin (*asa*) and 'cultural heritage' (*adaf*).

Third, Comaroff's view that nation-states today have little control over the flows of information may apply to the Internet and other interpersonal media, but certainly not to radio, television or the print media, including school textbooks. This is particularly true of authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia such as Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei with well-developed media organisations controlled by long-established governments. In these countries, the rural populations rely to a large extent on self-censored media products supplied by the urban elites. It is important, therefore, not to fall for attractive metaphors of the 'electronic commons' kind and strive to discern similarities and differences among the various media in specific national settings. A second example of this postmodern tendency is provided by Ginsburg (1993) who has adopted Appadurai's (1990) concept of 'mediascapes' to analyse the burgeoning of Aboriginal media productions in Australia. Below I take issue with her view that indigenous media producers everywhere 'enter transnational mediascapes in complex and multidirectional ways' (1993: 562). In the case of rural Sarawak, the flows of media products are often more 'unidirectional' than 'multidirectional'. The challenge here is not so much to understand countless intersecting pathways but to explain the prevalence of a top-down, two-step flow of media items from the West, especially the US, to rural Borneo via powerful cultural

brokers in West Malaysia. I examine in some historical detail the main features of this mass process of 'dual westernisation' in the latter part of the chapter.

Finally, to Comaroff's point that in the postcolonial world there is an 'increasing convergence of ethnic consciousness and nationalist assertion' leading to a spread of 'ethnonationalism'. This statement distracts us from Gellner's (1983: 140-143) robust thesis that states seek to monopolise legitimate culture through mass education and a national language. The driving principle of nationalism is 'one state, one culture'. A key neglected area of research is *exactly how, through which media*, postcolonial states seek to transcend their cultural diversity and assumed backwardness and achieve a 'literate sophisticated high culture' (1983: 141). Below I argue that one chief site of struggles between central and peripheral ethnic groups in Malaysia is language, and that the Iban and other Dayaks, who lack the 'political shell' of the state (1983: 140), are losing out to the politically stronger Peninsular Malays and their Sarawak allies. In this chapter I distinguish two periods of media production impinging upon rural Iban society. First, an early period (1954-1976) dominated not by 'global' media but rather by Iban-language radio and books controlled by the Sarawak government and aimed at consolidating its hold across the territory. I dwell on some of the ambiguities involved in the task, for the early Iban producers were striving *both* to modernise their society *and* to protect it from the ravages of modernity. In the second section I analyse a second period (1977-1999) dominated by audiovisual and print media agents from three urban centres (Kuala Lumpur, Kuching and Sibul). This period was characterized by powerful efforts to exclude the Iban language and culture from the mass media while all along promoting a colourful, vague Dayak identity in its stead – a creative process familiar to students of other Asia-Pacific nations (e.g. see Sullivan 1993 on Papua New Guinea).

1. First Period (1954-1976): the rise of Iban radio and print media

Iban-language broadcasting

Radio Sarawak was officially inaugurated on 8th June 1954. Sarawak was then a British Crown Colony. The Sarawak Legislative Council (or *Council Negeri*) had finally decided to go ahead with hotly debated plans to create a broadcasting service (Morrison 1954:391). Set up with the technical assistance of the BBC, the service had four sections: Malay, Iban, Chinese and English. The Iban Section broadcast one hour daily from 7 till 8 pm. In the early days the variety of programmes was limited to news, information on farming and animal husbandry (*betanam betupi*), and some Iban folklore, especially sung poems (*pantun, renong*) and epics (*ensera*). It was also used in case of medical and other emergencies in certain upriver areas (Dickson 1995: 137)¹.

The late Gerunsin Lembat (1924-95) from Malong, Saratok, was the first Iban broadcaster. In January 1956 he was promoted to Head of the Iban Service (Langub 1995: 56). He is still remembered by rural and urban audiences alike for his extraordinary voice, command of the Iban language and knowledge of the *adat* (customary law). Other early broadcasters include Pancras Eddy, Andria Ejau, George Jimbai and Edward Kechendai. In those days Radio Sarawak was jokingly called 'Radio Saribas' owing to the prevalence of broadcasters born or educated in that region. Even today, a strong influence of the Saribas dialect can be detected in standard RTM Iban.

The Iban were the first Dayaks to have their own radio programmes. In 1957 the

1. The development officer John K. Wilson (1969: 163; see below) was a pioneer in the use of radio for development purposes. His first development centre was at Budu, near Saratok (see Map 4): "That the people used the radios to listen in to organised programmes forwarded to Radio Sarawak either by tape or letter was of course encouraged to the limit. Budu news and educational features were a mainstay at Radio Sarawak in the early days. So if it happened that we were in Kuching and wanted a canoe to meet us anywhere, this was just very easy now. A telephone call to Radio Sarawak and that night the news had reached the longhouse".

Iban example led influential members of another major group, the Land Dayaks (today Bidayuh), to express their 'great desire' to have their own radio section (*Sarawak Tribune* 21/10/ 1957). Others, like the Kenyah and Kayan would follow suit in subsequent years. In the intervening years they were avid listeners of the Iban programmes².

Let us now consider the second organisation ever to broadcast in Iban. In 1958 the School Broadcasting Service (Ib. *Sekula Penabur*³) was set up in Kuching by a New Zealander, Ian Prentice, under the Colombo Plan. Most radio sets were donated by the Asia Foundation and the Government of Australia. A regular schedule of broadcast English lessons began in 1959, designed for native primary schools in rural areas, where most teachers had only a basic education. It was hoped radio would help overcome pupils' reliance on the English spoken by native teachers hampered by a 'limited range of knowledge, ideas, stories and vocabulary'⁴. By the end of 1960 there were 467 participating schools across Sarawak, and 850 teachers had attended 11 training courses⁵. Sarawak was a regional pioneer in radio-mediated teaching and learning. Indeed Malayan educationalists were to learn from their Sarawak colleagues at a later stage. The response from the target audience was very encouraging. In 1960 the Service received 700 letters from Primary 5 and 6 pupils around Sarawak in response to questions set to them⁶.

The service initially broadcast in English only, but difficulties with this language led to the introduction of Malay and Iban programmes and reading materials -- an

2. One well-travelled Iban informant told me that his language was much more of a *lingua franca* in Kayan-Kenyah areas in the late 1950s and 1960s than it is today (late 1990s) thanks to the popularity of the Iban-language service. Yet even today some Iban programmes are popular with other ethnic groups. An elderly Malay man from the Saribas assured me that he finds the Iban-language news programmes easier to follow than their Bahasa Malaysia equivalents, as he has no schooling. The Saribas Iban dialect is more familiar to him than the relatively new Standard Malay language from West Malaysia.

3. The term *penabur* is a metaphorical neologism derived from the Iban farming term *nabur* (to sow or scatter).

4. Sarawak Education Department (SED) Annual Reports 1958-1960: 34.

5. *SED Annual Reports* 1958-1960: 35.

6. *SED Annual Reports* 1958-1960: 34.

interesting example of how the introduction of a mediated oral genre (Iban radio lessons) created the need for a new written genre (Iban textbooks). Michael Burna, another Saribas man and renowned educationalist, was the first Iban officer. He produced three programmes: '*English ke kita*' (English for you), 'Dictation and Spelling' and '*Ensera*' (tales, stories).

Meanwhile Radio Sarawak was preparing for the country's independence. From 1961 to 1963 Peter Redcliffe, an alleged intelligence officer with Britain's MI5, and John Cordoux were in charge of Radio Sarawak. They were replaced by Charles McKenna, the last expatriate Director, soon before the formation of Malaysia in 1963. With 'independence through Malaysia', Radio Sarawak became Radio Malaysia Sarawak. The inclusion of the term Malaysia signals a shift in priorities for the Iban Section and all the other sections. The first task was to help the new country from the threat posed by Soekarno's Indonesia who saw Malaysia as another example of British imperialism seeking to maintain the Malay world divided. Soekarno claimed the Bornean states for his vision of a Greater Indonesia. A Psychological Warfare Unit (or Psy-war) was set up under British guidance that deployed tactics already successfully used by Radio Malaya against the communist guerrillas in the 1948-1960 period. One of the weapons deployed was the *cherita kelulu* (radio drama) which adapted traditional Iban storytelling genres, themes and characters such as the Keling and Kumang epic *ensera*. Other dramas were set in contemporary rural Sarawak and promoted the need for development, religious and racial harmony and loyalty to the new country. The first producer of these *cherita kelulu* was Andria Ejau, who also published a number of them through the Borneo Literature Bureau (see books section). Vivid jungle and longhouse sound effects were fundamental to the task of producing compelling drama. Some were borrowed from the BBC, while others were home-made.

Other time-honoured tactics included interviews with war victims and patriotic songs. An Iban singer, Connie Francis, sang *Tanah ai menoa aku* (lit. land and water of my

country, i.e. my Fatherland, the Iban/Malaysian answer to Indonesia's national anthem) to instil love towards Malaysia in the masses, while Hillary Tawan sang *Oh Malaysia!*. This was a time of growth for Iban pop. The 1950s influence of the Indonesian and Indian music industry gave way in the 1960s and 1970s to British and American influences. Pauline Linan was now joined by her sister, Señorita Linan, on frequent tours around Sarawak and recorded broadcasts. They were both brought up listening to Western songs. Señorita's personal favourites were, not unusually, Tom Jones and Engelbert Humperdinck. In her varied repertoire she sang in Iban but the rhythms and tunes were borrowed from the West. She knew her twist, rock'n'roll, country and sentimental. In those days Iban audiences lagged behind the more urbanised ethnic groups, says Señorita: 'for instance, the Chinese, were into The Beatles but back in the 1960s few Iban were exposed to world music'.

There were other popular Iban singers, including the police constable Eddie Jemat, as well as Esther Bayang, Antonio Jawie, Robert Lingga and Reynolds Gregory – also known as 'the Elvis Presley of Sarawak'. Ironically, the fruits of their pioneering efforts to create a 'modern' Iban pop scene are now collectively known as *lagu lama* (lit. 'old songs') as middle-aged Iban look back at those golden days and praise the depth (*dalam*) and subtlety of the lyrics, to them worlds apart from today's 'superficial' (*mabu*) Iban pop. Despite the foreign provenance of the tunes, the *lagu lama* are now regarded as legitimate heirs to the best Iban musical tradition. Why would this be so? According to Debray (1996: 177) nostalgia is 'the first phase of mediological consciousness'. As a first generation of media producers and consumers reach their middle and late years, their discovery of 'a clear deviation from the old norm grasps the new order as a disordering'.

In the early days of Iban pop, some songwriters and performers straddled both genres. For instance, Lawrence S. Ijau⁷ (1966), a teacher and collector of folklore,

7. The Borneo Literature Bureau (see below, third section) published three folklore books by Lawrence Sanoun Ijau in the 1960s. Like many other folklorists, Ijau was from the Paku area and trained at Batu Lintang Teachers Training College.

wrote a number of pop songs that were broadcast by Radio Sarawak. Another case in point is Señorita Linan herself, who apart from being a pop singer was a traditional dance (*ngajat*) performer in the 1960s and 1970s and currently teaches this art form in Kuching.

With the end of the Indonesian *konfrontasi* in 1965, priorities shifted from war propaganda to what a veteran Iban broadcaster has defined as the 'mental revolution of the people', that is to education, health and economic development. Or, as a Malay broadcaster put it: 'After independence changes were gradual: we broadcast more hours, there was more emphasis on the local dialects, development and racial harmony'.

In 1970 Iban air time was expanded to five hours: one hour in the morning, another in the afternoon, and three hours in the evening. Meanwhile School Broadcasting began to produce Iban-language programmes aimed at lower secondary Iban pupils (Untie 1998: 3), although English remained the medium of instruction and pupils were discouraged from using their mother tongues in school.

From mid-1971 a slump in the international timber market caused the economic situation in Sarawak to worsen, especially in the Sibu area. The combination of a rapid Malaysianisation, abject poverty and chronic unemployment led many Chinese to join the communist guerrillas (Leigh 1974:156). Their Iban support was considerable. The communists used terror effectively by publicly executing informers. They also targeted virtually every school in Sibu with moralistic pamphlets and lectures. Students were urged to 'win the victory' and 'oppose and stop to wear Mini-skirt and funny dresses'. Teachers were often blamed for the pupils' decadent ways: 'some of them even teach the students how to twist, and thus really lead the students into darkness' (Leigh 1974: 158).

The Iban Section was again enlisted to deploy psy-war tactics against the

insurgents. Two 15-minute programmes were broadcast daily: 'Topic of the day' (thinly veiled propaganda) and an appeal to the insurgents to surrender. In addition, special soap operas (*cherita kelulu*) were produced by Andria Ejau to, in the words of a colleague, alter the listeners' 'mental perspective' and 'get the people to report the terrorists' (*ngasoh rayat ripot tiroris*). In 1975 the gifted Iban storyteller and broadcaster Thomas T. Laka, still active today (see chapter 6), was trained in drama techniques by a British psy-war instructor based in Kuala Lumpur. That same year television arrived in Sarawak -- 12 years after it had done so in West Malaysia -- and some of the radio staff were headhunted into the new medium.

At this point it is pertinent to ask to what extent we can consider the Iban Section part of the growing number of 'indigenous media' around the world that have attracted the attention of media researchers (Spitulnik 1993: 303). Ginsburg (1993: 560-2), an anthropologist, is one of the better known practitioners in this new subfield (see Abu-Lughod 1997). She argues that two resilient tropes dominate the study of indigenous media. First, there is the 'Faustian contract' approach derived from the Frankfurt School. This approach is pessimistic about the possibilities of indigenous cultures to withstand the onslaught of western media and their repressive ideologies. Second, there is McLuhan's (1964) 'global village' optimism with its utopian dream of a worldwide electronic democracy. Ginsburg (1993: 561-2), as I mentioned earlier, opts for a third trope: Appadurai's (1990) 'mediascape', a call for 'situated analyses that take account of the interdependence of media practices and the local, national, and transnational circumstances that surround them'. In settler nations such as Canada and Australia which practise 'welfare colonialism', she notes, it is ironically the state that has to support these media given the lack of financial and technical resources available to the native populations. Another factor of growing importance is the globalisation of indigenous media, arts and activism. Thus, although Aboriginal culture has been continually exploited by the white majority for tourist and political gains, Aboriginal media producers have become more and more active at international film and video festivals and other forms of

networking. In order to grasp the significance of these developments, says Ginsburg, we need to study how indigenous media producers 'enter transnational mediascapes in complex and multidirectional ways' (1993: 562).

Where it may be useful in the context of Australian media, this approach would be of little use in the case of Iban radio. Here it is not so much 'multidirectional ways' we should analyse but rather the unidirectional, collective endeavour of Iban radio producers to spread the dominant ideology, a benevolent admixture of top-down developmentalism and salvage folklorism. Where many Aboriginal producers have shown an active commitment to the postmodern ideology of a global brotherhood of 'First Nations' or 'Fourth World Peoples', largely defined in opposition to white settler nations (Ginsburg 1993: 558), Iban producers have remained committed to redefining and refining 'Iban tradition' (*adat Iban*) within the context of a developmentalist state. This trend was reinforced with the advent of print media in the Iban language.

The Borneo Literature Bureau period: 1960-1976

In 1949, John Kennedy Wilson arrived in Sarawak from Scotland to become the Principal of Batu Lintang Training College. The chief aim of the College was to train young Sarawakian teachers and send them to far-flung corners of the new Crown Colony to set up and run primary schools, often under very harsh conditions. Its ethos followed in the Brooke tradition of symbolic respect towards the country's 'native cultures'.

Batu Lintang, with its white washed walls decorated with splendid native designs, its encouragement of local handicrafts and interest in the tribal dances, had already set a pattern of pride in indigenous culture and artistic achievement (Dickson 1995: 27).

In November 1952 Wilson attended his last school-leaving ceremony. All students arrived in 'traditional dress, bright with hornbill feathers, silver woven sarongs and ivory earrings' (Dickson 1995: 27). Wilson was to go on to found a remarkably successful experiment in what today is known as 'sustainable development'. For

four years he lived in the remote Budu area to set up a community development scheme from the bottom up, that is building on local Iban skills and cultural resources rather than importing them from the urban areas. When Malaysia was created in 1963, his success was perceived as a threat by the new Kuala Lumpur rulers and he was 'asked to leave Sarawak' (Jawan 1994: 121).

The indigenist nature of Batu Lintang's ethos, or rather its blending of British education and native arts and ceremony, was to have a decisive influence on a core of motivated pioneering Iban teachers who would set out to modernise Iban culture while preserving what they considered to be the best of its heritage. On 15 September 1958 the colonial government decided to create the Borneo Literature Bureau (Tawai 1997: 6). Like Batu Lintang and Radio Sarawak, the Bureau aimed at reconciling social and economic development with cultural preservation. The three main aims of the Bureau's publications in English, Chinese, Malay, Iban and other indigenous languages were:

- (a) to support the various government departments in their production of technical, semi-technical and instructional printed materials for the peoples of Sabah and Sarawak.
- (b) to encourage local authorship and meet local needs
- (c) to help in building up a local book trade (*Borneo Literature Bureau Annual Report* 1960).

Production started in 1960. The following year, the book of Iban folk stories *Rita Tujoh Malam* by Anthony Richards (1961) sold the promising figure of 1,765 copies within six months. In the same year the Bureau also published the religious text *Jerita pasal Daniel* (see below on Christian media) and took over the distribution of *Radio Times* from Radio Sarawak. The 1962 sales of English and Iban books were described by the Bureau as 'encouraging'⁸. Several booksellers reported selling books to illiterate Iban adults who would have their children read them aloud to

8. Total sales in all languages rocketed from \$38,739 in 1960 through \$171,157 in 1961 to \$348,528 in 1962. By contrast, Chinese books were selling poorly. The reason adduced was that neither Chinese adults nor children had much interest in books with Bornean themes (*BLB Annual Report* 1962).

them. Of the 9 Iban books published⁹, 2 were educational (geography and English), 3 were on Iban custom (*adat*), and 4 were oral narratives (*ensera* and *mimpi* [dreams]). The latter was Benedict Sandin's important *Duabelas Bengkah Mimpi Tuai Dayak-Iban*, a collection of dreams by Iban chiefs that had special historical significance¹⁰. Another prolific author who started publishing this year was Sandin's kinsman Henry Gerijih (1962) with *Raja Langit*, an *ensera* ('epic or saga sung in poetic language with explanations and conversations in prose' [Richards 1981: 87]) on Keling and other heroes and heroines from the mythical world of Panggau Libau-Gelong. Finally, A.A. Majang (1962), a former student of Wilson's at Batu Lintang, published a study on Iban marriage custom entitled *Melah Pinang*.

In 1963, the year in which Malaysia was created, '[t]he publication of books in Iban continued to play a large part in the Bureau's activities'¹¹. A grant was received from the Asia Foundation and a full-time Iban officer, Edward Enggu, was appointed. *Kumang Betelu*, a second saga (*ensera*) by H. Gerijih, and *Pelandok seduai Tekura*, an animal fable by D. Entingi, were published.

The following year the Bureau celebrated its seventh annual literary competition. Seven Iban manuscripts were sent in, out of which three were accepted. Sandin published *Raja Durong*, an *ensera* about the great Sumatran ancestor of Pulang Gana¹², the Iban 'deity of the earth' (Richards 1981: 288) or 'god of agriculture' (Sutlive 1994:214). Another previous winner, Andria Ejau's *Dilah Tanah*, was published this year. Arguably the first ever Iban novel¹³, the author describes it as an *Ensera Kelulu*, that is a 'pedagogical story' (*tau pulai ka pelajar*), which he distinguishes from the traditional genre *Ensera Tuai* (or *Cherita Asa*). A more

9. Source: Steinmayer (1990).

10. Traditionally Iban have relied on dreams (*mimpi*) as much as on omens (*burong*) for guidance (Richards 1981: 220).

11. BLB Annual Report (1963)

12. According to Richards (1981: 288), Pulang Gana '[r]epresents Indian Ganesh (Ganesa, Ganapati, lord of the troops accompanying (*sempulang*) or attendant on Siva) whose 'vehicle' is the rat (*ciŋ*) from whom the Iban obtained PADI [rice]'

13. Otto Steinmayer (personal communication, January 1999).

accurate translation might be 'morality novella', from the 'morality plays' staged in England between the 14th and 16th centuries in which personified virtues and vices were set into conflict¹⁴. Ejau's characters live in a longhouse situated in the imaginary land (*menoa kelulu*) of Dilah Tanah. They mean well, but keep running into trouble with the authorities for their reluctance to fully embrace the new *adat*, the so-called *adat perintah* (lit. government law), in particular the new laws aimed at curtailing slash-and-burn hill rice farming. It all ends well after the local councillor makes the locals see the need to follow the learned ways of the government regarding modern agriculture. There are obvious autobiographical elements in the story, for Ejau was a councillor from 1947 to 1956, frequently travelling to remote Iban areas, before he joined Radio Sarawak where he first started writing soap operas. During his official trips to the backwoods he enjoyed talking to the elders, as he was 'seeking knowledge that could benefit my people' (*ngiga penemu ke tau diguna bansa diri*). Before that he had been a security guard at an oil refinery in Seria (Ejau 1964). He was therefore well acquainted both with Iban customary law and with the state's own understanding of law and order. By means of his novellas and broadcasts, he sought to bridge the two.

Ejau and Sandin represent two poles of the modernist-traditionalist continuum running through the entire field of Iban media production. Ejau specialized in transforming oral accounts, metaphors and imagery into contemporary, power-laden narratives that would 'benefit [his] people'. He was using old linguistic materials through new media technologies in order to promote 'modern' practices. Sandin took the opposite route as he sought to salvage as much of the Iban oral tradition as he could for the benefit of future generations. In other words, he was employing a new media technology to save (selected) 'old knowledge' (*penemu lama*). Their respective 1964 publications exemplify this marked contrast. While Ejau concentrated on modern agriculture, Sandin wrote about the Iban god of farming. Although both authors were undoubtedly the products and producers of a modern

14. *Collins English Dictionary* (1994).

Sarawak, the generic divide they bolstered has indigenous, pre-state roots. Jensen (1974: 64) has divided the Iban oral tradition into (1) stories about ‘the origins of Iban custom, the rice cult, augury and social organisation’ and (2) ‘legends from the heroic past’ whose purpose is to explain Iban behaviour and the potential consequences of wrongdoing. Ejau’s contribution was to shift from this ‘heroic past’ to the contemporary Iban world he knew well, but his aim was equally to explain ‘the potential consequences of wrongdoing’.

In 1965 most books produced by the Bureau sold well, and it was expected that all the English and Iban books would eventually be sold out. The sale of English books increased by 63% and that of Iban by 64%, from 10,233 in 1964 to 16,747 in 1965. The number of entries from would-be Iban authors was twice that of Malay authors and many times larger than that of all other Dayak groups as a whole, as Table 2.1. shows. That year saw the publication of another book by Henry Gerijih, *Aur Kira*, a lengthy prose narrative with some poetic interludes on the adventures of Aur Kira, the younger brother of culture hero Keling. This work is a cross between an *ensera* (see above) and a *jerita tuai*, that is a ‘simple prose tale’ (Richards 1981). Another 1965 book was William Duncan’s *Anak Bujang Sugi*, an adaptation of the bardic (*lemambang*) epic genre known as *ensera sugi*. In the first part we witness the life and deeds of Bujang Sugi whom the bard’s tutelary spirit (*yang*) calls upon to visit the sick. In the second part we learn about Bujang Sugi’s descendants¹⁵.

32 English	1 Bukar Sadong
28 Iban	1 Bau Jagoi
18 Chinese	1 Biatah
14 Malay	1 Kayan

Table 2.1. Number of manuscripts by language sent in for the 8th Borneo Literature Bureau annual competition, 1965. Source: *Borneo Literature Bureau Annual Report* (1965).

¹⁵ Also published in 1965 were *Peransang Tunang* by A.K. Mancha, four English translations and an English-Iban, Iban-English phrase book which sold very well (*BLB Annual Report* [1965] and Steinmayer [1990]).

The deluge of Iban manuscripts received in 1965 caused a backlog of editorial work the following year. Six new Iban books were published, and many more were planned for 1967. Three of the six were by teachers who had trained at Wilson's Batu Lintang in the 1950s: *Ijau Berani*, an ethnohistorical account set in 19th century Sarawak by Jacob ak Imang, and one *ensera* each by Norman Pitok and Lawrence Ijau. However, the number of Iban manuscripts sent in declined dramatically from the previous year's 28 to this year's 10¹⁶:

20 English	2 Kadazan
17 Malay	1 Bau-Jagoi
15 Chinese	1 Bukar-Sadong
10 Iban	

Table 2.2. Number of manuscripts by language sent in for the 9th Borneo Literature Bureau annual competition, 1966. Source: *Borneo Literature Bureau Annual Report* (1966).

Another important change, this time *qualitative*, was the recognition by the Bureau that whereas most previous entries had been first records of 'stories handed down orally for many generations', henceforth original writing would be encouraged (*BLB Annual Report* 1966). The scales were therefore tipped in favour of Ejaú's line of work.

George Jenang, aged 19, took up the challenge and published *Keling Nyumpit*, an original¹⁷ *ensera*, in 1967. Meanwhile A.A. Majang chose to publish in a new, para-journalistic genre: Iban reportage. His *Padi Ribai* deals with the rumours that spread across the Rejang in the 1950s that Pulang Gana, the god of agriculture, had passed away and his son, Ribai, was sending *padi* from overseas to grow in river shallows (Richards 1981:289). Also in 1967, Andria Ejaú himself published a sequel to *Dilah Tanah*, his morality novella mentioned earlier. In his new book, *Madu*

16. No explanation for this fact is given in the Annual Report.

17. Jenang was born in Sungai Assam, Krian, Saratok. He learnt the art of storytelling from his father. A precocious author, Jenang wrote this *ensera* at the age of 16 'all by myself'; it did not follow from 'ancient stories' (*ensera tu ukai nampong batang ensera tuai tang iya empegal digaga aku kadir*). Unfortunately this was to be, to the best of my knowledge, his first and last published work.

Midang, Ejau resumes his preoccupation with social change and its effects on Iban culture. Two of his early themes re-emerge here: (a) the peasants' need to understand the new laws regulating migratory farming, and (b) their need to modify their customary law (*adat*) to allow for new developmental tools -- in this case the wireless radio. He exemplifies the latter with an episode in which the longhouse elders ban the use of radio for a month in accordance with the *adat* regulating mourning (*ulit*)¹⁸. Thus the community fail to learn about a dangerous fugitive presently roaming their land. One day the ne'er-do-well arrives and, posing as a government official, cheats the community out of their meagre savings.

A number of traditional stories were also published in 1967, including H. Gerijih's *Raja Berani*, B. Inin's *Bujang Linggang* and P. Gani's *Bujang Abang Bunsu*. The main event of the year at the Bureau, however, at least as far as Iban publishing is concerned, was the launching of *Nendak*, a magazine intended 'for Ibans who are unable to read with facility in any language other than their own'. The target readers were adolescents and young adults, both male and female. In order to attract them, a '[w]ide variety of material' was designed (BLB Annual Report 1967.3-6). Table 2.3. captures some of that diversity. In its 10-year long history, a total of 125 issues of *Nendak* were published. Besides being a rich repository of Iban lore, *Nendak* provides the 1990s reader with a privileged insight into the role of Iban intellectuals in state-sponsored efforts to modernise Iban culture and society on a wide front, from customary law through political organisation, agriculture and health to home economics.

In 1968 Andria Ejau put out *Batu Besundang*, a morality novella (*ensera kelulu*) that opens with a government-appointed native chief (*Pengulu*) instructing the residents of a remote longhouse on the proper way of celebrating *Gawai Dayak*, the annual pan-Dayak Festival recently invented by the Iban-led government to match the

18. According to Paku custom, during the mourning period people are not allowed to 'make music, shout and put on flowery and red clothes' or cut their hair (Sandin 1980:71) In my 1996-98 fieldwork I found that rural Iban, at least in the Saribas, have bent their mourning *adat* to accommodate radio and television (see chapter 4).

Malay and Chinese festivities (see this chapter, penultimate section, and chapter 4). The chief explains to his puzzled followers the meaning of the term 'Dayak' by listing 18 groups and comparing their bewildering language diversity to that of the Chinese. The Dayaks needed a longer period of time to recognise themselves as one people (*bansa*), he explains, because 'schooling arrived late to us' (*laban pelajar sekula laun datai ba kita*). As this example shows, the early Iban media products served to crystallize and reify what until then had been much more flexible and amorphous identities.

In 1968 a second 'original work' was born, Janang Ensiring's *Ngelar Menoa Sarawak*, a passionate ode to Sarawak¹⁹ written in the *pantun* genre, i.e. 'a song sung in rhyming pattern' (Sather 1994:60). Ensiring, who was 19 at the time, shows great love for both Sarawak and the 5-year old Malaysia. His *pantun* traces the history of Sarawak, from the cave-ridden, bloody chaos of prehistory through several stages of increased *adat* law and order to the glorious cry of Malaysian freedom from British colonialism in 1963: MERDEKA! (Ensiring 1968:32). To the young poet life before the Brooke Raj was hardly worth living:

<p><i>Bekereja samoa nadai meruan</i> <i>Laban rindang bebunoh ba pangan</i> [...] <i>Sida nadai Raja megai</i> <i>Adat nadai dipejalai</i></p>	<p>Their travails saw no profitable ends For they were busy murdering their friends [...] They had no Rajah to rule them Had no <i>adat</i> to guide them</p>
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(Ensiring 1968:2, my translation)

Penemu lama

Iban folklore²⁰

<p>7 ensera 6 cherita lama/tuai 2 cherita mimpi 2 ensera anembiak 2 entelah 2 adat Iban</p>	<p>fictive narratives, usu. epic sagas 'factual' ethnohistorical accounts²¹ dream narratives stories for children riddles Iban custom pieces²²</p>
--	---

19. Cf. Andrewson Ngalai's later pop song described below.

20. Including recent innovations, e.g. *Gawai Dayak* (Dayak Festival Day) ceremonies and pro-government morality tales (*cherita kelulu*).

21. See Sather (1994) for a learned discussion of Iban ethnohistory .

1 cerita kelulu	morality tale
1 pantun	sung poem
1 leka main	propaganda poem
1 jako kelaung enggau jako sema	proverbs and parables
1 ngalu petara leboh Gawai Dayak	Dayak Day ceremony to welcome gods ²³
1 lumba enggau main	traditional Iban games

27 sub-total items

Penemu baru

Educational material²⁴

2 betanam betupi	agriculture and animal husbandry ²⁵
2 ungkop sida ka indu	home economics ²⁶
2 ajar pengerai	health advice ²⁷
2 jako melintang pukang	Iban crossword puzzle
2 belajar Bahasa Kebangsaan	national language lessons
1 pengawa kunsila	the office of Councillor
1 tuai rumah enggau anembiak iya	the office of headman
1 rumah panjai	the longhouse in a modern society
1 ajar lumor	algebra lesson
1 main sains dunya & gaya pengidup	geography quiz
1 sekula di menoa Malaysia	the school system in Malaysia
1 Bujang Berani Anembiak Malaysia	pro-Malaysia propaganda article
1 Taun Baru China	Chinese New Year feature article
1 gambar tuai perintah	photographic report on Sarawak leaders
1 gambar Taun Baru China	photographic report on Chinese New Year

20 sub-total items

47 total items

Table 2.3. A breakdown of 7 issues²⁸ of *Nendak* magazine (from 1968 to 1975) by general (folklore vs. educational)²⁹ and specific subject matter.

22. One contribution by Benedict Sandin on longhouse *basa* (et'quette, good manners), the other an interview with Tunggay anak Mulla, also from the Saribas, on *ngetas ulit* (rite to end a period of mourning) and *serara bunga* (rite to 'separate' the dead from the living) (Sutlive 1994)

23. A newly invented rite to receive and introduce to the longhouse the *Petara*, or heavenly guests (Richards 1981: 7), during the *Gawai Dayak* festival, adapted from Iban custom. *Gawai Dayak* was invented in 1963, five years before the publication of this issue of *Nendak* (see discussion of Ejau's novella *Batu Besundang* below).

24. I am following the Bureau's terminology here. In some items, e.g. '*Bujang Berani...*', read propaganda.

25. Prepared by the Agriculture Department.

26. Idem.

27. Prepared by the Health Department.

28. Some parts were missing in two of the photocopies I was able to inspect, and I could not date another two of them.

29. The division of the items into two broad categories is mine. No such division is apparent in *Nendak*. Items from both categories are jumbled together in all issues examined. Furthermore, some of the 'Iban Folklore' items are also meant to 'modernise' the readers' supposedly traditional worldview.

There is no trace in Ensiring of Rousseau's 'noble savage' who lives in harmony with nature, and a great deal of Hobbes' famous dictum on primitive man's life being 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. For Hobbes (1651), the emergence of the state's monopoly of violence is a fundamental step towards peace, social evolution and prosperity – a view all Iban media producers would readily agree with. The teleological nature of modern Iban ethnohistory is a synthesis of foreign (British and Malayan) and indigenous elements. The foreign component supplies a view of nations as steadily marching along history towards greater unity and prosperity (Anderson 1983:23), whereas the Iban tradition has *adat* regulating all spheres of life and severely punishing those who threaten the longhouse harmony.

Another case in point is Sandin's 1970 ethnohistorical account, entitled *Peturun Iban* ('Iban Descent'). It recounts the history of the Iban people from their origins in the Kapuas, in present-day Indonesian Borneo, through their migrations into Sarawak, to the long pacification process under the White Rajahs culminating in the surrender of the last Upper Engkari 'troublemakers' in 1932:

Nya pengabis pengachau Iban dalam Sarawak. Udah bekau tu nadai agi orang deka ngaga pengachau ke nusah orang maioh. Ati berani agi dikembuan bansa Iban tang sida enda ngemeran ka nya agi. Sida berumah manah lalu besekula nunda pengawa enggau pemansang bansa bukai ke sama diau begulai enggau sida dalam menoa Sarawak tu.

This was the end of the Iban troubles in Sarawak. Henceforth nobody would cause suffering to the general population. The Iban are still endowed with brave hearts yet they pay little heed to them. They now build good solid houses and send their children to school following the example set by the other races³⁰ with whom they share Sarawak (Sandin 1970: 123, my translation).

Iban readers are here again given a teleological framework, employed this time by Sarawak's foremost ethnohistorian who combines oral and written materials in order to prove that the state saved the Iban from themselves.

Other works published in 1968 included Sandin's *Leka Sabak*, a complex ritual

30. I have translated the word *bansa* as 'race' here in line with the English usage prevalent at the time of Sandin's writing. It is still widely used in the English-language press and everyday conversation among urban Sarawakians. Another commonly used term equivalent to the current academic term 'ethnic groups' is 'ethnics'.

dirge, various *ensera* by Andria Ejau and S. Pelima and a collection of riddles (*entelah*) by Boniface Jarraw, a BBC-trained broadcaster and *ngajat* dancer. At the end of the year, officially owing to poor sales results (but see below), the Bureau decided to concentrate on less Iban titles. The 11th competition yielded the following harvest:

22 English	8 Chinese
19 Malay	1 Kadazan
15 Iban	

Table 2.4. Number of manuscripts by language sent in for the 11th Borneo Literature Bureau annual competition, 1968.

Of those 15 Iban books received only 2 saw the light in 1969: an *ensera* by Andria Ejau entitled *Aji Bulan* and a ritual dirge by Rev. Fr. Frederick Rajit entitled *Sabak Kenang*. This Anglican priest from Betong, in the Saribas, learnt the pagan dirge from his mother --- a characteristic example of that region's fertile syncretism (see chapter 4).

The year 1970 was more productive. A set of Iban language textbooks was published, namely Michael Buma's memorable³¹ *Pelajar Iban 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6* series, based on traditional folk tales -- which Iban leader Sidi Munan (1985:ii) saw at the time as an encouraging contribution to the survival of the Iban language. In addition to Sandin's aforesaid ethnohistory, E. Kechendai, a broadcaster and regular contributor to *Nendak*, published a book of animal fables (*ensera jelu*) aimed at the 10-15 age group, and Ong Kee Bian a guide to modern pisciculture in Iban translation.

In 1971 Sandin put out a bardic invocation to the gods named *Pengap Gawai Burong*, J.J. Awell a collection of mostly animal fables with a moral intent (*cherita kelulu*), and C.M. Liaw an *ensera*. The following year Andria Ejau brought out his

31. I myself found them very useful and enjoyable as a gentle introduction to the intricacies of the Iban language prior to fieldwork .

third morality novella, *Pelangka Gantong*. Again a longhouse community have difficulties coping with modernity, and again the wise local councillor comes to their rescue. The problems are by now familiar to Ejau's readers: land ownership, new political structures and literacy.

This year a new author, Joshua Jalie, put out *Pemansang mai Pengerusak*, also a morality novella on rural development. Jalie's peasants have been blessed with a school, a road and a rubber scheme, alas they soon squander their profits gambling at the cockfights. To compound matters further, most of them still believe in ghosts (*antu*). 'Since when have the rats run away from our spells?' says an unusually enlightened villager, 'The government has already given us poison to kill the rats but the others insist on following the old ways'³². In the preface, the author had made a clear distinction between rural Iban 'who know better' (*sida ti mereti agi*) and those who 'are still blind, who are not aware of the means and aims of development' (*sida ti agi buta, ti apin nemu julok enggau tuju ator pemansang*). Finally, also in 1972 W. Gieri had an *ensera* published on the adventures of a jungle ogre (*antu gerasi*). Here we have again a contrast of the Ejau-Sandin kind identified earlier. While one author ridicules his rural brethren's belief in spirits and ogres (*antu*), another tries to salvage for posterity a most prominent member of that supernatural family, one whose name was traditionally used in the longhouse to quieten unruly children. Their contrast reveals the contradictory nature of the wider modernising project embarked upon by the early generation of media producers, caught up in preserving for the future what they, urbanised literate Christians, had discarded in their own lives.

The only Iban-language book published in 1973 was a collection of short stories translated from Kadazan, a major Sabahan language. In 1974 two *ensera* by G.N. Madang and K. Uambat and a primary school textbook by C. Saong were brought out. Another two *ensera*, by S. Jawan and T. Geboh, came out in 1975.

32. In the original: '*Dini chit tau rari ka puchau kitai? Perintah udah meri rachun dikena munoh chit tang sida agi majak ka penemu sida nya*' (Jalie 1972).

The Bureau ceased to exist in 1977 when it was taken over by the Federal body *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (see below). In its last year of existence B. Sandin (1976) put out *Gawai Pangkong Tiang*, on a bardic invocation (*pengap*) recited during the festival of the same name; A. Joseph published an ethnohistory (*jerita tua*) and T. Geboh an *ensera*. Finally Andria Ejau brought out another morality novella: *Tanah Belimpah*. It contained episodes on the advantages of modern medicine over shamanic (*manang*) rites, on those of wet rice over hill rice cultivation, on the commendable efforts of the school authorities to create a Malaysian people (*bansa Malaysia*), and on the great potential of a newly arrived technology called 'television' to bridge the gap between rural and urban schools. We shall understand shortly just how tragically ironic Ejau's patriotic optimism would prove to be.

The significance of the Borneo Literature Bureau

To the literary scholar, the Bureau's books are an 'excellent source' for the study of Bornean languages and literatures (Steinmayer 1990: 114), a study still in its infancy. As Sutlive (1988: 73), an authority in the Iban language, has remarked:

Thirty-one years ago...Derek Freeman told me that Iban folklore "probably exceeds in sheer volume the literature of the Greeks". At the time, I thought Freeman excessive. Today, I suspect he may have been conservative in his estimate.

At a time when much of the oral tradition has disappeared, Iban books provide 'unparalleled insights into Iban social philosophy and epistemology'. They are 'instructive about Iban values, of achievement and self-reliance, of discretion, of restraint, of self-effacement and understatement' (Sutlive 1994: xxii). They also teach us about an under-researched area of study in Borneo: gender (see Appell and Sutlive 1991). Traditional Iban society was undoubtedly male-dominated. All the most venerated activities – pioneering, farming, headhunting – were the prerogative of men; they were designed to enable a man 'to become something else' (Sutlive 1977: 158). A close reading of the Bureau's stories on Keling and Kumang reveals how trouble often starts when a woman breaches a taboo, forcing Keling or

another male hero to intervene and restore order. We said earlier that in modern Iban ethnohistory the White Rajahs 'saved the Iban from themselves' by restoring order. Similarly, Sutlive (1977: 164) concludes that in Iban narratives women 'must be saved from themselves', from their jealousy and naivety -- by men³³.

At any rate, thanks to the unrelenting work of Benedict Sandin, Henry Gerijih and other Bureau authors, Iban oral literature is today far better recorded than that of any other Bornean ethnic group (Maxwell 1989: 186, Sather 1994), even if some scholars have doubts about the usefulness of the Bureau's books, in which the oral accounts have been 'abridged and edited making them almost unreliable for serious studies' (Said 1994: 58). One neglected research area, however, has been the significance of the Bureau's books not for posterity but rather in terms of *the 1960s-1970s attempts to develop a modern, literate Iban culture*. This was precisely my aim in the preceding pages: to situate the books in relation not to a timeless past or a scholarly future, but in the contemporary flux of a rapidly modernising Sarawak. Three concluding remarks are called for:

First, the vision driving the Bureau's editors and authors was to modernise the native societies through social and economic development while preserving what they considered to be the best of their rich oral traditions through literacy. At the same time Sarawak had to be protected from the related threats of racial conflict, a belligerent Indonesia and communism. We have seen some of the ways in which the Bureau's authors, notably Andria Ejau, served their government: in all cases they were animated by the paradoxical project of having both to change and to preserve Iban culture. *What* Iban culture did they draw upon? Not a wholesale 'pristine Iban culture' (Freeman 1980: 7) untouched by modernity, but rather local

³³ There is an important exception, however: the comic character Father-of-Aloi, a mischievous old man who always has to be rescued from his self-inflicted misery by his wife and son. Then again comic fables 'satirize everyday life' while the heroic sagas of Keling 'celebrate Iban ideal and dwell in particular on wars, travel and romance' (Sather 1984:ix). Hence one could see the henpecked Father-of-Aloi as the moral antithesis of Keling – a model of aborted manhood not to be tried at one's longhouse.

oral fragments of an eroded 'tradition' (*adat Iban*) that Ejau and others reconstructed piecemeal as they went along. Yet salvaging a story in print is a radically different action from telling a story in the semi-darkness of an ill lit and illiterate longhouse gathering. It is part of the collective 'objectification' of Iban culture undertaken by these pioneering media agents. Writing about the Bidayuh, formerly known as Land Dayaks, Winzeler (1997:224-5) applies Wagner's (1981) notion of 'objectification of culture', a process whereby implicit practices are rendered explicit as 'custom' or 'heritage'. To Wagner, such processes are part and parcel of the inventiveness of all human societies. Other anthropologists, however, have considered them to be unique to Western modernity. Winzeler seeks a middle ground. He argues that Southeast Asian societies adopted cultural objectifications of Indic and Islamic origin (notably *ugama* or religion, and *adat* or custom respectively) well before the arrival of the Europeans. Yet the tendency 'to turn native lifeways into matters of objective contemplation and selection of ethnic traditions' was greatly intensified under colonial and post-colonial governments.

Among the Bidayuh, for instance, the male ceremonial house (*baruk*), a strikingly designed building where enemy skulls were kept, has emerged in recent times as the 'ethnic emblem' *par excellence*. Winzeler (1997: 223) maintains that this choice of emblem results from its architectural beauty and from its being uniquely Bidayuh, for this multilingual group has little else other than architecture to distinguish it from neighbouring groups. Unlike the Bidayuh, the Iban have a common language with minor dialectal variations, a language with a long and rich history that is often invoked as the bedrock of the Iban culture. The Iban language was not only a *means* to the 'objective contemplation and selection of ethnic traditions'. The print media turned it an *object* of study, contemplation and culturalist devotion in its own right. Indeed language has remained the most powerful emblem of Ibanness to this day (see Masing 1981), far more powerful than any item of material culture or architecture could ever be.

Name	Origin	Secondary	Training	Other
1962 Sandin	Paku,Saribas	St Augustine	Swak Museum	<i>tukang tusut</i>
1962 Gerijih	Paku,Saribas	St Augustine	St Augustine	<i>lemambang</i>
1962 Majang	Kalaka	St Augustine	Batu Lintang	
1963 A. Ejau	Kalaka	St Augustine	councillor	Radio Sarawak
1965 Duncan	Saribas	St Augustine	Batu Lintang	
1966 Pitok	Simanggang	Simanggang	Batu Lintang	
1966 Imang	Simanggang	Simanggang	Batu Lintang	craftsman
1966 Guang	Paku,Saribas	St Augustine	Agric Dept	
1966 L.Ijau	Paku,Saribas	Paku,Saribas	Batu Lintang	
1967 Inin	Kalaka	Saratok	Lubok Antu	
1967 Nyangoh	Kanowit	Julau	?	
1967 Gani	Balingian	Kapit	methodist pastor	
1968 Pelima	Rimbis	Debak	trader, Paku	
1968 Ensiring	Saratok	Saratok	Rajang TTC	
1968 Jarraw	Kanowit	Kanowit	Radio Sarawak	BBC
1969 Rajit	Saribas	St Augustine	Anglican priest	
1970 Kechendai	Paku,Saribas	Debak	St Augustine	Radio Sarawak

Table 2.5. 17 Borneo Literature Bureau Iban authors for whom information is available, arranged by year of first publication, indicating place of origin, secondary school education, training and other relevant information where applicable. Sources: Borneo Literature Bureau publications and Steinmayer (1990). Keys: St Augustine = St. Augustine School, in Betong, Saribas; *tukang tusut* = genealogist; *lemambang* = bard; Batu Lintang = Batu Lintang Teacher Training College, in Kuching; Rajang TTC = Rajang Teacher Training College.

Second, as Table 2.5. shows, there was a predominance of authors from the Saribas-Kalaka belt, and in particular from Benedict Sandin's Paku river -- an area noted both by its early economic and educational achievements and love of Iban tradition (Sather 1994: 71-72). The Saribas was a curiously modernist-traditionalist crossroads whose leading families were well aware of the economic advantages of a Christian name and education and yet had retained a deep respect for their own cultural heritage. Sandin and the other Bureau authors created a cultural feedback loop: they acquired oral items in the rural areas, processed them in Kuching and

'fed them back' to the rural areas in a new, literary form. In the process they were adding symbolic and market value to their stories, for the written word carried immense authority among illiterate and semi-literate longhouse residents. It was a classic centre-periphery relationship whereby raw materials from the economic margins were manufactured in the urban centres and sent back to their places of origin. In so doing the Bureau was also standardizing 'Iban culture' through the systematic use of orthographic, generic and rhetorical conventions. Moreover, after 1963 its authors 'updated' Iban ethnohistory with the incorporation of Malaysia into their developmentalist accounts.

Finally, King (1989:243) understands ethnic categories as 'part of wider taxonomies and sets of social, economic, and political relations' and urges researchers in Borneo to relate ethnicity to other 'principles of social organisation'. Similarly, Eriksen (1993: 12) notes that 'ethnicity is essentially an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group'. More explicitly, Comaroff (1996: 180-1), as I said earlier, has argued that the study of ethnicity and nationalism needs to be situated within 'the broader context of the consciousness and claims of class, race, gender, and generation'. In the context of Iban ethnicity, one should add a fifth category: one's river of origin. Class and geography were inextricably conjoined in the making of the early Iban media producers. These pioneering authors were not only the products of a region. Their talents were fostered and channelled in a few educational institutions, which favoured the social and cultural development of the Iban. Table 2.5. demonstrates how nearly half the authors sampled obtained their secondary schooling at St Augustine, in the Saribas. Additionally, a sizeable number of authors trained as teachers at Wilson's Batu Lintang in Kuching. Virtually all were or had been rural schoolteachers. Four authors (Ejau, Jimbai, Kechendai and Jarraw) were also broadcasters with Radio Sarawak, another nativist institution. The exclusion of women from the new field of cultural production was a hidden, taken-for-granted 'principle of social organisation' at work in this process. Very few women in those days had access to a secondary school education, let alone to further training in the

capital. Besides, storytelling had always been yet another male Iban prerogative³⁴. In sum, our authors were mission-educated men from economically progressive yet culturally conservative areas, bent on developing their careers in a new field of cultural production while developing their people.

From the above discussion, it may appear as if there was no resistance to the modernising drive of these media producers. A closer reading of their texts, however, suggests a constant struggle to persuade reluctant rural Iban to modernise their ways, particularly in Ejau's educational work. In chapters 5 and 6 I argue that their efforts, at least in the Saribas and Skrang rivers, have paid off. This is born out by a history of ideas and media practices in these areas written from the perspective of local media consumers. Today, in the late 1990s, there is little resistance to 'development' (*pemansang*) in its myriad institutional forms, from Christianity through agriculture to health and education.

One aborted cultural project, two language-based media

According to Leigh (1983: 160), the three key political issues in the decade that followed independence (1963-1973) were federal-state relations, the opening-up of native land to commercial exploitation, and the debate over whether English or Malay was to be the medium of instruction in Sarawak. The first Chief Minister of an independent Sarawak 'through Malaysia' was an Iban, Stephen Kalong Ningkan. He was seen in Kuala Lumpur as a confrontational Dayak, especially because of his strong defence of English as the language of instruction and government and his reluctance to take on Malayan civil servants. In fact, like many other Sarawak leaders at the time, he considered the union with Malaysia as a 'treaty relationship between sovereign nations' (Leigh 1983: 162).

In 1966, the Malaysian Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, made use of

34. With the exception of the *sabak* (*dirge*) genre. Recall that Rajit (1969), the Anglican priest, acquired his *sabak* knowledge from his mother.

emergency powers to remove Ningkan from power³⁵. Instead he installed a more pliable Iban: Tawi Sli. The Tunku was a firm believer in the need for a strong national language, 'for language is the soul of the Nation' (in Leigh 1974: 88). He was convinced that under Tawi Sli 'there was a much better chance of the people developing a Malaysian consciousness' (Leigh 1974: 105, fn 79). The language issue was finally settled under the following Chief Minister, Abdul Rahman Yakub, a Melanau Muslim, in favour of Malay³⁶ (Leigh 1983: 163). With Ningkan went the political support needed for the development of modern Iban-language media. Appendix 2 shows how the golden period of new Iban titles at the Borneo Literature Bureau came to a sharp end in 1968. Allowing for the backlog created by the deluge of new manuscripts reported in 1965, it is safe to assume that the drop was linked to the new, unfavourable political climate.

From the mid-1960s the Iban (and other Dayaks) increasingly lost political ground to the Malay-Melanau Muslim elites. The only outlet for Iban discontent with the slow pace of rural development, the opposition party SNAP, was financially weak and ended up joining the government coalition in 1976. According to Jawan (1994: 124), all through this period there were token Iban/Dayak representatives in the state cabinet, but the real power always resided with the Melanaus and their Malay allies.

Radio Sarawak (later RMS and RTM) and Borneo Literature Bureau producers and authors were struggling to preserve a language and a culture that in the mid-1960s lost out to the new national language imported from Malaya. Iban-language radio and literature were complementary media: the former used oral/aural means, the latter visual means to achieve the same goals. Their target audience was in the politically weak rural areas, away from Kuching's corridors of power, increasingly linked to those of Kuala Lumpur. The cultural system from which the authors of

35. A move applauded at the time by Malaysia's current Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir bin Mohammed, then a backbencher. According to one biographer, Mahathir already held 'a dim view of democracy' in the early years of independence (Khoo 1995: 275).

36. Malay was accepted as the official language in Sarawak alongside English until 1985, when English was finally dropped (Zulficly 1989: 159).

books and scripts drew oral knowledge and to which they contributed literate knowledge was rapidly becoming a subsystem within a powerful national polity. Twenty-five years ago, Leigh (1974:94) predicted that 'the Iban school teachers may yet prove to be a politically pivotal group'. That has not been the case. We now turn to the abrupt end of the Iban medium with which those teachers were most actively involved.

2. Second Period (1977-1999): modern media and the production of a shallow Dayak identity

Iban print media: from boom to bonfire

Iban oral tradition in Kuching has it that soon after *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (DBP), Malaysia's language planning and development agency, took over the Borneo Literature Bureau in 1977, they had all the books in Iban and other Bornean languages buried. Shortly after, the mass media grave was discovered by a man who managed to rescue some of the books. To prevent future finds, it is alleged that the new cultural authorities resorted to a traditional agricultural practice: 'open burning'. What in the 1960s had been a modest literary boom had ended up feeding a bonfire.

DBP officials are understandably nervous on the subject of Bornean languages. In a paper riddled with inconsistencies, Z. A. Zulficly first states that the role of his agency is to publish works 'in the national language *or other vernaculars*' (my emphasis) and that it 'does not disregard Sarawak's principal aspiration in relation to its literature and local socio-culture, most importantly, its oral tradition in the form of folklores in order that such folklores will not be obliterated thus' (1989: 159). Soon after, however, he reveals the post-1977 function assigned by Kuala Lumpur to the local languages: to supply the national language with new words, a role he deems

'immensely significant for the purpose of fostering national integration'. Indeed, he says, '[h]itherto, 50 words in various regional languages have been officially assimilated in the *bahasa* Malaysia word vocabulary'³⁷ (1989:159). He concludes that DBP cannot publish books in regional languages 'because this would inadvertently contradict its policy and an apparently mediocre market' (1989: 161), thus inadvertently contradicting his own opening statement on the agency's role in publishing works in non-Malay vernaculars. The truth is that the protection and development of 'minority languages'³⁸ is enshrined in Article 152 of the Federal Constitution which guarantees 'the right of all ethnic communities in Malaysia to use, sustain and develop their mother tongue' (Tawai 1997: 18). In practice, however, the sustained aim is to create a Malay-based national language and culture. Thus in 1988, to mark the 25th anniversary of the creation of Malaysia, the Sarawak government ran a number of workshops on each of the state's major ethnic groups in order to determine 'what to discard in the interest of 'development' and 'unity' and what to preserve and *incorporate into* a national (Malaysian) culture' (Winzeler 1997: 201, my emphasis). The official policy is to teach the standard language (*bahasa baku*) to every Malaysian citizen 'and to officially criticize those who continue to speak and write in regional dialects' (Provencher 1994: 55).

Well-placed Dayaks aid this process of linguistic and cultural assimilation. Another DPB official, Jonathan Singki, the editor of the Iban-language magazine *Nendak* from December 1975 until its cremation in November 1977, offers a different explanation for the insignificant output of Iban books under DPB. Singki, who now devotes his energies to Malay-language texts, argues that Iban authors, and in particular the committee set up to publish Iban textbooks, are not sufficiently professional. Instead of sending Camera Ready Copy (CRC) manuscripts, says Singki, they send in crude printouts in need of a great deal of editorial work that

37. Including the Iban terms *berandau* (to converse, to chat) and *merarau* (to have lunch).

38. Ironically, in numerical terms Malay is more of a 'minority language' in Sarawak than Iban. The Malay population stood at 330,000 in 1988 (21% of the total), compared to 471,000 Iban (30%), the largest ethnic population in the state. Together, the Dayaks made up approximately 50% of the state population (Jawan 1994:24).

causes huge delays.

Most urban Iban I talked to privately suspect that there are political reasons behind these 'technical delays'. A case in point is Andria Ejau's manuscript *Layang Bintang*, a morality novella on rural development he wrote in 1972 in which he warns rural readers of the perils of sheltering communist-terrorist (CT) guerrillas. This *ensera kelulu* won a 1973 BLB award, though for reasons unknown to Ejau the Bureau never printed it. It was only in 1984, after a hiatus of 11 years, that he learnt that his manuscript could not be published by DBP because it had been originally sent to the Borneo Literature Bureau³⁹, an organisation no longer in existence (Ejau 1985:5). DBP were willing, however, to return the original manuscript to Ejau. Fortunately for him, that same year (1984) the Sarawak Dayak Iban Association (SADIA) was founded. One of their very first tasks was to publish *Layang Bintang*, which finally came out in 1985 -- by which time the anti-communist message was somewhat dated!. The rationale behind such an expenditure was enunciated in unequivocal terms by SADIA Chairman Sidi Munan (1985:3): 'For if we LOSE OUR LANGUAGE, we will LOSE OUR PEOPLE'⁴⁰, a slogan oddly reminiscent of Malaysia's first Prime Minister's aforesaid 'for language is the soul of the Nation'.

Eriksen (1993:128) makes the general point that literate minorities have a better chance of surviving than illiterate ones. He adds: 'Groups which have 'discovered that they have a culture', who have invented and reified their culture, can draw on myths of origin and a wide array of potential boundary-markers that are unavailable to illiterate minorities'. That was precisely what was at stake when DBP took over the Bureau. Ernest Gellner (1983: 140-143) has famously argued that the origins of nationalism lie in the rise of industrial society. The requirements of a modern

³⁹ John Lent (1994: 94), a media researcher, claims he was the victim of a different kind of restriction. His book manuscript on mass communications was banned from publication owing to 'a few timidly-critical points about Malaysian mass media'. The official line was that the manuscript had not been written in Bahasa Malaysia.

⁴⁰. '*Laban enti kitai LENYAU JAKO, reti LENYAU BANGSA*' (notice, ironically, the use of the Malay term *bangsa* rather than the Iban *bansa* [race, people, ethnic group, category, kind]).

economy that aimed for sustained economic growth led to a new relationship between state and culture. Such an economy depended on a 'literate sophisticated high culture' in which members could communicate precisely both face-to-face and through abstract means. States came to monopolise legitimate culture via mass education and a national language. The driving principle of nationalism was *one state, one culture*.

Ethnicity studies within social anthropology since Barth (1969) have tended to focus on how cultural differences among ethnic groups acquire 'social significance'. Anthropologists who adopt this 'constructivist' approach are not overly interested in the actual cultural differences that may separate one ethnic group from another, but rather in how those differences are constructed. Yet there are anthropologists with an historical bent who maintain that cultural features matter a great deal. For instance, Peel's (1989) insistence, mentioned in the introduction, that cultural and linguistic distinctiveness was central to the strong consolidation of the Yoruba identity within the Nigerian state.

In this chapter I am adopting a 'culturalist' and historical approach centred on language, emphasizing the importance of the Iban language during the first phase of media production (1954-1976) and the uniqueness of the re-invented cultural heritage preserved through it. This phase was one of new opportunities for a generation of young Iban men who had acquired literacy skills at the mission schools and were eager to build, to quote Gellner again, a 'literate sophisticated high culture' combining cultural materials from their colonial masters and longhouse elders. Their project was remarkably similar to that embarked upon by late 19th century Norwegian and other nationalists in Europe (cf. O'Connor 1999 on Ireland). The Norwegians, too, travelled to remote valleys in search of ancient stories and artefacts from an 'authentic culture'. They too selected items from the peasant culture they studied to create a coherent ethnogenesis back in the urban areas that was then re-exported to the countryside (Eriksen 1993:102). The crucial difference

was that the Iban teachers lacked an Iban state, for a literate culture 'cannot normally survive without its own political shell, the state' (Gellner 1983: 140-143). It is one thing to incorporate the state into a people's ethnohistory and drama, like Sandin and Ejau did. Quite another is to have such texts accepted as legitimate by the state. If they are not considered legitimate by the rulers of the day, they can be legitimately wiped out.

There is a profound irony in the fact that the late Andria Ejau was perhaps the most persuasive Iban promoter of Malaysia's civilizing mission in rural Sarawak, both as an author and as a broadcaster. The state repaid his efforts and those of other loyal servants by obliterating the field of media production they had painstakingly created in the 1960s. How did they obliterate it? Through a combination of what the Spanish call *silencio administrativo* (i.e. the authorities are not available for comment) and sheer physical force (burning the books) -- an impressive display of both power and force (cf. Canetti 1984) that went unopposed. With the entry of SNAP, the pro-Iban opposition party, into the government-led National Front in 1976 (Jawan 1994: 30, 114), the arsonists could be assured of getting off scot-free. The only recourse left to literate Iban was to vent their anger through conversations held in the privacy of their cars and homes. Thus a new urban *jerita* (oral story) was born; one that has been quietly told and retold many a time to this day.

The publication of *Layang Bintang* in 1985 set, however, a precedent. Since then a small number of Iban books has been printed with private funds through a Kuching house named Klasik, including two traditional *ensera* (Donald 1989, Tawai 1989) and four *cherita kelulu* or morality novellas (Ensiring 1991, Ensiring 1992, Garai 1993, Bangit 1995). We met Janang Ensiring earlier (1968) as a 19-year old poet infatuated with Malaysia. His 1992 novella *Dr Ida* deserves our attention for its innovative use of urban settings and problems -- a clean departure from the BLB's rural tradition.

The second non-governmental print outlet for the Iban language today is provided by the first institutions ever to create Iban-language texts: the Christian churches in Sarawak, of which I provide a detailed case study in chapter 6. Here I will only mention that the most successful religious texts appear to be those which have adopted a manner of 'BLB strategy', that is prayer books that seek to adapt the best of the Iban *adaf* (in this case religious *adaf*) to the essentially developmentalist Christian project. This dual strategy echoes that adopted in other Asia-Pacific societies. In Papua New Guinea, a European lay missionary directed in 1990 a television drama to teach villagers in a remote area new farming techniques. In Sullivan's (1993: 537) view, this was part of a long missionary tradition on that island of 'co-opting indigenous values (of community, mutual obligation, kinship and sharing) as the teachings of Christ and in so doing distinguishing church from private interests while easing a transition from barbarism to a market economy'. In Sarawak as in other states, the Catholic Church is ahead of rival denominations in its nativist-cum-modernist print media but has yet to use audiovisual media extensively, for reasons considered below. As Giddens (1984) has reminded us, social practices often have unintended effects. With the demise of the BLB, the Iban-language Christian texts have acquired greater significance as cultural repositories among the more literate Iban. This was surely not the intention of the Muslim authorities who ordered the destruction of the indigenous print media.

Only two state-sponsored outlets for Iban authorship survived into the 1990s. One was *Berita Rakyat*⁴¹, a monthly magazine founded in 1974 by the Rajang Security Command (RASCOM) in Sibu. This magazine was part of the government's efforts to defeat the Chinese-led communist insurgency in Sarawak's third division through military action and propaganda. The cover showed an Iban warrior in full ceremonial dress performing a sword dance (*pencha*). The contents were in the dual modernity-cum-tradition *Nendak* mould with an added emphasis on 'security'. Like in *Nendak*, a wide spectrum of Iban genres was represented. There were morality tales (*cherita*

41. Literally, 'The People's News'.

kelulu), sagas (*ensera*), riddles (*entelah*), ethnohistorical accounts (*jerita tua*), hagiographies of Iban leaders and even a cartoon strip featuring Roky, a young law-enforcing hero. Unfortunately for Roky's author, the negotiated end of the armed struggle would also mean the eventual phasing-out of *Berita Rayat*. Production ceased in the early 1990s (but see chapter 5 for its use during a 'traditional knowledge' quiz night at a Saribas longhouse in 1997).

The one extant Iban print medium in 1999 was *Pembrita*, a state government mouthpiece published monthly by the Information Department⁴². *Pembrita* is yet another Iban medium with an original Paku-Saribas connection, for it was the result of the pioneering Adult Literacy Scheme launched in 1950 in that river (Jawan 1994: 183). Aimed at rural Iban, it is a profusely illustrated newsletter containing two kinds of items: good developmental news (on exemplary longhouses, lucrative cash crops, animal husbandry, etc) and exhortations to the rural populace to modernise their ways, with a typical headline reading (in Iban): 'FARMERS MUST CHANGE THEIR WORK HABITS'⁴³. Unlike *Nendak* and *Berita Rayat*, however, it contains no traditional genres, despite repeated appeals to the readers for such materials, in an apparent attempt to broaden the readership base of what *Pembrita* editors call 'our Iban newspaper' (*Surat Kabar kitai Iban*)⁴⁴.

A stunted growth: Iban radio in a post-BLB Malaysian Sarawak

With the demise of the Borneo Literature Bureau in 1977 and the rapid spread of rural schools and television in the Malay language, the Iban Section of RTM was the sole Iban-language medium of any significance remaining in the 1980s. In 1980, after the communist threat had been finally quelled, the Psychological Warfare Unit at RTM was dissolved. The main focus at the Iban Section was now the phasing out

42. Its Malay version is called *Pedoman Rakyat*.

43. *ORANG BUMAI DI MENUA PESISIR ENDA TAU ENDA NGUBAH CHARA PENGAWA SIDA* (*Pembrita*, May 1996).

44. In my experience, *Pembrita* is not a popular newspaper with the rural population, especially in the Saribas area.

of slash-and-burn hill rice farming and its replacement with modern agricultural practices. Interviews with successful cash crop farmers were a preferred method of persuasion. Other important areas were health, education, the eradication of poverty and job vacancies. The purported aim was to change the rural population's conservative 'mind-set'. Meanwhile the Iban component of school broadcasting was undergoing fundamental changes. In the place of Michael Buma's spelling, dictation and traditional tales (*ensera*), more elaborate grammar-based Iban language lessons were now being broadcast to primary and lower secondary pupils⁴⁵. This improvement must be seen, however, in the context of a far more transcendent development that took place in 1980: the establishment of Malay as the sole medium of instruction across the state school system in the place of English (on the subject of school textbooks, see chapter 5).

A further expansion in airtime at RTM took place in the early 1980s with the launching of Sunday programmes in Iban and two more hours in the evening from Monday to Saturday. The next increase was to occur a decade later, with two more hours in the morning. Henceforth the total airtime would be set at 66 hours a week, with 9 hours a day from Monday to Saturday and 12 hours on Sundays.

In 1993 new studios were built and modern equipment acquired. Two years later some important changes in programming took place. First, the soap operas (*cherita kelulu*) were discontinued. According to producer Laja Sanggin, this was due both to the low quality of the scripts submitted and to the Iban Section's lack of manpower. Second, 'loose slots' were introduced from 6 to 8.30 pm, that is programmes in which the aim was to both inform and entertain the audience with varied capsules lasting 2 to 3 minutes instead of the accustomed 15 to 30 minutes. Some of these were aimed at a young audience. Messages on the evils of truancy, loafing, drugs, etc, were 'injected' (see below) to this group, says a producer, in between the pop songs. Another novelty was to open the lines to telephone callers

45. This innovation was known as *Pelajar Jaku Iban ke Sekula Primari & Sekondari* (Untie 1998:2).

with messages for their migrant kin on grave matters such as illness, death or financial hardship (*jaku pesan berat*) . Callers could now also take part in a new programme called *Nama Runding?* (lit. What's [your] opinion?) in which they could express their views on a given topical issue within the strict limits imposed by the Malaysian state, that is avoiding any direct reference to ethnic inequalities, land issues, or the Muslim religion.

These recent changes in the programming were both a response to perceived changes in the wider society (especially the growing competition from television and private radio stations, the rural-urban drift, a rise in educational standards, etc) and a consequence of a lack of financial and human resources to produce new programmes. As a result the more 'traditional' programmes such as *Main Asal* (Traditional Music) are now relegated to what in rural Sarawak is considered to be a very late slot: from 10.15 to 11 pm⁴⁶.

In 1997 Sarawak's first commercial radio station, CATS⁴⁷ Radio, was launched. Its aim is to capture a wide audience across the state through 'light entertainment', especially music. It has an Iban Section run by an RTM veteran and former intelligence officer, Roland Duncan Klabu, that transmits two hours a day: from 1 to 2 pm Monday to Friday, from 3 to 4 on Sunday and from midnight to 1 am seven days a week. To maximise his one-hour afternoon slot, Klabu has opted for the 'hot-clock system', consisting of a five-minute news bulletin and a motley of capsules, Iban pop songs, local reports, farming tips and suchlike. He makes no bones about the true purpose of these broadcasts. The programme, he says, is 'literally bought by a number of record companies seeking to promote Iban pop songs throughout Sarawak' (Klabu 1998:2). The most prominent figure to have emerged is undoubtedly Peter John anak Apai⁴⁸, an urbanised Iban DJ from a semi-rural

46. In my Saribas and Skrang experience, most rural viewers retire for the night between 8.30 and 9.30 pm (see chapters 4 and 6).

47. CATS is an acronym. It stands for 'Communicating Aspiration Throughout Sarawak'. It is also a pun, as *kuching* is the Standard Malay word for 'cat' .

48. His artistic name is a wordplay on the Iban teknonym 'Father-of' (*Apai*). It literally translates

background who became hugely popular overnight with his personal brand of daft humour and ability to communicate on air with callers from all walks of life. Peter John is an inveterate linker of two disparate yet overlapping worlds: rural and urban Iban life. CATS offers an amusing, hybrid alternative to a more sober RTM service. Its crystal clear FM sound makes listening a more pleasurable experience than RTM's crackling short wave transmission.

Peter John notwithstanding, urban Iban are agreed that Iban-language broadcasting is currently mired in a deep crisis whose roots lie in a wider social and political malaise (no pun intended). It is felt that the crisis of the Iban Section both reflects and amplifies the erosion and eventual demise of the Iban language and culture. With this bleak prognosis in mind and a sense of urgency, in April 1998 the Council for Customary Law (*Majlis Adat Istiadat*) in Kuching ran a one-day workshop on the current situation and future prospects of Iban-language broadcasting⁴⁹. The workshop was held almost entirely in the Iban language, a rare event in Kuching⁵⁰. The morning session was devoted to identifying the key problems besetting Iban-language broadcasting⁵¹. Perhaps inevitably, most of the subsequent discussions centred on the Iban Section at RTM to the detriment of CATS and BTP (school broadcasting). The following 15 key RTM problems were identified and summarised

as 'Peter John Son-of-Father'. I once attended a longhouse sermon in which the priest, using a meta-wordplay, told his flock that 'We humans are all like Peter John; we're all children of the Father' (*Semua kitai mensia baka Peter John meh, semua anak Apai magang*).

49. The idea for the workshop came about in a rather fortuitous manner. Jayl Langub from Majlis Adat Istiadat had suggested that I give a talk in Kuching on the preliminary findings of my fieldwork before returning to London. I agreed to do so, but then thought it would be useful to hold two sessions: one in English for a plural audience, the other in Iban for an Iban audience (at a recent conference on the Iban arts there had been complaints at the exclusive use of English). Rather than present the same general paper twice as first envisaged, and wishing to learn more from the experience of Iban producers and other cultural leaders, it was decided that the second session be narrowed down to one medium only (radio) and held in the more participatory form of a workshop in the Iban language.

50. However some of the participants, all of whom were native Iban speakers, had at times to revert to English. Like many middle-aged, educated Sarawakians of other ethnic groups, they found it difficult to sustain a work-related discussion exclusively in one language, especially in a language different from English. Moreover, most of the terminology associated with broadcasting has no Iban equivalents. Other participants chose to use English to stress particular points, a well-established practice among English-educated Sarawakians.

51. It was led by Mr Empani Lang, Chief Registrar of the Native Court.

by the workshop facilitator:

1. No clear aims or objectives⁵².
2. Insufficient audience research⁵³.
3. Not enough manpower⁵⁴.
4. Not enough money⁵⁵.
5. No code of ethics⁵⁶.
6. Poor infrastructure and facilities⁵⁷.
7. No supporting print media⁵⁸.
8. No full-time women employees⁵⁹.
9. Poor quality of transmission⁶⁰.
10. Low command of Iban among broadcasters⁶¹.
11. Unpleasant voices⁶².

52. Or, as the facilitator put it: '*Nadai tuju ke terang*'.

53. In the original 'Ibenglish': '*Nadai research digaga pasal proper content*'. In the 1980s, radio staff would often travel to the rural areas. Their travel reports included views from the listeners. Two preliminary audience research studies were carried out between 1993 and 1994. In addition, some 20 listeners telephoned with their views at the beginning of 1996.

54. The Iban Section had 15 staff in the 1980s, but only 6 in 1998. According to their new head, 27 more staff are needed (Montegrai 1998).

55. At the time of the workshop, advertisers were said to be 'flocking to CATS', the private station, and deserting RTM. Radio commercials are mostly on household goods. The Iban Section budget has shrunk from RM 80,000 in 1994 to RM 60,000 in 1997.

56. Participants felt that some broadcasters can at times be coarse or rude (*kasar*) and disrespectful towards the audience.

57. For instance, storage facilities at RTM are in sore need of improvements. Unique folk stories, traditional music recordings, etc, are kept on magnetic tapes rather than compact disks (personal communication, Nichol Ragai Lang, March 1997).

58. This point echoes a recurrent concern throughout the workshop and in conversation with educated urban Iban: the lack of written materials in Iban since the demise of the Borneo Literature Bureau.

59. '[The Iban Section] must be only organisation in the world with absolutely no women on the staff!' complained one producer.

60. The only area in Sarawak where RTM Iban can be listened to on FM is Mi i. All other areas receive a crackling AM service. The other three major languages (Malay, English and Mandarin) all have FM broadcasts.

61. This issue excited numerous comments from the participants. Two aspects of the complex problem were most salient. First, the interference of Malay terms and pronunciation with the Iban spoken by the younger broadcasters. Unlike their predecessors whose schooling was entirely in English, Iban under the age of 33-35 were educated in Malay. To compound this problem, as broadcasters climb up the organisational ladder at RTM they spend less time 'on air' and more on administrative duties. The younger translators were singled out for their tenuous grasp of both Iban and English and their speaking *Iban rojak* ('mixed Iban'). One senior participant described their Iban as 'more irritating than educating'. A second aspect noted was the lack of a standard Iban spelling, pronunciation and vocabulary. The result, said a participant, is that one can listen to the Iban word for 'person' being pronounced as *orang*, *urang*, *ohang* and even *uhang* depending on the broadcaster's river of origin (one could also add to the list the Skrang *ureang*). What nobody mentioned was the fact that the Iban Section has *already* played a fundamental role on the long road to standardisation by privileging the Saribas dialect. Any future decisions on standardisation will have to be made *with reference to the RTM-Saribas dialect* rather than, say, the Skrang or Baleh dialects.

62. The early broadcasters, such as Gerunsin Lemat, are said to have had beautiful voices.

12. Programmes not properly edited.
13. Less traditional programmes than before.
14. Low levels of professionalism⁶³.
15. Flawed recruitment process⁶⁴.

In addition, the following concerns about the Iban Section were voiced during the workshop or in private conversations elsewhere:

1. External interferences, both from Iban and Peninsular political quarters⁶⁵.
2. Poor leadership within the Iban Section.
3. Too many phone-in programmes replacing the forums, dramas, magazines and features of previous decades.
4. Growing competition from CATS, other commercial radio stations from West Malaysia, television, etc.
5. Some programmes broadcast too late for rural audiences.
6. No programmes for women (cf. no. 8 above).
7. No programmes for children and teenagers.
8. As a result of all the above: a highly demoralised staff.

What about the other two branches of Iban-language broadcasting? Although pushed to the margins of the workshop discussions, School Broadcasting (nowadays *Bahagian Teknologi Pendidikan* [BTP]) is also facing an uphill struggle. The excitement of the early years about the educational possibilities of radio have turned over the decades into bitter disappointment. For a start, few schools in the urban areas teach Iban. In Kuching there is only one school, St Mary's, still teaching it. Elsewhere out of the 600 to 650 primary schools in Sarawak with over 50% Iban pupils, only 40% currently listen to the Iban programmes⁶⁶. Why this low figure? According to a BTP survey (Untie 1998: 4) this was due to:

1. Programmes hard to fit into the exam-orientated, textbook-based school syllabus.
2. Poor reception in many 'shadow areas'.
3. No Iban language teacher in the school.
4. Radio set out of order.

According to Empani Lang, the workshop facilitator, the younger broadcasters not only have less pleasant voices, but are also 'very subjective'.

63. Owing to insufficient training, according to some of the participants.

64. In other words, it was felt that new staff are often recruited on the basis of their political allegiance rather than ability.

65. Some Iban politicians are said to treat the Iban Section as if it were 'just another government department'. Pressures can also come from Malay politicians from Kuala Lumpur and their Sarawak allies. Religion is a particularly thorny issue. RTM Sarawak, unlike its Peninsular counterparts, has regular Christian broadcasts in Iban and other languages. These have been discontinued at least twice during the past few years owing to pressures 'from high places'.

66. Kaji Selidik Tahunan Tentang Penggunaan Radio (*Bahagian Teknologi Pendidikan* 1993)

Finally CATS has also come under attack since its launching for some of its presenters' low level of competence in the Iban language. Rumour has it that one of them, who has never experienced longhouse life⁶⁷, had to be relieved from her newsreading duties following complaints from listeners. Also this station's Iban programmes are often seen as a mere channel for the Chinese-dominated Iban music industry, as the man in charge himself recognised (see pop section below).

In the afternoon the workshop participants sought practical solutions to the problems identified. In the end they adopted 12 resolutions that generally followed from the enunciation of the problems, e.g. the need for clear objectives, a more balanced programming, better training, etc. One interesting suggestion that went beyond the brief of the workshop was the need to create an official body to strengthen the Iban language through standardisation, research and other means.

To sum up, Iban-language broadcasting has had a long and eventful history. For over 44 years it has not only served the government of the day with unflinching loyalty but has also contributed to the standardisation and preservation of the Iban language and culture across Sarawak. The Iban Section of Radio Sarawak (now RTM) has served the state well: it fought Indonesia in the 1960s, the communists in the 1970s and what the state defined as the (backward) 'rural mind-set' from the 1980s onwards. At present, however, the state has other priorities. Among the most pressing of these, to build a strong, unified national culture based on the Malay language and traditions. The host of problems affecting all three Iban radio organisations (RTM, CATS and BTP) can be subordinated to a chronic meta-problem: the lack of political representation of the Iban and other non-Muslim indigenous groups through decades of vigorous nation-building and economic expansion (Jawan 1994:226-235).

There is, however, a more difficult problem facing producers: how to step out of their

67. As a rule of thumb, growing up in a longhouse is a chief criterion for being considered a 'true Iban' (*Iban bendar*) as opposed to an 'urban Iban' (*Iban nenger*).

ideological certainties and reinvent the field of Iban media production. On the basis of her work in Papua New Guinea, Sullivan (1993: 551) has argued that the ideas and practices of media professionalism spread in parallel to the transfer of technology from the economically advanced West to other regions. Quoting Keesing (1989:23) she adds that, across the Pacific islands, the ideologues who idealize the past are usually “hell-bent on technology, progress, materialism and ‘development’”. This observation applies equally well to Sarawak. The producers’ faith in the potential of radio to transform their audiences given the right political, financial and professional resources has remained undiminished despite years of institutional stagnation. A case in point is the aforesaid belief that positive messages can be directly ‘injected’ into young listeners – what media scholars call the ‘hypodermic needle model of communication’ (see Morley 1992: 45, Watson and Hill 1993: 87). Why this confidence? Because most of them were professionally formed in the 1960s and 1970s, a period of rapid economic growth, multi-ethnic nationalism, anti-communism and deep faith in the infinite possibilities of modern technology. Their urban careers developed amidst the growing disparities in wealth and status between urban educated Iban and their rural illiterate brethren. In turn, this chasm was blamed on the latter’s traditional ‘mind-set’. Unlike indigenous media producers in Australia (see Ginsburg 1993), Iban producers are too much a part of the state’s material and ideological apparatus to provide alternative visions. As trained government servants, they reproduce the views of what Debray (1996:176) calls the ‘mediocracy’, that is the ‘elite holding the means of production of mass opinion’. It is in such instances of tight media control and top-down communication that Appadurai’s (1996) post-modern notion of ‘multidirectional flows’ of cultural influences holds little analytical promise. In the case of Iban radio, the flow is unidirectional, from the urban corridors of power and objectified culture to the longhouse galleries and apartments.

The Sarawak press

As we saw earlier, there is no such thing as an Iban newspaper in the strict sense of the term. Sarawak produces 11 newspapers in other languages: 7 in Chinese, 3 in English and 1 in Malay (see Table 2.6). A key constraint affecting all papers in Malaysia, and even more so in thinly populated states such as Sarawak, is the high cost of paper. In 1993 a ton of imported paper cost US \$1,000 in Malaysia but only US \$780 in the United States. A further problem for Malay-language papers both in East and West Malaysia is that advertisers tend to regard Malay readers as belonging to the low-income group, so advertising revenue is much lower than that for the English and Chinese dailies (Amir and Awang Jaya 1996: 13). Any would-be Iban newspaper would have to overcome even more imposing barriers. One viable solution often suggested by urban Iban could be for one of the state's newspapers to carry a weekly Iban supplement, a practice already well established in Sabah with the Kadazan language. The state government controls virtually all papers in Sarawak. With the exception of one or two Chinese papers, writing favourably about any aspect of the much-diminished opposition is unheard of. On one noted occasion, a *Sarawak Tribune* editor was allegedly dismissed for publishing 'the wrong picture' of a powerful politician.

According to press insiders, it is always safe to write developmentalist articles. Another safe area is 'culture', that is the ceremonial, colourful side of Dayak cultures. The Sarawak daily press represents Dayaks in two radically different ways: (a) as camera-friendly 'ethnics' with picturesque cultures in need of protection (and more tourism) or (b) as ignorant, backward peasants in need of enlightenment (and more development)⁶⁸. In both monolithic portrayals, which never appear together, scant allowance is made for the various ways in which actual Dayak agents may be making and remaking their social structures at the local level.

68. For the second kind of portrayal, see Minos' 'Dayak attitude and NCR Land Development', *Sarawak Tribune*, 19 October 1997. Minos is a Bidayuh Dayak.

<u>Newspaper</u>	<u>Circulation</u>
Chinese	
1. <i>Chinese Daily News</i>	5,000
2. <i>See Huan Daily News</i>	n.a.
3. <i>Sin Hua Evening News</i> and 4 others	n.a.
English	
1. <i>Sarawak Tribune</i>	30,000
2. <i>People's Mirror*</i>	10,000
3. <i>The Borneo Post*</i>	n.a.
Malay	
1. <i>Utusan Sarawak</i>	20,000

Table 2.6. Circulation of major Sarawak newspapers. Source: (Amir and Awang Jaya 1996: 54). Keys: n.a. = not available; (*) = includes a Malay supplement.

The key to development, as seen by the mediocracy, is to get the rural Dayaks to change their collective 'mind-set' (a favourite term) so that development can proceed swiftly. There are similarities here with the ideology of Ejau and other Iban media producers from the earlier period. The key difference is that Ejau's generation drew largely from first-hand experience in upriver areas and an intimate knowledge of the Iban language and culture. Today's journalists, by contrast, write from urban areas for an English- and/or Malay-speaking urban readership. The former tried to blend culture and development in their texts, in pursuit of what today is known as 'sustainable development'. The latter constantly drive a harsh wedge between the two domains.

A recent example of the powerful interests behind this discursive wedge arose during the 1987-1991 period, when a total of 30 Penan and other Dayak communities, including Iban ones, carried out anti-logging blockades in the Baram and Limbang districts. They were protesting against the destruction of the environment upon which their livelihood depended. The following extract sums up

the role of the Sarawak press:

The stories by the *Borneo Post* were orchestrated based on government press releases...; self-censorship by reporters was exercised to adjust to the media's organizational and official requirements. The only on-the-scene report the *Borneo Post* filed was on 21 July 1987, when the media escorted the State Minister for Tourism and Environment (who owns one of the largest timber concessions in Sarawak) to one of his timber camps in Limbang (Ngidang 1993:94).

In its 11 July 1987 editorial, the *Borneo Post* lamented the fact that development had been hindered 'by two groups of people, namely the Penans and their allies and those who instigate people in rural areas to reject government efforts' (Ngidang 1993: 94).

Sarawak newspapers are at the service of the state government and their wealthy allies. They reveal the extent to which Sarawak is a rich 'resource frontier' (Cleary 1992: 168) in the hands of a small elite rather than a democracy. The chances of an Iban newspaper ever being produced are severely limited by both the economies of scale required for it to be profitable, and by the same political imperatives that led to the mass logging of Dayak forests and to the burning of Dayak books.

Sibu pop: an expanding Sino-Iban music industry

Sibu is the second largest town in Sarawak. From 1974 on the timber industry grew rapidly in the state, with Sibu as its hub (Leigh 1983: 164). This attracted large numbers of Iban to an urban setting where they were already well represented⁶⁹. Many of the poorly educated Iban entered into patron-client relations with Chinese merchants (*towkay*) (Sutlive 1972: 119). The same pattern was to prevail in the budding music industry of the late 1970s.

By far the most successful Sibu record company to date has been Tiew Brothers Company, better known as TBC. Mathew Tiew Sii Hock, a former salesman, and two

69. In 1947 there were less than 300 Iban in Sibu. In 1972, there were at least ten times this figure (Sutlive 1972: 466).

of his brothers, founded it in 1977. Initially they tried to market Malay albums but they found the competition from established Peninsular record companies to be too stiff, choosing instead to market Iban pop. Following the initial success of this subgenre, they began to release songs in Melanau, Kayan, Kenyah, Malay and recently Chinese. Iban has nevertheless remained TBC's mainstay. According to company sources, the uniqueness of Iban pop lies in its *rojak* ('mixed salad') melodies: a *melange* of Indonesian *dangdut*, global pop rock, heavy metal, Latin *baladas* and other styles, all performed to a peculiar Sibu-Chinese beat⁷⁰. On another level, however, Iban pop is far from unique. If in the 1950s it followed Indonesian and Indian patterns, and in the 1960s-1970s Western ones, since the 1980s it has increasingly aligned itself with musical trends arriving from West Malaysia and absorbed concepts and words from the national language. Critics say today's lyrics are bland, sugary, lacking the subtlety and vigour of 1960s Iban pop and the best contemporary Malay and Indonesian music. They are certainly politically safe: unlike some Indonesian popular culture,⁷¹ Iban pop is about entertainment, not social critique. Most songs in my sample (94%) deal with the vagaries of the human heart, as Table 2.7. clearly demonstrates.

40%	broken heart	<i>ambis asa, tusah ati</i>
40%	longing heart	<i>lelengau, sunyi</i>
14%	happy heart	<i>ati senang</i>
2%	ode to Sarawak	<i>Menua Sarawak</i>
2%	the meaning of life ⁷²	<i>Dunya Sementara</i>

Table 2.7. Subject matter of Iban pop songs produced in the 1990s, in percentages. Sample: 49 songs from 5 well-known cassette tapes⁷³.

70. 'Iban music industry fast catching up with the rest of the world' (*Sarawak Tribune*, 22/3/1998). This catchy headline from *Bemama*, the Malaysian national newsagency, conceals the fact that it is a Chinese family who controls the lion's share of the 'Iban music industry'.

71. See, for example, Peacock's (1968) classic study on 'proletarian theatre' (*Iudruk*) in the East Javanese town of Surabaya or Van Groenendael (1985) on the *wayang* in rural Java as, among other things, powerful sites of social critique.

72. A most unusual philosophical investigation into life's transience conveyed in a moralistic tone by Andrewson Ngalai and entitled '*Dunya Sementara*', from his album *Ambai Numbur Satu*.

73. The five tapes are: *Ambai Numbur Satu* and *Andrewson Ngalai* by Andrewson Ngalai, *Taju Remaong* by Johnny Aman, *Iban Karaoke* by several artists (Johnny Aman, Andrewson Ngalai, Josephine, Wilson, and William Awing), and *Joget Iban* by several artists (Andrew Bonny

William Awing sings⁷⁴:

<i>Sepuluh taun dah lalu</i>	It's been ten years
<i>Tua nadai betemu</i>	Since we last met
<i>Tekenyit aku nerima surat nuan dara</i>	Couldn't believe your letter, girl
<i>Nuan mai aku nampong</i>	When you told me that you wanted
<i>Pengerindu tua</i>	To start once again

<i>Nama kebuah nuan</i>	How can you say
<i>Agi ka berguna aku</i>	That you still need me?
<i>Aku tu aku suba</i>	I'm still the one I used to be
<i>Ukai orang baru</i>	I'm not a new person

Very occasionally singers will follow the lead of their Radio Sarawak forebears and step out of their love grooves to reproduce the views of the Establishment. In the following verse, the immensely popular Andrewson Ngalai praises Sarawak while promoting a commercial alternative to slash-and-burn farming:

<i>Rakyat diau sama senang ati</i>	The people all live merrily together
<i>Mu[n]suh nadai agi dikenangi</i>	Enemies are no longer remembered ⁷⁵
<i>Tanah besai alai endur betupi</i>	Plenty of land to rear livestock
<i>Lantang senang dudi ari</i>	So that one day we'll be happy

On other occasions, while still on the painful subject of love, they touch on current social problems, notably the inequalities brought about by education and migration (*bejala*). Johnny Aman sings about the barriers of class and wealth now dividing the once egalitarian Iban society:

<i>Malu amai asai ku dara</i>	I feel really ashamed, girl
<i>Ka jadi enggau nuan</i>	I who wanted to marry you
<i>Enda diterima</i>	But was rejected
<i>Laban aku orang merinsa</i>	For being poor
<i>Nadai pemandai bekuli ngapa</i>	For being an ignorant coolie

James, Ange a L. Jua, Johnny Awie, Jus Allen, Gibson Janggum, Jackson Dana and Alice Awis). Only the latter album is an *Irama* production; the other four are all TBC.

74. 'Nuan enda ngasoh nganti', In Iban Karaoke Vol. 7 (TBC audiocassette).

75. Probably a reference to Sibu's recent past. More generally, the notion that there are no longer any 'enemies' (*munsoh*) thanks to the pacifying efforts of the government is widespread among the Iban (see next section).

And on the temptations of *bejalai*:

*Baka aku ti bejalai
Ngiga belanja sulu
nuan ti diau rumah panjai
Bejaga diri selalu*

I have to go away
To look for money, my darling
you're staying in the longhouse
So look after yourself

*Baka jako orang bukai
nusi berita enda tentu
Anang nuan arap ambai
Nya mina berita pelesu
Nadai aku kala asai
Ngayah ka nuan sulu*

Don't listen to those
who tell stories about me
Don't listen to them, my love
They're just lies
Not once have I felt
Like betraying you, my darling

TBC has sponsored many song contests and 'discovered' rising stars, many of them young Iban from the Rejang basin. They publish an Iban-language magazine called *Merindang* (Entertainment), purchase ample airtime on CATS Radio and even have a website to promote both their starlets and established singers. At present (1999) the company boasts two recording studios, one fitted with analogue equipment, the other with more advanced digital technology⁷⁶. Their 1997 production was two albums a month. Besides cassette tapes, they produce karaoke videotapes and compact discs. Karaoke videos are significant because they provide the only regular audiovisual outlet for Iban artistes who seldom, if ever, appear on television. Patterned on West Malaysian video clips, they are extremely popular at social gatherings in the longhouse (e.g. weddings and Gawai Dayak, see chapters 4 and 5) and at public functions involving Iban leaders. The cassette and video cover illustrations project a dynamic urban persona devoid of any ethnic markers: the singers wear Western-style clothing and accessories (headband, sunglasses, mobile phone) that make them resemble Sarawak's visiting Filipino artistes⁷⁷.

Irama, another Sibu company, often uses exactly the opposite imagery. Irama produces both Iban pop songs (*lagu Iban*) and folk music (*main asa*), including *taboh* (gong and drum ritual music) and *ramban* (love songs). The performers are clad in traditional Iban costume and surrounded by Iban motifs. Modernity is

76. TBC website (<http://www.tbc.inet.com.my>, 28 January 1999).

77. Indeed, Filipino bands have long been part of the urban Sarawak night scene.

nowhere to be seen. These tapes appear to be less popular than TBC's⁷⁸. In this connection, some Iban leaders and cultural organisations have decried the loss of the vast Iban musical heritage⁷⁹. Suggestions have been made to introduce Bornean folk music in the Malaysian school curriculum⁸⁰ and the Dayak Cultural Foundation has announced the creation of a Dayak classical music orchestra⁸¹. At the same time, some leaders have called for tighter regulations in the pop music industry in order to protect the Iban singers from exploitation by middlemen, as well as official support to market their own tapes⁸². The Housing Minister, Datuk Celestine Ujang, believes some Iban artists would be millionaires if they were given a fair share of the industry's profits⁸³.

The thriving Sino-Iban music industry in Sibul is the outcome of a number of favourable circumstances, both old and new, local and regional: the economic growth and diversification of the Sibul area in particular and Sarawak in general, the urbanisation of Iban society and growing demand for 'modern' forms of entertainment that RTM was failing to provide, the expansion of the music industry in other parts of the Archipelago, the old symbiotic relations of patronage/exploitation binding Sibul Chinese and Iban, and the entrepreneurial acumen of one particular Sibul family.

78. Even though the folklore tapes were considerably cheaper. In 1997 they were selling at RM 7.25 compared to the pop tapes' RM 12.50 to RM 13.50. I do not have at present, however, any sales figures from either company.

79. A case in point is the Iban politician and former headmaster, Jimmy Donald, who has worked on the musical heritage of the Iban. In a recent paper (Donald 1997), he singled out a number of traditional genres, including *didi* (lullabies) and other songs for children, *ramban* (used to correct someone's behaviour), *pelandai* (to entertain and egg on a warrior), *dungai* (an entertaining form of 'conversation'), *kana* (a sung epic), *pengap* or *timbang* (invocation of the deities at major festivals), *renong* (to recall a love story, to heal a shaman's patients, to open a *pengap*), and others.

80. *Sarawak Tribune*, 8 April 1997.

81. *Sarawak Tribune*, 2 April 1998.

82. These views were put forward by an Iban councillor (name not recorded) at a workshop on Iban arts held in Kuching in April 1997.

83. *Sarawak Tribune*, 2 April 1998. Incidentally, Ujang himself is a millionaire. He is a member of the 'Linggi Jugah' group formed by three most influential Iban tycoons-cum-politicians in Sarawak (Jawan 1994:122, see below).

Does Iban pop provide an 'open space for Iban self-expression', as C. Sather (pers.comm. August 1998) has suggested? In my view, it does not. Based largely on urban Peninsular Malay melodies, lyrics and notions (especially of love), this genre contributes to the spread of a key branch of the dominant national culture, *its tame popular culture*, into Sarawak, with Iban singers performing as its subnational agents. Their songs may at times *touch* on contemporary social problems, but they certainly *never probe into their roots*. Iban pop is bland, humourless, uncritical – and entertaining.

The Dayaks can be seen on TV, but they cannot be heard

The histories of Malaysia and of Malaysian television are intimately related. Both were born in 1963. Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) was created with the technical assistance of the Canadian government (Nain 1996: 162). Unlike the BBC, it was never intended to be a public service. Rather it was to be a *government* service with a crucial mission, for it was regarded 'as an important tool for facilitating or encouraging socio-economic development and for fostering national integration amongst the country's multi-ethnic peoples' (Anuar and Kim 1996: 262)

Six years later, a second channel was launched. Its directives followed those for the first channel and have remained unchanged into the 1990s:

1. to explain in-depth and with the widest possible coverage the policies and programmes of the government in order to ensure maximum understanding by the public;
2. to stimulate public interest and opinion in order to achieve changes in line with the requirement of the government;
3. to assist in promoting civic consciousness and fostering the development of Malaysian arts and culture; and
4. to provide suitable elements of popular education, general information and entertainment (Nain 1996:162)

Over the years, the realities of Malaysia's political life have tarnished these lofty ideals. Three examples will suffice. In 1983, the populism of Dr Mahathir, Malaysia's Prime Minister, was at its peak. As leader of the ruling coalition's dominant party, the

United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and undisputed national leader he was able to mobilize the UMNO-owned newspapers, especially the *New Straits Times* and *Berita Harian*, to carry 'reports, features, analyses and letters [...] slanted against the Malay royalty'. In addition, the state-owned TV stations ran a series of Malay films on the rampant tyranny suffered by the people 'under the Malay equivalents of the *ancien regime*' (Khoo 1995: 206-7). Second, in 1986 RTM screened an edited police videotape to discredit opposition party PAS (Khoo 1995: 228). One final example: in 1988-89 the *Lagu Setia* (a song of loyalty to king and country, leaders and people, religion and race) was repeatedly broadcast over radio and television and sung at political, governmental and civic functions (Khoo 1995: 321). The late 1980s were marked by the increased authoritarianism of a vulnerable Mahathir. His ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional, used docile media organisations, notably television and the press, owned by politicians and businessmen 'to promote and legitimise itself' and to 'discredit political opposition and dissent more generally' (Gomez and Jomo 1997:3).

Critics say that television's potential role as a tool of 'popular education' and national integration has lost out to the dictates of advertisers who favour entertaining foreign productions. In the 1980s, Mahathir's government began issuing licenses for the creation of private TV companies. His intention was to raise funds while retaining control over party political content by selling to carefully chosen bidders. Television has always been a key electoral tool for Barisan Nasional, the Malay-controlled ruling coalition (Anuar and Kim 1996).

TV3 was created in 1984. The official justification was that private television would foster competition, help reduce the size of the government debt and counter the VCR threat to national unity after increasing number of ethnic Indians and Chinese had turned to imported videos in their own tongues, shunning the Malay-language domination of RTM's programming (Hashim 1995). TV3 was a huge commercial success. Despite a strong economic recession, it recorded a pre-tax profit of RM

2.16 million in 1985. Five years later, this figure had multiplied fifteenfold to reach RM 31.59 million. This led to rapid changes in the shareholding structure. By 1994 the majority shareholder was the group MRCB, controlled by close associates of Anwar Ibrahim (Gomez 1997: 91-92). TV3's positive coverage of Anwar is said to have played a key role in his wresting the UMNO deputy presidency from Ghafar Baba, as part of his bid to ultimately become Prime Minister (Gomez 1997: 126-127). In 1997, Shamsuddin Abdul Kadir, close to Mahathir, became one of TV3's directors (Gomez 1997: 73).

Some vocal sectors of urban West Malaysian society have expressed dismay at what they see as a constant meddling of politicians in the programming, a widespread lack of professionalism and the unrelenting search for lucrative revenues from transnational advertising agencies. Both RTM and TV3 have been attacked for allowing un-Asian levels of sex and violence into their programming. RTM's hard-earned 1980s ratio of 60 domestic productions to every 40 imported ones had by 1993 been reversed. TV3 was even more westernised: 80% of its programmes came from the West, mostly from the USA (Hashim 1995). These figures, say the critics, indicate that the policies to foster a national culture are under severe threat (Nain 1996). Pressure from non-Malay quarters led to a compromise: RTM would devote its first channel to the promotion of the Malay(sian) language and culture, while TV2 would target the needs of the non-Malay groups by broadcasting in Chinese, Tamil and English (Hashim 1995). Despite this adjustment, a number of pressure groups still feel that their constituents are under-represented, including women's groups, small ethnic minorities and non-Muslim religious groups (Anuar and Kim 1996).

A persistent bone of contention is religion. Islam is a main ingredient in the synthetic Malaysian culture dreamed up by the UMNO leaders after the serious 1969 racial riots in West Malaysia. It is the only religion that ever gets TV coverage, a source of resentment from other religious quarters. So far moderate Muslim values have

dominated local production. Most RTM dramas revolve around the concerns of the Malay community, notably how to reconcile the demands of modernisation with the Islamic faith⁸⁴. Two Malaysian researchers describe how 'Islamic values are injected [in many dramas], partly as an indirect response to the government's desire to instil Islamic values into the administration and wider society' (Anuar and Kim 1996: 270). Iban audience reactions to these programmes are analysed in chapters 5 and 6.

In their television history, the Bornean states are again a special case. Transmission commenced in Sabah in 1974, eleven years after it had done so in West Malaysia. From 1975 Sarawak was allowed to use the Sabahan facilities. Various cultural, musical and religious programmes were produced and broadcast by the two states over a joint channel known as Channel 3. However in 1985 Channel 3 was closed down following directives from Kuala Lumpur -- predictably, it was seen as a threat to national unity. Programming was taken over by the centre, with which airtime was now 'shared'. Non-Muslim religious programmes were never again broadcast⁸⁵. Today, in spite of Sarawak's impressive economic growth of the past two decades, local production is lower than it was in the 1970s. Three kinds of programmes are produced in Sarawak:

1. *Rampai Kenyalang*⁸⁶. The state's oldest programme, launched in 1976, this 30-minute newsreel is broadcast every Wednesday from 12.15 to 12.45. It covers political events, sports and cultural celebrations such as Gawai Dayak.
2. Documentaries on development and culture. Irregularly broadcast, on average twice a month.
3. Music, the arts, entertainment. Also irregular broadcasts.

In conclusion, television in Sarawak is largely a West Malaysian phenomenon that arrived more than a decade late in the state. Together with the Malay-medium

84. An interesting parallel with the Radio Sarawak dramas and BLB novellas discussed earlier. The close relationship between rural Iban 'ideolects' (local ideologies) and the national ideology spread from West Malaysia is investigated in chapters 5 and 6.

85. When the Christian Kadazan-dominated *Parti Bersatu Sabah* (PBS) swept into power in Sabah in 1990, the rebirth of a state television station was top of their electoral manifesto (Jawan 1994: 220-221). The Federal government, however, successfully thwarted such attempts.

86. Previously known as *Majalah Sarawak* and *Mingguan Sarawak*.

school system, television is an integral part of the wide-ranging process of 'dual westernisation' affecting Sarawak and Sabah since the Federation was created in 1963 and accelerated since the mid-1970s. By 'dual westernisation' I mean the two-step flow of ideas, images and practices from the Western world (especially the USA) selected and recycled in West Malaysia and then re-exported to East Malaysia. Television is also a key propaganda tool for the ruling government coalition, and in particular for the country's authoritarian Prime Minister. It is a fundamental conveyor of nation-building and modernity visions. Finally, it is the site of many a struggle for political and economic clout. Attempts by the Bornean states to develop an autonomous channel in the 1970s were soon thwarted by Kuala Lumpur in the interest of 'national unity', the same interest that led to the burning of Iban books. The Iban and other Dayak groups are systematically excluded from television. The sole recurrent Iban contribution is that of the young 2020 singer mentioned earlier, an example of the nation-state's indefatigable efforts to tame cultural diversity by stressing or *overcommunicating* the aesthetic appeal of the various cultures to a nationwide audience while *undercommunicating* (Eriksen 1993:84 following Goffman) their chief perceived threat to national unity: unique languages and cultures. The Dayaks can be seen on television, but they cannot be heard.

Gawai Dayak, that civilised multimediated festival

With the decline of the great pagan rituals of the past, the tedious simplicity of Christian rites (see chapter 6) and the development of an urban Iban elite in Sarawak, a secular celebration has acquired growing prominence over the past three decades: *Gawai Dayak*, the 1st June pan-Dayak Festival launched in 1963 by the Iban Chief Minister of Sarawak, Kalong Ningkan, to match the Malay *Hari Raya* and Chinese New Year celebrations. *Gawai Dayak* is a multimedia event celebrated in towns and longhouses across Sarawak. There are special state television and radio programmes, newspaper features and adverts, souvenir programmes, postcards and other tourist memorabilia, posters and hoardings of international beer

and tobacco brands, photographs by tourists and Dayaks alike, greeting cards, telephone calls, speeches mediated by public-address systems, Iban karaoke audio- and videotapes, and the *Gawai Dayak* midnight toast, which is synchronised across the land by means of radio and a tiny information device: the humble wristwatch. In a word, it all very much resembles the Malay and Chinese festivals, but with the exportable attractiveness of the Dayaks being seen as friendly, colourful natives. *Gawai* is an elite-controlled explosion of ethnic jubilation. Other kinds of outbursts, as we saw in the case of the anti-logging blockades, are carefully defused and kept away from the media limelight.

Here I will only cast a brief glance at one of the *Gawai*-specific media products: the 1994 *Gawai Dayak* souvenir programme published by the Kuching-based Organising Committee (for a rural case study, see chapter 4). The cover shows the portrait of the previous year's *Kumang Gawai*, or *Gawai Beauty Queen* (Iban Section). Overleaf the reader is welcomed with the greeting 'Happy Gawai 1994' in Malay and eleven Dayak languages. Page 3 contains a list of 'Gawai Themes' from the first Festival in 1987 to the present day. They all stress the need for unity, in line with the Chief Minister's oft-repeated slogan 'politics of development', i.e. the idea that development should be above ethnic-orientated 'politicking'. The last three themes focus more specifically on the familiar problem of how to reconcile tradition and development:

1992 CULTURE: THE PILLAR OF UNITY AND DEVELOPMENT

1993 ADAT AND TECHNOLOGY FOR NATIONAL PROGRESS

1994 CULTURAL CONFLUENCE AS A BASIS FOR DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS VISION 2020

The next item is a preface written, also in English, by the Iban anthropologist and former Director of the Sarawak Museum, Dr Peter Kedit. He relates the 1994 theme to the metaphor 'confluence of rivers', applicable in his view to Sarawak's cultural and economic history, as well as to Malaysia's national motto 'Unity in Diversity'. The Pacific nations provide us again with a useful comparative framework. LiPuma and Meltzoff (1990: 79-90) have analysed the social construction of a 'public culture' in the Solomon Islands during ceremonies of independence. Like Malaysia, this

nation-state was a British colonial creation at a time of heightened European rivalry. These ceremonies provide an annual setting for complex struggles over the representation of a national identity amidst great ethnic diversity and growing class differences. Ethnicity is simultaneously exalted and nested within the national identity. As in the Iban ethnohistorical accounts mentioned above, headhunting is presented as part of the internal strife that fragmented the Solomon Islands before unification. Similarly, the new media are mobilized by the elites to present the scattered Islands as 'a new, fledgling nation built on a primordial unity' (1990: 90). Time and space are reconceptualized, and the nation is portrayed and performed as a natural unit antedating its official birth. The implicit leitmotif is to preserve the indigenous traditions 'by creating a special time and space (i.e., ritual ceremonies) where they may be displayed' (1990: 90). In chapter 4 I take issue with too liberal a use of the term 'ritual', but the point is well taken: across much of the post-colonial world, the elites have invented pseudo-rituals and media narratives to symbolically conjoin centralised states with their sub-national ethnic groups (cf. Hobsbawm 1983). Across the Pacific, says Sullivan (1993:551), notions of *kastom* (custom) have become powerful political tools, 'so vague as to be both unifying and dividing, invoking various levels of community'. These 'ideologies of primordial culture' are pervasive across the vast region's mass media because 'like [the] mass media themselves, [they] easily transcend geographic and linguistic barriers'. In Island Southeast Asia, from Southern Thailand to Irian Jaya, the term *adat* (custom) performs an identical service through a growing number of elite-controlled media, both modern (radio, television, public-address systems, etc) and pre-modern (dance, music, etc). Lacking a common language and cultural heritage, the Dayaks are being re-presented through a small set of vague terms. They are portrayed as having essentially the same *adat* and as being one people (*bansa*) who have only recently recognised their common origin because, to quote Ejau's native chief again, 'schooling arrived late to us'.

The next section in the souvenir programme is a series of double-page messages

from two state and another two Dayak leaders. The Dayaks (the Deputy Chief Minister, Alfred Jabu, and the State Minister for Land Development, Celestine Ujang) are members of the so-called 'Linggi Jugah group', or the 'big three' Iban millionaire politicians with the Melanau-controlled PBB, the dominant party within the ruling coalition at state level (Jawan 1994: 122). There follows the official prayer, *Sampi Gawai Dayak 1994*, written by Janang Ensiring, whom we have encountered twice before in this chapter, first as a young patriotic poet, then as a mature novelist. Among wishes of good health and longevity for all, he waves a cockerel (*miau manuk*) to ask the benevolent spirits 'that our *adat* and our unity will follow firmly and closely the *Rukun Negara* [Malaysia's national ideology]' (*Awak ka adat kitai enggau sempekat kitai tegap nunda sapat Rukun Negara*). Then there is a long *biau* (blessing) by Iban politician Jimmy Donald in which he rewards, to quote from the English abstract provided, 'the efforts of our wise leaders to perpetuate the noble values and the rich cultural heritage of the Dayak community', followed by a long photographic section in which the leaders partake in the colourful festivities.

Tourism being a growth industry in the state, on page 22 we learn about 'Gawai Tourism Nite' which includes a 'Traditional Gawai Welcome', dinner, Gawai 'rituals', traditional music, a beauty parade and the latest Dayak pop hits. The next section is made up of background information on some of the Dayak cultures represented in 1994, including materials from a foreign anthropologist (Jensen), an Iban ethnohistorian (Sandin) and Dayak staff from the Council for Customary Law (Langub, Belawing). Finally, there is a long list of committee members and a number of mostly tourism-related adverts.

In conclusion, this remarkable mediated ceremony proves the great continuity in the state's ethnic (im)balance of power. The ceremonial, colourful side of 'the Dayaks' has accompanied powerful figures in Sarawak since the Brooke days. All along, these societies have been relegated to a subordinate political role. Since 1987, we witness a concerted effort by the state authorities to make every *Gawai Dayak* into a

memorable multimedia occasion. It is in their interest to do so, for *Gawai* lends legitimacy to their claim that 'the politics of development' is a successful formula of government that reconciles the demands of modernisation with the preservation of a rich cultural heritage. In turn, it is argued, this rich heritage can generate more revenue for the state and its people in the form of tourism.

Interpersonal media: the producers are the consumers

Gawai Dayak is also interesting because it mobilizes two kinds of media: the mass media we have discussed throughout the chapter (radio, books, magazines, television, etc) and also what are known as 'interpersonal media', that is technologies that allow two or more persons to communicate at a distance, including letters, telephone, fax, e-mail, and public-address systems. The production/consumption boundaries are blurred in the case of two-way media such as the telephone. Who is the author of a telephone conversation? It is co-authored by its 'consumers'.

In a nation-state such as Malaysia where the mass media are under strict government control, the interpersonal media have a special significance for the population at large. For instance, the indirect (and imperfect) channels by which Internet reports of all kinds reach rural Iban communities demand a study in their own right. In 1997, a deluge of 'flying letters' accusing the Chief Minister, Taib Mahmud, of fleeing Sarawak at the height of the forest fires in neighbouring Kalimantan, reached all areas of the state (see *Sarawak Tribune*, 13 October 1997, for one of many pro-Taib retorts). Rumours that Taib had deposited 8 billion ringgit from his logging ventures in a Swiss bank account reached the rural areas and were quietly relayed in some coffee shops and longhouse galleries. In this case, a number of interpersonal media (especially e-mail, telephone and letters) and face-to-face exchanges were mobilized to define the reality or falsity of certain claims over which the mass media had imposed a blackout.

Conclusion

I have discussed two remarkable 22-year periods, two generations, of media production in Sarawak intimately related to profound social and cultural changes within Iban society. The first period (1954-1976) saw the rapid development of language-based Iban media – radio, books and a magazine – largely driven by a generation of Saribas teachers both immersed in and detached from oral Iban culture. Their aim was to reconcile economic development and cultural preservation. At the same time they were furthering the state's aim of 'saving the Iban from themselves'. The second period (1977-1999) was born with the mass destruction of books in Iban and other Dayak languages by the new postcolonial, Malay-dominated state, part of the ongoing aborted ethnogenesis of a modern Iban culture and its rebirth as a derivative national subculture. This was a period of accelerated Malaysianisation or 'dual westernisation' through media products reaching rural Sarawak, notably school textbooks, television and cassette tapes. At the subnational level, the Sarawak state and its Dayak allies consolidated a vague, colourful Dayak identity supported by a wealth of visual media (*Gawai* cards, beer posters, tourist brochures, hoardings, etc) displayed most prominently during *Gawai Dayak*. Meanwhile a parallel discourse in the state government-controlled press flourished and was pressed into intensive service at critical junctures of resistance from the Penan and other Dayaks: the representation of the Dayaks as a backward people in need of a modern 'mind-set'. Partly as a reaction to the state's monopoly over legitimate media, this period also witnessed the growth of interpersonal media 'products' (telephone conversations, fax messages, etc) that challenged the ruling elite's accounts of rural development, especially in the urban areas.

Following King (1989) and other anthropologists, I have argued for the need to understand ethnicity not as an isolated category of analysis but as part of a broader context of social, economic, and political relations – as part of what Comaroff (1996) calls the 'politics of difference'. *Contra* Barth (in Hann 1994), the study of ethnicity in

the post-colonial world cannot be detached from the study of culture and nation-building. Indeed in Borneo as in other Asia-Pacific islands, ethnicity and nationalism are two aspects of common developmentalist projects that seek to spread vague primordial notions (of 'custom', 'heritage' and the like) through various media. It is precisely the 'various media' aspect of these processes that I have sought to explore in historical detail, for this is a much neglected area in the literature. This approach led me to stress the centrality of behind-the-scenes struggles not so much over vague symbols, but over the development and consolidation of a modern national language and culture in post-colonial states. The attempts by Saribas Iban media producers to create a literate Iban high culture were thwarted by the new Malaysian state's will to monopolise legitimate language and culture. A literate culture 'cannot normally survive without its own political shell, the state' (Gellner 1983: 140). In this regard, Iban radio posed less of a threat to the fledgling Malaysian nation-state than Iban print media, so it was allowed to live on.

Under the spell of Appadurai's (1990) 'mediascape' trope and the ubiquitous notion of 'globalisation', Ginsburg (1993), Sullivan (1993) and others working on non-Western media production have stressed the multidirectional nature of mediated influences. While agreeing with the need to design models that can capture some of the complexity of contemporary media practices, I have insisted on the *unidirectional* flow of media products and practices from the West, especially America, into East Malaysia via West Malaysia: a massive process of 'dual westernisation' over which the end-consumers in rural Sarawak have little control. This is not to say that rural Iban are passive recipients of alien media products. In the following chapters I switch from an historical to an ethnographic approach to explore the myriad, yet regulated, ways in which situated rural Iban agents transform media objects (e.g. television sets), news (e.g. the forest fires) and genres (e.g. broadcast storytelling) into social currency.

Chapter 3

The social life and afterlife of Saribas Iban media artefacts

Once you are dead, put your feet up, call it a day, and let the husband or the missus or the kids or a sibling decide whether you are to be buried or burned or blown out of a cannon or left to dry out in a ditch somewhere. It's not your day to watch it, because the dead don't care.

Thomas Lynch, an American poet (1998: 14)

So we gave [our TV] to the deceased because she still wanted to watch it. Sometimes people dream [of the dead]; that means they're searching [for personal belongings they left behind]. The more you pity the dead, the more things you let them take with them.

Indai Luta, a Saribas Iban farmer, 1997

Introduction: a working television set

Semak longhouse, the Saribas, April 1997. At dawn, the all-male burial party marched down the longhouse gallery to an uproar of wailing women and the shrill squawking of cocks. The European-style coffin had been fastened onto a long bamboo pole. Half a dozen men carried it. As is customary, it was lowered from the downriver end of the longhouse. The men lifted it onto the back of a lorry and drove some five minutes until they reached a narrow opening in the thick forest undergrowth. The pallbearers lowered the coffin by the pole and followed a man who cleared the way with a bush knife. About a dozen men followed down the slippery trail. Some carried food and cooking implements for the graveyard meal, others the deceased's grave goods (baya'): his clothes, his comb and toothbrush, his favourite chair and table, his television.

After the men had dug up the grave, the deceased's son-in-law took one of the idle hoes and smashed up the television screen. 'So that he can still watch TV over there', he explained to me. He then proceeded to shatter the rest of the grave goods. Later in the day, once the Christian burial and the meal were over, the television set was placed at the foot of the grave.

When I witnessed this event, I found it hard to believe that the deceased's son-in-law, a construction worker with a family of 16 to support, had so readily given up their only working television so that the departed member could 'still watch it

over there'. Not long before this burial, I had conducted a door-to-door longhouse survey which clearly demonstrated that Saribas Iban *bilik*-families consider television to be their most important belonging, for reasons I explain below. All the evidence suggests that today Iban everywhere greatly value modern commodities. Writing in 1951, Derek Freeman (1992: 222) describes how, for young Iban men 'going on journeys is the greatest and most consuming interest which life has to offer. The lure of the distant sea and its fabled ports is inducement enough; but added to this are varied opportunities to earn money, and ultimately to purchase a gong, a jar or a shot-gun for one's triumphant home-coming'.

Forty years later, the Iban passion for family heirlooms (*pesaka*) seemed to have subsided. Arno Linklater (1990: 45) was commissioned by *Time Life* to write a book about the Iban as a 'colourful, exotic and above all primitive' people. He found that his co-researcher's photographic work was doomed from the outset. This is what they encountered in a remote Batang Ai longhouse:

Outboard engines and chain-saws hung from posts in the gallery. Their kitchens were stocked with bright yellow plastic buckets, aluminium saucepans and tins of Milo, a syrupy night-time drink. All this could be minimised but not the problem of their clothes. Sarongs had replaced short woven skirts for the women, and the men no longer wore the traditional *sirat* or loin-cloth originally woven from bark. They found cotton shorts more convenient, and from their work at the timber camps and oil-fields, they brought back baseball caps and T-shirts advertising Camel cigarettes and such folk beliefs as 'Love is never having to say you're sorry'.

It is not only foreign visitors who have lamented the erosion of a pre-industrial material culture across Sarawak. Lucas Chin (1988:102-103), a former Director of the Sarawak Museum, explains that from the 10th century A.D. onwards ceramics, brassware and beads from China, the Malay world and the Middle East

had been traded by our people who had in turn cherished them as symbols of status and wealth, treasured them as heirlooms and used them for a multitude of purposes. However, in recent years, there seems to be a tendency that these heirlooms which have been kept for generations, are being readily disposed of for one reason or another. Our people now seem to prefer outboard engines, motor-bikes and TV sets instead.

An obvious answer to the burial mystery was not hard to find. It was both given to me at a later point by the participants themselves and available in Richards' *Iban-English Dictionary*. Before sending an object to the afterlife the Iban must destroy it¹, for their Afterworld (*Sebayan*) is a back-to-front realm where things fall upwards, water is carried in sieves and cracked jars, light is dark (Richards 1981: 30) and television can only be watched on smashed-up screens. In *Sebayan*, the belief goes, the deceased will be able to make use of the object's 'spirit' (*semengat*) (1981: 336). But the nagging question remained unanswered. Why destroy a valuable television set? Wasn't that an irrational act, a waste of precious technological resources?

The anthropological problem of value

The 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a surge in scholarly interest in the study of consumption and material culture. One important collection of essays, *The Social Life of Things* (Appadurai 1986) challenges what the authors see as prevalent Western notions of an atomised, culture-free individual consumer with unlimited needs. In his introduction, Appadurai sets out to overcome the Marxist tendency to define economic relations largely in terms of production by examining more closely the specificities of consumption across historical periods and cultural boundaries. He defines commodities as 'things in a certain situation' (1986: 13) rather than as kinds of things strictly differentiated from those used in gift and barter exchanges. To this anthropologist, what is socially relevant about commodities is not any intrinsic, immutable attribute but rather their exchangeability at various stages in their social careers. In order to understand the shifting social and economic value of commodities, we must study how they circulate in social life, hence the title of the volume.

¹ Hoskins (1998: 21) reports that the Kodi of Sumba, in Eastern Indonesia, break some of the deceased's 'significant possessions' on the grave. She does not, however, explain the possible reasons for this practice.

One of the contributors, Alfred Gell (1986: 110-114), has urged western anthropologists to transcend the utilitarian bias prevalent in their own societies when studying consumption in other cultures. He supports his argument with the case of the Sri Lankan fishermen whose income rose sharply following the introduction of new technologies of refrigeration (Stirratt 1989). They promptly acquired modern toilets and TV sets and had spacious garages built. Alas, they had no running water, electricity or roads with which to enjoy these modern conveniences. Rather than seeing this episode as an example of peasant naiveté or irrationality, Gell finds that their purchases resemble those of wealthy art buyers in the West: they are the creative, collective act of appropriating a radically novel aesthetics, one not previously available locally.

It is easy to laugh at such crass conspicuous expenditure, which by its apparent lack of utilitarian purpose makes at least some of our own consumption seem comparatively rational. Because the objects these fishermen acquire seem functionless in their environment, we cannot see why they should want them. On the other hand, if they collected pieces of antique Chinese porcelain and buried them in the earth as the Iban do (Freeman 1970), they would be considered sane but enchanted, like normal anthropological subjects (Gell 1986: 114).

Similarly, it is easy to laugh at the replacement of those pieces of antique porcelain that Freeman came across in the late 1940s with the 'modern' television sets I witnessed at 1990s Iban burials. Are the Iban no longer 'sane but enchanted'? Are they no longer 'normal anthropological subjects'?

The trouble with Gell's post-utilitarianist approach is that it can lead us to the opposite extreme of discarding all potentially utilitarian aspects of consumption in non-Western societies. It also hampers the ethnographic inquiry by reducing the problem of value to a dichotomy: that of utility vs. the absence of it. A more promising approach to artefacts is Miller's (1998: 6-7) view of material culture as 'an endless creative and hybrid world' to which no rigid etic classification can do justice. What is needed, he argues, is an ethnographic 'generality of difference' in the study of artefacts. Those artefacts that matter to participants in the ceaseless construction of self and others ought to matter to researchers as well.

Rather than focusing on the flow of commodities, like Appadurai and Gell do, what matters to Miller is the processual aspects in the relationship between persons and artefacts: how they construct one another as time progresses. There is a paradox here, though. Despite Miller's advocacy of an open-ended research strategy, his post-structuralist stance downplays the potential importance of the more permanent or 'structural' elements in any given culture. In this chapter I will focus on media artefacts that matter to Saribas Iban, especially television, yet seeking to achieve an analytical integration of structural and agentive aspects in the relationship between persons and artefacts.

<i>Possession</i>	<i>Responses</i>
1. television set	26
2. refrigerator	14
3. earthenware jars (<i>tajau</i>)	10
4. land ²	8
5. radio set	7
6. gas cooker	4
7. vegetable garden	3
motorcycle	3
9. telephone	2
car ³	2
all heirlooms	2
no preference	2

Table 3.1: Most valued *bilik*-family possessions among Saribas Iban. Sample: 119 *bilik*-families in 6 longhouses.

I will not however limit the inquiry to those aspects of the value of Saribas Iban

² It is possible that many respondents did not consider land as a 'thing' they owned (*utai dikemisi*), hence its relatively low valuation when I asked respondents to enumerate valuable things rather than provide them with a pre-set list of them. Richards (1981: 158) defines the term *keresa* as '1. Belongings, chattels, possessions, *kerekesa*, esp. those passing by inheritance and of ritual family (*bilik*) worth, incl. *jukut* (precious objects), *utai pesaka*. Property in land and things fixed to land is separately named and described (e.g. *kebun getah, kayu' buah*), and is excluded from *k.* because traditionally it was free and plentiful and had economic rather than ritual value'. On the other hand, stories abound of Iban in the Saribas basin selling their land to Chinese speculators at very low prices in order to fund costly rituals such as Gawai Antu and/or buy TV sets and other goods.

³ Very few rural Iban can afford to buy and maintain either a car or a telephone, which may explain their low valuation given that respondents were asked to value their actual, not their *desired*, possessions.

media artefacts that would appear to contrast with a supposed Western utilitarianism, for I am doubtful that Gell's contradistinction is a valid one. Instead I will start by opening up the semantic field of the term 'value' (*rega, guna*) in a Saribas Iban context to situate more precisely the subsequent inquiry.

In a survey I carried out early in 1997, television appeared to be the most highly valued property owned by Saribas Iban, even above their family heirlooms (*utai pesaka*). I asked adult residents of three longhouses which among all their belongings, both family heirlooms and modern objects, were most useful or important to them (*Di antara semua utai ti dikemisi kita sebilik, lama enggau baru, nama utai ti berguna agi?*). The results indicated a clear preference for television, as shown in Table 3.1. The follow-up question in the survey was: Why are these particular objects so important to you? Those who had chosen their TV sets gave very similar, concise explanations: they want to know what is happening in the world, keep abreast of development(s), especially overseas. In the written responses which I quote *verbatim*, three adults made this clear⁴.

Melissa, 25, handicraft factory worker:

TV shows countries other than Malaysia. It also shows both foreign and Malaysian news.

Baka TV iya bisi mandang ka menoa orang bukai kelimpah ari Malaysia. Tambah mega bisi mandang ka berita dalam enggau luar negeri selain ari Malaysia.

Apai Dunggat, male, 45, farmer, former labourer:

We can watch the news on TV, watch stories and see countries that are far away from Malaysia when we turn it on.

Baka TV kami ulih meda brita, meda cherita serta meda menoa ti jayoh ari Malaysia tu leboh maia kami pasang iya.

Indai Edut, female, 28, housewife:

In our family we find that the most useful thing [we own] is [our] TV, because through TV we can know what has happened around the world: the wars, the floods, the burnt down houses and much more.

⁴ I have not corrected any spelling mistakes or Malay language interference as this would take away some of the original flavour of the written responses.

Utai ti beguna agi ba penemu kami sebilik iya nya TV, laban ari TV kitai ulih nemu nama udah ti nyadi ba serta dunia, ba perang, ambuh bah, rumah angus enggau maioh agi utai bukai.

These survey responses demonstrate that Saribas Iban, unlike Gell's Sri Lankan fishermen, do indeed value television as an information technology. Such a form of valuation, as I argue below, derives from recent historical memory, from a sense of having been left behind by those among their urbanised brethren who are now 'clever and rich' (*udah pandai, udah kaya*). However, this is but one way in which they talk about television, one appropriate to the context of a formal survey conducted by a foreign researcher. That is, they stressed the 'serious' value of television over, say, its entertainment value. But I wish to argue that there are at least eight other kinds of overlapping value frameworks whereby Saribas Iban estimate the worth of television as an artefact-cum-medium outside the rigid confines of a questionnaire.

(1) *Market value (rega)*. Television sets are expensive to purchase yet, unlike family heirlooms (*utai pesaka*), they rapidly lose market value. The market is controlled by the Chinese diaspora.

(2) *Exchange value*. Television sets are important exchange items in the regular flow of gifts (*meri*) and counter-gifts with the living and with the dead; they keep people together.

(3) *Status value*. Television sets are conspicuous markers of inter-familial disparities in wealth, prestige and social status (*pangkaŋ*); they separate people.

(4) *Utilitarian value (guna)*. Television sets are seen as the chief providers of information (*berita*) about more advanced urbanized societies.

(5) *Moral value*. Owning a television and watching it regularly provides Saribas Iban with materials (both hardware and software) to contrast their local custom (*adat*) with the televised lifestyles and morals of other, more powerful ethnic groups.

(6) *Aesthetic value*. Television sets can be appreciated for their design and style. The Saribas Iban domestic aesthetics is eclectic: Iban and alien elements are often juxtaposed to achieve a potent 'symbolic closure' or synthesis.

(7) *Historical value (asal)*. Television sets, unlike family heirlooms (*pesaka*), are not generally attributed the potentiality to transcend the human lifespan (historical temporality). However, some urbanised Saribas Iban may regard

them as 'collectibles' (*koleksi*).

(8) *Biographical value*. Television (both as an artefact and as a medium) is routinely used in the construction of a sense of self in relation to others (lifelong temporality, cf Hoskins 1998). In certain situations, it can be therefore reclassified as a grave good (*baya'*).

(9) *Social value*. Television sets routinely provide the time-space coordinates for a new form of *bilik*-based evening socialising (day-to-day temporality).

The purpose of charting out this vast analytical space is to capture some of the complexity inherent in any study of value and exchange. Covering all these dimensions of value adequately is not possible in this chapter. The problem of the moral value (no. 5) of television programmes is addressed in chapters 5 and 6. That of their social value (n. 9) in their coordination of evening activities in the longhouse, in chapter 4. Here I will concentrate on the *exchange value* (no. 2) of media artefacts, and in particular television, although it will soon become apparent that the boundaries between these analytical constructs are fuzzy. For instance, the market value (no. 1, *rega*) of a television set can be an important measure of its significance as a gift (no. 2) when a well-off *bilik*-family decide to give one to poorer relations. In addition, the act of giving might also be interpreted in terms of status (no. 3), utility (no. 4) and morality (no. 5) at different times by different people within the social network concerned. The status of the givers will be undoubtedly enhanced, the utility of the gift to the receivers remarked upon (or lack of it, e.g. if the receivers' electricity generator is beyond repair), and the moral integrity of the givers may be questioned (e.g. if they expect as a counter-gift a vast piece of land belonging to the receivers). The analytical combinations are endless, and in the ten case studies presented below I can only hope to capture some of the socially-regulated paths through which media artefacts circulate and are valued, some of the regularities that make such exchanges viable.

The life crises of Saribas Iban television sets

Another influential essay in the Appadurai (1986) collection mentioned earlier is Kopytoff's *The cultural biography of things*. Kopytoff maintains that the same biographical techniques that some anthropologists have successfully adopted in a variety of cultural settings can be transferred to the study of artefacts (see also Hoskins 1998 and below). A promising line of inquiry, he says, would be to collect and present to the reader a range of possible biographies of artefacts rather than attempting to produce ideal types. Depending on the analyst's aims, different kinds of biographies are feasible. They can be used to shed light on the domestic economy, kinship relations, technical developments, the class structure, and so on (1986: 67).

Below I use the biographical approach to artefacts to examine the social and economic significance of television in the Saribas area. But rather than produce full biographical profiles of television sets I will concentrate on two phases in their 'careers': (a) how they are acquired and (b) how they are disposed of. One reason for leaving the middle phase out is to avoid redundancy, as I devote Chapter 4 to the impact of media technologies on the organisation of time and space in Saribas longhouses. Another is the assumption that we can learn a great deal from the critical points at which commodities are exchanged for money, labour, gifts or supernatural protection, for it is at these junctures that the group members tell themselves (and at times others as well) who they think they are and what kinds of things they value – or, to paraphrase Miller (1998), what kinds of things matter to them. In addition, we can learn about the conflicts that may emerge when two or more different value frameworks impinge upon an exchange, for instance when selecting the burial goods (*baya'*) that a deceased family member will take with her to the afterlife. This approach integrates the social, relational and active nature of consumption (Appadurai 1986:31) with the endemic features of Saribas Iban culture. I have identified three chief paths through which television sets are acquired and four through which they are

disposed of, as shown in Table 3.2.

ACQUISITION	DISPOSAL
1. As a gift from rich relations	1. As a gift to poor relations
2. As a local hire-purchase (<i>Jun</i>)	2. As a collectible (<i>koleksi</i>)
3. As an urban cash purchase	3. As a 'stand-by', broken piece of furniture
	4. As a grave good (<i>baya'</i>)

Table 3.2. The socially-regulated paths of acquisition and disposal of television sets among Saribas Iban

Three methods of acquisition

One point of entry of television sets into Saribas Iban homes is as gifts (*meri*) from better-off relations. Many Saribas *bilik*-families cannot afford to purchase their own TV sets. They must rely on migrant kin working in urban areas, timber camps or off-shore oil rigs.

Household A: Thomas, 31, supports a family of 8. He used to earn only RM 420 a month as a conductor with STC, the local bus company. Now he can make as much as RM 75 on a good day as a construction worker and occasional carpenter. In 1990 or 1993 a cousin of Thomas' who lives in Kuching presented them with their first, and to date only, television set - a colour Goldstar. Thomas estimates it cost him approximately RM 1000 upfront.

Household B: This hard-up family of 6 depend on the erratic earnings of two brothers who currently work in the local building sector. They bought their first TV set, a black-and-white model, in the early 1980s. They had it repaired in Kuching once but it broke down again. In 1995 the head of the household's brother, a carpenter in Kuching, gave them a black-and-white Panasonic imitation. It still works. They estimate it cost him RM 700 to RM 800.

In many developing countries it appears that people are prioritising televisions and other mass-produced objects in their expenditure patterns (Miller 1994b: 415). This is often at the expense of achieving 'adequate levels of nutrition and shelter'. Today, says Miller, we are 'confronted with images of decaying slums festooned with cars and television aerials' (1994b: 415). This is not the case among Saribas Iban. On the contrary, there is a strong link between income and television or car ownership. In the richer longhouses, often close to a market

town or further away but blessed with abundant pepper harvests, most if not all *bilik*-families own a TV set while very few or none own a car. In poorer communities television sets are rarer, and rarer still it is to have them repaired when they break down. When households face hardship owing to, say, a depressed local job market, a poor harvest or the death of the family ricewinner, televisions become luxury items.

In the six longhouses I surveyed in the Saribas area, the percentage of *bilik*-families owning one or more TV sets (usually one) went from 100% at a community next to the market town (*pasar*) to 55% at a poorer longhouse some 4 miles further away from town. Yet these figures can be misleading: at a third, even poorer longhouse with 65% ownership, I found that of the 13 television sets owned by families there, only four were working -- having the other nine repaired was beyond their present means. *Television is a much valued, yet dispensable, commodity.* There are indeed poor families in the Saribas who have no support from relatively wealthy relations and cannot even afford a radio set, let alone a television. Most of them, however, can count on closer-to-hand relations to watch it, as in the following example:

Household C: A 6-strong family of two parents with four children aged 4 to 15. The father, 45, works intermittently as a labourer (*kuli*) for some RM 30 a day and helps with the wet paddy farm at peak periods. They have no family heirlooms and have never owned a TV set. To watch it they often go next-door to the mother's first cousin's who is married to Thomas (Household A). They used to have a small radio bought when the father was a labourer in Brunei but it broke down 'a long time ago' (*lama udah ja*), so they also have to listen to the radio next-door.

A second well-established point of entry for a television set is as a flexible hire-purchase from a prominent local Chinese shopkeeper. We shall call him Mr Chan. A long-time resident and fluent speaker of Iban, Chan set up his own shop in 1982. His father was a fishmonger, whereas he has diversified into furniture, electronic goods, bicycles, and antiques⁵ and claims to have customers virtually

⁵ Including brass (*temaga*), glazed earthenware jars (*tajau*), gongs (*tawak*) and round metal stands (*tabak*).

in every longhouse across the Saribas and Skrang region. He used to travel frequently up the Skrang in search of Iban heirlooms (*utai lama*) but nowadays few of any value are to be found in longhouses. Most of them, he says, are now owned by wealthy urban Sarawakians (as Beavitt 1995 confirms⁶). Moreover, as longhouse residents have become aware of their increasing market value only destitute families are today prepared to part with their heirlooms. When asked about the potential risks of selling haunted jars Chan is firm: 'No, no, my jars have never harmed anyone' (*nadai kala ngachau urang*).

Chan buys his television sets and other mass-produced merchandise wholesale in Kuching. For almost 20 years now his customers have been able to hire-purchase (*lb. lun*, from E. loan) television sets and other costly goods. Thus a television worth RM 1000 can be purchased in monthly instalments of RM 100, sometimes RM 80 or less if the family are facing financial difficulties (*suntok*). Black and white sets cost just over RM 300. According to Chan, his customers are happy to buy in instalments. Newly arrived traders are reluctant to offer this service for lack of trust in the local population. Indeed even Chan has suffered from an increase in the default rate. He estimates that one or two out of every 10 customers never meet their financial obligations. 'People are not like before. I'm paying so-and-so's wife a visit to embarrass him [into paying up] (*'Ka nemuai bini Sanu, ngasoh iya malu*)'.

Household D. Four generations share this 6-strong *bilik*, from a primary schoolboy to his great-grandfather, born in 1901. Aki Nyaru, 58, was the first person in the longhouse to own a wireless, a Philips he bought in the 1950s for RM 115. In those days he was a 'leading coolie' [E. term used] in the divisional capital, Simanggang. The new artefact was an instant success in the longhouse. He still remembers how a dumbfound woman went round the talking box in search of the mysterious speaker, and how their *bilik* was always full of people eager to listen to the Iban-language broadcasts. In 1977 he found local employment as a *kuli* with the Public Works Department. Two years later he started paying Mr Chan for a black-and-white television in irregular instalments. Two or three years after the longhouse had celebrated its 1988 *Gawai Antu*, or mourning feast, he replaced it with a Sharp colour TV which he also paid Chan for in variable instalments of about RM 100 a month totalling some RM 2100. He believes local life has generally improved over the years. For instance, 'in the old days you

⁶ Beavitt (1995: 15) links the 1990s boom in the antique (*pesaka*) business in Sarawak to the steady growth of the tourist industry. He reports an unending quest for 'authentic' ethnic objects among foreign tourists and urban Sarawakians alike.

couldn't buy on hire purchase'. No longer a labourer, these days he taps his own rubber trees and farms wet paddy. The family live on his son's considerable wages as a lorry driver, up to RM 1800 a month with overtime.

Household E. Stella, 28, and her husband Edut, 36, live with their daughter in a small house on stilts they built beside the longhouse. He is a mechanic with the local bus company. She does some farming and describes herself in English as a 'housewife'. They bought their first television and video in 1990 on hire purchase from Chan, RM 700 upfront and the remaining RM 400 in four monthly instalments. When it broke down Chan himself repaired it. In 1994 they decided to buy a Panasonic television and video set. This time the method of payment was 'more comfortable' (*nyamai agi*): Edut's employer paid directly to Chan by deducting RM 100 from his salary every month.

Chan's business activities illuminate two aspects of local media acquisition. First, they shed light on the middle-income section of the longhouse population, that is families with one regular wage earner employed locally, almost always a man working for a construction firm, the bus company, the police or the Public Works Department (now JKR⁷). There is a marked sexual division of labour in longhouses lying close to the market town. Unlike more remote communities devoted exclusively to rice farming and cash cropping in which many everyday tasks are shared by men and women (cf. Skrang pepper cultivators in Chapter 6), here in longhouses within the market town orbit, men generally work for wages while women combine farming and domestic chores. These wages allow families to hire-purchase television sets, refrigerators and other costly commodities, making them ever more dependent on the vagaries of a local job market that relies heavily on developmental funds from the state government in Kuching, that is on political patronage.

Second, trade in television sets and other media devices is in the hands of the Chinese diaspora – and so is the private sector that employs thousands of Iban labourers-cum-consumers across Sarawak. Chinese entrepreneurs have to understand their customers' beliefs and needs if they are to prosper. In the account just presented Mr Chan reveals his knowledge of both pagan thought and of the uses to which the notion of *malu* (shame) can be put in an Iban

⁷ *Jabatan Kerja Raya*, humorously known by the Malay phrase '*Jangan Kerja Rajin*', i.e. 'Don't Work Hard'.

setting. Kopytoff (1986:88-89), following Curtin (1984), has stressed the importance of trade diasporas for the history of world trade. These groups have 'provided the channels for the movement of goods between disparate societies' acting as a cushion against the impact of the world economy upon small-scale societies. With the continued monetization and urbanization of rural Sarawak, however, it is likely that informal arrangements of the kind Chan has established with his longhouse customers will be increasingly replaced by more impersonal, inflexible written contracts. In fact, a rival company already uses quite a different strategy with defaulters: they recover their goods by force. In other words, the nature of commodity exchanges in the Saribas is changing as its economy becomes more firmly locked into the wider national and world economy.

There is a third point of entry for television sets: as commodities purchased by Saribas migrants for their own uses -- that is, not as gifts. The migratory flow of rural Iban is by no means one-way, and many migrants return to their longhouses when economic circumstances in their home areas permit it, or to retire. Once they have decided to settle back into their home communities, they bring their television sets, refrigerators and other household goods along with them.

Household F. The longhouse headman, 46, is married with three children. They all share a spacious *bilik* with his mother, his sister and her two daughters -- a 9-strong domestic unit. The headman is a driver with the local bus company. His wife, 30, works as a farmer and housewife. His late father was a business associate of Chan's, trading mostly in Skrang heirlooms and Kalimantan cattle. This connection allowed his father to hire-purchase from Chan one of the longhouse's first television sets. He began payment of a 14' black-and-white National set in 1982 at the reduced rate of RM 450. In those days Semak longhouse did not yet have a regular electricity supply, so their television ran on a car battery costing RM 90. The headman's sister used to work as a teacher in Kapit, far in the interior of Sarawak, where she bought an 18' colour National television for RM 800 in the 1980s. Living conditions in Kapit were hard, and after a few years she decided to return to her Saribas *bilik* bringing back, among other objects, her colour TV set. It replaced her father's obsolescent set which they gave to relations in a poorer longhouse 8 miles from town. She now works locally as a clerk and earns some RM 1000 a month. In 1996 she bought a Sony television on a trip to Kuching for RM 1200 upfront. A year later, she bought a video. She also owns the only car in the longhouse.

This example shows that we should be wary of fetishizing that most visible of visual media artefacts: television. It is no secret to rural Iban that increased employment opportunities and financial security are open to the better educated

among them. The latter's acquisition of expensive commodities over the years provides other families with what to them is tangible proof that education is the best avenue to wealth and security. When talking about relatively wealthy relations, Saribas Iban often refer to their early educational successes. For instance, a Semak longhouse teenager who is now studying for a first degree at an American university on a government scholarship, is well-remembered as a studious boy who was 'always reading books in his *bilik*'. In the minds of Saribas Iban, the school's print media are the means to the future acquisition of electronic media and other advanced technologies (see chapter 5). The true significance of the headman's sister's purchases lies in the 130-year long Saribas association of literacy with tangible material wealth. Pringle (1970: 201) says of 1860s Saribas Iban that their conversion to Christianity 'was linked to [an] interest in education, and undoubtedly to the conviction that writing was somehow the key to European power'. An early European missionary related the following incident:

A party of Saribas Dayaks going on a gutta expedition asked for a copy of the first Dayak reading book, because one of them could read, and thought he would teach the others in the evenings when they were not at work. And this is indeed what did happen, and when the party returned most of them were able to read. The Saribas women were just as keen as the men, and many of them have been taught to read by some Dayak friend. I have myself noticed, when holding services for some Christians in villages in the Saribas, how many of those present were able to use the Dayak Prayer-Book and follow the service and read the responses (Gomes 1911: 107, quoted in Pringle 1970: 201).

Four methods of disposal

At the time of field research (1997-98), wealthy families in the Saribas and other rural areas of Sarawak had owned and replaced television sets for almost twenty years. Over the years, four standard ways of disposing of old sets have emerged. One possibility is to present it to relations who cannot afford to purchase or repair their own set, as in the above example from the headman's *bilik*-family (Household F). What kind of an exchange is this? According to Appadurai (1986: 12) anthropologists have tended to romanticise the difference between a gift and a commodity exchange as being representative of small-scale and industrial

societies respectively. He prefers to understand commodities not as special kinds of goods but as 'any thing intended for exchange' and reminds us, with Bourdieu (1977), that gifts are also 'economic calculations' yet with in-built lapses of time that may conceal their true nature. To him, as we said earlier, commodities are 'things in a certain situation', that is things whose most salient feature at certain times in their social lives is their exchangeability. The main difference between gift and commodity exchanges is that the former are generally person-centred, social exchanges whereas the latter are object-centred, relatively impersonal and asocial (1986:12-13). According to this perspective, giving a television set to relations in another longhouse is therefore a self-interested, yet personal, form of economic calculation. This corresponds to the evidence I have gathered. Kedit (1993: 136) describes how urban-based Iban still

maintain ties with their rural communities and help them solve problems in such activities as farming, funerals or festivals. Their original home is a place of sentimental value with fond memories of childhood. But it also has economic value because land holdings are still owned by their families and they have rights to them.

The phenomenon is not merely one of a flow of gifts from the urban rich to the rural poor, or vice versa (see Sutlive [1989a] on rural Iban support to Sibuan squatters), nor is it limited to money given for farming and feasting. In addition, there is a growing *intra-rural* flow of used televisions and other costly commodities-turned-gifts that reflects economic inequalities derived from an unequal access to waged employment. Giving a television set is both an act of kinship solidarity and an unambiguous statement about the relative success of each *bilik*-family in the race to modernity. Gell (1986: 112) argues that 'very recognizable forms of consumption' studied by anthropologists, such as eating, drinking or sharing the pipe should not mislead us into thinking that 'consumption equals destruction'. Even ephemeral goods such as the food served at a feast 'live on in the form of the social relations they produce'. He sees consumption as 'the appropriation of objects as part of one's *personalia* – food eaten at a feast, clothes worn, houses lived in'. Be that as it may, in the Saribas Iban case we must make a distinction between the materiality of television sets and that of

ephemeral goods. As I argue in detail in the following chapter, television is having an enormous impact on the organisation of time and space in the more economically advanced Saribas longhouses, while foodstuffs and beverages of European origin (e.g. French liquors) readily fit into existing temporal and spatial structures.

A second option available to rural families is to keep the old television set at hand. Some families store them away in the loft (*sadau*), others in the main living area of the *bilik*. As the following case study shows, a long acquaintance with the obsolescence of modern technology, together with influences arriving from the urban areas, is gradually allowing some television sets to inch their way into the new category of 'collectibles' (*koleksi*).

Household G. Three generations share this wealthy *bilik*. Indai Rita, 33, is married with two children. Her husband works as a well-paid lorry driver along the logging tracks of the interior. Her sister, 30, also has two children and is married to a laboratory technician who lives in a small town a four-hour drive away. Their father, Emmerson, 56, is a retired policeman. He joined the Police Field Force in 1963, the year Sarawak joined Malaysia, and was soon involved in skirmishes with the Indonesian army along the border. In the 1970s he took part in anti-communist operations in the Rejang and in 1983 he fought off Ilanun pirates who were raiding Sabah from bases in the Southern Philippines. Transferred back to his native Saribas in 1996, he was promoted from corporal to sergeant before retiring. These days he looks after a large pepper garden with his wife, a profitable activity owing to prevailing high market prices.

They first acquired a television in the late 1970s, a black-and-white model Emmerson bought while he was based in the divisional HQ which they brought back to the longhouse in 1996 as a 'collectible'. It is now gathering dust at the far end of the *bilik*, next to their family heirlooms. 'It's part of our collection (M. *koleksi*)' says Indai Rita, laughing, 'Who knows, one day it may fetch a high price as an antique!'. The television they currently use, a 16' colour Singer, was hire-purchased by Indai Rita's sister for over RM 1000 in the late 1980s. 'It's an old Malaysian model. Nowadays there are lots of models to choose from: Panasonic, Fischer, Toshiba, you name it...I reckon the one at Beng's coffee-shop [in Betong] is at least 36 inches. Now the screen at the laser-disc shop⁸, that's even bigger'. The family have built a small house by the pepper garden where Emmerson spends most of his time. There he has a 20' colour Toshiba he hire-purchased in the mid-1980s in Betong.

This case study brings us to two closely related problems: contemporary Iban identity and temporality. First, it captures the long-term repercussions of one of

⁸ These micro-cinemas became popular with young people across Sarawak in the 1990s. The state-controlled press have repeatedly denounced the screening of illegal pornographic films and their misuse for lewd purposes.

the few career avenues open to young Iban men after independence in 1963: the security forces. Many Iban families were built 'on the move' as the head of the household was posted to different Sarawak localities in accordance to the security needs of the new nation. For both parents and offspring, the construction of a sense of self and family took place alongside the army's construction of a united Malaysia. Commodities played, and still play, an important part in this parallel process of family- and nation-building. Indai Rita enjoys demonstrating her technical sophistication through a code consisting of the television's size, price, and brand. In doing so she is indirectly proving her competence in matters modern as well as her family's urban credentials. Indai Rita is well aware of her cultural ambiguity as a young, formerly urban woman now living in a longhouse. Often during our frequent conversations in the longhouse gallery, she would pepper her remarks with English and Malay terms and laugh at the odd juxtapositions created. She was particularly fond of ironies and wordplays involving both rural/Iban and urban/Western notions.

Indai Rita's remark about their old TV set being part of their *koleksi* (a Malay term few rural Iban would use) of family heirlooms made us laugh because it was an insightful way of bridging two distinct classes of things (traditional heirlooms vs. modern goods) by means of a single, non-Iban word. After all, humour and insight alike are based on the meaningful reunion of two disparate items of common knowledge. Miller (1994: 396) argues that through artefacts 'we give form to, and come to an understanding of, ourselves, others, or abstractions such as the notion of the modern'. In an indirect way, Indai Rita tries to understand the modern by joking about the historical process whereby some items from the class 'new things' (*utai baru*) may come to be considered 'old things' (*utai lama*). There are a number of historical precedents. For instance, shotguns and rifles, known as *senampang* (orig. Dutch *snaphaan*) have been treasured as family heirlooms (*pesaka*) for over a century now.

Another intriguing dimension of this case study is the relationship between

narrative and the materiality of television. Hoskins (1998: 3-5) has explored the social significance of objects for the Kodi of Sumba, Eastern Indonesia. She found that Kodi storytellers use certain objects as autobiographical cornerstones, as an indirect way of talking about themselves. For instance, a lonely young woman informant loved telling the story of a magic spindle that in the end snared her lover. Through metaphor-rich stories such as this, Kodi men and women can explore the gender dualities that prevail across their culture. Their ideology idealises the combination of male and female in a myriad expressions, from the 'Great Mother, Great Father' Creator to minor spirits (1998: 17). Hence Kodi storytellers, in Hoskins' interpretation, feel incomplete unless they have achieved narrative closure by balancing the gendered attributes of the story. In other words, the teller's counterpart is an indispensable element of the story's ending.

In Chapter 6 I study the striking parallels between Kodi and Iban religious notions of a double-gendered Creator, now incorporated through prayer books into a Christianised Iban pantheon. Here I wish to suggest a different application of Hoskins' argument: the chief 'narrative closure' Saribas Iban have been struggling to achieve ever since the pacification of the region in 1860 is not related to gender but to achieving a balance between traditional versus modern 'things' (*utai*, e.g. rice plants vs. rubber trees), practices (e.g. storytelling vs. reading books) and institutions (e.g. local *adat* vs. Christianity). In 1909 a Saribas leader named Budin pioneered the large-scale cultivation of rubber. However, many pagans were inhibited by the belief that the spirit of rubber trees would kill or drive away the 'spirit' (*semengat*) of their *padi*. In fact, some areas were swept by 'rubber panics' as people destroyed their trees to protect their rice farms (Kedit 1993: 108). Most Christian converts had no such qualms (Pringle 1970: 203). The upshot was two decades of unparalleled prosperity in the Saribas linked to the worldwide rubber boom, although 'pockets of conservatism' prevented the wealth from spreading to all tributaries (Sather 1994: 72). In the Paku tributary, the wealth from rubber and later pepper was used to build solid ironwood longhouses, purchase heirlooms, and revitalise traditional feasts to

honour dead heroes (*Gawai Antu*). This newfound wealth also helped to finance the mission education of the young as well as trade ventures (1994: 69-72). New and old objects were fruitfully combined to bring renown to leading Saribas men and their families. A provisional narrative closure was achieved, namely the harmonious balance of old and new materials that kept the Saribas country 'cool' (*chelap*, i.e. peaceful) and prosperous⁹. The spirit of the age is best captured in the proud recollections of the late Paku-Saribas ethnohistorian, Benedict Sandin, of his home river during the First World War:

When I was still young, rubber was paid for mostly in dollar coins. In fact, the Iban were partly responsible for silver coins being withdrawn from circulation. This happened after Mr Hardie saw hundreds and hundreds of silver dollars being used by Iban women to decorate their skirts during the Gawai Antu festival of my father's eldest brother, T.R. [Headman] Uyut of Tanjong longhouse in 1917. After that he made a report to the Sarawak Government recommending the withdrawal of silver coinage (in Sather 1994: 71).

Well before the arrival of the Europeans, Iban and other Dayaks had developed a sophisticated trade system in alliance with Chinese merchants based on the export of jungle products in exchange for textiles and ceramics (Cleary and Eaton 1995: 36). It is unlikely, however, that 15th century Dayak groups were aware of, say, the important role 'the birds' nests they sold to intermediaries... played in Chinese medical and culinary practice' (Appadurai 1986: 42). On the contrary, it is likely that these Dayaks developed 'specialized mythologies' (1986: 48) to explain the significance of commodities whose ultimate destination they knew little about. When the physical and cultural distance between producers and consumers is vast, knowledge about the commodity flow is partial and contradictory (1986: 48, 56). The 'rubber panics' that swept the Saribas and other areas of Sarawak were an historically decisive instance of such a specialized mythology. They were the result of failed attempts by pagans at incorporating an

⁹ As Jensen (1974: 104) has remarked, the principle of balance 'lies at the centre of Iban thought'. King (1976:48- 49) calls it 'the equality of opposites'. Among the Iban, unlike other societies, there is 'no predominant or privileged alternative between, for example, right or left or male and female'. In the Iban cognatic system, adds King, 'there is some concordance between the social and symbolic contexts..., a concordance based on balance and [e]quality, rather than on the structured inequality of prescriptive alliance systems'.

alien export commodity into a system of thought and exchange based on the cultivation of rice. What was extraordinary about the leading Saribas families in the 1910s and 1920s is that they were able to transcend this parochial mythology. They did it thanks to the confluence of three favourable circumstances: (a) many community leaders had led trading expeditions to Singapore, Sumatra and beyond before the arrival of rubber and were therefore acquainted with inter-island trade practices (Sather 1994:70), (b) many had converted to Christianity whose agents promoted the pursuit of 'modern' economic activities (Pringle 1970: 203) and (c) the worldwide demand for rubber remained strong all through the first two decades of the century, especially during the First World War (Cleary and Eaton 1995: 79).

After the rubber market collapse of the 1930s, the Saribas never recovered that momentum of economic and cultural growth. The Sarawak economy, like that of other Bornean states, has remained dependent on a few primary products and resource-based enclaves of economic activity (notably Miri, Bintulu, Sibu) far from the Saribas. The 'resource frontier' nature of the Bornean states during the European era has only become more accentuated since independence. The economic and spatial marginality of Borneo with respect to Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur is replicated on a smaller scale by the growing gap in infrastructure, investment and growth between urban and rural areas within Sarawak (Cleary and Eaton 1995: 169) and between the Iban and other ethnic groups (Jawan 1994: 186). A third specialized myth grew out of these conditions of urban-led development in the 1960s, namely the belief that radio sets may be causing Iban longhouses to 'heat up' (*nyadi angat*) and go up in flames. This belief, which at least one Iban broadcaster and author (Ejau 1964: 21) fought to eradicate, was again a failed attempt at integrating a new commodity into a pagan system of thought. It is likely that it came about through logical deduction. 1. Before we had radio, reports of burnt-down longhouses were rare. 2. Now that we have radio they are frequent. 3. Therefore radio sets are somehow upsetting the state of ritual well-being of longhouses, that is their 'coolness' (*chelap*), making them

spiritually 'hot' (*angaf*) and prone to fires and other misfortunes (see Chapter 6). Today's Saribas Iban residents feel left out of the rapid development they have witnessed in other parts of Sarawak and watched routinely on television. At the same time, the early 20th century Saribas elite ideology of achieving a synthesis of old and new is still a cultural ideal that is most visibly displayed in the longhouse material culture during the yearly Gawai Dayak celebrations, when giant radio-cassette players blast Malay and Iban pop hits to a backdrop of Dayak decorative motifs and ceremonial dresses. The ideal is also expressed when explaining the success of certain Iban businessmen and politicians. For instance, Sarawak's Deputy Chief Minister, Dr Alfred Jabu, a Saribas Iban timber and plantation tycoon, is said to have reached the summit through a combination of magical powers derived from dreams and charms (*pengaruh*) and a modern education furthered in the semi-mythical 'land of the white people'¹⁰ (*menua urang putih*). In turn, Jabu is both a patron of the (Saribas) Iban arts and folklore and an ardent modernist who uses the Iban-language radio service to propagate his synthetic worldview (and bolster his power-base in the process).

A third television disposal method is what we might call 'non-disposal', or a 'stand-by position'. In poor Saribas longhouses which have suffered the ravages of a depressed rubber market and consequent outmigration of the younger population, it is common to find television sets that ceased to work many years previously still taking pride of place in a quiet *bilik*. Usually they are covered with a cheap embroidered cloth awaiting the return of a young migrant who will, it is hoped, see to it that it is repaired. This event may take years to materialize, if it does occur at all. It is one thing to acquire a television set or refrigerator in an urban area. Quite another problem is to have them repaired when they break down and the only person left in the *bilik* is, say, an elderly woman. In poor communities devoted to farming and some occasional low-yielding rubber tapping, the attitude of the largely elderly population is one of having to 'make-do'

¹⁰ Dr. Jabu completed his formal education at a university in New Zealand.

with whatever resources are available at the time.

This chapter opened with the fourth available socially-regulated path, namely the disposal of the television set at the grave:

Household I. Indai Luta is a wet rice farmer and housewife in her mid-forties. She is married with three adolescent children. Her husband is a driver with the local bus company. In the mid-1980s he hire-purchased their first television set, a RM 400 (new) black-and-white Japanese model, at Chan's. Every month RM 30 to 50 would be deducted from his salary. A decade later, Indai Luta's mother '...took it [to the Afterlife] with her. She used to enjoy watching TV...We Iban have many kinds of heirlooms: jars, shallow gongs, deep gongs, old china plates...But nowadays there aren't any old things left so we give them TVs. You see, things wear out all the time, so we give them away [i.e. to the dead person]. It's a shame to throw things away when people die. So we gave [our TV] to the deceased because she still wanted to watch it. Sometimes people dream [of the dead]; that means they're searching [for personal belongings they left behind]. The more you pity the dead, the more things you let them take with them'. Some time after Indai Luta's mother died, they hire-purchased a new television set, once again at Chan's. This one was a new 14' colour Panasonic paid in monthly instalments of RM 50 for a total of RM 1200.

Household J. With 16 souls, this is by far the largest *bilik*-family in the longhouse. Apai Laka, 47, is a construction worker. He lives with his wife, 26, their three children, his mother-in-law, his wife's seven siblings and their three offspring in a rather small *bilik*. Apai Laka's father-in-law bought the family's first television in 1983, a colour model with a dangerous propensity to heat up ('*ka angus*'). In 1987 he decided to replace it with another colour television. He remained a keen viewer for many years. Unfortunately in 1997 he was taken seriously ill. Some blamed it on an evil spirit, others on poisoning, still others mentioned the word cancer (*kenser*). He died in a Kuching hospital and was brought back to the longhouse for a syncretistic funeral. His family have at present no functioning television, for 'the deceased took it with him' (*udah dibai urang mati*) to the afterlife. With 16 mouths to feed, Apai Laka can ill afford the RM 100 needed to repair the old set.

We can now retake the questions that opened this chapter. Why destroy a valuable television set? Is that not an irrational act, a waste of precious technological resources? After all, the survey results I present earlier in the chapter show an undisputed preference for television, whose purchase requires a considerable financial sacrifice for most Saribas families. Part of the answer is contained in Indai Luta's explanation: the dead will come back to search for their goods unless their relations 'pity them' (*sinu ka sida*) at the burial. Despite a long period of missionary activities and the proven advantages of a Christian education, Saribas Iban are notably sceptical about the efficacy of purely Christian practices. Anglican priests from other Iban areas of Sarawak have

decried for generations the obstinate unwillingness of Saribas Iban to overcome their 'pagan fears', in particular the fear of spirits (*antu*). As one priest put it to me, punning on the Malay word for democracy: 'Saribas Iban live in an *antukrasi*, not a *demokrasi* (cf. Jalie's 1971 morality novella mentioned in chapter 2).

To fully answer the question, we have to examine critically the expression 'valuable television set'. Valuable for whom? In what context? At which stage in the life of the person and the object? A narrowly utilitarian answer would miss the point of why such goods should matter to the dead – and, more importantly, to the living. They matter to both the living and the dead only if they have become 'biographical objects' (Hoskins 1998), that is objects with which the dead had made sense of their lives, as we saw earlier in the way Indai Rita explored her own past through the attributes of the television sets her family had owned. Television sets, unlike family heirlooms, were not purchased to transcend the mortality of their users. They were not purchased either to accompany them to the afterlife, yet some sets do become so closely associated with the life of a person that they enter an irreversible state of 'decommodification' (Kopytoff 1986:65) as part of a set of grave goods (*baya'*) that will eventually achieve immortality. Commodities, we said earlier, following Appadurai (1986: 13) are 'things in a certain situation'. Thus in most societies women reach the peak of their commoditization at marriage, while paintings do so during an auction (1986: 15) . Television sets smashed up at an Iban burial have reached the lowest point of their monetary value as worldly commodities, and yet they are at their highest level of value in terms of the exchange system binding the dead and the living. This conflict between two bordering exchange systems is, of course, accentuated when the television set is still in good working order. In such cases, the 'degree of value coherence' (1986: 15) is high: it is valuable for both the living and the dead.

The nature of television does not make it an ideal grave good, especially in crowded *bilik*-families with stretched financial resources. As we shall see in the

following chapter, watching television is a deeply social event in a Saribas Iban longhouse. It is the main technological support (with electricity) of a new, *bilik*-based form of evening sociality. By contrast, radio, although often also a communal medium in the longhouse gallery or farm hut, is less problematic an afterlife-bound artefact, for its small size and low weight allow for its lifelong association with a certain individual carrier. Furthermore, its low cost relative to television minimizes the economic loss to those who have survived the deceased. In a word, radio sets make less problematic grave goods. Indeed their sad broken entrails are a common sight at Saribas Iban graveyards¹¹.

Summary and conclusion

It should be clear by now that Saribas Iban television sets and other media artefacts are complexly involved in a web of social and economic relations. In this chapter I have concentrated on the value of television sets through the complex, regulated paths of exchange revealed by a biographical approach to artefacts in ten households. I have had little to say, for instance, about the revolutionary impact upon the organisation of longhouse social time and space wrought by television, for this is the subject of Chapter 4, or about the aesthetics of this commodity. Television sets are expensive commodities that require socially negotiated routes of entry into and exit from the domestic sphere. Saribas Iban have established over the years three main entry routes: television sets have crossed the home's threshold as either gifts from wealthier relations, as local hire-purchases or as cash purchases in an urban area. Television is a much valued commodity, yet at times of hardship it can be dispensed with. The poorer *bilik*-families either do not own a set or own one which is unusable. The biographical approach allowed us to illustrate this important distinction between television haves and have-nots. A correlation was established between income

¹¹ Another factor favouring their presence at graveyards is that radio sets have been bought and sold in rural Sarawak since the mid-1950s, while television sets only began to spread in the 1980s.

and form of purchase. Wealthy families generally made their modest fortunes while the head of the household (*tuai bilik*) or main earner was employed in the public or private sector far from the longhouse, often for a period of 10 years or longer. Their display of, and discourse about, advanced home technologies, including television, set them apart from poorer *bilik*-families whose own acquaintance with television is more recent and superficial. In this respect, television sets can confer status on their owners, in the Weberian sense of status as 'the positive or negative estimation of honour or prestige attributed to persons or groups' (Smith 1997: 447).

We should, however, fight the mesmerizing pull of television upon the analytical gaze and remember to occasionally train our minds on the less visible (and less visual) print media. Saribas Iban have long been convinced of the power of the print media first introduced by European missionaries. This conviction has remained intact all through the arrival and incorporation of more costly media such as radio, television, and videos. The utilitarian value of television is, to the Saribas Iban, radically different from that of the school textbook (*surat sekula*). The former may inform rural adults about the outside world, but parents hope it is the latter that will transform their children into knowledgeable and wealthy adults (see Chapter 5).

The second 'life crisis' of television sets studied above is the problem of how to dispose of these artefacts. Four exit routes were identified and analysed: some sets are given to poor relations as gifts, others are stored away or kept as semi-heirloom 'collectibles', others break down and remain on display in the *bilik*, and still others are taken to the graveyard and shattered by a member of the deceased's *bilik*. These alternative routes also revealed inter-familial disparities in wealth and a link between the way a set was acquired and disposed of. It is generally the gift-receivers whose sets remain unrepaired for long periods of time. Longhouses located far from the market town with a predominantly elderly population are strewn with broken television sets that still take pride of place in

the bare *bilik*. Correspondingly, longhouses such as Semak with many a three-generation *bilik*-family supported by at least one wage earner, abound in second- and third-generation television sets.

A television set is more problematic a grave good (*baya'*) than a radio. As an expensive commodity usually enjoyed by all age-groups within the *bilik*, the clash between two of the value frameworks listed above -- namely its market value versus its biographical value (to the deceased) -- can create tensions among family members. In the two case studies presented earlier, the survivors decided to sacrifice their television sets in exchange for the deceased's supernatural blessing. Thomas Lynch (1998: 14), the American poet, advises his readers to put their feet up, to 'call it a day' as soon as they die, 'and let the husband or the missus or the kids or a sibling decide whether you are to be buried or burned or blown out of a cannon or left to dry out in a ditch somewhere'. After all, 'the dead don't care'. This piece of advice would make little sense to Saribas Iban, for whom the dead care a great deal about the persons and things of this world¹².

¹² I do not wish to conclude on a crude 'Us-Them' (Geertz 1988) note. Many Europeans and North Americans would, I think, be repelled by Lynch's words -- a reaction that would probably please the poet. For example, a new ritual practice has been spreading across Romania since the Ceaucescu era. Many elderly peasants, concerned at the ritual ignorance of their children, have begun to carry out elaborate funeral rehearsals in which they even 'try on' the coffin. They also prefer to give away their personal belongings to passers-by (an old practice) *during their lifetimes* (an innovation) rather than entrust their unreliable survivors with this most critical task. The entrenched belief is that parting with their goods in this life will secure them a life of material abundance in the Afterworld. In this regard, not long ago the Romanian press reported the case of an elderly woman who murdered her inebriated husband after he had destroyed some of the goods she was preparing to give away (Prof. Vintila Mihailescu, personal communication, June 1999).

Chapter 4

Modern media and the organisation of time and space in Saribas Iban longhouses

...so following the wishes of the Dayak people, every first of June from the year 1965 onwards would be officially recognised as [Gawai Dayak Day]. Ever since that day our people has been on a par with other peoples, for all men to behold. Ever since there have been two days out of 365 in every year in which all other peoples have paid their respects to us, two days of public holiday.

An Iban native chief (*Pengulu*) to his followers, in Andria Ejau's (1968) morality novella *Batu Besundang* (my translation)¹.

There ain't no black in the Union Jack.

Gilroy (1987, quoted in Comaroff 1996: 163)

The anthropological problem of mediated time and space

In 1965, after years of lobbying², the Iban and other Dayaks achieved calendrical parity with the two dominant ethnic groups in Sarawak, namely the Malays and the Chinese. Calendrical visibility -- 'for all men to behold' -- meant, to the Dayak leaders, official recognition for their people's struggle to achieve an ethnic form of unity-in-modernity within the new Federation of Malaysia. It was not a struggle against the modern nation-state. On the contrary, it was a struggle to firmly embrace one of its central pillars: clock and calendar time.

Much of the current anthropological debate on the problem of time and space has

1 . '*...lalu diletak nitih ka pinta raban bansa Dayak kena Satu hari Bulan Enam genap taun berengkah ari taun 1965 suba. Nya alai bedudok ari nya, bansa kitai sama ayan enggau bansa bukai dipeda samoa mensia, bisi dua hari ari 365 hari dalam sataun, dibasa samoa bansa sereta dikediau ka Perintah dalam menoa tu*'.

² According to the Iban anthropologist Peter Kedit (personal communication, 28 May 1999), the Gawai Dayak bill was passed in September 1964, 'but the lobbying for Gawai special holidays for the Dayaks, was done in the 1950s: the colonial masters refused to give in to the requests/campaign started by Tra Zehnder in the Council Negri, it was left to the Ningkan government to legislate it'.

taken an inward-looking, academocentric turn, paradoxically out of touch and step with the revolutionary changes in the social organisation of time and space that are transforming the world, many of which are a product of new information and communication technologies. Four examples will illustrate this point:

1. Fabian's celebrated *Time and the Other* is partly to blame. In this cogent historical critique of the way in which anthropologists have distanced themselves from their objects of study, Fabian (1983: 31) refers to the 'persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse', a professional malpractice he calls 'denial of coevalness'. Unfortunately he offers little ethnographic evidence to support a viable alternative to the study of non-western ideas and practices related to the organisation and perception of time and space, nor does he discuss 20th century economic and technological changes around the world.

2. More recently, Adam (1994: 503) has argued that there are 'virtually no time specialists in anthropology'. In her view, two factors complicate the numerous isolated studies already conducted into systems of time-reckoning in various societies and into the cross-cultural perception and organisation of time. First, time is an integral part of the lives of both researchers and researched. Second, despite its ubiquity, 'time is curiously invisible and constitutes one of the most taken-for-granted features of our lives'. Adam is not interested in contrasting 'Western time' with non-western times. Instead, she sets out to problematise what she sees as the stereotypical backdrop of 'Western time' prevalent in anthropology since its early professional days. Thus Evans-Pritchard's (1940) study of Nuer time and Whorf's (1956) study of Hopi cosmology represent 'Western time' as a residual category characterized by 'abstract, spatialized quantity that is divisible into single units; as a two-dimensional, linear, directional flow or succession of constant rate that extends from the past to the future (or vice versa); and as something that passes or can be saved, sold or wasted'. Adam (1994: 509) then explores the complexity of everyday

perceptions of time in 'our society' [sic], concluding that the existence of an international network of standardized time 'does not obliterate the rich sources of local, idiosyncratic and context-dependent time-awareness that are rooted in the social and organic rhythms of everyday life'. Again, nothing is said here about possible similarities and differences between 'our society' and other societies in relation to the new chronometric technologies.

3. Similarly, Hobart (1993) has taken Geertz to task for denying the Balinese both agency and a sense of history. In Geertz's account (1973: 393), Balinese calendars are 'clearly not durational but punctual...Their internal order has no significance, without climax. They do not accumulate, they do not build, and they are not consumed'. According to Hobart (1993: 4), this interpretation deemphasizes the importance of the Balinese solar-lunar *saka* calendar, and the fact that Balinese people use well-known events such as volcanic eruptions, wars or plagues to single out periods between events. More importantly, by basing his analysis on his own reading of formal calendars, Geertz is assuming that there is 'a meaning which may be extrapolated without regard to the understandings and purposes of the agents and the subjects of actions' (1993: 4). Although I sympathise with his post-interpretive approach, Hobart expends too much energy on revealing Western academic presuppositions about time as a 'linear and irreversible' reality and not enough on more pressing actualities. For instance, on the use by the Indonesian state of precisely such 'linear and irreversible' clock and calendar time notions, practices and media (e.g. textbooks, radio, television, *wayang*) to spread and consolidate its rule over the Archipelago. Take the following mid-1970s statement by one of Soeharto's New Order scholars on the ills of Javanese peasants:

...irrationality, work methods which ignore economic criteria, dependence on one's family due to [a] lack of self-confidence, a low valuation on time, working without a plan, absence of an orientation towards the future, an avoidance of directness which obstructs communication and so on (Wibisono 1975: 59)

What solution does the Indonesian scholar propose? To train more puppeteers who can convey developmentalist messages to the rural masses through the pre-modern

medium of *wayang* (shadow puppet theatre). Second, Hobart fails to discuss the use of standard clock and calendar time by ordinary Balinese and other Indonesians in addition to, and/or competition with, indigenous systems of time-reckoning.

4. Finally, Gingrich (1994: 169) argues that non-western conceptions of time and space are not abstract but 'concretely embedded within the totality of sociocultural cosmovision'. Building on his fieldwork among the Munebbih, 'a tribe of mountain peasants in north-western Yemen', he contrasts the written almanacs of urban Arabs with the 'orally transmitted star calendar of the Munebbih'. The former are of no use in the tribal society whose calendar is 'fragmentary, irregular and interrupted'. Among the Munebbih, 'the experience of time is deeply rooted in bodies and emotions' (1994: 175). Thus during the unnamed period between the time-span of the white stars and that of the black (firmament) stars, people experience private feelings of insecurity, danger and lurking evil -- it is, in Gingrich's inspired phrase, 'the social time of silent fears' (1994:173). Again, there is no adequate consideration here of the role of the nation-state in the everyday and ritual life of the localities studied. Are the Munebbih magically exempted from the moral-temporal order imposed by the Yemeni state? Have they somehow managed to preserve their 'social time of silent fears' entirely separate from the various social times imposed by the school system, public administration, army and economy? Is their experience of time so 'deeply rooted in bodies and emotions' that it cannot be touched by the transnational and national mass media and their calendrical programming? The truth is

[t]here is no fairyland where people experience time in a way that is markedly unlike the way in which we do ourselves, where there is no past, present and future, where time stands still, or chases its own tail, or swings back and forth like a pendulum. All these possibilities have been seriously touted in the literature on the anthropology of time...but they are all travesties, engendered in the process of scholarly reflection (Gell 1992: 315, see also Munn 1992)

In a comprehensive survey of anthropological works on the mass media, Spitulnik (1993) concludes that one of the central questions still to be addressed by anthropologists is how these technologies may be structuring people's senses of

space and time. One of the three works on the 'mass mediation of concepts of time' she lists is Anderson's (1991 [1983]) influential *Imagined Communities*. Anderson (1991:23) describes the modern mind as having mastered 'clock and calendar time'. From the 18th century onwards, Europeans made use of novels and newspapers to imagine the modern community of the nation-state. This use spread to other regions in subsequent centuries. From Mexico to the Philippines and Indonesia, nationalist leaders and novelists conceived their nations as steadily marching along history, while the rapid obsolescence of newspapers made possible the 'extraordinary mass ceremony' of their simultaneous consumption across the nation's literate quarters.

The extract from Andria Ejau's (1968) morality novella that opens this chapter is premised on the same modern notion of a steady march along history, albeit at the subnational level of the newly created 'Dayak people' who can now metaphorically walk abreast of the two hegemonic Sarawak peoples. In this chapter I study not rural Iban resistance or alternatives to a stereotypical 'Western time' and its supporting media -- watches, television, radio, public-address systems, etc. -- but rather *some of the bewildering variety of local media-related practices structured through clock and calendar time*. The aim is to demonstrate through ethnographic examples that there is no essential, pre-modern 'Iban time' lurking behind the seeming ubiquity of clock and calendar time. Rather coeval Iban in the late 1990s structure most of their activities through clock and calendar time, more specifically through their supporting media, especially radio, television, wristwatches and public-address systems.

The chapter is divided into two sections. In the first one I explore the day-to-day use of various media among Saribas Iban women, men and children, focussing on what I will call the 'chronographic' or time-explicit dimensions of radio, television, textbooks and other commonly used media. In the second I try to ethnographically sharpen the blunted edge of the term 'ritual' through the detailed analysis of a Gawai Dayak festival I videotaped in a Saribas longhouse, arguing that the festival was not a ritual in the strict, religious sense of the term, but rather a boisterous celebration of

modern Time with an inbuilt promise: that inter-ethnic coevalness will one day bring inter-ethnic equality.

1. Media in the daily life of Saribas Iban

New information technologies are not immediately assimilated into the domestic sphere. Their incorporation may demand a great deal of adjusting and negotiating among family members, for particular technologies may clash with the moral, spatial and temporal structuration of the family group (Silverstone and Hirsch 1994:1-11). Thus in Australia radio was seen at first, in the 1920s, as an intrusive guest for its 'timetabled family activities and challenged domestic rituals'. Over the years it was gradually naturalised, helping to normalise a regimentation of time and space demanded by the new industrial order (Johnson 1981: 167).

Saribas Iban have listened to the radio on a regular basis since the 1950s. To understand its naturalization over the decades we need to recall its early days. In the previous chapter Aki Nyaru, aged 58, then a 'leading coolie' in the divisional capital and the first person at Semak Longhouse to own a wireless receiver, explained how an astonished woman went round the set in search of the invisible speaker, and how extremely popular his set was. This is how the wife of an official of the British Colonial Service described the arrival of radio in a remote Iban (then Dyak) longhouse in 1954.

There were some children playing at the landing-place of the long-house as we arrived. They greeted us and some of them ran off and told the headman or Tuai Rumah, an old friend called Garu...I had come up-river from Sibu, the Divisional capital, with Philip Daly, the Programme Director of Radio Sarawak who was on a trip to demonstrate wireless receivers to a community of Dyaks who were not familiar with them and to make recordings of their songs and stories...
...The orchestra sounded charming on the river bank and the ever-conscientious Philip and his engineer, Mr Chung, immediately set to work to take a recording. The Dyaks were very curious and it was a matter of some difficulty to explain to them exactly what was being done. The music was played back to them and this created great enthusiasm. Once they understood what was wanted they were extremely pleased with the idea and did everything possible to help.

This is typical of the Dyak mentality. Although a relatively backward and unsophisticated people they are quick to grasp new ideas (Morrison 1954: 390).

But how did Saribas Iban listeners integrate radio into their day-to-day lives in the early days, after the initial excitement had died down? For lack of hard ethnographic data, let us consult a well-placed Iban source: the rural officer, broadcaster and author Andria Ejau whose work I mentioned in chapter 2. In the extract that follows, taken from his novel *Dilah Tanah* (1964: 21) the residents of a remote longhouse have all gathered at the headman's section of the gallery (*ruai*) to settle a land dispute between a man called Biul and the resident shaman (*manang*). The community's only wireless has been turned on:

...Biul lalu deka bejako meda sida sama udah sampal datai.

'Anang guai dulu, agi mending ka berita menoa,' ko Enchelegi bini Manang Ula.

Sida sama bela jenoh, batok enda meh tau. Sida ke mit-mit bisik-isik di tisi pen dianu Ensingut. Berita menoa panjai lemai nya, lalu siti ari berita nya nusoi rumah panjai orang di Batang Kara Tunsang udah angus malam dulu...

...Realizing that everybody was there, Biul tried to address the gathering.

'Hang on, we're still listening to the news,' said Enchelegi, the wife of Shaman Ula.

Not a word could be heard, even coughing was forbidden. The little ones who were whispering on the fringes were promptly scolded by Ensingut. The news was unusually long that evening. One of the reports said that the longhouse at Batang Kara Tunsang had burnt down the night before....

In the early days of radio, when receivers were expensive, their reception poor, money rare, and news scarce owing to the difficulty and expense of transport, listening to this medium in rural Sarawak was a collective activity undertaken in the longhouse gallery (*ruai*). Listening etiquette was probably markedly stringent, and 'even coughing was forbidden'³. The same applies to television. A Westerner who knows the Iban well was shocked on a recent trip to Sarawak when an old Iban friend whom he had not seen in years ignored his attempts at conversing while an Indian film was being shown on television, in glaring breach of traditional norms of longhouse hospitality. In a parallel example, Pace (1993: 196) describes Gurupa, a

³ John K. Wilson, the energetic development officer introduced in the second chapter, played a pivotal role in spreading the new radio technologies in the Saratok area. In the mid-1950s, a grant from the Nuffield Foundation allowed him to purchase a number of radio telephone sets: "Through those radios, Saratok used to relay important messages to all [development] centres and to all longhouses at certain times each day. Indeed each day at ten thirty, everyone stopped what they were doing to come and listen in. Why not? There might be a message for them or for someone in their longhouse" (Wilson 1969: 163).

Brazilian community where television was still a novelty in the late 1980s and 'viewing etiquette' was characterized by a fixed collective gaze upon the screen, still bodies and the absence of talking. He recounts how on one occasion two distinguished guests from Sao Paulo where television had been widely available for several decades visited the mayor of Gurupa during prime-time. To the high-status visitors, 'television etiquette required no strict rules on silence, and they proceeded to converse throughout the programme'. Their hosts, however, were trapped in an 'uncomfortable bind' and responded with 'constant fidgeting in their seats, unable to watch television nor properly entertain their visitors'. Going back to the Iban anecdote, it appears that after all it was the Westerner who was breaching his host longhouse's newly established viewing etiquette!

Modern media and women's day-to-day life

Matters today are very different in Saribas from the 1950s. Radio sets are very common, with many *bilik*-families owning more than one set, and there are alternative sources of information available, notably television. Radio has long become an integral part of day-to-day life among Saribas Iban, especially women. As I explained in the previous chapter, there is a marked sexual division of labour in Saribas longhouses near the market town. At Semak Longhouse most men work as low-skilled labourers in the construction sector, for the Public Works Department (M. JKR), the bus company, and the police. By contrast, most women alternate farming with household chores. There is also a good proportion of children of school age, as well as of people over the age of 65 who seldom leave the longhouse.

Door 18⁴. Indai Michelle is in her 50s. She usually gets up at around 5 in the morning, prepares the family breakfast (coffee and rice or biscuits), cooks some more rice for lunch, sweeps the *bilik* and sees her grandchildren off to the nearby bus stop at 630. Soon afterwards she leaves for her paddy farm, taking her farming implements, a small radio and a pot with boiled rice and some greens or meat. At around noon she takes a lunch break in the farm hut (*langkau*) and listens to the midday radio programme (*Ngela Tengahari*) on RTM's Iban Section. She enjoys in particular the personal messages (*jaku pesan*). In the afternoon she farms again, returning to the longhouse at around five. Now that they have television they hardly ever listen to the radio in the

⁴ In this chapter I am assigning random 'door' (*pintu*) numbers to all *bilik*-families in order to facilitate the reader's cross-referencing (e.g. between doors no. 4 and no. 12 below).

evening. 'We no longer have any elders [at Semak Longhouse]', she says. 'In the old days people would chat in the gallery because there was nothing to see in the *bilik* (*laban nadai utai dipeda dalam bilik*)

Radio sets are today inexpensive and easily portable. Many Saribas Iban women either keep a small set in their farm hut or carry one with them in their farming baskets (*sintong*). Some have it on while they work in the fields, most during their lunch break in the hut. This extract also illuminates a fundamental change that began at Semak and other longhouses in the 1980s: the shift of evening social interaction from longhouse gallery to *bilik*. All human beings and societies construct their views of the past in the present (Adam 1994: 509). Indai Michelle looks back at the not-so-distant 1970s, when the longhouse gallery was still busy at night, and offers a presentist explanation for its current bareness: in those days 'there was nothing to see in the *bilik*'. I encountered this version of the past as the 'absence-of (*nada*) many a time in rural Sarawak. The past is portrayed as the time when they had no electricity, no piped water, no roads, no schools, and so on -- a not-yet-modern time (*bedau moden*). For instance, a Semak man in his 30s who is very fond of action videos told me that his grandparents were quite happy to attend shadow theatre performances (*wayang kulit*) because in the old days 'they didn't know any better' (*nadai nemu utai buka*). Another man in his 40s described the institution of *randau ruai* (evening gallery chats) as 'the entertainment of our ancestors' (*hiburan urang kelia*) in the days when there was no television *as yet* (*bedau bisi tibi*). But what distinguishes Indai Michelle from both men is not her presentist view of the past, but rather the fact that as a woman and a farmer, not a labourer, *it is radio that structures most of her daylight life*, while television viewing is reserved for the evening. The following case study brings this point out even more clearly:

Door 10. Indai Dora, 32, is a farmer and a housewife. She is married to the headman and has three children aged 8, 6 and 3. Every morning she rises to RTM's Iban Section. Her mother-in-law looks after her infant daughter when she is away farming. Indai Dora is a very keen radio listener. She usually listens to part of RTM's midday programme and to the 1 to 2 show on CATS, the new commercial station, while having lunch and cooling off in the farm hut. She enjoys the news, songs, and personal messages. Sometimes she listens to the Malay Section as well. After completing her farming work she returns to the longhouse at around 5 to look after her children and prepare supper. From 6 to 6.45 she listens to RTM Iban in the kitchen, including the news at 6.30 from Kuching and the debates. In her view, one recent improvement has been the opening up of the telephone lines to listeners who can now pass on urgent messages to their relations in remote longhouses or take part in debates of all kinds. 'The RTM people used to do

all the talking, they wouldn't let any outsiders [participate]. Now [the listeners] phone in every single day, it started this year, for example to talk about new longhouse projects (*Suba semina urang RTM bejaku, nadai urang ari luar. Diatu talipaun sida tiap-tiap hari, taun tu setak, baka buka line pasal projek rumah panjai*). In the evening Indai Dora watches TV with the rest of her *bilik*-family. Although there are more Iban radio programmes now than ever before, she thinks traditional songs are losing ground to pop songs and radio in general stands no chance against the advance of television.

Indai Dora's day-to-day life offers us a variation on the same theme of daytime radio vs. nighttime television structuring. Like other Saribas Iban women, she is keenly aware of the fairly varied yet predictable broadcasting schedule, and uses it to guide her farming and *bilik* chores. What struck me about Iban farmers in the early days of fieldwork was their their confident, matter-of-fact handling of clock time. I had expected to encounter a widespread vagueness about time of the sort one associates with Southeast Asians in general and peasants in particular, such as Indonesians' proverbial *waktu gumi* (literally, 'rubber time'). In stark contrast, Indai Michelle exemplifies a high degree of temporal structuring built upon what we might call the 'chronographic' dimension of radio and television. In addition to the linear (throughout the day) and cyclical (from day to day) guidance provided by these two media, she values simultaneity, that is the newly-found ability of broadcasters and listeners to partake in a debate (*randau*) or hear an important announcement at the same time from distant places. Simultaneity becomes more valuable during certain seasons, notably in the March-May period punctuated every year by the paddy harvest and subsequent build-up towards Gawai Dayak, the pan-Dayak festival of 31st May-1st June. At this critical period of work completion followed by celebration, knowing that others are, to paraphrase Anderson (1991: 23), steadily marching along the same path, is a reassuring feeling.

Finally, besides structuring women's day-to-day lives and synchronising them with that of other women, men and children (both locally and throughout Sarawak) radio provides listeners with a source of autobiographical and historical reflexion, for instance on the fate of Iban traditions as pop music gains airtime and television attracts ever-larger audiences. A third case study draws our attention to yet another temporal dimension structured by radio and television: national calendrical time:

Door 20. Indai Martina, 23, is a housewife. She is married to a bricklayer and has two young children whose care prevents her from doing farming work. She listens to Iban radio several times a day, roughly from 7 to 9 am, from 12 to 2 pm and from 6 to 7 pm, mostly in her *bilik*. However in the middle hours of the day, when the sun-beaten zinc roof makes the stifling *bilik* air unbearably hot, she joins other women and elderly residents in the cooler gallery. Leaving the door open, she can still listen to the radio from there while she knits or sews and her children sleep in their hanging cots. Her favourite programmes are *Selamat Pagi Malaysia* (Good Morning Malaysia), the news, songs and the weekly Iban folk stories (*peringat tua*). In the evening she watches television with her 8-strong *bilik*-family, including her husband and parents-in-law. She enjoys the news and the commercials. They usually turn off the television at around 9.30 and go to sleep.

When people talk about their favourite programmes, they are not simply telling us about their personalities and cultural influences (see chapter 5); they are also talking about how they structure their day-to-day social time and space, and about a specific articulation between personal, local, and national time-space. *Selamat Pagi Malaysia*, like *Good Morning America* and its other overseas precursors, addresses the whole nation simultaneously, morning after morning, in the national language, with a combination of 'information' and 'entertainment' -- what some Kuching producers define as 'infotainment'. Below I expand on this calendrical function with reference to both television and radio.

A second aspect emerging from Indai Martina's media-related practices is the combined effect of four post-War technologies upon the longhouse 'soundscape', namely corrugated iron roofs, radio, electricity and television. The replacement of leaf-thatched roofs (*atap daun*) made of local materials with mass-produced corrugated iron roofs has had the unintended side-effect of making the longhouse hotter, leading to the routine afternoon migration of people from *bilik* to gallery to escape the oppressive heat -- a shift which mirrors the impact of electricity and television upon evening patterns of spatial use in the opposite direction, that is from gallery to *bilik*. In addition the sound emanating from *bilik* radios onto the shared gallery has altered the afternoon soundscape. Some sections of the gallery are fairly quiet, particularly at peak farming periods, for they correspond to *bilik* whose women spend their afternoons on the farm. Others are loud, especially when two or three women have their radios on. Writing about Gerai Dayak longhouses in the

Indonesian province of Kalimantan Barat, Helliwell (1993:51) argues that the permeability of the partitions between neighbouring family rooms (*lawang*) allows 'an almost unimpeded flow of both sound and light between all the apartments that together constitute a longhouse'. The Gerai Dayak longhouse, she adds, is a 'community of voices'. Gerai voices 'flow in a longhouse in a most extraordinary fashion; moving up and down its length in seeming monologue, they are in fact in continual dialogue with listeners who may be unseen, but are always present. As such they create, more than does any other facet of longhouse life, a sense of community'.

In Saribas Iban longhouses walls are also thin and permeable to the human voice, yet during the day another familiar strand is woven into the invisible fabric that crosses through the thin walls and along the gallery: the voices and music from the radio. Together they web a distinctive kind of temporality, the here-and-now of a hot, sleepy longhouse in the middle hours of the day (*ngela tengahari*). In the evening, this *ruai*-based community of mediated and unmediated sounds moves back to the *bilik*, where it disperses into clusters of loud electronic sounds and flickering lights that allow for little inter-*bilik* communication.

A man-made, commodified time

Now to men's labour-dependent activities. If most women structure their days with radio, men's days are already pre-structured by the demands of an inflexible workplace. The following example illustrates, perhaps in an extreme form, the contrast between men and women:

Door 4. Apai Ross is a policeman in his early 50s. His wife and daughter-in-law work together on a low-lying paddy farm (*umai tanjong*) by the Saribas river. He met his wife in the Kuching area and was then posted to Sri Aman where their three children were born. In 1987 they moved into Semak Longhouse to prepare for the following year's major bardic ritual, *Gawai Antu*. They have lived in the area ever since, for the past few years in a detached brick house they built opposite the longhouse. Apai Ross works in shifts (*sip*), either on Shift A (from 7 am to 3 pm), Shift B (from 3 pm to 11 pm) or on Shift C (from 11 pm to 7 am). He has one day off a week. In the office he sometimes listens to Malay-language broadcasts and checks the football results in the

Malay papers. If he is not working in the evening he will usually stay at home listening to the radio. Most evenings his teenage son and daughter watch television at a cousin's *bilik* in the longhouse (door 12, see below). It is Apai Ross' own television but they cannot watch it at home because they have yet to be supplied with electricity. Occasionally he will join his wife, children and cousins at door 12. At other times he watches television with his sister who lives fifteen doors downriver. Either way a glass or two of distilled rice wine (*chap langkau*) are always good to relax (E. *rile*).

Where women's daily, seasonal and yearly cycles are structured primarily through practices related to subsistence farming, those of men are structured through the waged workplace. Apai Ross's shift-based schedule is a non-natural application of clock and calendar time to the organisation of labour -- it knows no seasons. By contrast, his wife's annual organisation of farming work is seasonal, following the cycle of wet and dry seasons (*maia landas* and *kemarau*). Moores (1986, in Morley 1992: 258) maintains that radio brought the 'domestication of standard national time' to families around the world. This excerpt shows how in the Saribas Iban case, this point is far more relevant to women's apprehension of clock and calendar time through radio than to men's utter dependency on the rigid temporal demands of the workplace, in which radio does not play a central role. Radio does not merely produce and reproduce an imagined national community, it also helps women coordinate their freelance activities with those of their men and children whose day-to-day life is organised for them by their institutions. In other words, it sustains the social organisation of a far-from-imagined local community over time and space. It is only in the evening that standard national time is jointly 'domesticated' in the family *bilik* by stable clusters of television viewers drawn from all four socio-economic segments of the longhouse population (men, women, children and the elderly), as in the following case study:

Door 11. Apai Juna, 43, has been a local bus conductor for 18 years. His wife is a farmer and a housewife. He works six days a week, including Sundays. He rises at 5.30 and leaves for work at 6 as the first Iban programme comes on the radio. At 11.30 he returns from the market town bringing greens or fish to supplement their lunch. If his wife is away farming, he eats with his elderly father. At 12.30 he goes back to work. The last bus (Ib. *lasbas*) he inspects departs at 3.20 pm and returns to town over an hour later. Occasionally he will listen to the news at 7 on the Iban Section. Apai Juna used to be a keen radio listener as a young man. He was particularly fond of traditional Iban oral and musical genres (incl. *ensera*, *entelah*, *mengap* and *renong*), even if often he could not grasp their 'deep meaning' (*jaku dalam*). Nowadays he prefers television, especially the 8 o'clock evening news on the first channel, which he watches with his father, wife and children. The institution of *randau ruai* (evening chats in the gallery) was the only form of entertainment available to Iban in the old days (*hiburan urang kelia*), he says. Today they

can enjoy watching people from other countries (*rindu meda urang ari menua tasik*).

Moore (1988:35) maintains that capitalism 'tabled' time, dividing weeks and days into 'units of work and leisure'. In the context of rural Iban representations, this division is captured verbally in the spread of two standard Malay words into everyday Iban: *kerja* (work) and *hiburan* (entertainment). *Kerja* is normally used to signify waged employment as opposed to unwaged activities within the longhouse sphere, all labelled *pengawa'*, including ritual and farming practices. It is therefore a term more commonly associated with men. *Hiburan* was often used by informants when I asked them about their reasons for watching television or about their favourite programmes. Apai Juna's above usage of *hiburan* is interesting in its dual temporality: on the one hand, it charts out the daily and weekly stretch of time-space when he is free from work commitments and able to watch television, on the other it separates him and his generation from the material lacks of previous generations, a view of history I earlier termed 'presentism'. At electrified Saribas longhouses, the *bilik*-family's central marker and conveyor of *hiburan* is television. Echoing the etymological roots of this medium (lit. 'vision from afar'), Apai Juna and many other Saribas Iban I talked to often explained their interest in television by explaining that it enables them *to see people in distant countries*, especially white people, deemed far more modern and wealthy than the Iban (see chapter 5). Television therefore allows them not only to 'broaden their horizons' but also to see the future. At the local level television compresses the time-space paths of Saribas Iban by fomenting the clustering of social life away from the gallery and into family *biliks* every evening at around 8 o'clock. At the cognitive level, by contrast, it *expands* those paths by imaginatively transporting viewers to distant lands and times. The two levels are routinely naturalized in bodily movement, conversation and play.

Games Saribas Iban children play

In addition to the *bilik*-family and the longhouse, a third organization contributes to the naturalization of clock and calendar time among Saribas Iban: the school.

[L]ike all disciplinary organizations, schools operate with a precise economy of time. It is surely right to trace the origins of school discipline in some part to the regulation of time and space which a generalized transition to 'clock time' makes possible. The point is not that the widespread use of clocks makes for exact divisions of the day; it is that time enters into the calculative application of administrative authority (Giddens 1984: 135).

In Malaysian schools pupils always stand up and pay their respects to the teacher before and after every lesson. This is one of many daily practices through which a sense of clock time is literally 'embodied' by the learners. All everyday activities -- washing, drinking, eating, learning, urinating, playing -- are coordinated by the clock -- there is 'a time and a place for everything'. In addition, the textbook-dominated teaching-learning process provides the teachers and pupils with a calendrical device akin to women's radio programmes, albeit a more abstract and standard one, fully independent from the natural cycles that regulate the cultivation of rice. In Foucauldian terms, morality among the ancient Greeks

was an art of the 'right time' and this right time demanded consideration of age (body time), the time of the seasons, dietary regulations and the passage of day and night...An entirely different conception of time (our own) occurs in societies of the modern era and, as with space, it is linked with disciplinary practices. Activities become precisely controlled in terms of measured intervals in army drill, in factories, in schools and places of correction. Time is to be added up and capitalized. Disciplinary power is articulated on to a particular time corresponding to its usage of space (Tilley 1990: 112).

How do Saribas Iban children structure their 'free time' after school hours? What do they consider to be satisfying sources of *hiburan* (entertainment)? In Western Europe one often reads about children's increased dependency on television, computers and other media for entertainment. According to a recent report, British children spend an average of five hours a day using different electronic media and are growing up in an isolated 'bedroom culture' dominated by television, TV-linked games machines and the Internet (*The Guardian* 19/3/1999). In Spain, during 1995 approximately one fourth of all children from the 4-12 age group watched television programmes aimed at an adult audience between 930 and 11 pm (*El Pais* 8/6/1995).

Neither scenario -- individual isolation or late viewing -- applies to the Saribas region. Iban children are extremely gregarious. If it is true that one can sometimes

find them 'glued to the box'⁵, more often than not they are either learning in a classroom, reading or drawing in the company of others, or playing in the gallery or outdoors with their peers. As for their bedtime, it seldom crosses the invisible 9.30 pm frontier. In July 1997 I carried out a survey into the favourite hobbies of Form 1 and Form 2 Iban pupils in Betong. As Table 4.1. demonstrates, television lags well behind fishing (among boys) and reading (among girls, see chapter 5).

In a *Sarawak Tribune* feature article tellingly entitled *Games children used to play*, Lugun (23/11/1997) laments 'the by-gone days when children would indulge in simple but fun-filled games' such as jacks, hopscotch and marbles and their replacement with 'computers and electronic gadgets offering an alternative mode of entertainment'. In stark contrast to this bleak urban account, participant observation at Semak Longhouse supported the survey results in confirming children's wide range of interests besides television and electronic games. Many upriver communities in the Saribas and other areas of Sarawak resemble old people's homes, with most of the younger population away either as migrant labourers or as boarders at state schools, but in Semak and other longhouses closer to town children are not allowed to board at school, so they spend long hours in their home communities. Besides the hobbies listed above, non-media activities such as jacks (*main Tambi*), *takraw* (a Malay game of rattan ball), swimming, running, skipping, hide-and-seek and throwing-the-slipper (*nikau selipar*) are also very popular.

Saribas Iban children are no mere passive consumers of alien electronic media: they constantly transform media items into resources for their active social lives, a process Silverstone *et al* (1994: 21) have named 'conversion'. On the other hand, their conversions are shaped by ideological, moral, temporal and spatial constraints. I explore these kinds of constrained practices in chapter 5.

5. A rare form of behaviour normally exhibited when colourful American products such as *Power Rangers* and quality cartoon programmes are being shown.

<i>Ranking of hobbies</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>boys</i>	<i>girls</i>
1 reading stories	19	5	14
2 fishing	15	14	1
3 playing football	9	9	0
4 playing badminton	6	2	4
5 gardening	5	1	4
6 cycling	4	1	3
6 studying	4	1	3
6 watching TV	4	0	4

Table 4.1. Favourite hobbies of Form 1 and Form 2 Iban pupils in the Saribas.

Prime time, prime place

Scannell & Cardiff (1991: 319) have argued that both radio and television have over the decades made the British nation 'real and tangible through a whole range of images and symbols, events and ceremonies relayed to audiences direct and live'. Following Giddens (1984), Scannell (1988: 5-7) has distinguished three intersecting temporal planes in the structuring of broadcasting: clock time, life time and calendrical time. Through calendrical time, discrete events in the life of the British nation previously separated in time and space, such as the FA Cup Final, the Last Night of the Proms and the Grand National are now, thanks to the mass media, 'woven together as idioms of a corporate national life'. The importance of television in this continuous process of temporal and symbolic weaving has also been noted in Brazil. The remote Amazonian town of Gurupa relies for its electricity supply on a costly diesel generator controlled by the municipal authorities who restrict its operation to a few hours in the evening. However, during daytime broadcasts of events considered vital to the nation, such as a presidential funeral or a football match involving the national team this rule is relaxed so that the local population may partake of the unique spectacle (Pace 1993:1997). In Saribas Iban longhouses, such 'idioms of a corporate national life' are viewed every evening before, during and after the 8 o'clock news on RTM's first channel:

Semak Longhouse, 18 June 1997. Watching TV1 with Grandmother-of-Kalong. At 7.30 pm they started showing *Emosi* (Emotion), a dull Malay horror drama. Ini Kalong kept filling me in on the various kinship relations binding together the cardboard characters. The 'drama' was interrupted by the Muslim call to prayer, featuring new footage of the Malaysian team who recently climbed Mount Everest and some aerial shots of Kuala Lumpur's modern architectural wonders. The slogan 'Let us follow the path to prosperity' was presented in three languages: Arabic, Malay and English. At 7.52 we watched another promotional video, this time on PM Mahathir's Vision 2020 project, aimed at turning Malaysia into a developed nation with a strong national culture by the year 2020. The video appeared to stress the compatibility between Islam, science and technology. It was followed by a panel with the countdown to the 16th Commonwealth Games, to be held in Kuala Lumpur in September 1998.

There followed a second Vision 2020 clip in a karaoke-like format. Five attractive young women clad in traditional dress, each one representing a major ethnic group (Malay, Chinese, Tamil, Kadazandusun and Iban) sang the catchy 2020 song hand in hand. Subtitles had been added, presumably to entice the audience to join in and make the song more memorable. There followed a clip urging drivers to control their speed on the motorway. Then came a third 2020 song promoting cooperation (*kerjasama*) among the nation's many groups. A torrent of pleasant images flooded the screen: there were vibrant cultural shows from Sarawak and other states, glistening robot-operated factories, homes for the elderly and the handicapped, healthy-looking schoolchildren, and more. Finally, the news at 8 began. The first item was PM Mahathir's 3-day visit to the Lebanon. A sharp increase of sales of Malaysia's national car, the Proton, was expected as a result of this historic visit. Then came a second encouraging report...

This barrage of Federal government propaganda can be broken down into nine items:

1. Urban Malay serial (interrupted)
2. Muslim call to prayer together with developmentalist slogan
3. Vision 2020 promotional video: Islam, science and technology in harmony
4. Countdown to Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games
5. Vision 2020 promotional video: the five major ethnic groups in harmony
6. Motorway safety promotional video
7. Vision 2020 promotional video: all ethnic and social groups in harmony
8. News at 8: first governmental propaganda item.
9. News at 8: second governmental propaganda item.

In chapter 5, I analyse prime-time television from the perspective of Saribas Iban viewers' ideas and practices. Here I wish to tease out a number of interrelated spatial and temporal issues. First, the highly structured, predictable nature of prime-time television. Saribas Iban viewers often remark on how they can get to see distant, more advanced countries through television. What they systematically fail to mention is the temporal and ideological framing of such news reports, a taken-for-granted, naturalized, invisible component that 'goes without saying' Anderson (1991:33) has discussed the arbitrary juxtaposition of items on the front page of a newspaper. How are they linked? Through the date at the top, signifying 'the steady onward clocking of homogenous, empty time'. In the case of Malaysian television,

the randomness of world news affairs is routinely organised around the clock and the calendar to serve a stable representation of the world in which the nation is steadily progressing along 'the path to prosperity'. Items 8 and 9 above may be news to the viewers, but they are still designed to support an unchanging unity-in-diversity national ideology. Second, whilst the BBC broadcasts of the FA Cup, the Grand National, etc, constantly recreate the theme of a common national past, Malaysia's RTM repeatedly broadcasts the theme of a common national *future* that will transcend current religious, linguistic, ethnic, regional, economic and social divides by the year 2020. Saribas Iban viewers may or may not be confident about the attainability of Mahathir's Vision 2020. In either case, and owing to relentless broadcasts on radio and television, they all believe that their future has already been charted out on their behalf by leaders in far-off Kuala Lumpur. No alternative national future is ever broadcast.

This monofuturistic orientation of the government-controlled media has percolated into all spheres of Saribas Iban day-to-day life. Earlier I gave the example of a girl singing the catchy 2020 song. Numerous other instances can be given. Thus I once overheard an inebriated man loudly question the ability of the Iban people to achieve the 2020 dream. At a wedding, a local official encouraged the attendants to strive to achieve Vision 2020. On a trip upriver I met an Iban man who had a 2020 tattoo on his arm. On another occasion, a young man proudly told me about the Commonwealth Games to be held in September 1998 in which 'all countries in the world would participate'. He knew the exact date and place, but little more. A fourth man had followed closely the Malaysian team's Everest climb, but wished an Iban had been represented, and so on. These examples are proof of how radio and television not only weave together a national calendar, for instance through the national football league, but also of how they promote the government's temporal orientation made tangible through repeated national success stories in the fields of diplomacy, sport, technology, business, etc.

To recapitulate, radio and television help structure the day-to-day and annual life of the more economically developed Saribas Iban longhouses, especially radio in the case of women. These two media accompany daily activities such as housework, farm work and homework, breakfast, lunch and supper, social drinking, smoking and conversing. The 8 o'clock news on television is the central evening time marker. It is a fixed synchronising device planted along the length of the shared building signaling it will soon be bedtime. If 8 to 9 pm is Saribas viewers' prime time, then the family-*bilik* is its corresponding prime *place*. However, rather than isolating people from one another, television fosters a new kind of evening (*lemai*) gregariousness, one no longer based on the gallery and on radio-mediated oral genres, as was the case in the 1970s. According to Giddens (1984: 147-148), modern capitalism commodified time as labour time and space as 'created environment'. Perhaps the monastery set the regularity of time, he argues, but it was capitalism that made it spread from the sphere of labour to all others. In an ethnographic approach to media, we need however to be more specific about the complex of institutions and practices we call 'capitalism'. The examples given above show that the channels whereby Giddens' 'regularity of time' have spread from the wider Malaysian society into Saribas longhouses are crucially dependent on age and gender, and that the spread of clock and calendar time through what we might call 'chronographic media genres' – especially radio and television news programmes – has not replaced but rather transformed local patterns of social interaction. The general point to be made is that both 'capitalism' and 'modern time' are abstract concepts. The forms they take are numerous and adjusted to local circumstances. In ethnographic practice, we can only meaningfully talk about 'capitalisms' and 'modern times' in the plural.

2. Media in the festive life of Saribas Iban

The lumping of media, ritual, and performance

The Western identification of media consumption with ceremony or ritual is almost

as old as the modern media themselves. Hegel, who was born in 1770, already spoke of newspapers as modern man's ersatz for morning prayers (Anderson 1991: 35). Prominent media researchers working in a variety of countries have followed suit. Some use the term 'ritual' interchangeably with 'custom'. Thus according to Nordenstreng *et al.* (1972), for Finnish viewers watching the news is 'a ritual, a custom serving to maintain a feeling of security'. Others take ritual to be a national tradition. For Scannell (1988: 5) the FA Cup, the Last Night of the Proms and other live events broadcast over radio and television in Britain have become 'traditions, rituals, part of national life'. Hartley (1987: 123-4), following Anderson (1983) following Hegel, associates the term with a daily pseudo-religious 'ceremony'. He argues that newspapers are 'the ultimate fiction' for 'they construct the imagined community, and the basis of a mass ritual or ceremony that millions engage in every day'. Others call television viewing a 'rite of passage' or mechanical 'ritual'. Thus according to Silverstone (1988:26) 'news-watching is a ritual, both in its mechanical repetitiveness and...more importantly, in its presentation of the familiar and the strange, the reassuring and the threatening'. Others use ritual in its domestic, everyday sense: Johnson (1981: 167), as we said earlier, considers radio to have been at first an intrusive guest in Australia, for it 'timetabled family activities and challenged domestic rituals'. Finally, there are those who link mediated rituals with capitalism. According to Hobart (1995: 10), media specialists such as Fiske (1989) 'concur that quiz shows are the rituals of late capitalism: they reenact the workings of knowledge, power and success'⁶. The first four quotes are taken from Morley (1992: 251-70) who uses them at various points of his essay to argue for the

⁶ The literature on media and ritual is vast. In recent years, a key influential work has been Dayan and Katz's (1992) *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. The authors consider events such as sports broadcasts, the Pope's visits, or coronations as 'collective rites of communion' which serve to integrate otherwise fragmented parts of society while legitimising its institutions. More recently, Liebes and Curran (1998) have edited a volume in which they rethink Katz's legacy. Thus Carey (1998: 42-70) studies 'political rituals' on American television and concludes that media events can also divide people; they can create antagonisms. He exemplifies this point with a discussion of the televised struggle between Democrats and Republicans over the nomination of R. Bork to a seat on the United States Supreme Court in 1987. The judge was eventually 'excommunicated'. An older source of inspiration for theorists of media and ritual is Goffman, in particular his *Interaction Ritual* (1972 [1967]) in which he advocates a 'sociology of occasions'.

importance of detailed ethnographic research into the domestic use of various media. Unfortunately, all along he leaves the various contradictory usages of the term 'ritual' unexamined. Some anthropologists (e.g. Hirsch 1998: 214) have questioned the recent adoption of the problematic label 'ethnographic' by media researchers from other disciplines. Rather unkindly, Hobart (1995: 11) has referred to Morley's (1992) call for an adaptation of Geertz's (1973) interpretive methodology to the media cause in the following terms: 'There is a sense of *deja vu* in seeing media studies specialists pull Granny's knickers out of the attic and lucubrate over the smell'. As far as I am aware, however, no anthropological critique of the much earlier appropriation of the term 'ritual' by media scholars has yet appeared. This is probably due to the fact that social anthropologists themselves are increasingly uneasy about one of the discipline's 'great tropes' (Munro 1999:163).

In a recent volume by anthropologists entitled *Ritual, Performance, Media* edited by Hughes-Freeland (1998) a range of issues are explored and detailed ethnographic analyses from societies in Europe, West Africa and Melanesia are presented. In their desire to steer clear of a number of '-isms', the contributors fail however to provide us with an adequate working definition of ritual. Thus in order to distance herself from structuralism, the editor stresses the similarities between ritual and performance, privileging agency and creativity over constraint in an attempt to overcome the supposedly Western notion of a passive audience (1998: 9). She is also post-symbolist, arguing that Turner's (1969) *communitas* is not necessarily a period of anti-structure that frees participants from the tedium of everyday life; post-essentialist, pointing out that anthropologists have tended to exoticize ritual behaviour; and post-interpretivist in rejecting Geertz's performance-as-text model (to the editor, ritual is not a pre-written text 'but something which emerges as participants bring together bits and pieces of knowledge in the performance: it creates reality and selves experientially' [1998: 15]). Finally, she is post-consumptionist, for the urgent problem in her view is to understand human behaviour, not consumption which she deems a eurocentric notion. Instead, the

authors subordinate the term ritual to the broader category of 'situated social action'. In the editor's view, the ritual process cannot be divided into periods of structure and anti-structure. Rather it is 'a form of practice, in which agency, creativity, structure and constraint *become simultaneous, rather than distinguished in time and space, whether real or metaphorical*' (1998: 8, my emphasis).

In the discussion that follows, I wish to make a radically different point: it is precisely the segmentation of social time and space facilitated by clock-calendar time and a set of supporting media (esp. radio, television and public-address systems) that allows Saribas Iban agents to (a) clearly distinguish between day-to-day life and special occasions, including rituals, (b) plan their use of the social time and space available outside school and working hours, (c) carry out their daily, weekly and annual cycles of activities in coordination with others, and (d) actively reflect on those activities in order to abandon some of them and retain others, effectively 'making history' in the process. By lumping together agency, structure, time and space in a 'simultaneous' ritual performance, Hughes-Freeland is playing down the spatial and temporal dimensions of this and related social practices such as secular festivals. I am therefore eschewing two 'analytical lumps' (de Bono 1976): first, the woolly identification of ritual with media consumption prevalent in media studies; second, the pro-agency stance of post-structuralist anthropology that erodes distinctions of time and space in ritual and para-ritual practices.

A better entry point into the problem of ritual is offered by Parkin (1992: 18), an East Africanist who argues, following Turner (1982:24) following Van Gennep (1960 [1909]), that directionality is fundamental to the ritual process everywhere. Rituals often take the form of a journey or passage 'undertaken and/or marked by participants standing in spatial relations to each other'. They are based on what Parkin calls 'formulaic spatiality', that is 'the capacity to create and act through idioms of passage, movement, including exchange, journey, axis, concentricism, and up-and-down directions'. This elegant description certainly applies to the Iban

ethnography. Iban pagan rituals are 'structured as journeys (*jalai*) and meanings are conveyed through images arranged linearly, in space and time, to create an itinerary of travel or movement' (Sather 1993: 65). For instance, birth rituals are symbolic and physical journeys from the family *bilik*, then outwards onto the veranda (*tanju*), followed by a ritual procession from the gallery (*ruai*) to the river where both mother and child will take their first bathing or 'ritual cooling' (*ngasoh chelap*), followed by a rite of incorporation into the longhouse community consisting of a second ritual cooling in the gallery. In Iban ritual practice, 'spiritual danger is spatialized' (1993: 87). The longhouse architecture 'supplies coordinates of motion rather than stasis'. It is not a 'fixed, physical matrix' but rather the setting where metaphors of time and space render explicit relationships between the individual *biliks* and the longhouse that in daily life remain implicit. Freeman's (1960, 1970) influential early work privileged the Iban longhouse 'as a built form'. In a famous phrase (1970: 129), he defined it not as 'a communal pavilion, but as a street of privately owned, semi-detached houses'. Sather (1993:65) puts forth an alternative model: the longhouse as a 'ritually constituted structure' in which ritual orders persons and materials in time and space.

In the following ethnographic account I wish to present a third model of the (Saribas) Iban longhouse that integrates and updates those of Freeman and Sather: the longhouse as (1) a physical structure and organisation whose day-to-day main economic unit is the *bilik*-family (Freeman) as well as (2) an organisation which subordinates the *bilik*-family to the longhouse community during ritual periods (Sather) *as well as* (3) an organisation increasingly built around the demands of clock and calendar time, both during day-to-day life and even more markedly throughout the community's major annual festival: Gawai Dayak (Postill). To understand the significance of Gawai Dayak we have to start by comparing and contrasting it to antecedent longhouse gatherings. Sather (1993) distinguishes three main categories of pre-Christian Iban ritual (but see Jensen 1974:195):

- * *bedara*: small family thanksgiving
- * *gawa*: rituals of intermediate scale
- * *gawai*: major bardic rituals with hundreds or thousands of guests from the river region and beyond, including the longhouse's *sapemakai*, or 'co-feasters'.

According to this classification, the 'Gawai' component of the term Gawai Dayak is a misnomer, for the festival is neither a 'major bardic ritual' nor are guests from the immediate riparian region invited, not even the longhouse's co-feasters, as each longhouse celebrates it separately. The key features of Gawai Dayak and the four other major gatherings in Saribas longhouses are summarised in Table 4.2.

The category 'banned media' in Table 4.2. brings us to the subject of ritual restrictions to media consumption. Take the burial rites studied in chapter 3. The death of a longhouse member marks for the *bilik*-families and longhouse affected the beginning of a disruption to their established day-to-day routines. Over a mourning period (*ulit*) of four weeks, no one in the longhouse is allowed to listen to the radio or watch television. For this reason, when bereaved headmen speak at funerals it is

Gawai Antu

Creator:	Apai Puntang Raga, a Deity who taught Serapoh after his people had suffered great misfortunes for not caring after the dead properly ⁷
Purpose:	To honour the longhouse dead since the previous Gawai Antu ⁸
Areas:	Saribas, Kalaka
Frequency:	Ideally at least once in a generation
Main Guests:	Government officials, the longhouse's co-feasters, the wide river region
Supporting media:	RTM Iban Section, letters of invitation, printed programme, photographic cameras, video cameras
Banned media:	In the more traditionalist longhouses, all electronic media except cameras; in other longhouses no restrictions

Gawai Dayak

Creator:	Stephen K. Ningkan, post-colonial Sarawak's first Chief Minister, 1965
Purpose:	To achieve official calendrical parity with the dominant ethnic categories in Sarawak, i.e. Malays and Chinese.
Areas:	Officially all areas of Sarawak, but spreading into Indonesian Borneo ⁹

7. Sandin (1972: 1).

8. Gerijih (n.d.)

9. A case in point is the journal *Kalimantan Review* published in Pontianak, in the Indonesian province of West Kalimantan. In its March-April 1996 issue the staff wish all their Dayak readers a Happy Gawai Day. They do so in Indonesian: '*Selamat Hari Gawai Kepada Seluruh*

Frequency: Once a year, on June 1st
 Main Guests: Few guests, as it is primarily an intra-longhouse celebration
 Supporting media: Gawai greeting cards, letters, telephone, state radio, state press, advertising hoardings and posters, public-address systems, cassette players and tapes, karaoke videos, photographic cameras
 Banned media: None

Christmas

Creator: Christian missionaries.
 Purpose: To celebrate the birth of Jesus, the son of God (*Allah Taala*).
 Areas: All areas of Sarawak.
 Frequency: Once a year, on 25 December
 Main Guests: Chiefly a *bilik*-family affair
 Supporting media: Christmas cards, printed carols, prayer books, photographic cameras
 Banned media: None

Nikah (Wedding)

Creator: Originally known as *melah pinang* (lit. splitting the areca nut), nowadays usually a Christian ceremony or *nikah* introduced by missionaries.
 Purpose: To ritually mark the marriage of a man and a woman.
 Areas: All areas of Sarawak.
 Frequency: Irregular, but often soon before Gawai Dayak to ensure maximum attendance.
 Main Guests: 'Co-feasters' (*sapemakai* or *samakai*) from nearby longhouses
 Supporting media: Wedding invitations, letters, telephone, public-address systems, cassette players and tapes, karaoke videos, photographic cameras
 Banned media: None

Anjong Antu (Funeral)

Creator: Apai Puntang Raga, a Deity who taught Serapoh after his people had suffered great misfortunes for not caring after the dead properly. Nowadays a syncretistic ritual combining pagan and Christian practices.
 Purpose: To literally 'escort the soul' (*anjong antu*) on its way to the Afterworld (*Sebayan*)¹⁰.
 Areas: All areas of Sarawak
 Frequency: Irregular.
 Main Guests: 'Co-feasters' (*sapemakai* or *samakai*) from nearby longhouses
 Supporting media: Letters of invitation, telephone calls, RTM Iban Section messages, public-address system, wristwatches.
 Banned media: During mourning period (*ulit*): television, radio, cassette-players and other entertainment (*M. hiburan*) technologies out of respect for the dead

Table 4.2: Main rituals and festivals at Saribas Iban longhouses.

Masyarakat Dayak'.

10. See Richards (1981:12).

customary for them to ask visitors from other communities to keep them informed of any important news from the outside world. (In practice, however, this ritual interdiction (*pemali*) is not strictly adhered to, and residents still watch the news at 8 on television and listen to the radio regularly, albeit with the volume turned down). For a brief period, the longhouse community returns to what Helliwell (1993: 44) has described, on the basis of fieldwork among the Gerai Dayaks, as 'a community of voices'.

Such ritually-shaped periods of restricted media consumption are nevertheless few and far between, particularly in Christian longhouses within the market town (*pasar*) orbit. More often than not, as I argued earlier, the Saribas longhouse is a community of *noises* emanating from radio and television sets. The really striking aspect of social practices in the area, both day-to-day activities and those surrounding ritual occasions, is just how profoundly structured along secular clock and calendar time they are. For instance, a Gawai Antu I attended in the Paku tributary of the Saribas in 1997 was carefully planned and followed a detailed programme that was distributed to all distinguished participants, including the Chief Minister of Sarawak and his deputy, Dr Alfred Jabu, whose wife originates from the host longhouse. Similarly, the ethnohistorian and folklorist Benedict Sandin (1980: 34), also from the Paku area, structures his account of a 'traditional' night vigil (*rabat*) by means of the repeated, unselfconscious insertion of clock time:

At about 6 p.m. the wailer starts to sing her dirge [...]
Eventually, at 8 p.m. all the guests are invited politely by their hosts to sit in a long row along the gallery (*ruai*) [...]
At about 10 p.m. coffee, bread or other light refreshments are served to the guests [...]
[After the speech] supper is [served at] around 2 a.m., [lasting] for about an hour [...].
Eventually, [at] about 5 a.m., the deceased'[s] body will be put into the coffin.

With the spread of formal education and waged employment, Saribas Iban now perceive time as, among other things, a valuable commodity. It is therefore deemed

natural and right (*patuŋ*) for employed guests to time quite precisely their attendance at weddings and funerals and stay a mere few hours, enough to pay their symbolic tribute and monetary dues to the host *bilik*-family so as to avoid causing offence whilst reserving their energies for the following working day. The more urbanised, devoutly Christian among them consider rituals lasting more than a few hours to be wasteful and irrational. In this section I explore one such timed occasion: the annual Gawai Dayak festival, a complex post-independence institution that conjoins neo-pagan rites, secular games, artistic performances and media practices in a collective celebration *through and of* clock and calendar time.

Children's quiz night: going by the clock and by the book

Semak Longhouse, 25 May 1997. After dinner, a group of children gathered at the headman's section of the gallery to await anxiously the beginning of the competition. Some were carefully studying the 1997 Gawai Dayak programme (M. *aturcara*) posted on the wall. Others were practising the latest karate kicks they had seen on television. Half an hour later the gallery had been transformed into a manner of classroom. A dozen children, aged between 9 and 12, had been divided into three teams. There were plastic chairs, a board and a teacher-like figure in the person of Suri, a young unmarried woman. Her cousin Tom, also aged 22, was the time-keeper. He was holding a plastic clock resembling a giant wristwatch of the kind popular on rural Sarawak living-room walls. There were also two judges sat on a woven mat (*tikai*) behind a low table. A small crowd had gathered around the competitors, with some mothers closely behind their offspring for moral and technical support. The first part of the competition was a Malay-language quiz on the history, geography and administration of Sarawak and Malaysia, the first ever to be held at Semak Longhouse. It was a rather messy affair, for often a number of participants would shout out an answer simultaneously, or a cunning boy would try out two or even all three options in rapid succession: 'A...B...C!' or 'C...A...B' he would yell, until his ruse was denounced. This led to some lively, only half-serious debate among the audience as to the correct procedure to adopt but no conclusion was ever reached. One rule was however both unambiguous and strictly adhered to: the time limit assigned to each answer.

The second part of the quiz was conducted in the Iban language. The participants were now asked about Iban history and traditions. For instance, 'Where does Keling [the Iban culture hero] live?', 'Who created Gawai Dayak?' or 'What's the name of the Iban radio storyteller?'¹¹. The players all seemed fully concentrated and determined to win, and for once ignored my camcorder throughout the session. The third part was a reading contest. A number of boys and girls took turns to read out of a Malay-language storybook of their choice. Their performances were again strictly timed. One boy chose an abridged version of Tom Sawyer, while Sue read a Walt Disney story. Her mother, who was standing nearby, urged her to slow down. Invariably the readings were mechanical and lacking in rhythm and feel for the text. In other words, they were delivered in 'schoolspeak'. The audience soon lost interest and appeared relieved when the last competition was announced: a Malay version of Pictionary. The words were simple enough to draw – car, table, glasses, letter, chicken, cat, radio, river, eye, person, etc. – and the players had few problems identifying them. It was a greatly enjoyable game all the same, for the

11. An example of how post-War institutions such as the Iban Section and Gawai Dayak have been naturalised into the 'traditional' (*asa*) category.

challenge lay in trying to pack into a short span of time as many correct answers as possible.

There are a number of interesting aspects to this seemingly innocent pastime. First, this was the first-ever such competition at this longhouse – and perhaps in the entire Saribas. Indai Sue, the clerk and former teacher who dreamt it up, explained to me that the aim was to teach children to cherish learning by rewarding the more studious among them. The idea of having a quiz night occurred to her while watching one on television. Earlier we saw televised quiz shows described as ‘the rituals of late capitalism: they reenact the workings of knowledge, power and success’ (Hobart 1995: 10). Although I have questioned the wisdom of applying the term ‘ritual’ to media programmes and practices, the association of quiz shows with ‘knowledge, power and success’ is still a valid one¹². A more accurate way of describing Indai Sue's efforts would be as the creative transformation of a television genre into a longhouse performance with the purpose of rewarding the local children's early accumulation of cosmopolitan ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1998:5). Such capital is deemed essential to access the dominant Malaysian culture later in life. Thus Fiske (1989: 266-7) asserts that ‘[q]uiz shows use knowledge in the way that Bourdieu argues culture operates [in his theory of cultural capital], that is, to separate out winners from losers and to ground the classification in individual or natural differences’ (quoted in Hobart 1995: 10).

A second interesting feature in terms of media usage was the centrality of precise timing to the running of the show. Children were learning not only that their knowledge would be rewarded at a prize-giving ceremony to be held on Gawai's Eve, but also that speed is of the essence (with the exception of the more performative reading contest in which striking the right *tempo* was vital). The very structure of the quiz carries the implicit message that time is a most precious resource. In addition to clock time, by looking at the programme posted outside the headman's *bilik*, at the community's political heart, they were learning that

¹² For an ethnographic analysis of televised quiz shows in Japan, see Painter (1994)

calendrical time applies not only to their school life but to all spheres of social life, including longhouse gatherings.

Finally, only a small part of the competitive evening (one out of four timed segments) was devoted to Iban knowledge. The organiser, Indai Sue, who also teaches neo-traditional dancing (*ngajat*), is a good representative of the Saribas Iban cultural ideal of modernisation through education while preserving what is seen as the best of the Iban heritage (see chapter 2). Her priorities in the education of her own two daughters lie however with the 'modern' side of this cultural project. She firmly believes it is only through a modern education that the Iban will develop and eventually reach standards of living comparable to those of the more advanced peoples (*bansa*) of Sarawak. The structure of the evening clearly reflected those priorities. In chapter 2, I described the complex process of 'dual westernisation' affecting Sarawak whereby media items of Western origin (from television genres through comic books to pop music tapes) are being constantly imported into West Malaysia, reprocessed and re-exported to Sarawak and Sabah as 'Malaysian' products. The reading contest is a case in point. Malay-language versions of stories by Mark Twain, Enid Blyton, Walt Disney and others are extremely popular with Iban children, especially girls (see chapter 5). The contest rewarded the most competent end-consumers of this powerful transnational print medium.

Women's quiz night: timing an uncertain past

Two days later, another pre-Gawai competition took place at Semak Longhouse:

27 May 1999. After supper, there were again some expectant children in the headman's section of the gallery (*ruai*) studying the programme. Tonight's main event was the women's quiz, another Gawai innovation. The participants would be expected to answer questions on Iban mythology and to solve obscure riddling sayings (*entelah*) of the kind sometimes heard on the radio. Over the next half hour, some twenty women gradually made their way into the cordoned-off section of the *ruai* reserved for the competition. This was no school-like setting, though, as there were no chairs and the women sat on woven mats (*tikai*) in three files, each representing a team. The quiz was again strictly timed. The atmosphere throughout the contest was decidedly festive, with a fair deal of patting, slapping, pushing, screaming and rolling over with laughter amongst the women participants, especially when a fellow team member blurted out the wrong answer. The second competition of the evening – an Iban version of pictionary, also provided the audience with a hilarious contrast to the children's performance, as a series of women struggled to hurriedly sketch out on the board different familiar objects – a kitchen knife, a newspaper, a

cooking pan, an airplane, a handbag, a chair, a wristwatch, a radio, a car, etc. -- which their fellow team members often had problems identifying. The audience were delighted. The evening reached a roaring climax with the game of mime, consisting of one team member miming activities such as sweeping, singing, playing the piano, videotaping, digging, *ngajat* dancing, harvesting, etc. Some of the women were literally rolling over the woven mats in fits of laughter. Finally, there was a half-serious women's *ngajat* dancing competition to the beat of drums and gongs (*begendang*) played mostly by men. This was somewhat of an ordeal for the less accomplished dancers, some of whom were overcome by shyness (*malu*) and retired before completing their performances. Only the more competent dancers and those who managed to clown their way through by exaggerating their incompetence held on until the end.

What were the key modern media mobilized on this occasion? First and foremost, as in the children's evening, it was the clock and calendar (or chronographic) media that structured the evening's social time and space, especially the printed-out Gawai programme and the alarm clock used to time the various competitive slots. A second set was formed by information and entertainment media external to the community, which provided the generic forms and materials: thus the idea for the quiz came both from Malaysian television quizzes and from their equivalent on Iban radio, including riddle (*entelah*) contests, while most of the questions originated in two or three old issues of the now defunct anti-Communist Iban magazine *Berita Rayat* that I had acquired in Kuching for my own research purposes (see chapter 2). I was in fact first introduced to *Berita Rayat* by Indai Saur, the 32 year-old woman who selected the questions and acted as judge (*M. hakim*). She once lent me a copy of this magazine to supplement the data contained in her genealogy (*tusut*), a treasured item of knowledge which she had neatly copied down in a school notebook as a younger woman after interviewing her grandfather, a former Semak headman.

Not many women at Semak, young or old, share Indai Saur's interest in the old ways, which made their quiz a particularly challenging test. Few of them are these days regular listeners of the traditional Iban broadcasts, the only readily available source of Iban folklore in a community long bereft of any 'real elders' (*urang tuai endar*). To further complicate matters, the questions were open-ended rather than multiple choice, although the riddles came with a conventional rhyming clue known as *ulu lungga*, literally 'knife handle'. Yet unlike the child competitors, these women

were neither tense nor determined to win – they were determined to have a good time. In a sense this was a mere light-hearted rehearsal (*main aja*) of the festival to come. But their laughter was also part-embarrassment at the impossible task of having to 'remember' items of indigenous knowledge they had never learnt in the first place; and all in the suddenly unfamiliar setting of the headman's *ruai* with a white student of Iban culture videotaping their performance.

Laughter can serve as a smoke screen aimed at concealing feelings of shyness and embarrassment (*malu*). This was evident again later in the evening during the *ngajat* dancing, another decontextualized 'traditional' practice that revealed the women's uneasy location between an eroded rural past and an elusive urban future. In marked contrast with their children and grandchildren, rural Iban women are not themselves running in the inter-*bilik* race to accumulate literate and chronographic Malaysian cultural capital. At one level, their contest was a playful parody of the children's more serious struggle involving the social reproduction of the longhouse community. At another, it brought into the community's social arena a series of television-inspired, secular forms of entertainment (M. *hiburan*) with no precedents in Iban culture – the quiz, the pictiography, the dance contest – that transformed and *relegated Iban materials to a subordinated role*, including oral items from a riddling genre (*entelah*), local artifacts such as woven mats (*tikai*), and formerly ritual dance forms (*ngajat*).

Taking the two evenings together, we were offered precious insights into (1) the organizers' assumptions about the internal and external relationships that make up their longhouse community, (2) their characteristically Saribas Iban desire to strike a balance between complementary categories, particularly between modernity and tradition, as argued earlier in this thesis.

We can arrange some of these clues into two complementary sets:

<i>Quiz A</i>	<i>Quiz B</i>
children	adults
school	longhouse
office work	farm work
chairs	woven mats
nation-state	locality
Malay language	Iban language
television	radio
literacy	orality
modernity	tradition

In this festive season of reflecting upon and performing all things Iban, the evening contests aimed at striking a balance between the two realms. The quiz presenter embodied two controlling roles as both 'master of ceremonies and schoolmaster-examiner', with luck being the 'unknown quantity' (Hobart 1995: 14). But the dice were loaded from the start in favour of the left-hand side column, that is of the mastery over a literate future structured through clock and calendar time. The 'chronophilic' nature of the festival was to become even more apparent on Gawai's Eve (see below).

Gawai Dayak opening rite and the invisible chronographic media

Semak Longhouse, 31 May 1997. Before dawn, a crowd had gathered at the headman's section of the gallery to accompany the colourful carved Hornbill (*Burong Kenyalang*) to its resting point during the Gawai festival: the top of a 'remembrance pole' (*tiang pengingat*) erected in front of the longhouse. As is customary with rituals associated with birth and fertility, the entire community led by their elders exited the longhouse through its upriver end. The headman carried the Hornbill; his followers food and rice wine (*tuak*) especially brewed for the occasion. They then described a circle until they reached the pole. The headman nailed the Hornbill to the top of the pole illuminated by torches and by the flashlight of a few photographic cameras. This task was followed by a round of applause. Back on the ground, the headman was given a fowl which he waved (*biau*) seven times while praying (*sampi*) for the well-being of the community. Being relatively new to the job, he was unsure as to his performance and asked an elder whether he wished to add (*nampong*) any further formulae. The elder had nothing to add, so the headman proceeded to kill the fowl. This was followed by the hand-shaking and well-wishing of all present and by the consumption of the food and drinks. Half an hour into the feast, someone realised that there were two items missing from the remembrance pole, namely the flags of Sarawak and Malaysia. They were promptly fetched and nailed to either side of the Hornbill figure.

In what sense was this a ritual? First, in terms of Parkin's (1992:18) aforesaid stress on directionality, according to which most rituals take the form of a journey or passage 'undertaken and/or marked by participants standing in spatial relations to each other', and confirmed by Sather's (1993) Iban ethnography. Burial processions leave the longhouse through the downriver end, as we saw at the opening of chapter 3, whilst on this ritual of renewal and joyful celebration they left through the opposite end. Second, it was a ritual in its search for efficacious performance. Ritual does things, it has effects on the world, it is 'work that is carried out' (Parkin 1992:14). Indeed the most commonly used Iban words for ritual, *gawa'* and *pengawa'*, can also be translated as 'work' (Richards 1981: 271). Participants may quibble over the details, but they are all agreed that the ritual must follow 'some time-hallowed precedent' (Parkin 1992: 15). This explains the inexperienced headman's hesitation and call for assistance.

Ostensibly the only modern medium used on this occasion was the photographic camera. Photographs reach nooks and crannies in Iban life that are too personal, too local, to be of any interest to national television and other mass media, which in any case seldom portray Dayak lives. Cherished photos help to compress the time-space chasms between kin separated by migration or by death, just like they do in western societies. At times they are also used by shamans (*manang*) when their patients are not present in the longhouse. Paradoxically, these visual media are also employed in death rituals that have precisely the opposite intent: to separate, that is to keep the dead from returning to this world. These include *nyabak* (ritual dirge), *besserara bungai layus* (rite to 'separate' the dead from the living) and *Gawai Antu* (feast to honour the ancestors)¹³. Gawai Dayak photographs are of the time-space compression kind. Like the remembrance pole itself, they will lend material support to the collective memory of the community for years to come, including those of its members living in distant urban areas.

13. Clifford Sather (personal communication, November 1997).

There was another class of media mobilized that morning. Though the rite was not as precisely timed as the quizzes, I must again insist on the ubiquity of clock and calendar time. As an integral part of the Gawai programme, this neo-pagan rite was decided upon well in advance; there was a fixed date, a time and a place attached to its commencement that was publicly posted: 31 May at 4.45 am at the headman's section of the gallery. A time and a date that remain unchanged year after year. The rite could have been performed without the cameras, but not without the common knowledge of clock and calendar time. The cameras were visible, dispensable media, while the calendars and clocks were absent yet indispensable – they provided all longhouse residents with the means towards coordinated, efficacious ritual action. In contrast to this modern rite, the date and duration of traditional Iban rituals was dependent on a number of variables: bird omens, dreams, weather conditions, war, etc. Masing (1981) witnessed one such celebration in the Balleh region in 1979, a major bardic ritual known as *Gawai Tansang Kenyalang* (Ritual of the Hornbill's Nest) that followed an auspicious dream by a local leader. In contrast, the date of Gawai Dayak and its minor Hornbill rite is by definition entirely independent from the dreamlife of local leaders: it transcends local time and space.

Gawai's Eve: celebrating clock and calendar time

In 1968 the prolific Iban author and broadcaster Andria Ejau put out *Batu Besundang*, another of his morality novellas (or *ensera kelulu*, see chapter 2) aimed at educating rural Iban on the changes affecting Sarawak as a newly independent state 'through Malaysia'. In one episode, the residents of a far-off longhouse are visited by their government-appointed native chief (*Pengulu*). The chief instructs them on the proper way of celebrating Gawai Dayak, a new festival created three years previously that the locals are still unfamiliar with. Timing is of the essence, he explains: at the stroke of midnight, the whole Dayak people will be toasting together with *ai pengayu*, that is rice-wine especially brewed for the occasion. He also

clarifies to his puzzled followers what is meant by the term 'Dayak', listing no less than 18 groups and comparing their language diversity to that of the Chinese. The reason why it is only now that the Dayaks recognise themselves as one people (*bansa*), he adds, is because 'schooling arrived late to us' (*laban pelajar sekula laun datai ba kita*). Thirty-two years after its inception, I witnessed a fully naturalized and perfectly timed Gawai's Eve in the Saribas.

Semak Longhouse, 31 May 1997. After supper, the girl dancers (*kumpulan ngajat*) were being helped with the final touches to their dresses, headgear and make-up at a crowded *bilik* two doors downriver from the headman's. Near them an Iban pop cassette tape was playing and a colour television was on. Outside in the gallery, the drum and gong (*gendang*) ensemble were going through a brief rehearsal while the master of ceremonies, the native chief's Kuching-based son, aged 32, was testing his microphone. Gawai's Eve was officially launched with the ceremonial cutting of a tape by the native chief and the headman under the festival banner. The ensemble then began to play and a procession of ten girls and two boys in traditional attire marched out of their changing *bilik* and into the *ruai* to describe a propitious circle around the dance floor and exit the *ruai* again. Prompted by the master of ceremonies the mostly female audience gave them a round of applause. Back in the *bilik*, the dancers found a crowd of boys and men gathered around the television set. They were watching a football match: Sarawak versus Kedah. It was a crucial match for Sarawak in their bid to wrestle the league title from Sabah. Oblivious to the mesmerized viewers, a group of dancers posed for the parental cameras at the other end of the *bilik*. Meanwhile two urban Iban girls were quietly sitting in their grandmother's *bilik* reading West Malaysian comic books -- they had little interest in either football or *ngajat*.

But the show had to go on. For the next hour the ten contestants, aged between 9 and 15, took turns to dance in the well-lit gallery to the soothing beat of the *gendang* and intermittent flashes of photographic cameras. One by one the graceful dancers were introduced by the master of ceremonies who informed the depleted audience of their names, ages, hobbies and career goals. Then it was the turn of the only two male dancers, two young boys in loincloths whose obvious lack of preparation and glaring lack of fit with the Iban culture hero, Keling, that muscular epitome of manhood, caused a great deal of understandable laughter. Some of the football fans even came out of the *bilik* to enjoy their joint performance. There followed a beauty parade featuring the same ten girls, all nervously vying for the title of Kumang, Keling's mythical wife and paragon of female beauty.

At around 9.30 the official speeches began. The first person to take the microphone was the headman who thanked the native chief, the organising committee, the *gendang* ensemble and the entire community for the smooth running of this year's much expanded programme. He also thanked those who helped financially with the prizes, especially a local politician, and Aki James for repairing the wooden Hornbill. He concluded his speech praying to the Iban Supreme Deity (*Petara*) that those in the government service would be promoted (*niki pangkat*), that farmers would reap abundant harvests and that labourers would earn high wages (*bulih duit, bulih ringgit*). Then the native chief took the microphone. His speech centred on the presence among them of a student of Iban culture from London University who had followed in the footsteps of Robert Pringle, the eminent scholar, to study Semak and other leading longhouses in the Saribas. Finally the white guest himself delivered a rather rambling speech to thank his hosts.

The master of ceremonies then thanked all three speakers and announced the beginning of the prize-giving ceremony. One by one the winners were awarded their prizes to the now playful, suspense-creating beat of the *gendang*. Soon before midnight the sound system was given over

to the loud playing of recorded Iban pop and a few courageous dancers took to the dance floor. At 11.56 the master of ceremonies announced that only four minutes remained to prepare for the annual Gawai toast. The elders positioned themselves standing in the place of honour along the outer wall of the gallery and, like everybody else, filled up their glasses with specially brewed Gawai Dayak rice wine (*ai pengayu*) . Ten seconds before the metaphorical stroke of midnight the collective countdown (or rather, 'countup' from one to ten) began -- '*satu, dua, tiga, empat...*' -- until a jubilant '*SEPULUH!!!(10)*' was reached, followed by the customary cheer of joy '*bababababaaa uuuuuuhhh*', a deafening shotgun salvo from a nearby veranda, the Gawai Dayak toast, and the collective exchange of greetings and hand-shakes. It was only then that the revelling began in earnest to the beat of recorded Iban *joget* and Malay *dangdut* songs that were danced to all through the night.

A number of points arise from an analysis of this eventful evening:

- First, the boisterous climax of Gawai Dayak at Semak Longhouse was not a ritual in the strict sense of the term, as defined earlier. Instead the entire festival programme was built linearly *towards* and *from* (before and after) a secular abstraction: the calendrical watershed that separates May and June. This was a celebration of ethnic modernity, the coming of the modern age to the Dayaks, who are now included in the official state calendar -- a joyful festival structured *through* and *in honour of* clock and calendar time.
- Timing was of the essence. Two main information and communication technologies were pressed into the service of clock and calendar time: the humble, common wristwatch and the sophisticated, local elite-controlled public-address system (PAS), an interpersonal medium much neglected in the media studies literature¹⁴. Through the PAS, the master of ceremonies could coordinate the activities of dancers, *gendang* players, and other participants over time and space. Thanks to it, the community leaders could metaphorically transcend the here-and-now of a Saribas *ruai* and bolster their legitimacy through their association with God (*Petara*), government (*perintah*) and custom (*adat*). The PAS carried the voice of orderly temporality and authority along the gallery. Not coincidentally, it was used by the headman to ask the Iban God for the blessing of all three 'classes' of local Iban -

14. For instance, Watson & Hill's (1993) *Dictionary of Communication and Media Studies* makes no mention of this medium.

- government servants, farmers, and labourers – thereby normalizing a social and economic system at odds with the pre-capitalist, *adat*-regulated Iban emphasis on egalitarianism (cf Freeman 1960).

- A set of modern and pre-modern media were subordinated to the PAS-mediated crescendo towards the annual calendrical climax, notably photographic cameras, cassette tapes and the *gendang* (gongs and drums) ensemble. Together, they formed a tapestry of light and sound that added nuanced, emotive sensorial strands to the evening. The role of the *gendang* is worthy of reflection. Percussion is used in a variety of *rites de passage* around the world to communicate with 'the other world' (Tacchi 1998: 25, following Needham 1967: 612). Among the Iban, one of the traditional uses of *gendang* was at the beginning of a major *gawai*, as a signal to the divinities to come to the longhouse as guests (Richards 1981: 102). With the consolidation of a *gendang*-less Christian liturgy and the secularisation of longhouse gatherings, these instruments have now been relegated to an ancillary role as providers of entertainment (*M. hiburan*). In a neat transposition of modern time for pre-modern space coordinates, the aim of the *gendang* players was no longer to communicate with 'the other world' (*Sebayan*) but to add an aural strand to the midnight-bound oral, aural and visual crescendo.

- Paradoxically, this multimedia celebration of the community's tangible mastery of modern time was undermined by another modern medium of fundamental chronometric importance: television. The calendars of the Malaysian football league and television channels are, like most important matters in the Federation, built around the needs and requirements of urban West Malaysia; they do not make provisions for Gawai Dayak, a uniquely Sarawakian celebration. When a high proportion of Semak's men and boys decided to literally turn their backs on unique events taking place in the *ruai* and remain watching television in the *bilik*, they were making a bold bodily statement about where their priorities lay. It was unfortunate for the organisers that their carefully timed programme coincided that year with an

unusually exciting television programme. After all, as I argued earlier, most Saribas Iban consider everyday television to be dull and uninspiring.

The triumph of modern longhouse time and its discontents

Semak, 1 June 1997. The best part of the day was spent *bilik*-crawling (*belanggar*) in the propitious manner, that is exiting through the upriver end of the longhouse in drunken procession, describing a circle by visiting the four outlying houses, and entering the longhouse again through its downriver end. Every *bilik*-family lay out its best woven mats (*tikai*) and served its most invigorating beverages to the merry revellers amidst the deafening blast of Iban pop. Back in the longhouse *ruai*, Aki James took a break from the action to teach me Iban ritual. He was saddened by the fact that the Hornbill (*Burong Kenyalang*) had not been properly 'fed' at the remembrance pole rite the previous day. This deity was not even given the roasted rice (*letup*) it needed to embark on its long journey. Not wishing to criticize anyone in particular (*ukai nganu urang, uka*) he insisted that *Kenyalang* had not been properly praised (*dipuji*) at the opening ceremony or given charms (*ubat*). We were sitting two doors upriver from Aki James' section of the *ruai*, now taken over by a group of tone-deaf young revellers enjoying a session of Iban karaoke pop featuring the all-time favourite Gawai singer, Andrewson Ngalai. They were so loud that we decided that, since we could not defeat them, we ought to join them.

Parkin (1992:19) maintains that rituals survive through 'agency by default' as rival participants criticise each others' performance to gain control over the ritual process. Aki James did indeed criticise the organisers, but he did so on the quiet, in the sole company of a powerless outsider, not through the public-address system or during the rite. In the context of gendered media practices, Morley (1992: 162) has suggested the need to study who controls the family's television remote control, a tangible instrument of domestic power. In the context of an Iban gathering we need to focus instead on who controls (a) the organisation of festive time-space through the elaboration of a printed programme posted outside the headman's door, and (b) the serialized linking and transcending of local time-space by means of the public-address system. At Semak's Dayak Festival 1997, an organising committee led by a woman (Indai Sue) designed the programme, while only the male leaders and their white guest had access to the public-address system. Together, they set the festival's moral and political agenda and constructed the social time and space upon which the agenda rested. Aki James' muted complaint speaks volumes about the marginalisation of proper ritual practices within the festival, which reflects a much wider trend across Sarawak society. The views of the woman organiser – an

educated Christian modernist – are no less revealing. When I asked her about the religious significance of the Hornbill rite she was unsure, but dismissed the rite as yet another example of how their ancestors (*urang kelia*) subdued their young through frightening tales of ghosts and spirits (*antu*).

The festival was not a ritual in honour of the mythical Hornbill. It was a largely secular celebration in honour of modern Time. The various activities that anticipated and marked the passage from May to June were at the very peak of the festival in terms of media usage and degree of community participation. This was a very special time, an eagerly awaited time. It was abstract clock and calendar time (*jam, maia*) collectively transformed into intense social time (*rami*).

Summary and conclusion

The modern media structure Saribas Iban time and space in myriad ways. They structure day-to-day, *bilik*-based life as well as ritual and festive periods in the social life of the longhouse. In the 1980s the electrification of Semak and other longhouses within the market town orbit set them apart from the more inaccessible upriver communities (see chapter 6). The combination of electricity and television shifted the locus of evening sociability from the longhouse gallery (*ruai*) to the family *biliks*. Social life has nevertheless continued: women still chat with other women while their radio is on in their farm huts or in the gallery (*ruai*), children play games with and without modern media, and working men routinely join women, children and the elderly in social clusters facing a television set, but are by no means 'glued' to its screen, unless an exceptional action film or football match are being broadcast. Television has *transformed* everyday routines of social interaction in electrified longhouses – it has not reduced sociality. Ritual and festival periods demand the mobilization of a different set of media. Death-related rituals place restrictions on the media owing to their association with merry-making and entertainment (*hiburan*), while life-affirming rituals and festivals such as weddings and Gawai Dayak demand

a great display of media coordinated by a powerful interpersonal medium: the public-address system. Both day-to-day and festival/ritual media practices are subordinated to a hegemonic, naturalized moral-temporal ideology based on clock and calendar time. Gawai Dayak is an unequivocally postcolonial creation. It is a highly entertaining celebration of modern Time with an implicit promise: that inter-ethnic coevalness will one day bring about inter-ethnic equality.

By means of ethnographic case studies and episodes I have argued that we should eschew three related approaches in the study of time, space and the media. First, we should abandon the search for primeval non-Western systems of time-reckoning untouched by clock and calendar time; we should opt instead for ethnographic analyses that focus on the articulation between different temporalities. Second, we should reject the characterisation, common in media studies, of media consumption as a manner of 'ritual'. It is more fruitful to define ritual as a set of practices with supernatural efficacious intent carried out through orderly social time and space. Third, the blurring of ritual, performance, time and space advocated by some post-structuralist anthropologists is a strategy that fails to address (a) the importance of precedence, directionality and sequence in ritual practices and (b) the question of how different societies around the world are incorporating clock and calendar time into their ritual and pseudo-ritual practices.

Chapter 5

Saribas Iban knowledge: fuzzy media practices, a consistent ideolect

Newsreader: Coming up next on the news: terrifying inexplicable events occurring in far-away places, presented without historical or sociological context!

Husband: Geez! It looks pretty *bad* out there!

Wife: I'm certainly glad *we're* safe here at home!

Cartoon on the cover of Morley's (1992) *Television, Audiences & Cultural Studies*

There's always wars in those foreign countries!¹

Saribas Iban woman, 32

The anthropological problem of mediated knowledge

Researchers working on television and other media have broached the problem of how people in different societies interpret media products in a variety of ways. Two central questions in need of urgent ethnographic attention can be discerned from this eclectic, multi-disciplinary field of study:

1. Where on earth is the audience?

In 1992, David Morley called for the ethnographic study of the 'television audience' in the family or domestic sphere as the 'natural setting' where this medium is consumed. This relocation was a conscious move away from earlier studies which laid too much stress on textual analyses of television programmes. More recently, together with Silverstone and Hirsch (1994) he

¹ *Selalu bisi perang ba menua tasik nyin!*

has furthered this aim by researching not only television, but also a number of other information and communication technologies (ICT) within the context of London families. Researchers working in other countries have questioned the notion of the domestic as the universal 'natural setting' for media consumption. Thus, Franz (1995) has argued that in Thailand other settings, such as shops, markets and public transport may be equally important. Another social anthropologist, Skuse (1998), has studied radio listening in Afghan family rooms, male guest houses, shops, mosques and other locales. H. D. Lyons (1990) maintains that the social setting affects Nigerian responses to violence on television. In the presence of elders, young men from Benin City would demurely agree with their betters' condemnation of televised violence, but in the sole presence of their peers and the researchers, they were only too eager to extol the virtues of the genre. Likewise, in Belize men tend to be more critical in their television commentary in the rum-shop than in their homes (Wilk 1993). We should not therefore assume that the family is the key universal site of media interpretation. To be sure, Saribas Iban make use of other locales besides the *bilik*. They include the longhouse gallery, farm hut, local bus, coffee-shop, classroom, playground, etc.

Viewing practices are, like all other social practices inevitably messy and bound up with other practices. Some researchers have withdrawn from this confusion by attacking hegemonic constructions of the audience by producers (e.g. Ang 1991). Others have opted for the calmer waters of 'satinized interviews', according to Hobart (1995), who prefers to bypass the problem by speaking of 'media practices' which only partly overlap with watching television, including talking, drinking, smoking, doing housework or homework. All these practices dissolve the analytical category of 'the audience'. A similar point was made by Bausinger (1984) in the context of West German families. Below I focus on one subset of 'media practices',

namely those most closely to do with the ways in which Saribas Iban try to make sense of the world in a variety of social settings. The theoretical aim is twofold. First, to steer clear of an implicit audience vs. viewers dichotomy (the audience as a construal, the viewers as an empirical reality) present in much of media studies (Franz 1995). This dichotomy betrays, in my view, both an excessive preoccupation with television among media researchers and a naive theory of society based on a dated macro-micro distinction (cf. Giddens 1984). Second, to capture through ethnographic means some of the complexly mediated interpretive practices of Saribas Iban in the late 1990s. These include school essays (largely book-derived), public-address speeches, television commentary and radio listening.

2. What difference, if any, does literacy make in how people interpret the media?

Abu-Lughod (1997) has forcefully defended the need for an anthropological approach to television that can provide intellectuals in specific national settings with alternative views on rural populations. Media producers in developing countries, she argues, are often condescending towards what they see as the backward masses. By contrast, she considers her rural Egyptian informants to be 'rural cosmopolitan' viewers. Borrowing from Robins, she defends the anthropological study of 'discrepant cosmopolitanisms' that can be traced by the researcher to 'particular configurations of power, education and wealth in particular places' (1997:127). In a similar vein, Mankekar (1993:556) argues that poor Indian viewers are able to 'see through' to the governmental agenda in the developmentalist soap operas, and still identify with the characters. Likewise, Rofel (1994:700) discards the dichotomy resistance vs. incorporation as unhelpful. On the basis of her field research into a controversial soap opera in China, she concludes that television and other forms of popular culture are

complex sites 'for the constitution of national subjects, one that offers complicated possibilities for oppositional practices'.

All three authors are part of a recent trend in media research away from top-down, 'hypodermic' explanations of media effects. To them, the media do not define 'reality'. Rather they are 'dynamic sites of struggle[s] over representation' (Spitulnik 1993: 296). There are, however, problems with their accounts of 'subaltern viewers'. In their programmatic eagerness to elevate marginal viewers to interpretive parity with cosmopolitan viewers, these authors downplay the growing gaps in wealth, power and literate knowledge that characterize the recent history of most countries in the world. Indeed, Abu-Lughod (1997) herself recognises that the literate elites' 'discourses of enlightenment' broadcast over television can create in rural Egyptian viewers feelings of inferiority, while Mankekar (1993:555) gives the example of a lower middle-class woman in India who felt she was more discerning a viewer than members of the lower classes. Similarly, the comments of poor viewers in the Brazilian town of Gurupa upon seeing wealthy urbanites on television revealed a clear sense of collective inadequacy and failure that some explained by reference to their own racial shortcomings, others to exploitation. In Belize, the middle classes have developed folk models of the negative impact of television on the young that resemble those of an earlier generation of media researchers in the West, while the lower classes appear to be less concerned with such effects and have passionately embraced the US-dominated medium (Wilk 1993:231). Similarly, Banjarese Muslim viewers in Indonesian Borneo with a higher level of school education, most notably rural teachers, are more critical of governmental propaganda on television than less educated viewers (Caldarola 1994). In Benin City, Nigeria, the better educated parents restrict their children's viewing time, whilst most poorer viewers, such as petty traders, believe television '[teaches] children sense' (H.D. Lyons 1990: 419) and do not attempt to curtail their viewing.

All these studies cast serious doubts on Abu-Lughod's (1997) project of an ethnography of television premised on the 'discrepant cosmopolitanism' of the less educated groups in contemporary nation-states. At the same time, they suggest the urgent need to delve deeper into the role of a pre-television institution, literacy, and its supporting media, especially school textbooks, in the interpretive disparities that are bound to exist in all developing societies (cf. Morley 1980 on British audiences).

Some scholars have investigated the central role of literacy and the print media in the constitution of modern societies, a process accelerated throughout the 20th century across the world (see Gellner 1983, Anderson 1983, Goody 1987, Sweeney 1987). I believe it is here we must begin if we are to understand the role of class and education in the interpretation of media products in post-colonial societies. Below I explore the striking similarities between Goody's account of the spread of literacy in West Africa and the Saribas Iban case. It is only after we have an adequate model of the unequal impact of literate, cosmopolitan knowledge upon a given rural society that we can hope to tackle the complexities of local television 'readings'. A key notion I elaborate on throughout the chapter is 'ideolect', that is the subordinate ideology that shapes local interpretations of the world, particularly mass-mediated interpretations (see below).

In this chapter I tackle, then, two closely related problems: (a) the great diversity of interpretive media practices regularly carried out by Saribas Iban and (b) their relationship to the production and reproduction of a uniform ideolect, which in turn shapes subsequent interpretations. The first part of the chapter seeks to describe and explain the great continuity over time and consistency across social life of the Saribas Iban ideolect, a system of ideas premised on a small set of local and imported notions, notably nationalism, clock and calendar time, graphophilia (the love of print media), filial piety and

the respect of tradition (*adaf*). I examine three specific media practices that shape and are shaped by this idelect: school essays and exercises, radio and television commentary and public-address speeches. The second half of the chapter centres on the idelect's inconsistencies and to what extent they were created by early media (radio and textbooks) and exacerbated by later ones (esp. television).

Malaysia's national ideology and its sub-national derivative

In 1991, Malaysia's prime minister, Mahathir, launched a new agenda for the nation officially promoted as *Wawasan 2020* or Vision 2020. The aim was to transform Malaysia into a 'fully developed country' by that year. The five core components of this project (see Khoo 1995: 327. Gomez 1997: 169) were:

- a united, harmonious nation
- a freer capitalism
- a society driven by science and technology
- a universalizing Islam
- a family-based welfare system

Implied in the vision were

- a scripted populism
- an authoritarian government (Khoo 1995: 327)
- clock and calendar time (e.g. 2020)
- a residual anti-Communism

Mahathir's nationalism has evolved over the years from being primarily concerned with improving the economic standing of the Malays vis-a-vis the Chinese to promoting the idea of a united Malaysian nation, 'psychologically subservient to none, and respected by the peoples of other nations' (quoted in Khoo 1995: 329). This is to be achieved through an 'accelerated industrialization drive' and a more profound 'economic liberalization' (1995: 328). Science and technology are seen as central to this drive. Malaysian society is to become a 'scientific, progressive, innovative and forward-looking

society' (Gomez 1997: 169). The moral underpinning of a future national culture is to be provided by a moderate, progressive form of Islam that will produce a 'fully moral and ethical society whose citizens are strong in religious and spiritual values' (Khoo 1995: 328). Mahathir's political style has always been 'people-centred'. A former rural doctor, he believes he understands the masses' (*rakyat*) ills thoroughly. He knows 'what is good for them' (1995:200). His populism is not spontaneous; it is based on carefully worded scripts disseminated by a compliant media apparatus (1995: 201-203). Finally, Vision 2020 is designed to foster a 'mature democratic society', yet for the foreseeable future the masses are not deemed sufficiently mature to live in a democratic society (1995: 329). This view became clear during the 1998 arrest and imprisonment of Mahathir's deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, under much disputed charges of corruption and sodomy.

The official Sarawakian sub-ideology, as abstracted from the ruling coalition's, *Barisan Nasional*, Sarawak Manifesto of 1991 (in Ritchie 1994: 127-130), comprises:

- a united, harmonious state
- a freer capitalism
- sustainable land development
- balanced urban-rural development
- preservation of cultural heritage
- a more caring society with strong moral values

Implied in this sub-ideology are:

- a scripted populism
- an authoritarian government
- clock and calendar time
- a residual anti-Communism
- a lingering mistrust of Indonesia

The Sarawak state government has been led since 1981 by Taib Mahmud, a Melanau Muslim whose slogans closely resemble those of his federal mentor, Mahathir. When compared to the Mahatharist creed, however, two of the

areas listed above show some discrepancy. First, in the Sarawak sub-ideology there is one item that does not appear in its parental system of ideas: the need to achieve 'sustainable land development'. Unlike West Malaysia, Sarawak is still a predominantly rural state in which much of the land is in the hands of indigenous communities. Changes to the native customary law under Taib's leadership have gradually undermined the position of the Dayaks. His official aim is to transform Sarawak from a backward state dependent on small-holding farming to an industrialized one with large-scale estate development, timber processing (Ritchie 1994: 106-7) and an efficient tourist sector that can profit from the state's 'rich cultural heritage'. Although ostensibly committed to a balanced pattern of urban-rural development, his 'Integrated Regional Development' (IRD) concept is clearly tilted towards the urban domain. It is intended to urbanise what are seen as inefficient rural areas (Mohd. Kassim 1995).

Second, there is no mention of Islam in the Sarawak manifesto. Sarawak is again different from the Peninsula, where Muslims make up the majority of the electorate (60%), and exert a decisive influence upon electoral strategies and policy. In Sarawak, Muslims are in the minority, with only 27 % of the population (Jawan 1994: 24). Taib, the Chief Minister, may count with the support of pivotal Malay Muslim leaders in Kuala Lumpur, but he is careful not to alienate his non-Muslim voters in Sarawak. For this reason he has relentlessly expounded his 'politics of development' through the press, hoardings, speeches and other means (see chapter 2), as a healthy alternative to the 'communal politics' allegedly pursued by his Dayakist opponents (Ritchie 1993: 106).

The Saribas Iban idelect

Having sketched the official, and therefore contested, Malaysian ideology

and its Sarawakian derivation or sub-ideology, I would now like to outline the Saribas Iban local ideology, which I shall call an 'ideolect'². This neologism is a combination of the terms 'ideology' and 'dialect'. It is intended to convey the localized, politically marginal nature of the Saribas Iban system of ideas; a system which integrates ideas from the literate, mass-mediated power centres -- Kuala Lumpur and Kuching -- with local ideas inherited from an oral tradition based in the longhouse. The linguist Max Weinreich once described a language as 'a dialect with an army and a navy' (Pinker 1994: 28). In the context of the ongoing process of nation-building in Malaysia, the Saribas ideolect can be seen as 'an ideology without a mass media outlet', that is a subaltern system of ideas derived to a large extent from the national (esp. television and textbooks) and state (esp. radio) mass media which in turn does not contribute much to the national ideology. The following core of societal goals is abstracted from three sets of media practices that I examine below: school essays, radio and television commentary and microphone-mediated longhouse speeches:

- a united, harmonious nation, state, and longhouse
- a society driven by 'book knowledge' (*penemu surat*)
- an indigenous form of Christianity
- a well-preserved local heritage (*adat kami*)
- educated Iban who respect and care for their parents and kin

When compared to the national ideology that prevailed in 1997 -- late Mahathirism -- two areas stand out as divergent. First, Saribas Iban do not appear too enthused with the idea of their children becoming entrepreneurs. The dream of local parents is to see at least one of their offspring secure a job in the government service, the exception being those parents who send their children to the local Chinese school in the hope that they will acquire the necessary linguistic and commercial skills to succeed in the Chinese-

² The term 'ideolect' should not be confused with its homophone 'idiolect', which means 'the variety or form of language used by an individual' (*Collins English Dictionary* 1994).

dominated private sector. In terms of Bourdieu's (1998) theory of capital, Saribas Iban parents, and their children, are far more interested in the latter's accumulation of *cultural capital* (i.e. official Malay[sian] culture) than they are in their accumulation of economic capital (i.e. Chinese commercial culture). The reasons are explored below. A second deviation from Mahathirism is the choice of universal religion. For over a century now, Saribas Iban have been converting to Christianity, primarily to Anglicanism, while seeking to reconcile the new faith and its print media with their oral traditions. Christianity has become a fundamental boundary-marker with regard to the hegemonic Malay-Muslim society and its national state 'shell' (cf. Gellner 1983: 140-143). On the other hand, the basic principles of both faiths as propagated in Sarawak -- monotheism, universalism and developmentalism -- are indistinguishable. As such, they draw educated Sarawakians from both sides of the religious divide closer together in ideological terms while, paradoxically, strengthening the ethnic boundaries through conspicuous differences such as clothing and the consumption, or not, of pork and alcoholic beverages.

When compared to the Sarawak state sub-ideology, the Saribas ideolect deviates on one important count: for the locals, developing their land for commercial uses is not a priority. This is, of course, closely related to their aforesaid lack of capitalist inclinations. Farming is the unenviable fate of those young men and women who fail to reach a high standard of living in the wider society. An educated Iban is an outmigrated Iban. This maxim is in conflict with the penultimate societal goal enunciated above: 'a well-preserved local heritage (*adat kami*)'. How to preserve their heritage when their most capable men and women leave the longhouse is a chronic problem. Below I study this problem in the unlikely context of people's reactions to a specific television genre: Malay soaps.

These core ideas are articulated, expressed, and enacted in a variety of settings both during everyday life and ritual or para-ritual occasions. They provide Saribas Iban of all ages with a common interpretive paradigm with which to make some sense of the world around them, including the mediated worlds brought into the domestic sphere by radio and television. They form a highly consistent and predictable, yet subtly mediated, idelect unique to this riverine region but with strong family resemblances to the idelects of the Skrang (see chapter 6) and, one would expect (pending further research), other Iban rivers as well. In the following sections I explore the historical background to this idelect, as well as the various agents and media that sustained it in the late 1990s.

Literacy and the birth of a modern idelect

Jack Goody (1987: 139) has studied the spread of literacy into rural West Africa. He argues that in the early days literacy was used as an alternative means of communicating with supernatural agents. There was no shame in being illiterate. Gradually, with the consolidation of a colonial administration, upward mobility was associated with those who, in the regional English dialect, 'know book'. For instance, legal innovations in Ghana in the 1930s put pressure on the native chiefs to become literate. The country's first indigenous members of parliament, elected in 1951, were school teachers and clerks rather than native chiefs. The illiterate were effectively barred from the new corridors of power. The arrival of radio kept the elders informed of developments in the wider national arena, but it could not substitute for 'know book' (1987: 140-3). To Goody, the most radical impact of literacy upon rural populations in West Africa is that 'those who remain behind...begin to see themselves as inferior to those who have learnt book and gone away' (1987: 146).

An akin process took place in rural Sarawak throughout the same period. The Iban equivalent of 'know book' is the strikingly similar *nemu surat*, a term frequently used by illiterate farmers to describe the brighter longhouse youngsters, or the new generations as a whole. By contrast, they themselves 'don't know book', *nadai nemu surat*. The post-war generation of school-educated Saribas Iban that manned Radio Sarawak and the Borneo Literature Bureau, described in chapter 2, were part of a new order of knowledge that has strengthened its hold over rural Sarawak over the decades. With the spread of rural schools across the state that began in the 1960s (Jawan 1994:172-4), the vast majority of Saribas Iban under the age of 35 have acquired at least basic literacy skills.

Even more important than the vast reach of literacy is the continued role of schools and their central print medium, the textbook, as instruments to separate out young rural Iban into two categories: a 'bright' (*pandai*) minority and a 'stupid' (*beli*) majority. Seymour (1974) observed the process first-hand in Sarawak's Second Division in the early 1970s. She found a gulf between the administration's lofty ideal of the rural school as a tool of national development aimed at the backward masses and the actual practices of teachers and parents. The real goal of the teachers was to prepare a small handful of pupils from every class for secondary school. They would openly praise the high achievers and deprecate slower pupils as lazy and stupid. Performance was largely evaluated on the basis of mechanical, uncritical reading and writing skills (1974: 282-4). Most parents were not concerned about teaching methods or the potential uses of the new knowledge in the local economy. They saw the school as the only possible avenue for their children's, especially the boys', upward and outward mobility (1974: 282) away from what was now described as 'rural poverty' (*kami urang bumai merinsa*).

The life histories of Semak residents who are now in their 40s and 50s confirm Seymour's account of the rural primary school as a manner of occupational sorting office.

1. Apai Dora, aged 46 in 1997, entered school in Betong (Saribas) in 1961, at the age of 10. He used a longboat to paddle to school from his father's longhouse, a journey that could take from thirty to sixty minutes depending on the current. His sixth year of primary was particularly 'tough' (*pedis*), for out of 88 pupils only 17 made it to secondary, himself included. He failed however his Form 3 examinations and had to give up his formal education.
2. Sulah is a paddy farmer in her late 40s. She went to school until Primary 5. In those days, she recalls, there was no piped water or electricity. The main road had already been built, but there was no bus service. There were many boarders, but Sulah was not allowed to board because of Semak's proximity to the school. All pupils were required to help with the construction and care of a fish pond. They also grew vegetables, for which the teacher would reward them with a dollar every year, and cleaned the school in teams. 'We had to be clean'. The principle guiding many school activities was, she explains, *gotong-royong*, a Malay term meaning 'cooperative undertaking'. Unlike youngsters today, Sulah's generation, she says, were highly disciplined. There was no smoking. The few mischievous (*manchal*) boys were made to roast in the sun (*jemboi*) for hours on end. Literacy was the top priority. 'They made us write a lot. I still know how to'. Lessons were in English or Iban, although Sulah, like most of her contemporaries, never learnt 'deep English' (*Inglis dalam*). She left school early because her mother needed help in their crowded *bilik*. 'Nowadays who wants to do that?'. In those days girls were generally not encouraged to attend school for too long, if at all. Sulah's older sister, Iding, has no schooling. As a girl she was busy helping her mother raise their many brothers. 'My mother wouldn't send me to school' (*Indai aku enda ngasoh belajar sekula*). She now regrets it: 'It's a wretched life in the longhouse if you didn't go to school' (*Merinsa ba rumah panjai 'ti nadai sekula*).

A parallel formative influence was radio. For many Saribas Iban growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, whether at home or as immigrants in an urban area, literate or illiterate, the Iban Section provided a constant source of news about and entertainment from the wider society at a time of far-reaching social, political and economic changes. In those days, the Iban Section had a strong Saribas flavour to it (see chapter 2). It was a very powerful disseminator of the developmentalist creed they had learnt at school. This creed maintained that individual development through book learning should serve the common good rather than selfish pursuits. As in West Africa, however, listening to the radio was no substitute for knowing book³.

³H.D. Lyons (1990: 421) describes a similar ideology in Nigeria.

In biographical terms, the third influential institution in the lives of many rural Iban has been mentioned in previous chapters: it is known as *bejalai* or *pegi*, a journey traditionally undertaken by young bachelors in search of adventure, employment and valuable artefacts to add to the *bilik*-family heirloom (*pesaka*).

When Apai Dora failed his Form 3 examinations, he decided it was time to *pegi*. 'I was not fit for farming' (*Aku enda tan bumai*). In 1970 he worked as a 'coolie' (*kuli*) for a Chinese *towkay* at a sawmill near the divisional capital. From 1973 to 1976, until the age of 25, he worked at building sites in Brunei, where the wages were higher than in Sarawak. On returning to Semak he felt he had no choice but to take up pepper growing and farming. In 1983 he left again for Brunei, where he worked as a labourer for another three years, after which he once again returned to the longhouse.

The institution of *bejalai* is gradually turning into the rural-urban-rural oscillations that characterize the unstable economies of most developing countries (Kedit 1993: 152, Goody 1987: 146). As such, it is no longer restricted to men. From the end of the Japanese Occupation onwards, increasing numbers of young women have emigrated from Saribas longhouses to other areas in search of waged employment or to join their husbands. Some settled permanently in urban areas, while others returned to their longhouses. Sulah belongs to the latter category:

In 1980 Semak residents lived in small makeshift houses (*dampa*) while they built a new longhouse. In order to raise funds towards the construction costs, Sulah moved to Bintulu for a year to work as a maid for wealthy relations. The following year she moved to Kuching to work for another highly educated branch of her kinsmen (*kaban*). 'They paid a thousand ringgit a month rent. I didn't pay any'. Her starting wages were RM 120, then RM 150, of which she would send RM 50 to her parents through registered mail. In 1982 her ageing parents asked her to return to the family *bilik*. But there was 'no money to be made' at Semak, so she moved out again, on this occasion to Simanggang, to look after an Iban teacher's baby daughter.

This is not the place to relate in any detail Apai Dora's and Sulah's complex migratory histories⁴. The point to be made is that they both acquired a basic school education that did not equip them for a successful career in the urban centres. Instead, it prepared them for a low-skilled, low-waged cycle of relocations to and from their longhouse *bilik*. Their experiences in the

⁴ For a detailed study of the Iban institution of *bejalai*, see Kedit (1993).

employment of wealthy Iban relations or Chinese *towkay* were similar to those of their semi-educated rural brethren everywhere. They taught them more vividly than any school lesson that wealth and power only come to those with a solid educational background and a supportive social network. They taught them about the growing disparities between the rural poor and the urban rich, and about a middle level (*pangkat*) available to rural Iban who have completed their secondary education: the expanding lower ranks of the government service comprised of clerks, nurses, teachers and others. The dream of a 'pleasant' (*nyamai*) life employment in the public sector has remained a central component of the Saribas ideolect ever since the spread of literacy, and has been passed down to the younger generations.

A fourth source of pro-literacy and pro-development ideas was the growing number of developmental agents operating in the Saribas from the 1960s onwards, including politicians, literate headmen, doctors, nurses, missionaries and catechists. Their messages reiterated a plain, undisputed idea: success belongs not only to the hard-working, it belongs to the hard-working *and highly literate*.

All four sources of ideology were integrated by Saribas Iban during their formative years with ideas learnt informally in the longhouse to form an ideolect largely shared with their kin and neighbours. The new ideas were grafted onto a pre-state Iban system of ideas which was modified in the process. Richards (1981: 3) defines the Iban word *adat* as 'Way of life, basic values, culture, accepted code of conduct, manners, and convention', adding that generally this term is used to signify 'custom, law, behaviour, tradition'. With the advent and consolidation of state and capitalist institutions in Sarawak, the field of action formerly covered by *adat*, in the broad sense of 'way of life', has branched out into a number of modern fields led by literate professionals. In all these fields, new forms of custom, law, behaviour and

tradition have eroded or replaced the longhouse-based *adat*. Even those spheres of life that belong strictly within the longhouse confines (*menoa*), such as the ritual payment of fines (*tunggu*) have been compiled and codified by government officials. Increasingly, literate headmen 'go by the book', that is by the standardized *Adat Iban Order* of 1993, rather than by the unwritten longhouse customary law (*adat rumah*). Everywhere in Sarawak, illiterate headmen, branded by all, including themselves, as ignorant of matters modern (*enda nemu utai baru*), are being replaced by younger literate men. The process is irreversible, and there is little resistance to it, for no one doubts the power of the printed word to create wealth and political clout.

Boys will be policemen

In a recent collection of essays on the 'ethnography of moralities', Howell (1997: 4) stresses the dynamic relationship between moral values and social practices: 'Values are continuously changing and adapting through actual choices and practices, while, at the same time, they continue to inform and shape choices and practices'. Contra Howell, I wish to argue that in the case of Saribas Iban society, values are not 'continuously changing'. Despite the dramatic pace of technological and economic change experienced by all middle-aged residents, there has been a remarkable continuity in the local value system. As Raymond Williams remarked long ago: 'A main characteristic of our society is a willed coexistence of very new technology and very old social forms' (in Silverstone and Hirsch 1994: 1).

At the end of a list of thorny methodological questions to do with morality, Howell (1997: 5) asks: 'Which social domains most profoundly articulate moral values and which are most (or least) affected by such?'. In what follows, I will argue that *the moral order of Saribas Iban children is most explicitly and repeatedly articulated through classroom media practices in*

which they are asked to faithfully reproduce, often verbatim, the dominant modernist ideolect shared by their teachers, parents and adult kin. Saribas children learn about their world in a variety of ways -- through social interaction with adults and other children, through radio, television, comics, and textbooks, through direct contact with a man-made environment, etc. Yet it is only in the context of the teacher-pupil relationship, and mostly through written tasks such as essays and exams, that they are asked to spell out a preformed moral order. In other contexts, for instance while they are watching television, moral ideas remain implicit or at best poorly articulated. Therefore, in terms of moral and ideological reproduction during childhood, the school essay is a far more interesting, and researchable, media practice than watching television.

In July 1997 I asked two Iban language teachers in the Saribas to set the following optional essay questions to 63 lower secondary (*Tingkatan 1* and *2*) pupils:

1. *Hobi (pengerindu) maia lapang*
Your favourite hobby or hobbies
2. *Julok ati nuan jemah ila*
What do you want to be when you grow up?
3. *Cherita television ti pemadu dikerindu ka nuan*
Your favourite television programmes
4. *Nama tuju 'Wawasan 2020'?*
What are the aims of Vision 2020?

Most Form 1 pupils chose to answer either the first or the second question, while most Form 2 pupils wrote about the first one. Both groups, however, wrote along very similar lines. Most of the boys would like to become either policemen, soldiers or football players. I will concentrate on the first category (policemen) in order to trace this seemingly free, individual career choice to conditioning from the wider interpersonal and mediated milieux in which boys grow up. Ganggong, aged 13, is well aware of the importance of written

exams:

When I grow up I want to be a policeman. I like the idea because one day I want to be a policeman who people like and are fond of. If I want to become a policeman I have to pass the PMR, SPM, and SPTEM exams and go to the highest school of all, that is university. The reason why I want to become a policeman is so I can arrest [wrongdoers] and protect our land. So that our land is in peace and harmony and free from troubles. If I become a policeman I will not become just any ordinary policeman (*polis ngapa*), I want to be an ASP, that is a police chief or officer. If I become a policeman I must behave well so that there are no complaints about us. If I become a policeman I must respect the local customs (*adat*). People who become policemen must be strong and honest (*lurus ati*) and feel compassion towards others (*sinu ka orang*) and must always help others⁵.

I have to become a policeman because I really like this job. If there is a thief I can arrest him and put him in jail. This is why we have to obey the law so that we're not arrested by me.

Ganggong's intention of studying hard in order to secure a high social status is tempered with his desire to help others by protecting them from wrongdoers. This same balanced outlook is expressed by others, including Williamson:

When I grow up I would like to be a police officer. The reason I have chosen this job is because I can help people like if somebody's house has been burgled I can help catch the person who did it.

Chris, who accidentally collapsed all four essay questions into one, finds in the protagonists of an American serial his policing role-models for the highly developed Malaysia of the year 2020. His view of the future is undoubtedly influenced by the electronic media:

When I grow up I would like to be a policeman. I want to arrest people who have committed crimes and protect the country so that there is not one single person left among all the people of Sarawak committing crimes. [M]y favourite TV programme is The X-Files. It is about two FBI agents who have not lost hope (*M. putus asa*) and are still looking for evidence, they are looking for people who have committed crimes. We all know what the aims of Vision 2020 are. I reckon there will be no cars in the future only aircraft because in the year 2020 Malaysia will already be developed (*M. maju*)[...] Perhaps we will have telephones at home and we will be able to see the picture on television. Who knows, there may be more and stranger diseases. Perhaps the police will carry laser guns.

⁵ This sequence of pitying followed by assisting the needy has deep cultural roots. It closely resembles one of Richards' (1981: 350) examples of the uses of the term *sinu*: '*laban penyinu' hati ia, ia ngusong aku*, because he was moved to pity, he came to help me'.

The X-Files is a finely crafted and acted US serial on the efforts of two glamorous FBI agents, Mulder and Scully, to solve classified cases involving supernatural beings or humans with so-called paranormal powers. It is highly popular with Saribas Iban viewers under the age of 35, partly perhaps because it resonates with indigenous Iban notions about *antu* and other supernatural agents, and partly as an expression of the wider archipelagic interest in such beings, now avidly published as inexpensive pulp fiction in Malay and Indonesian. It is unlikely, however, that Chris can follow the fast-moving plots with any accuracy by reading the fleeting Malay subtitles. This essay passage reveals the kind of interpretive work he has carried out on the serial. In short, he has integrated a rather subtle (by television standards) foreign serial into a simple, schematic, ideolectal representation of the work of policemen everywhere: 'they are looking for people who have committed crimes'. In fact, Mulder and Scully, two self-assured Ivy League graduates, are far more interested in probing into the paranormal than they are in mundane policing tasks⁶. Arresting simple mortals was the speciality of Starsky and Hutch and other unsophisticated *orang polis* familiar to Saribas Iban viewers of an earlier generation.

Another aspiring policeman, Nyawai, weaves together three recurrent concerns of young Saribas Iban: (1) farming as the unenviable fate of those who fail to excel at school, (2) the duty to repay one's parents for all their efforts, and (3) the need to secure the national borders from the threat of unidentified 'foreigners':

When I grow up I would like to be a policeman if I can. The reason I want to be a policeman is to protect the behaviour (*ulah*) and the well-being of our country. [...] If I cannot become a policeman I will work in the longhouse with my parents. I always think of what I want to be when I grow up.

⁶ *The X-Files* has generated a strong international following, including a large number of web sites and chat groups on the Internet. For a range of textual analyses of this series see Lavery *et al* (1996).

Another reason why I want to be a policeman is because policemen do not have to do a lot of heavy work. [...] Another reason why I want to be a policeman is because I want to protect the masses (*rayat*) from the troublemakers who come in from other countries. I want to become a policeman so that I can repay the generosity of my parents who pay for my school.

Similarly, Simon writes:

When I grow up I want to be a policeman. The reason why I would like to be a policeman is because I want to protect the country.

Where did these 'stable representations' (Sperber 1996: 57-59) about a future career come from? How did they spread and consolidate? I believe they are prevalent because they are supported by a number of entwined institutions, agents and media, notably: (a) the long-standing Iban preference for employment in the security forces, a culturally-sanctioned legacy from the Brookes' 'pacification' of Sarawak, based on the principle of *divide et impera* (b) positive textbook and radio representations of the police as 'our friends' (*pangan kita*) since the Communist troubles in the 1960s, which influenced an earlier Iban generation, (c) newer versions of these early propaganda items repeatedly influencing the present generation, (d) the daily television spots showing proud uniformed men parading across Kuala Lumpur to mark special days on the national calendar, (e) glamorous television shows such as *The X-Files*, and (f) the compatibility of this profession with core components of the Saribas Iban idelect, such as courage (*pemerani*), endurance (*tan, naka*), personal achievement (*niki pangkat*), a modernist desire to escape from rural backwardness, a conservative love of law and order, and the customary obligation to help kindred in need (*nulung kaban*).

A comparison of three items from school textbooks demonstrates the unbroken continuity of these representations since the advent of the mass print media. In Buma's pioneering Iban textbook, *Pelajar Iban 2*, published in 1970, we find:

A POLICEMAN

Laja is a policeman. He joined the police when he was still young. Many people besides Laja join the police.

Every morning Laja practises how to parade. He parades with a rifle. Many other policemen parade with Laja. They parade in a field. Often they march to a piece of music. The music is played by a band. After he has finished parading, Laja works in an office. He often guards the office, too. He carries a rifle.

There are times when Laja guards the main road. He looks out for people who drive in the middle of the road. When people ask for help, Laja helps them. Laja is extremely kind. He always helps people. He never gets angry. He feels compassion towards people.

Laja always visits Beji and family. Laja often spends the night there. Beji likes Laja. Laja tells Beji about his job. Beji understands the job. He wants to be a policeman. Beji knows how to feel compassion towards people. He is kind to people.

Many people know Laja. They praise him. They say he is a kind policeman. They are not afraid of talking to him. Even their children are not scared. They are Laja's friends.

The police are our friends. The police help us. We should not be scared of the police. We ought to be friends with the police. They protect us.

These flattering accounts were bolstered through radio broadcasts, political rallies and interpersonal relations to entice a new generation of Iban males to join the police and armed forces in the 1960s and 1970s, at the height of the Indonesian and communist insurgency. Twenty-seven years on, an Iban-language book written by and for Primary 6 teachers, *Malin Pengajar Jaku Iban Taun 6*, published in 1997, furthers the same cause among a new generation:

ON BECOMING A POLICEMAN

In my view, not many people really understand the work of the police. The truth is that the police are our friends.

The work of the police is to protect people and country, and arrest those who steal, murder, swindle and commit many other crimes. The police do not arrest people who have not broken the laws passed by our government.

This is why the task of those who become policemen is not an easy one. It is a very stressful job. They always have to beware of any incident or misfortune that may befall them should they not be alert, for they themselves would be the first to be struck by such a misfortune.

We children or citizens of Malaysia should always help the police who protect the lives and country of the masses so that our troubles will lessen as time goes by. Therefore we should all stand behind our police force to guarantee the safety of our citizens and country.

In addition to ideological continuity over time these print media products display a high degree of consistency across the various school subjects, forming an intricate web of mutually reinforcing ideas, *a stable framework of*

intertextual consistency. Take this poetic example from the Form 1 English textbook (Chua 1996:234):

AUNT SUNITA

Have you ever seen Aunt Sunita?
So very smart she looks,
She drives her blue and white police car,
And catches all the crooks.

She writes many reports,
She directs traffic well,
Everyone gives her support,
So that she can do her duty well.

She helps everyone, young and old,
She's friendly and always fair,
People who do what they are told,
Won't be afraid when she is there.

Besides historical continuity and intertextual consistency, this ode exemplifies one significant change in Malaysian society over the past two decades: the increasingly active role of women in fields previously monopolised by men. In chapter 2 we saw that the first generation of Saribas Iban teachers to publish with the Borneo Literature Bureau was exclusively male. I also quoted earlier two sisters from Semak Longhouse whose *bilik*-family priorities prevented them from either attending school or furthering their education beyond primary school.

Matters for girls are far better today. The Saribas Iban ideolect, especially as it is routinely articulated by influential adults, does not single out boys as their *bilik*-families' sole hope for educational achievement. Today boys and girls stand, as far as schooling is concerned, on an equal footing. In fact, teachers and parents alike often remark that girls are better pupils, with a keener interest in reading for pleasure and enlightenment outside school hours, a view corroborated by a survey I carried out in the Betong public library (see chapter 4) and participant observation in longhouses.

Girls will be teachers

A majority of girls expressed a preference for a career in teaching. Notice the moral grounds on which Lucy justifies her choice:

When I grow up I would like to be a teacher. The reason why I would like to be a teacher is because I want to make worthy persons (*urang ka beguna*) out of children and teach them the difference between right and wrong (*nama utai ti patu[t] dikereja enggau utai ti enda patut dikereja*)

The Saribas idelect, as I argued earlier, clearly separates out intelligent and well-behaved children from stupid and badly behaved ones. Patricia, aged 13, writes:

Compare those children who have not learnt anything with the clever ones. Look how the stupid children wander aimlessly around the market town (*pasar*).

With adequate guidance, some children can become intelligent. Magda explains:

The reason why I want to be a teacher is to teach children so that one day they will be well-behaved⁷ and intelligent (*awak ka mereti serta pandai jemah ila*).

A fourth girl, Lisa, draws upon the ideolectal emphasis on policing to imagine her future teaching practice:

When they are too noisy I will have to report them [...] When they run away from the classroom, the teachers must look for them until they find them so that they do not get lost

In the Saribas idelect, high moral standards are often associated with filial piety. Molly conjoins piety with individual achievement in her career projection:

When I grow up I would like to be a teacher. The reason I've chosen this job is because I want to teach young children, so that they grow up to be clever and to respect their parents (*awak ka sida pandai enggau hormat apai indai sida*).

Saribas Iban are agreed that one fundamental prerequisite for professional

⁷ Jawan (1994: 268) glosses *enda mereti* as 'bad mannered; mischievous'

success is a fluency in reading and writing. If one cannot read, says Tanya, from Form 1, 'people will call one letter-blind (*buta urup*)'. Many girls mentioned a keen interest in the print media. Notice again the explicit moralistic tone of their essays:

1. Madeline, Form 1: Every human being must have a hobby. My hobbies are reading story books and studying. The reason why I chose these hobbies is because we benefit from them (*meri penguntung ngagai kita*).

2. Molly, Form 1: I like playing with my friends [...]. I also enjoy reading story books, magazines, and newspapers in my *bilik* [...]. They not only fill in my spare time but also make me more intelligent (*meri pemandai ngagai aku*).

3. Sylvia, Form 1: I always read story books in my spare time. Reading story books makes us more intelligent. They also provide us with moral teachings (*jako ngajar*) for example people who are obsessed with money will end up with nothing. I always read stories about ghosts and spirits (*antu*) and stories that move me to pity (*ngasoh ati aku berasai sinu*).

4. Alison, Form 2: Every human being has a hobby. My favourite hobbies are playing volleyball and reading story books. I always read story books in my spare time. Reading story books makes me and everybody else more intelligent. Intelligence comes not only from textbooks. But also from story books.

Reading books helps me to fill in my spare time [and keeps me away] from wrongdoing.

When we go to the public library we must have seen a sentence that reads 'Reading is the Bridge to Knowledge'. Thus reads the moral teaching for those of you who are not too fond of reading (*Nya munyi jako peransang ngagai kita ti enda berapa ka macha bup*).

The final two sentences are exemplary. They capture perfectly the style, moral tone and ideolectal certainties that result from years of joint school, longhouse and mass media indoctrination. Alison's memorisation of the state's graphophilic slogan and her slippage into the second person in order to brandish the slogan against her sluggish classmates prove to what extent the hegemonic ideolect has been internalized by Saribas children -- *especially by those who do well at school*. In turn, it is the latter who will in future reproduce these ideas from positions of influence. The main features of that ideolect, as expressed on paper, can be summarized in one imaginary essay paragraph based on a close reading of 63 real essays:

IDEOLEKT KITAI

Semua orang patut bisi julok hati jemah ila. Semua kitai mensia mesti belajar bebendar ba sekula awak ka ulih nyadi orang ti beguna, orang ti nemu nama utai ti patut dikereja enggau utai ti enda patut di kereja. Buku meri pemandai. Anang muai jam, laban 'masa itu emas'. Kitai Iban bedau tentu mansang enti banding enggau bansa bukai, baka sida Melayu enggau China. Patut kitai anembiak Iban sama seati nuju pemansang menoa kitai maia taun 2020.

Menua kitai enda tau enda dijaga ari dikachau orang ti datai ari menoa bukai. Kitai Iban rebak baru tu ti udah ngambi pangkat jemah ila enggai sumbong enggau urang tuai. Patut kitai meri basa enggau sukong ngagai apai indai enggau semua urang tuai ti bukai ke bisi nulong kitai maia agi besekula.

OUR IDEOLECT

Everyone should have a goal in life. All human beings must go to school and study very hard so that they can one day become worthy persons, persons who know the difference between right and wrong. Books make us intelligent. Do not waste time, for 'Time is Gold'. We Iban are not as developed as other races such as the Malays or the Chinese. We Iban children should unite to develop our country by the year 2020. Our nation must be protected from troublemakers arriving from foreign countries. Those of us Iban from the new generation who manage to achieve a higher status should not be arrogant towards our elders. We should respect and support our parents and all the other adults who helped us while we were still at school.

'Knowing book': a shared paradigm of inference

To understand the huge significance of this standardized cluster of beliefs we need a working theory of human belief acquisition. Richard Rorty (1991: 93), the pragmatist philosopher, has developed one. He encourages us to think of human minds as 'webs of beliefs and desires, of sentential attitudes -- webs which continually reweave themselves so as to accommodate new sentential attitudes'. Following Bain and Peirce, he treats beliefs as 'habits of action' which produce bodily movements and, 'by shoving items in the environment around, produce new beliefs to be woven in, which in turn produce new actions, and so on for as long as the organism survives'. Following Dewey, Rorty (1991: 94) makes a distinction of degree between 'habit' and 'inquiry'.

At one end of a spectrum are situations where minimal reweaving is required -- as when one moves one's left hand to pick up the fork, comes to believe that it is not there but rather on the other side of the plate, and so moves one's right hand. The reweaving involved in assimilating the novel belief 'The fork is on the wrong side' is usually too minimal to deserve the name of 'inquiry'. But sometimes, in special situations, the acquisition of that belief will provoke the sort of large-scale, conscious, deliberate reweaving which does deserve that name. It might, for instance, lead one to realize that one's host is not who he claims to be, but a daring foreign impostor - a revelation which leads one to rethink one's long-term plans and, ultimately, the meaning of one's life. The same goes for the incursion of the belief that there are unexpected patterns of mould in a Petri dish, or unexpected flecks on a telescopic image. They may lead to 'reflex' actions or they may initiate scientific breakthroughs. Which they do is a matter of what *other* beliefs happen to make up the mechanism which is reweaving itself.

Rorty (1991: 94-5) also distinguishes between 'paradigms of inference' and 'paradigms of imagination'. The former occur when the logical space does not change, that is 'when no new candidates for belief are introduced', for instance when we add up a column of figures or run down a flow-chart. Paradigms of imagination include 'the new, metaphorical use of old words (e.g. *gravitas*), the invention of neologisms (e.g., 'gene'), and the colligation of hitherto unrelated texts' such as Derrida's study of Hegel and Genet or Geertz's juxtaposition of cockfights and Northrop Frye. In our world there is a hierarchy of

increasingly complex adjustments to novel stimulation - the hierarchy which has amoebae adjusting themselves to changed water temperature at the bottom, bees dancing and chess players check-mating in the middle, and people fomenting scientific, artistic and political revolutions at the top (1991:95).

This foray into Rorty's account of inquiry as recontextualization was necessary in order to situate the media-related learning practices of Saribas Iban children. It should be apparent from the essay extracts given above that these children operate largely within a paradigm of inference. Their teachers, parents, peers, textbooks, story books, and television all provide them with highly consistent chunks of knowledge about the world. Over the years they learn how to practise 'minimal reweaving' in order to incorporate new items into their web of beliefs and desires. Some examples from Tracy's (aged 10) Iban language exercise book will clarify this point. On 17 February 1997 she was set the following tasks:

Tulis sekeda ari orang ti patut dibebasa ka kitai ke anembiak
[List some of the people we children should respect]

Nama pengawa ti patut dikereja kitai dikena nulung apai-indai?
[What kinds of things should we do to help our parents?]

Kati ko kitai tau malas budi apai-indai kitai ti udah ngaga leboh agi mit sampai ka besai?
[Can we ever repay the kindness our parents have shown us all through our lives?]

The expected 'correct' answers are, of course, entirely consistent with the form and content of the essays studied earlier. A week later, Tracy had to

rearrange jumbled sentences, a classic language learning activity which in her school often comes with moral strings attached:

1. *betundi leboh anang kelas dalam pengajar ngajar enti*
[joke while do not classroom in the teacher teaching while]

[Answer: Do not joke in the classroom while the teacher is teaching]

2. *sebedau jari kitai dulu makai basu utai*
[before hands we before eat wash (any)thing]

[Answer: We must wash our hands before we eat anything]

etc.

These exercises add very little to the child's web of beliefs and desires. They are hackneyed, predictable and demand no inquiry beyond their tight parameters. There is no 'colligation of hitherto unrelated texts' at work, but rather the tedious reproduction of well-established moral certainties. Instead of metaphorical leaps of imagination, pupils are expected to work metonymically to fill in gaps or reorder pre-set bits of information. This kind of low-order inferential learning appears to be prevalent across the Malaysian educational system⁸.

Inferential games Saribas Iban children play

To paraphrase a Saribas Iban school girl, humans are not robots. Local children continually transform media items from the classroom, public library, *bilik* and other settings into resources for their active social lives, a transformation Silverstone *et al* (1994) call 'conversion'. Their two key conversion sites are the school playground and the longhouse gallery (*ruai*),

⁸ According to Shaw (*Newsweek* 1/9/1997), when the currency crisis of 1997 struck Southeast Asia (see this chapter, below), governments in the region spent \$15 billion in foreign exchange markets, 'all for naught'. This sum, he argues, would have sufficed to endow a number of world-class universities in the region. In his view, without 'intellectual capital' Southeast Asia will remain a centre for cheap labour and low margin products, and will still have to rely on higher-cost, knowledge-intensive imports from the developed countries. See also Jayum (1994:208-13) on the politics of rural education in Sarawak and Sweeney (1987) on orality and literacy among Peninsular Malay university students.

where they often play during the late afternoon and at weekends. Sometimes they use the *ruai* as the setting where they transform print media into TV-inspired drama:

Semak Longhouse, 24 March 1997. This afternoon I saw Sue, 11, sitting behind a chair in the *ruai* and reading a news bulletin from her Bahasa Malaysia textbook to an audience of half a dozen tiny 'viewers'. The back of the chair was her screen. They were all fully concentrated.

Alternatively, they may transform the family *bilik* into a textbook-mediated classroom:

18 December 1997. Sue has gathered her younger sister and cousins around a makeshift whiteboard in her *bilik*. They are playing teachers and pupils, and spend most of their time practising how to spell. The television is showing *Sesame Street* but nobody is really interested. Every now and again Garan, a boy aged 8, will move closer to the television screen in search of action. He cannot follow the American English dialogue, and unfortunately there is little action. A Native American puppet boy is showing his white friend pictures of his extended family. The white boy is amazed at the contrast with his own small family. Garan soon tires of the unintelligible nasal patter and returns to the imaginary classroom. Later on in the show one of the puppets is humming a catchy tune. This part of the programme Garan and others do enjoy, and soon they are all humming along.

They might also transform television or radio materials into drawings or songs...

8 July 1997. At 5pm the kids are unusually quiet. They are sitting in the *ruai*. One of them is busy drawing the cat from Along [a TV programme for children] while his chums look on. At 6 pm I can hear Tina singing the Vision 2020 song⁹ from her *bilik*. The little ones are trying to follow her lead. I think they have the radio on.

At other times they turn hot video materials into cool drama...

18 December 1997. Apai Atong has some relations visiting from Kuching over the Christmas holiday. As I walk down the *ruai*, the 11-year old city boy who loves action videos yells in American 'Freeze!!' as he points an invisible gun at me. I freeze.

Or they may playfully upgrade their media technology:

25 May 1997. While videotaping the Gawai Dayak festival in the *ruai* I noticed little Morgan, 3, lying on a woven mat (*tika*) while he simultaneously took his bottle and confidently 'filmed'

9. A catchy propaganda tune repeatedly broadcast over Malaysia's TV and radio stations. The aim is to promote PM Mahathir's dream of achieving a fully developed Malaysia with a strong national culture by the year 2020.

the festival with a toy photographic camera.

Parish (1997: 362) maintains that in the 'creative nonreality of play', everyday actions and objects 'are subject to playful transformations (a rock into a car, a toy into a person, self into something else) in ways that may help individuals explore culture and self, learn about society and social roles, express feelings, and reorganize thought processes'.¹⁰ To what extent does this model apply to the Saribas Iban case? Or do these games merely reinforce ideolectal items learned from their teachers, parents, and older children? In my view these games do indeed help Saribas Iban children 'explore culture and self' and so on, but they do so along well-trodden discursive and moral paths. In other words, they reproduce quite faithfully the dominant idelect. Take the *Sesame Street* example, where two powerful media -- television and textbook -- occupied the same strip of social time and space. Television viewing was severely impaired owing to (a) the novelty of the power-laden game, (b) the children's lack of competence in both English (the show was not subtitled) and in the peculiarities of America's current multicultural ideology. The ideolectal habits of action obtaining in the Saribas delineated above prevent Iban children and adolescents from 'colligating hitherto unrelated texts', such as multiculturalism in America vs. Malaysia, reducing their interpretive work to low-order adaptations of items such as catchy tunes, karate kicks and memorized phrases of the 'Freeze!' kind.

The transformation of Iban notions of transformation

Whether people are reweaving their webs of beliefs inferentially or imaginatively, they are inevitably transforming the new belief or item of

10. An alternative definition is offered by Schechner (1994: 644): 'Play is in the subjunctive mood, the 'what if' and 'as if', the provisional, the open, the anti-structural'. I agree with the provisional and open aspects of this definition, but not with its being characterized as 'anti-structural'. Play is a highly structured activity that often transforms items from a variety of settings into a new, provisional form of reality.

knowledge in the process, adapting it to their mental webs and to those of their social milieux. The *transformative* nature of media-related interpretive practices is therefore a promising field of investigation. In the study of Iban society, there is an added bonus: transformation is a key notion among the Iban and other peoples across the vast *Kulturkreis* known as Austronesia -- which encompasses Madagascar, Island Southeast Asia, Melanesia and the Pacific islands -- and has therefore great comparative potential. Strathern's *The Gender of the Gift* (1988) maintains that

in traditional Melanesian societies transformative principles are stressed, rather than those of either affinity or theory. An object is always perceived in terms of its ability to transform into or elicit another object: a tool is the potential creator of garden crops, a boy is a potential man, a shell necklace may attract another form of valuable. Objects are thus viewed less in themselves than for their place in an exchange or ritual which will have an effect (Miller 1994b: 400).

Similarly, as Freeman (1975: 286-7) explained when attacking Jensen's (1974) static model of Iban religion:

One of the most fundamental notions of the Iban is expressed in the phrase *bali nyadi*. *Bali* means: to change in form, and *nyadi*: to become. Together, these words refer to the capacity of all things, substantial and insubstantial, animate and inanimate, to change in form and become something else: to metamorphose; so that a stone may become a spirit as readily as a spirit may become a stone... The process of metamorphosis is obviously derived from dreaming, in which it frequently occurs.

In my own field research in the Skrang river, I came across a well-known local story which had a dream-like feel to it. Once upon a time two young women were bathing in a river. Suddenly a fish leapt out of the water and attached itself to one of the girls' nipples. Naturally, it would not let go. The two girls began to giggle and were at once turned into two boulders (*batu kudi*) that can still be seen at the very same spot today. The moral, familiar enough across the Archipelago, is that one should never laugh at fish and other living creatures¹¹.

11. Andrew Lang (1913: 149-150) argued in the 1910s that though 'in the legends of less developed peoples men and women are more frequently metamorphosed into birds and beasts than into stones and plants, yet such changes of form are by no means unknown'. He then went on to relate an Australian Aboriginal story remarkably similar to the Iban story just told. It goes as follows: 'Some black fellows were once camped at the lakes near Shaving

In everyday interaction with Iban one often hears expressions that hinge on the notion of transformation, such as

Bepandam tau nyadi pira' A stroke¹² can become a boil,
*betundi tau nyadi laya*¹³ a joke can become a broil

Or the more popular, probably a Malay borrowing¹⁴:

Mimit-mimit lama-lama nyadi bukit
Little by little a mountain is made

According to Barrett & Lucas (1993: 573-4), the chief method whereby pagan Iban transform states of knowledge, health, experience and personhood is the evocation of depth. Thus

Iban talk about words, speech and meaning as shallow [*mabu*] or deep [*dalam*]. Depth refers to the degree of difficulty of interpretation: the deeper the meaning, the harder it is to interpret [...]. Iban shamanic therapy relies on a mastery of semantic depth. It draws forth interpretations which transform the understanding of illness and serve to return the patient, his or her family, and the community as a whole, to a state of health.

These authors describe interpreting as an active process undertaken collectively by the longhouse community. They take interpreting to be

a powerful form of sociality. Iban join together to decipher - a group of women united in grief as they listen to the funeral chant, school children engrossed in the word play of their riddles, a wedding audience engaged by the verbal combat of orators. The Iban term for this process is 'searching' (*ngiga*). Another term renders 'meaning' (*reti*) into an active verb, *mereti* ('to

Point. They were cooking their fish when a native dog came up. They did not give him anything to eat. He became cross and said, 'You black fellows have lots of fish, but you give me none' So he changed them all into a big rock. This is quite true, for the big rock is there to this day, and I have seen it with my own eyes'. Compare it to Sandin's (1967: 11-12) account of what happened to Jelapi, an Iban shaman (*manang*), after his 'medicine box' was stolen. Jelapi pursued the thief and 'as they ran near the landing place Manggi's other envoy, who was hiding there, instantly killed Jelapi. Immediately the horizon turned dark, and the wind blew fiercely over the land. There was a great storm. Jelapi's body was transformed into a huge boulder, which is still called 'Batu Jelapi', situated at Stirau in the lower Batang Lupar river'.

12. As in the strokes during a friendly massage. The dictionary gloss of *pandam* is 'to strike downwards with the side of the fist' (Sutlive and Sutlive 1994:189).

13. I was taught this proverb by Stevenson anak Ingkon of Semanggang.

14. The unit trust scheme Amanah Saham Nasional (ASN), aimed at increasing indigenous ownership of equity capital throughout Malaysia and valued at 182 million ringgit in 1994 (Gomez 1997:37), entices prospective customers to join in through leaflets bearing the equivalent Malay proverb *Sedikit-sedikit lama-lama menjadi bukit*.

meaning'), for which the closest English expression is 'to understand' (Barrett & Lucas 1993: 576).

According to Freeman (1975: 284-85), one central subject of collective investigation is dreams. At day-break one can see groups of people

dispersed along the gallery of the long-house, talking together with rapt attention. They are discussing their dreams of the night just ended, interpreting them, and deciding how to be guided by them. Further it is almost entirely from dream experience that the myths, religious beliefs and practices of the pagan Iban have been, and are, derived...
...[D]reams produce not 'ordered pattern', but innovation and change.

How relevant are these intriguing accounts of pagan Iban interpretive practices to the Christian, modernist Saribas of the late 1990s? Unfortunately for lovers of cultural diversity, not a great deal. At Semak Longhouse, dreams no longer play an important role in deciding upon day-to-day activities. One obvious reason is that the inflexible labour market would be unforgiving to workers who decided to stay at home on the basis of inauspicious dreams. In this and other respects, Christianity is far more accommodating, as new converts can simply pray and resume their normal life. Shamans (*manang*) are no longer allowed to practise at Semak, and residents rely on the local hospital to have their health restored. Illness is usually explained using modern English or Malay medical terms. For instance, at longhouse gatherings, middle-aged and elderly men often complain that they can no longer drink owing to 'high blood [pressure]' (*tinggi' darah*). Many will then inform their insistent hosts of the exact, alarming numerical reading to deter them from pouring them a drink. Only when the white man's medicine fails do Semak *bilik*-families quietly resort to a shaman (*manang*). As regards funeral chants, riddles, oratory combats and other activities demanding the active interpretive participation of the audience: *they are seldom or never practised.*

With the consolidation of schooling, radio, television, waged labour and other modern institutions (or sets of practices), people's interpretive efforts are now applied to passing exams in the Malay language, finding and keeping jobs, or trying to make sense of the country's social and economic changes.

A black year, business as usual

The question then arises: Have contemporary Iban transferred their indigenous interpretive skills, based on the notion of transformation and the practice of collaborative and egalitarian discussions, to the understanding of social and economic trends in the wider society? In this chapter I am arguing that thus far they have failed to do so because the present system of ideas is itself a product of the new Saribas-Malaysian society formed in the 1960s. The Saribas Iban idelect owes too much to the hegemonic national and state ideology to provide local Iban with independent interpretive tools with which to see or dismantle the latter's inner workings. They have no pristine, pre-state interpretive haven to repair to (*pace* Freeman 1980).

Three case studies will support this position. The year 1997 was marked by a series of extraordinary crises in Sarawak. There was the revival of large-scale headhunting in neighbouring Indonesian Borneo; an outbreak of Coxsackie-B (a little-known infectious disease); an outbreak of dengue fever (a much more familiar threat); huge forest fires also in Indonesian Borneo, and a region-wide collapse of the financial markets.

February 1997: Foreign headhunting

In February 1997, a mass outburst of headhunting took place in West Kalimantan, Indonesian Borneo, in which 'Dayak' groups took an estimated 2000 heads from a rival group of Madurese Muslim immigrants (Parry 1997). The bloody events occurred a mere 80 miles away from the Saribas -- a negligible distance when contrasted to Kuala Lumpur's 800 miles across the sea. Yet on this side of the border there was a virtual media blackout for fear of Sarawakian Iban joining their Kalimantan brethren, so rural dwellers, who do not have access to the Internet, were kept in the dark all along. For most

people in rural Sarawak the events, quite simply, did not occur.

Often in the course of fieldwork people would ask me why white people are always at war, and whether my country lies near Bosnia. On one occasion, I was watching the news with a young woman when a report on rioting in Kampuchea was shown. 'There's always wars in those foreign countries', she said. 'Yes, but don't forget Kalimantan, right nextdoor to us', I replied. 'Oh, yes, out there in Indonesia' (*di Indonesia nyin*). She had heard vague rumours about the killings. The nationalist ideology promoted through television reinforces, day after day, the contrast between a peaceful Malaysia and war-ridden overseas countries. In the Saribas Iban imagination wars always happen in far-off lands (Bosnia, Palestine, Iraq, Africa, Kosovo)¹⁵ and there is no end in sight to them, despite the best efforts of the Malaysian government's 'blue helmets', some of whom are Iban. At the same time this medium effectively strengthens the two-fold idea of geographical and cultural distance from Indonesian Borneo -- my informant's 'out there' -- and proximity between East and West Malaysia. As a result, Borneo is not part of the local idiolect.

The land of the white man (*menua urang putih*) is often singled out as a realm of strife and violence. One woman in her 30s told me that 'When you whites disagree with someone, you shoot them, like President Kennedy' (*Kita urang putih, enti enda besetuju, nimbak urang, baka Peresiden Kennedy*). She added that Malaysia is a peaceful country, and that neither the Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir, nor Sarawak's Deputy Chief Minister, Dr Jabu, have any need for bodyguards. Another woman, a former teacher, would never allow her daughter to study abroad because 'you're always at war'. Likewise, an elderly informant complained to another researcher along the lines of

15. In this respect, they are very much like viewers around the globe. When it comes to wars and other calamities, television is true to its etymological roots: it takes a view from afar.

'Ever since we've had television, there's more and more wars in the world'¹⁶
(cf. chapter 6).

For decades, researchers have been interested in determining how the media set the political agenda (e.g. McCombs and Shaw 1972). One standard definition of agenda setting is 'the way the media set the order of importance of current issues, especially in the reportage of news'. Agenda setting 'defines the context of transmission, establishes the terms of reference and the limits of debate' (Watson and Hill 1993:3). The headhunting events amply demonstrate the power of Malaysian television and radio to shape the rural worldview by limiting, or in some cases eliminating altogether, unwanted reports. Furthermore, the visual component of television's technology fosters a form of naive realism that equates 'as seen on television' with 'as it happened'¹⁷ -- one which local politicians are only too keen to promote in their speeches (see below). One informant assured me that he has more trust in television than in radio news reports. 'They can't possibly lie, we can all see the pictures!' (*Ni nyadi nusoi bula! Kitai tau meda gambar!*). Another was shocked at my suggestion that a senior police officer, speaking at a televised press conference in Kuala Lumpur, could be lying: 'Lying?!? How can he be lying? He's on television!' (*Bula? Ni ulih nusoi bula ba tibi!*)'. A third informant was taken aback when I asked her whether newsreaders ever lie on television: 'They can't, people would sue them if they lied' (*Enda nyadi, bisi urang kumplin [E. complaint] enti nusoi bula*).

¹⁶ Clifford Sather (personal communication, January 1998).

¹⁷ This reliance on eye-witnessing is by no means a Western import linked to the advent of television. It has well-documented narrative precursors in the Iban tradition (e.g. Sandin 1967).

Like Rorty, Dan Sperber (1996: 89) has devoted a great deal of attention to the elusive problem of belief acquisition. He distinguishes two kinds of beliefs: (1) intuitive, that is acquired through perception by means of inference, e.g. tables are solid (cf Rorty's use of the term 'inference' above), and (2) reflective, or interpretations of representations embedded in a validating context, that is accepted on authority. For instance, a schoolgirl believes that 'What the teacher says is true'. This belief provides her with a validating context with which to accept, for the time being, the counter-intuitive new item 'The teacher says that there are male and female plants' (1996: 88).

Political beliefs, says Sperber (1996: 96) depend on institutions to spread and survive. For example, the belief 'All men are born equal' only became consolidated when enough people took the risk to propagate it in institutional settings. In the context of contemporary Saribas Iban thought, the widespread belief 'Our leaders don't lie in public' depends on (a) the validating context of the elites' superior school education and position of authority, and (b) the chronic institutional propagation of such a validating context through a plethora of media and agents: television newsreaders, school teachers, longhouse speakers, etc.

Only on one occasion did I encounter a rural viewer who rejected the 8 o'clock news on the first channel on the basis that Malay newsreaders 'are always telling lies'. An elderly Dayakist with no political clout, he preferred watching the Mandarin-language news programme on the second channel. This was in spite of his utter lack of competence in this language, for he believed that 'the Chinese don't lie'. He was the exception that confirmed the ideolectal rule.

August 1997: Borneo burning

In August 1997, an ecological catastrophe befell Indonesian Borneo as a prolonged drought and irresponsible fire practices at a number of plantations produced gigantic fires that destroyed thousands of hectares of forest. Thick blankets of smoke were soon blown over into Sarawak, causing a major health hazard that led to the closure of schools and the declaration of the state of emergency on 19 September. The previous day the air quality index (AQI) in the state capital, Kuching, had reached the 'hazardous level' of 404. On the 19th, the figure shot up to 625 into an uncharted region beyond the hazardous, a region that was to remain nameless throughout the crisis.

How did Saribas Iban react to the blanket of smoke, school closures and soaring index, which was continually updated over radio and television? Most adults were understandably worried about the repercussions on their health and crops, yet they did not attempt to probe deeply into the causes of the catastrophe, in the manner one would expect having read Barrett & Lucas (1993), that is in a collective, persevering, open-ended manner. Instead, they relied on radio and television for regular updates on the AQI figure and official assurances that massive resources from the Malaysian state were being deployed to overcome the crisis -- among them, a team of highly trained firemen sent to help their Indonesian counterparts in Kalimantan. Consider the following informal conversation in the longhouse gallery (*ruai*):

Semak Longhouse, 24 September 1997. When I joined the group, Indai Rita, aged 33, was saying that 1997 had been a tragic year, what with the Coxsackie virus, dengue fever, and now the haze (M. *jerebu*). Ini Tanut, who is 60, replied that she had never seen anything like it in her entire life. People in Kuala Lumpur used to have a lot of haze in the old days (*suba*), she added, 'but nothing like this'. 'I've heard you want to run off to your wife in Japan', said Indai Bakar. 'No, I think I'll go to the Philippines instead, it's closer', I replied. 'Don't', said Ini Tanut, 'it's full of Indonesians', and we all laughed. 'The index went down to 600 today', said Indai Rita. As if he had understood the significance of the alarming figure, little Morgan, aged 3, fled the small gathering and shot down the gallery towards his *bilik*. 'Joging!' said his mother with a chuckle, ever so happy to throw in a modern English word [see chapter 3]. She then asked her older son to go after Morgan lest he ate a bank note he was carrying (*enggai ka makai duit*). Once the two of them were safely back with us, I asked Indai Rita whether

Morgan already knew the meaning of money. 'No, not yet', she replied. 'Ask Rengayong [my Iban name] for money', said Sulah to Morgan, as if to teach him in a practical way. Ini Tanut then said that people in towns were coping with the haze better thanks to air-conditioning in their homes. 'Yes', said Sulah, 'we in the longhouses are worse off; the foul air can come into our *bilik*'. 'I've already shut all our windows', added Ini Tanut. 'Where's the haze coming from?' asked Indai Matt. 'How would we know? Suharto has already apologised', said Ini Tanut.

Rudie (1994: 31), a Danish anthropologist, sees culture not as a backdrop to human action but rather as an 'interpretive repertoire'. There are occasions, however, in which our culture does not provide us with standardized ways of dealing with new experiences. Such occasions can be a rich source of anthropological insights (1994: 38). For instance, both Rudie and a Peninsular Malay informant had to creatively make sense of their lives when they took up new careers which departed from their family backgrounds. What kind of 'interpretive repertoire' did the above conversational partners draw upon? Were they coping with a new experience creatively, in non-standardized ways? There was certainly creativity in how they deployed standard practices such as turn-taking, joking, informing, asking, and replying. In turn these practices depended upon a common stock of knowledge of different kinds, including linguistic (Saribas Iban peppered with Malay terms spread by the media, e.g. *jerebu* [haze]), interpersonal (people knew one another), chronometric (1997 as a black year), biographical (urban life), indexical (the index reading) and political (Suharto's apologies).

I have referred to Barrett & Lucas' (193: 576) notion of Iban interpreting as an active process in which the longhouse residents search (*ngiga*) for answers to a puzzling event or difficult question -- a grave illness, an unexpected death, an obscure riddle. This *ruai* conversation exemplifies a radically different process: participants in the Saribas would habitually touch upon a worrying societal problem without ever inquiring in any depth into its possible causes. The conversational partners were obviously 'well informed' about the choking smoke. They had a standard way of naming it (*jerebu*) and many ways of framing it -- within the context of a 'black year', a life history, a joke,

a rural-urban contrast, a numerical reading, and so on. Yet they lacked the conversational rules and epistemological tools to interpret it beyond a shallow (*mabu*) 'How would we know? Suharto has already apologised'. The following questions were never asked: What commercial interests were behind the plantation fires? Why did the Indonesian government react so slowly and inefficiently? Was information about the disaster withheld from the Malaysian public? What multinational interests, if any, supported the massive plantation expansion of the 1990s? Such questions (*pace* Abu-Lughod's [1997] notion of the 'rural cosmopolites') are not questions peasants in the developing world are likely to pose. They are the kinds of questions that some university students and urban intellectuals in those same countries *do* ask of their governments and private sector. Indeed a number of urban Iban I talked to in Kuching were privately furious at the Indonesian government, and some were also critical of their own government's handling of the 'crisis'. The rural preoccupation with the visible effects of the disaster rather than its puzzling causes is exemplified in the following 'reading' of a television film:

Semak, 24 September 1997, late evening. It is the time of the year when people clear grass and bushes (*tebas uma*) for a new farming year. I visit Sulah's *bilik* for a chat. She looks tired. As usual, their TV is on. There is quite a crowd tonight, for Apai Pulin, her brother, has brought his three young children with him to watch television. Out of respect towards Apai Pulin's recently deceased father-in-law, they are not watching TV or listening to the radio in their own *bilik*. Sulah is not sure how long the mourning period (*ulit*) will last. 'Two weeks?' I suggest. '*Pia, meh*', she replies: that's about right. 'It used to be three months, but now it's only one' clarifies Apai Pulin, and quickly adds, as if reading my mind: 'We *can* actually watch TV but not too loud'. Timah, 18, also looks tired. She is stretched on a mat in front of the box, eyes half-closed. A long day in the shop. Tom, the mechanic, is already slumbering in a corner with his radio on. The TV is showing a white-man film, a tidy American story about an unruly tornado. There is dust and desolation everywhere. Soon we are talking about the choking smog engulfing Sarawak. Sulah is worried about how it might affect the padi¹⁸.

The first part of the evening revealed how Iban agents negotiate the ritual restrictions on media consumption following the death of a longhouse resident (see chapter 4). The second part has to do with 'reception'. As

18. Her worries were well founded. In a recent letter, she confirms that the harvest was indeed affected by the smoke.

Morley (1992) and others have demonstrated, watching TV requires interpretive work on the part of the viewer. What you see is not necessarily what your co-viewer gets. As I was watching that tornado spin I was trying to work out what the film might tell us about American popular culture, or something of the sort. My co-viewer however soon imaginatively *transformed* the funnel-shaped cloud into the smoke affecting her farm. Local knowledge is usually of a practical nature. For farmers removed from the corridors of power and knowledge, *the effects* of adverse weather conditions are of far greater import than inquiring into the causes of man-made calamities such as the forest fires in Indonesia, let alone mapping America's cultural imperialism. Seemingly trivial routines (eating, greeting, chatting) are crucial to building a sense of trust in the world as it appears to be, Giddens' (1984) sense of 'ontological security'. This instance shows how the trivial routine of watching television can threaten this security in unpredictable ways. At the same time, television fails to provide Malaysian viewers with reliable interpretive tools with which to make sense of societal crises.

September 1997: the Southeast Asian currency crisis

In September 1997 the currency depreciation and stock market fall in Southeast Asia provoked a region-wide economic crisis from which Malaysia and other nations have yet, two years later, to recover. In the candid description of Bernama, the national news agency, the Information Ministry vowed to 'mobilise its entire broadcasting and information machinery as well as the private media to explain to the people measures taken by the government to stimulate the economy' (*Sarawak Tribune*, 15/12/1997). Besides 'explaining', however, the governmental media practised scapegoating by repeatedly blaming the crisis on 'the foreign media and currency speculators' (*Sarawak Tribune*, 8/10/1997), and especially on George Soros, an American financier reportedly described by the Prime Minister as 'a Jew' intent on destroying the Malaysian economy¹⁹. What

¹⁹ Mahathir later sought to calm his foreign critics with the following statement: 'I merely

these media failed systematically to examine was the role of Malaysia's own speculators, some of them very close to UMNO, the ruling party.

On 19 October 1998, Edmund Gomez, a prominent Malaysian political economist, delivered a talk at the London School of Economics in which he painstakingly analysed the political and economic crisis affecting Malaysia a year after the financial collapse. His talk was very well attended, mostly by Malaysian students in Britain. Some students agreed with his analysis, others did not, but they all had direct access to an incisive colligation of materials from a variety of sources. More importantly, they possessed the interpretive tools and rules to argue for or against the learned speaker. A study from West Malaysia, however, suggests that most university students there, like rural Iban viewers, have blind faith in 'the mass media'. Following a shooting incident, Zaharah S.A. Keeney (1989) set out to determine whether students from Universiti Pertanian Malaysia relied on interpersonal channels of communication or on the media as sources. She discovered that 'the mass media were overwhelmingly more credible in the eyes of this audience' (Lent 1994:88). Be that as it may, the kinds of colligations and skills needed in order to make critical sense of media reports are not widely available to rural viewers in Malaysia. The result is what Parkin (1972) calls a 'subordinate response' to the hegemonic ideology:

Semak, 14 November 1997. I asked Apai Fred, who is in his 50s, about the previous night's news. 'Something to do with some politicians in the American Congress asking for Mahathir's resignation' [following his anti-Semitic remarks]. 'I didn't quite get it, though; I wouldn't know whether it was true or false' (*Enda tentu paham aku. Enda nemu ngumbai betul ka salah*). And he added that America is a powerful nation increasingly concerned about Mahathir's intelligence. 'They know he is too clever' (*Sida ingat iya kelalu pandai*).

Semak, 15 November 1997. I asked Apai Abin aged 52, if he ever watched the news on television. He said he always did, every evening at from 8 pm on TV1. I asked him about the main news stories of the month. 'The stock shares are always going down' (*Saham selalu nurun*), he replied. I asked why but he did not know the reason. 'Do you believe in the news?', I asked him, with the cassette recorder switched off. 'I do, I believe it all' (*Arap, semua arap magang*). He trusted in the veracity of both radio and television news -- 'they

stated that incidentally this person (George Soros) is a Jew and incidentally we are Muslims...The Jews is [sic] a very strong race...they are the strongest race in the world...We cannot make such wild accusation...they will twist your arms' (*Sunday Tribune*, Kuching, 12 October 1997).

never tell lies' (*enda kala nusoi bula*) -- and enjoyed keeping abreast of developments in the America, Iraq, Palestine and other war-ridden countries.

In sum, the way in which Saribas Iban dealt with all three crises points at an endemic blind spot in their ideolect: the interpretation of 'macro' events was undertaken within tight inferential parameters that did not allow for either (a) the individual critical stance of, say, the well-read Internet user in Kuching or Kuala Lumpur, or (b) the collective, oral search (*ngiga*) for understanding characteristic of Iban longhouses before the advent of 'know book' (*nemu surat*). With the exception of their better-read members, Saribas Iban inhabit a no-man's interpretive land, for they lack the interpretive rules and tools of both the highly literate elites of today and the elders of past generations who were steeped in an oral tradition. In the privacy of their cars and homes, urban Iban can be very critical of the government. Rural Iban are left with the mediated views of those very urban Iban who will publicly praise the government whenever it is required of them. Only exceptionally, in the privacy of a longhouse *bilik* and with the aid of potent beverages, will certain clusters of Saribas Iban and their urban relations quietly criticise government policies, including their control over the media. With the re-absorption of the only credible opposition party, PBDS (Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak), into the state coalition in the early 1990s (Jawan 1994: 242), the scope for more sustained, systematic critiques was drastically reduced.

More often than not, urban and rural Sarawakians will express the view that, by comparison to a war-ridden world beyond their shores, all is well with Malaysia. As one Kuching journalist put it, catastrophes are rare in Sarawak. People in this state only *see* them happen 'in other countries through television' (*People's Mirror* 27/9/1997). This assertion is oddly reminiscent of Tom Tomorrow's memorable cartoon on the cover of Morley's (1992) textbook, *Television, Audiences & Cultural Studies* in which an all-American, late 1950s family are gathered around their television set:

Newsreader. Coming up next on the news: terrifying inexplicable events occurring in far-away places, presented without historical or sociological context!

Husband: Geez! It looks pretty *bad* out there!

Wife: I'm certainly glad *we're* safe here at home!

Saribas Iban viewers are certainly glad *they* are safe in their longhouse *bilik*.

'Charge your batteries!': public-address systems as face-to-face ideolect channels

So far I have discussed two crucial state-locality interfaces where the Saribas ideolect is systematically renewed: (1) the textbook-mediated teacher-pupil relationship and (2) the radio- and TV-mediated verbal interpretation of major events. I will now turn briefly to a third site of ideolectal (re)production: public speeches. In the previous chapter I studied the spatial and temporal ordering accomplished during the Gawai Dayak festival by the few men who were allowed access to the public-address system (PAS). Here I wish to retake those examples and add another three to explore some of the ways in which the Saribas ideolect is reinforced through the PAS medium. The reader will recall the summaries of the Gawai Dayak speeches at Semak Longhouse:

1. At around 9.30 pm the official speeches began. The first person to take the microphone was the headman who thanked the native chief, the organising committee, the *gendang* ensemble and the entire community for the smooth running of this year's much expanded programme. He also thanked those who helped financially with the prizes, especially a local politician, and Aki James for repairing the wooden Hornbill. He concluded his speech praying to the Iban Supreme Deity (*Petara*) that those in the government service would be promoted (*niki pangkat*), that farmers would reap abundant harvests and that labourers would earn high wages (*bulih duit, bulih ringgit*).

2. Then the native chief took the microphone. His speech centred on the presence among them of a student of Iban culture from London University who had followed in the footsteps of Robert Pringle, the eminent scholar, to study Semak and other leading longhouses in the Saribas.

At another electrified, economically developed longhouse in the Saribas, a funeral ceremony (*anjong antu*) was held in honour of a distinguished elder:

3. The deceased's nephew, Apai Minggat, reputed to be a successful lawyer, stressed his late uncle's deep respect (*basa*) and consideration towards all fellow humans, whether rich or poor, young or old. Despite his humble origins, he achieved much in life, and yet he was never arrogant (*sumbung*).

4. Datuk Telichai [not his real name], a former member of the State Council, highlighted in his speech the deceased's dedication to the preservation of the Iban heritage. He provided young people with a role-model (*teladan ke manah*), for if the Iban do not preserve their traditions (*adañ*), their 'culture' [E. word used] will be severed (*culture kitai putus*). 'We must remember the things we are told; keep the good things, discard the bad ones' (*iya ke manah simpan, iya ke jai letak*). 'Don't forget to write. Write everything down' (*Anang enda nulis. Nulis semua utai*). And he encouraged his audience to follow the examples of the late Benedict Sandin and Michael Buma, the accomplished Saribas Iban authors.

There is a fundamental difference between school textbooks and television on the one hand, and PAS-mediated local speeches on the other. The former are mass media addressing an anonymous, faceless audience made up of both rural and urban, Malay and non-Malay, Peninsular and Bornean citizens. Producers have no feedback from the immense majority of users, so production proceeds largely independently from its reception (cf. Ang 1991) -- certainly to its reception in the Saribas, an area few Peninsular producers are likely to have ever heard of. The PAS, in contrast, is an interpersonal medium in which the immediate, face-to-face reactions of the audience are an integral part of the unedited 'production process'. Competent public speakers in all societies have to be sensitive to the likes, dislikes and mood of their audiences. Barrett and Lucas (1993: 574-5) have described public speaking in Iban society in the following terms:

In oratory, depth of meaning is a key to engaging the audience. At weddings the groom's community and the bride's community are each represented by orators and the long duel between them is likened to defending or attacking a fort (Barrett and Lucas 1993: 574-5)

Knowledgeable Iban, both urban and rural, are agreed that the art of oratory has seriously declined in their society since the post-War spread of Christianity, school education and outmigration. I did not witness any 'long duels' at Saribas weddings, nor was 'depth of meaning' (*jaku dalam*) a key defining feature of speeches on these and other occasions. What I did witness and record was the oratory bind in which many a speaker found himself, caught between two complex, 'deep' (*dalam*) systems of knowledge - - literate, cosmopolitan Malaysian knowledge and oral, parochial Iban knowledge --, neither of which they mastered. It is customary these days to offer each speaker a glass of distilled rice-wine (*chap langkau*) or liquor as he

prepares to address a gathering and to egg him on with the jocular neologism '*Chas dulu!*' (lit. Charge [your batteries] first!). Alas, the energizing beverage can be no substitute for the speakers' ancestors' long hours of daily oratory practice in the poorly-lit *ruai* in which storytelling was unmediated by either literacy or television in urban tongues.

Another recurrent feature of PAS-mediated speeches is, in a sense, the other side of the epistemological coin: speakers constantly search for ways in which to bridge the widening gaps that are transforming Iban society. In brief, they pursue a 1990s version of the cultural project I identified in chapter 2 with the early producers and writers at Radio Sarawak and the Borneo Literature Bureau: the dream of a developed Iban society, yet one steeped in a rich tradition (*adat*). Thus the headman (Extract 1), an Anglican Christian, asked the Iban God (*Petara*) not the Christian God (*Allah Taala*), for his blessings in the ongoing development of the longhouse. Similarly, both the native chief (E2) and the first politician (E4), emphasized the compatibility between 'knowing book' and the preservation of custom. Apai Minggat (E3) made the same point whilst stressing the importance of respect and good manners (*basa*) as a pillar of a modernized *adat* that can help the Iban to achieve parity with other peoples without losing their moral bearings. A second politician (E5) will provide us with a significant contrast. At a fund-raising dinner organised by the Anglican Church in the Saribas

5. ...the politician, a Saribas Iban, delivered a flawless speech. He told his audience that being a Christian does not consist simply of attending the Easter and Christmas services and banquets. That would be like washing oneself only twice a year. Anglicans must practise their faith continuously. They must also unite now that other churches have come to the Saribas 'to cause trouble' (*ngachau*). It is no use being baptised an Anglican only to run off to embrace other churches until the time comes to be buried, as others have no proper cemeteries. 'We should all be united' (*Patut kitai serakup magang*), he insisted, and told a local parable (*sempama*) to drive his point home. Finally, he reminded the audience of the Prime Minister's recent words to the effect that we can all see on television how people in other countries are always waging wars over ethnicity and religion, whereas here in Malaysia there is ethnic harmony and religious freedom.

Speaking on church premises rather than in a longhouse, this speaker had to pitch his speech at a higher geopolitical level. He offered his provincial

audience a nationalistic, Mahathirist message that reinforced the well-established belief that other countries are chronically at war, as discussed earlier. He also called for the unity of all Iban Christians above denominational divides. In his skilful blending of domains he encouraged his audience to reconcile the variegated *Christian* Iban heritage with the national culture project. He did nevertheless *implicitly* support the preservation of the oral heritage through his use of the parable and other relatively 'deep' (*dalam*) rhetorical devices. In chapter 2, I mentioned the work of a European missionary in Papua New Guinea. His 1990 television drama on farming techniques, argues Sullivan (1993: 537) was part of a long missionary tradition of "co-opting indigenous values (of community, mutual obligation, kinship and sharing) as the teachings of Christ and in so doing distinguishing church from private interests while easing a transition from barbarism to a market economy'. The Anglican Church speech summarized above is equally part of a long Sarawak tradition of 'co-opting' strikingly similar values to those promoted in Papua New Guinea (see also Gewertz and Errington [1991] below).

All five speeches, in their different ways, lent support to core areas of the Saribas idelect. In the final section I analyse the key tensions and contradictions in some of the media practices that shape the continued making of the idelect.

Ideolectal inconsistencies

No system of ideas is free from tensions and contradictions, as both Marxian and Jungian thinkers have often reminded us. New beliefs and desires, says Rorty (1991: 93) put strains on the old. Human agents use different techniques to tackle these tensions and inconsistencies. In this section I examine four media practices routinely employed by Saribas Iban to deal with key problem areas in their idelect.

Wealth disparities

Throughout fieldwork in the Saribas, viewers complained about the declining standards of television. Malay soaps, very popular with RTM programmers in Kuala Lumpur at prime-time, were conspicuous for their absence from a popularity survey²⁰ I carried out early in 1997 in Saribas longhouses (see Table 5.1). The following three responses are characteristic of the general attitude towards Malay soaps:

1. Indai Saur is in her early 30s. When I asked her about television in the old days (*suba*) she told me there were no 'company stories' (*cherita syarikat-syarikat*) then, stories full of rich urban Malays always eating in expensive restaurants. She doesn't enjoy watching them. After the interview we watched a video they had rented, *George of the Jungle*, a new American comedy on the old theme of Tarzan and his troubles with Civilization. Indai Saur, her husband and their young daughter enjoyed the action, especially the 'lies' achieved through 'computer animation' (*nya bula, dikena computer animation*) that allowed monkeys to speak and elephants to leap about like dogs. They also enjoyed George's uncouth antics in Manhattan and admired the luxury shops. 'City people don't mind spending in shops, do they?', she asked me.

2. Indai Kamba is 30. She told me television programmes used to be better (*suba manah agi*) for there were no rich people, and the stories were true (*suba nadai urang kaya, betul-betul suba*). There were no companies run by arrogant urban Malays in those days. 'We in the longhouse don't like these stories. They've got cars, they eat well, they live in brick houses...' (*Kami rumah panjai enda rindu cherita nya. Sida bisi motor, makai manah enggau rumah batu...*).

3. Indai Rita, aged 33, upset my interviewing schedule, for she was reluctant to talk about radio. 'I don't know a thing! I'm not interested in radio' (*Enda aku nemu! Enda minat ka radio*), she said. 'What I *do* like is television. I'm a modern Iban!', she added with characteristic irony (*Tibi baru rindu meda. Aku Iban moden!*). She told me only old people know about *renong*, a type of sung poem sometimes broadcast on the radio, not young people such as herself. Besides there was no one willing to teach them -- 'and it's boring!' [E. term used] and she laughed again. So we decided to talk about television. The trouble with television, according to Indai Rita, is that the standards have declined. 'Malay dramas are not good, they're always about money' (*Wayang melayu enda manah, selalu pasal duit*). Broadcasters are no longer keen to air white-man films, she explained. Last night, however, there was a nice (*manah*) 'action movie' [E. term used. The film was about four US policemen who team up to destroy a foreign pimp]. She watched it with her siblings until midnight 'When they have a sponsor, the films are better, like Dunhill for example'. She also enjoys watching quality soaps, such as *Santa Barbara*, which she intends to follow week after week until the end (*M. sambong-*

²⁰ The question 'What is/are your favourite programme/s on television?' (*Nama cherita ba TV dikerindu ka nuan?*) was open-ended, that is no set menu of genres was suggested to the respondent. In this manner, a standard ideolectal classification of television programmes into 'genres' or kinds emerged, a sample of which is captured in Table 5.1.

sambong sampai abis). She has enjoyed similar white-man serials in the past, especially *Dallas* and *Dynasty*.

<i>Favourite Genre</i>	<i>Responses</i>
News (<i>berita</i>)	54
Music/dancing (<i>lagu/foget</i>)	14
Football (<i>bul</i>)	11
War (<i>perang</i>)	10
Cartoons (<i>katun</i>)	4

Table 5.1. Most popular television genres among Saribas Iban adult viewers. Sample: 119 households in six longhouses.

To make sense of this collective rejection of an entire television genre (recent Malay soaps) on the basis of their being ‘full of rich people eating in expensive restaurants’, we need to keep in mind that the pre-state Iban social ideology was decidedly egalitarian, as discussed in chapter 1. There was some differentiation in terms of wealth and influence, but no institutionalised subordination. With his usual eloquence, Freeman (1970: 129) writes:

Iban society is classless and egalitarian – and its members, individualists, aggressive and proud in demeanour, lacking any taste of obeisance.

To Davison (1987: 108) Iban society is/was an

acephalous meritocracy, bound together as a ritual community, but otherwise fragmented into autonomous *bilek*-families which interact with one another in an egalitarian but highly competitive social milieu

If Saribas viewers reject the Malay soaps because they clash with this egalitarian ethos, why then do they enjoy watching *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, or *Santa Barbara*, all three equally about the rich and powerful? In my view, their comments reveal an inherent contradiction in the Saribas ideolect -- they tell us where the hinges creak, to paraphrase Debray (1996). The problem is best broached in terms developed in Gewertz and Errington's (1991) ethnography of the Chambri of Papua New Guinea. The Chambri are part of an inter-ethnic regional exchange system premised on the equality of autonomous trade partners and knowledgeable elders -- what these authors have termed a ‘system of commensurate differences’. By contrast, the

exchanges with overseas tourists and the wider world system are both incommensurate and hierarchical (1991: 56, 164). During their extended fieldwork in the area, they came to know a young man who had set out to write the first-ever Chambri Bible, an attempt at reconciling Catholic and Chambri truths. In an ethnographic twist that echoes a well-known Borges tale²¹, this man found the resemblance between the two traditions to be so close that some passages from his Bible read exactly like the Catholic original. He soon ran into difficulties, however. The elders, who were otherwise proud and relieved to see their traditions preserved in print, would not relinquish the deeper levels of their knowledge to the aspiring Evangelist. Having done that would have, in the anthropologists' analysis of the elders' comments, allowed the literate young man to 'transcend and thus subvert the system of commensurate differences' (1991: 166).

The sight of urban Malays flaunting their wealth on television is at loggerheads with the Saribas Iban rejection of those individuals who have 'climbed the ladder' (*niki pangkat*) and become arrogant (*nyadi sumbung*) towards their rural brethren. These serials also belie the daily propaganda videos on television and more irregular speeches on the radio and *ruai* in which all Malaysian peoples (*bansa*) are walking abreast 'along the path to prosperity' (see chapter 4). The Saribas Iban 'system of commensurate differences' is geopolitically broader than the Chambri's -- it is no longer riverine. Ever since the consolidation of the state-controlled media and the region's marginal idelect in the 1960s and 1970s, Saribas Iban make use of a *national, inter-ethnic frame of reference* in which the low standard of living of 'we Iban' (*kami Iban*) is constantly contrasted to the higher standards of 'the Chinese' (*sida China*) and 'the Malays' (*sida Melayu*), or alternatively 'we in the longhouse' (*kami ba rumah panjai*) is counterposed to 'them in the cities' (*sida ba negeri*) and akin expressions. Television dramas are an

²¹ J.L.Borges, 'Pierre Menard, Autor del Quijote', in his *Ficciones* (1995)

important source of materials in this ongoing comparative exercise: they provide viewers with what is seen as updated information on the brick houses, sports cars, exclusive restaurants, and so on, of the rich. In this system of commensurate differences the remote, semi-mythical land of the white man does not play a part. In other words, it is incommensurate. As Indai Awas put it, 'The way they act in *Dallas* is different. They are truly developed (*maju endar*)'. White-man programmes, like all white-man products, are considered to be of superior quality, as befits the most advanced race (*bansa*) on Earth. The stories, as one viewer put it 'have a logic' (*bisi logic*): they are beautifully filmed and acted, whilst Malay dramas are seen as pale reflections or shoddy imitations of the genuine articles (*sida 'ka nunda ka urang putih*, 'they want to follow the white people'). In the Saribas imagination, aesthetic accomplishment and ethnicity are inseparable.

The crucial difference between the Chambri and the Saribas Iban is that the Chambri elders successfully managed to prevent a literate man from subverting their egalitarian, parochial, fragmented, oral ideology, whereas the Saribas elders have long been relegated to a mostly ceremonial role with little real power or prestige knowledge within a nationwide system premised on the mastery of cosmopolitan, literate knowledge. The Saribas Iban ideolect was built in the 1960s and 1970s on a false premise: that 'knowing book' (*penemu surat*) would allow the Iban to march hand in hand with the two hegemonic peoples of Sarawak while helping to preserve in print form the pre-state system of commensurate differences, i.e. the egalitarian longhouse *adat*. In reality, the modern nation-state is built not on rural equality writ large but on nationwide inequality.

Can the viewers' rejection of Malay dramas be interpreted as a way of opting out of an ideological 'game' already rigged by the urban elites? Is it a short-term tactic pitted against the longer term strategies of the powerful (cf. de Certeau 1984)? I believe a better way of looking at the problem is in terms of Douglas' (1984) textbook concept of dirt as 'matter out of place'. To Saribas

Iban, the soaps are an irritating anomaly: they fall within the ideolectally-correct genre of television drama (*cherita tib*), a genre classified as 'entertainment' (*hiburan*) and yet they subvert the old, prescriptive egalitarian ethos of their idelect. For C. Boulanger (pers. comm. 1998) a central question social scientists must address is 'how human beings collude, despite their better efforts, in fabricating and replicating conditions of oppression'. The rejection of these soaps is *both* an indirect form of 'peasant resistance' (cf. Scott 1985) to a hegemonic state system *and* a form of collusion in that it is tantamount to recognising: 'We know that our leaders' inter-ethnic egalitarianism is a sham (*bula*), but we don't need to be reminded of it'. What is crucial is not so much the existence of this opposition-collusion interpretive duality, much favoured in the recent media research literature (e.g. Mankekar 1993, Rofel 1994, Abu-Lughod 1997), but rather the fact that refusing to watch Malay soaps is a thoroughly ineffectual form of resistance, for it perpetuates the illusion of a nationwide egalitarianism despite mounting evidence to the contrary.

The universal problem of ageing

In recent years, some anthropologists have turned their attention to the universal problem of ageing (Spencer 1990). One media anthropologist working in Belize, formerly British Honduras, found that after only 11 years of broadcasting, television had become 'a cultural and historical watershed, allowing people to create a new and mythical past when children respected their parents, and social justice and good morals were the rule. Television has given Belizeans a temporal fix, a spot to mark the beginning of modernity and the passing of the old' (Wilk 1993: 237).

In the Saribas, the watershed is less clearly defined, and it is not a 'before and after television' divide that people talk about but rather a distinction between the early and the latter days of both television and radio. The widespread sense of alienation from the current business-orientated,

anonymous urban stories filmed in West Malaysia is counterbalanced with nostalgia for the golden days of Iban radio and television genres such as US wrestling matches, *kampong* (M. village) serials and films featuring John Wayne and P. Ramlee -- 'the Malaysian Elvis'. 'I don't recognise the actors anymore' (*enda ngelala pelakun agi*), complained a middle-aged viewer. Like their fellow viewers in Belize, Saribas Iban long for the 'good morals' of the past -- which is to say, *they long for the days when they were still young*. They do so through a variety of naturalised media: radio, cassette tapes, cinema, and television.

1. 22 June 1997. I visited Teban Longhouse, some four miles 'uproad' (seldom upriver [*kulu*] these days) from Semak. The *ruai* was abustle with activity in the evening, a striking contrast with Semak's naked gallery. There were women weaving a kind of mat known as *tikai kerupok*, young men playing cards and mixed groups chatting and/or listening to the radio. A woman told me that Iban women were not allowed to emigrate (*pegi*) in the old days. 'Now it's different. They've gone to school' (*Diatu ulih, bisi sekula*). A man in his 60s added that when he was still a boy, only eight boys from the longhouse went to school. These days they all go. The lads still went around courting the girls (*ngayap*) in their secluded *bilik* lofts (*sadau*); whereas nowadays they write them letters (*diatu ngena surat*). They knew how to woo the girls through songs (*renong*) and they could play the *ruding*, a manner of Jew's harp. 'Would you like to listen to a courting song (*renong gayap*)?', asked the man. I said I would be delighted to, and prepared my tape recorder while he entered his *bilik*. To my surprise, he did not bring out a harp but rather an old Philips cassette-player. 'We taped it from the radio', he explained.

2. Semak longhouse. Apai Jara is a policeman in his mid-50s. He has witnessed great changes on television. 'In the old days (*kalia*) there was a lot of good stuff, there were funny stories like P. Ramlee's which made you laugh. The actors travelled from place to place (M. *tempat-tempat*) which they don't do anymore. There's no comparison, TV today isn't really very good'. He likes *The X-Files*, however, as 'they're always solving cases' but he seldom watches 'the company serials' (*wayang syarikat jarang meda*)

3. Semak. Indai Gupi used to enjoy *Six-Million Dollar Man* in the 1980s, [the serialized story of a man whose blood was so rich that he was relentlessly chased by the lackeys of an ageing billionaire in pursuit of immortality]. She also liked *Little House on the Prairie*, on the struggles of a poor white rural family [of pioneers in the American frontier]. 'In the old days [of television] you could learn from the stories, like the difference between being lazy and hard-working' (*ngelusu enggau enda*). Among her old favourites were Elvis Presley and P. Ramlee. I asked her if there were any Iban singers similar to P. Ramlee in those days. 'Of course! (*Bisi!*) We had Michael Jimat, Christopher Keli and others.'

4. Indai Saur, 33, from Semak, told me that films were better when she was still a girl. There were no 'company stories' (*cherita syarikat*) then. They used to go to the now defunct local cinema to see cowboy and kung-fu films, the latter featuring Bruce Lee and other Chinese stars. On television they would watch *Six-Million Dollar Man* and *Charlie's Angels* which featured, she told me, the beautiful actresses Cheryl Ladd and Kate Jackson [as glamorous detectives working for a mysterious playboy]. They also enjoyed *Little House on the Prairie* 'with Melissa Gilbert and Michael Landon'.

5. A group of Semak women are listening to the Iban programme on CATS, the new commercial radio station, while they take a lunch break in the farm hut (*langkau umai*). Towards the end of the programme, they play an old pop song by Christopher Keli. Indai

Duat, who is in her mid-40s, says: 'Oh, this is from the days I was still single!' (*Agi dara aku, maia nya!*).

The past is not (*pace* Wilk 1993) a fixed, unchanging 'mythical' place imaginatively visited by media users from time to time. As these extracts show, the past is constructed by means of different media in accordance with the age of the respondent. Saribas Iban over the age of 60 are more likely to reminisce through and about the 'traditional' Iban radio they listened to in the 1950s and 1960s than about the golden era of television. What all age groups have in common is that remembered materials from the modern media, and especially radio and/or television, are unselfconsciously used to talk about the past in relation to the present. Owing to the long presence of radio in the area (since the mid-1950s) and the relatively late arrival of television (in the 1980s), people from the 30 to 50 age group in longhouses within the town orbit will often associate their childhood with a *ruai*-based form of evening sociality (known as *randau ruai*) of which their elders' old crackling radio sets were as integral a part as the woven mats, fishing nets and betel nuts. Notice, however, the survival of these practices in longhouses lying a mere few miles further away from the market town. Be that as it may, adults of all ages and communities do tend to agree on two points: (a) life is better now thanks to the new technologies, including electricity and television, and (b) in the old days there was more respect (*basa*) towards older people, and longhouse *bilik*-families were closer to one another. Television is critically involved in this endemic ambivalence towards the new technologies and modernity as a whole.

Family life

Among many other things, television can entertain, amuse, bore stiff, put to sleep, and/or scare rural Iban *bilik*-families. But it is also the most powerful conveyor of exogenous ideas *about* the family as a social institution. Malaysian public television offers three main cultural models of the family:

Malay (lb. *melayu* or *lauf*), Western (*urang putih*) and Chinese (*china*), but never Iban. More often than not urban middle-class families will provide the role-models. It is these models Iban viewers choose from in the daily work of thinking about their families. As a matter of fact, there is a fourth family being promoted on TV, typically through commercials featuring Eurasian-looking actors²² as well as in Federal government propaganda: the *Malaysian* family. A family in the making, as this excerpt shows.

Semak, 7 June 1997. Watching the news at 8 on TV1. They are interviewing an Indian Malaysian who has just returned from climbing the Everest with his team. Only two of them managed it to the top. The interviewer uses fluent standard RTM Malay and the climber falters along in a Tamil-accented patois (M. *rojak*) of Malay and English. The journalist congratulates the hero. 'The whole national family (*seluruh keluarga negara*)', he says with a big smile, 'was behind you'.

The Iban *bilik*-family may have been a largely self-sufficient economic and ritual unit in the past, as Freeman (1955) cogently argued over forty years ago. Today it is an eclectic 'moral economy' made up of ever more diverse cultural items as more Iban migrate to towns while new media products arrive in rural Sarawak. Television is sometimes used to exemplify moral and immoral behaviour:

Indai Anchai's *bilik*, 4 December 1997. In the evening little Gloria, 4, sat in her potty a few feet from us to heed the call of nature. '*Enda nemu malu*' complained her aunt: she has no shame. 'But she is shy (*malu*) with strangers in the *rua*' I replied. Indai Anchai ignored my comment and concluded: 'White children aren't naughty, are they? They're not like Iban children; I always see them behaving themselves on TV'. Her two vivacious sons appeared to have understood the hint, and for the next five minutes they managed to behave themselves.

An ancient Austronesian concept, *malu*, is being supported here with contemporary media representations of western origin. The result is a

22. White actors are banned from TV commercials in Malaysia, another instance of PM Mahathir's crusade against the cultural hegemony of the West. The advertisers' solution is to hire Eurasians, a non-confrontational strategy known in social science as 'defection' (see Hirschman 1970).

rhetorical blend of moral continuity and change. In using her television example, the agent (Indai Anchai) is shifting the source of moral authority from local customary law, as her grandmother perhaps would have done, to what is perceived to be the most refined (*alus*) society of all: the neo-mythical land of the white man (*menua urang putih*) populated by happy, healthy and wealthy people.

Such casual, daily micro-transformations of media items can easily slip through the cultural historian's analytical net. They are small fry compared to, say, the great political changes brought about by independence. The implications are nevertheless far-reaching, for the federal government has made great efforts to Malaysianise television production as a way of stemming the flood of American imports and instil love for the new nation in the masses (*rakyat*). The low quality of most Malaysian programmes, alas, has only reinforced the old notion that 'they do things better in the West' (*kita urang putih pandai magang*²³). Of the four family models supplied by television, they like the pale one best. This preference echoes that shown by West Malaysian viewers surveyed in 1987. Researchers (Mohd. Hamdan bin Andan and Parween Akhtar 1987) found that the four most popular TV programmes were foreign, as well as seven of the top ten – mostly American shows (Lent 1994: 88).

But there are problems with this choice, for the behaviour of the white race on television is not always exemplary.

I asked Apai Nathaniel, a policeman in his 50s, what he thought of America, a country that had been mentioned earlier in the interview. 'I'd say it's fifty-fifty nice (*setengah nyama*) because they're always at war, they've always got trouble (*charu*). On the other hand, they're already developed, whereas Malaysia is still developing. There are lots of modern conveniences in America (*Udah maju sida, mayuh pemansang. Malaysia baru 'ka maju. Mayuh kemudahan sida ba Amerika din*) '

23. Literally 'You white people are all clever'.

The good old radio days

The Saribas Iban ideolect contains a fourth inconsistency. Most local leaders preach the need to preserve the best of the Iban heritage (*adaŋ*) while the majority of their practices (including media-related ones) belie such an interest. Saribas Iban leaders often lament the erosion of the Iban culture wrought, in their view, by schooling, migration and television, among other factors, yet most of them are as immersed in the absorbing task of 'becoming modern' (*nyadi moden*) as their followers. In what ways, if any, do Saribas Iban try to preserve their heritage? What media, if any, do they press into such a service? We have already encountered two instances: public-address speeches in which literate leaders encourage their followers to write down their 'old knowledge' (*penemu lama*) and the Gawai Dayak quizzes aimed at reviving such knowledge among women and children of Semak (see chapter 4).

A third media practice deserves our attention: retaining the longhouse gallery (*ruai*) as a space where radio-mediated Iban knowledge is acquired and the allure of television resisted. I observed this practice both in Saribas longhouses recently electrified and in those yet to be electrified. Take Teban, the community mentioned earlier where I was introduced to taped folklore. After a period of religious experimentation in the early 1990s, most *bilik*-families are gradually choosing the Anglican path to Salvation, although some *bilik* remain pagan and syncretism is rife. Politically the longhouse is now firmly within the governing *Barisan Nasional* fold, after years of Dayakist sympathies. As a result, in 1996 they were blessed with electricity and a new road. Many in Teban, especially the young, have taken advantage of the improved infrastructure to watch television in the semi-privacy of their *bilik*. There remain, however, many clusters of middle-aged and elderly residents who refuse to relocate to the *bilik*, and younger men who enjoy a game of cards in the cool gallery. Still a predominantly agrarian longhouse, these residents converse and listen to Iban radio while they carry out tasks such as knitting fishing nets, weaving mats or repairing farming tools. Diehard

listeners of the Iban Service are clear about their loyalty to this medium: it is *their* radio, and no one else's:

1. Male farmer, 68: 'I listen because [the folklore] comes from our ancestors, from days gone by, [I listen so that] it won't disappear' (*Laban ia endang sigi turun menurun ari kelua, awak ka enda pupus*).

2. Male farmer, 62: 'This is our own language, our own people' (*Tu jaku kami, bansa diri*).

3. Male labourer, 44: '[I listen] because I want to know about the Iban origins' (*laban ka nemu asal Iban*).

4. Blind housewife, 40: 'I know Iban, whereas Malay I only know a little. Iban radio is nicer' (*Nemu jaku. Melayu nemu mimit aja. Radio Iban nyamai agi*).

This association of radio with the preservation of the Iban heritage is even more marked in the more remote Skrang area, as shown in the following chapter.

Summary and Conclusion

In the previous chapter I concentrated on mediated ideas and practices that contribute to the organisation of social time and space in Saribas longhouses. In this chapter, by contrast, the focus was on belief acquisition. Following Rorty (1991), I put forth a pragmatist account of Saribas Iban belief acquisition, paying close attention to the main media practices involved in such a process. The modern Saribas Iban system of ideas, or idelect, was formed in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of four expanding sets of practices: Iban-language radio, schooling, outmigration and local development projects. A close examination of late 1990s school essays, longhouse speeches and television commentaries revealed a consistent set of core ideas cutting across these diverse media practices, as well as the prevalence of a 'paradigm of inference' whereby the critical colligation of disparate interpretive materials seldom occurs. A case in point was the uncritical acceptance of government propaganda items during the environmental, medical and economic crises of 1997. A focus on diverse media practices also revealed a fundamental contradiction in the Saribas idelect: the belief that literate, cosmopolitan, hierarchical knowledge is

compatible with oral, parochial, egalitarian knowledge. This contradiction is continually expressed through a different set of media practices, including nostalgic comments about the golden, *adat*-abiding early days of radio and television, a rejection of Peninsular Malay soap operas featuring 'rich, arrogant people' (*urang kaya ti sumbung*) and, in the more traditionalist longhouses, the selfconscious defence of the communal gallery (*ruai*) as a social time and space for radio-informed oral/aural knowledge 'from our ancestors'.

The conclusions derived from this chapter are at odds with some of the contemporary trends in the fledgling anthropology of television I identified in chapter 1. Some scholars (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1997, Hobart 1995), in their preoccupation with elevating rural viewers from the status of passive receivers to that of active, subtle media commentators, have neglected a number of urgent comparative issues in the study of developing countries, such as (a) the role of radio and school textbooks in the local history of ideas *before television*, (b) the relative wealth of interpretive resources available to urban media users in the South who 'know book' (and Internet) compared to marginalized, semi-educated viewers in the rural communities, and (c) the complex relationship between diverse media practices (of which watching television is but a subset) and the spread and consolidation of pro-development ideolects across the world's newly-literate rural areas. Therefore, in addition to studying media practices of commentary and interpretation in the domestic sphere (e.g. Silverstone *et al* 1994) we need to broaden our inquiries to include pre- and non-television media practices and the spread of the kinds of literate, cosmopolitan knowledge demanded by modern nation-states (cf. Gellner 1983). As a first tentative step in that direction, in the following chapter I compare and contrast the Saribas idelect with that of a more isolated Iban river -- the Skrang.

Chapter 6

Skrang Iban knowledge: The Bible is hot, the prayer book is cool

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore media-related practices in a second field site, the Skrang area of Sarawak, and compare them to those in the Saribas (chapters 3-5). I devote special attention to a recent development that is transforming the chosen Skrang longhouse community, namely their conversion to Christianity in 1993. The new Christian print media, I argue, provide the locals with new interpretative tools to make sense of worrying stories brought in by television and radio, but they also contribute to some of the problems posed by a rapidly changing society, which can be summarised as the drying-up of local sources of cultural reproduction. In this respect radio still plays an important, yet declining, role as a source of an increasingly reified Iban folklore and identity. I also explore the failure of television to capture much of a local audience. The central theme running through the chapter is the relationship between (a) the locals' desire to strike a balance between economic development and cultural preservation, and (b) their diverse media-related practices. The key analytical notions are *idelect* and *practice*. I am asking the following questions:

1. What kind of local ideology, or *idelect*, is spoken and practised in the Skrang community studied?
2. What has been the role of the various media-related practices (viewing, playing, listening, praying) in its spread and consolidation?

To answer these questions I look in turn at three central social organisations and their supporting media, namely the *bilik*-family (TV, photography), the longhouse (radio), and the Church (the Bible, prayer books).

Historical background to the Skrang region

Our historical knowledge of the Skrang region is scant by comparison to that of the neighbouring Saribas. Few genealogies of the most prominent leaders have survived, not even that of the celebrated anti-Brooke warrior Rentap (Sandin 1967: 55). This is probably the result of the migration of leading Skrang families and ritual experts to the Rejang and other Third Division rivers during the 19th and 20th centuries (Sather 1994:28, Sandin 1967:29). In my own chosen field site, a longhouse community I shall call 'Nanga Kandis', my best historical informant could not go back further than five generations when asked about the origins of his own longhouse group. Indeed it was often pointed out to me that the community no longer has any 'real elders' (*kami nadai agi urang tuai endar*). The Skrang today lacks that 'quality of community and continuity' that one finds in some Saribas communities (Pringle 1970: 208), especially in the Paku¹ -- a rather ironic state of affairs when we consider that tourists from around the world come to the Skrang to experience the 'traditional Iban lifestyle'. An important difference between the two river-systems is that the Saribas was protected by rugged hills from the chronically war-ridden Batang Lupar and Kanowit, while the Skrang had always easy access to and from them and remained unsettled well into the 20th century (Pringle 1970: 207) What we know today about pre-Brooke Skrang history is largely via the surviving oral literature from the Saribas, painstakingly collected by the Paku ethnohistorian, Benedict Sandin (Sather 1994: 28; see also this thesis ch. 2).

Saribas oral tradition has it that the first leader to settle in the Skrang, some 17 to 18 generations ago, was one Lau Moa ('Withered Face'). He had six famous bard sons who were taught their trade by Sengalang Burong (Sandin 1967: 10),

1. Although in the Saribas longhouses I surveyed genealogical and historical knowledge was also very low (see chapter 4).

father-in-law of the main omen birds (Richards 1981: 178) . Early in the 18th century, Skrang and Batang Lupar residents paid tribute to the Sultan of Brunei in the form of cotton (Pringle 1970: 43). Around this time one Father-of-Paau (Ib. Apai Paau) of the upper Skrang instructed a group of Rimbas men on the proper offerings (*piring*) to the gods following a strange incident with a python. These teachings brought abundant harvests and prosperity to the Rimbas region (Sandin 1994: 135). During this 'middle period' of Iban ethnohistory, men were still learning their *adat* (customary law) from the gods and spirits. In return the supernaturals expected humans to follow their instructions or suffer their wrath (*kudi*) in the guise of poor harvests, illness, natural disasters, etc. In the Skrang it was also a period in which the local Iban drove out some of the nomadic Bukitan groups (Sandin 1994: 161) and assimilated others (Sandin 1967: 15). Skrang pioneers explored and settled the Paku, Padeh, Baan and Rimbas (Sandin 1967: 16-20, 51-54).

From the mid-18th century onwards two kinds of war were waged by powerful allies from the Skrang and Saribas, both Iban and Malays: (a) 'intertribal warfare' against weaker groups in the Batang Ai, Sebuyau and other areas, and (b) 'piratical' raids against Land Dayaks, Melanaus and others as far as Pontianak. Skrang leaders were actively involved in the remarkable career of Orang Kaya Pemancha Dana, the Saribas war leader who from 1800 to 1834 systematically raided and plundered the coastal areas and rivers all the way to West Borneo, deploying over 200 warboats at the height of his power (Sandin 1994: 166-175). It was all part of a 'remarkable outburst of human energy' (Pringle 1970: 51) that also led to migratory waves in the early 19th century to the vast Rejang basin and beyond. It was therefore not difficult for the English adventurer James Brooke to curry support from the Sebuyau, Undup and other groups when he set out to 'pacify' the Skrang and Saribas in the 1840s (Sandin 1967:71). In this same decade leadership in the region shifted from the Saribas to the Skrang with the rapid ascent of the war leader Libau, better known by the praisename

'Rentap'. In 1844 a well-armed British expedition attacked the rebel stronghold at Kerangan Pris, in the Skrang. They were defeated by Rentap and his men, who used only stones and spears and earned the first European head ever to be taken in the region (Pringle 1970: 101). The Battle of Beting Marau in 1849 was altogether different. The White Rajah's fleet of cutters and Royal Navy steamers attacked a large fleet of Malay and Iban 'pirates' from the Saribas and Skrang, leaving more than 500 men dead, most of them Skrang Iban (Pringle 1970: 80-83).

In 1850 a fort was built at the mouth of the Skrang river to force the remaining rebels into submission by restricting their movements and enforcing a salt embargo (Pringle 1970: 87). The following year an Anglican mission was sent to the Fort but it soon withdrew to more promising lands having found Skrang Iban 'altogether unresponsive to the gospel' (Pringle 1970: 89). In 1853 a wholly new relationship of enmity between upriver and downriver Skrang residents was established. It followed the slaying of Alan Lee, a Brooke official, at the hands of Rentap's men. Downriver Brooke allies swiftly retaliated and destroyed twenty upriver longhouses (Pringle 1970: 92). For the next eight years Rentap, to whom the Iban attributed supernatural powers, resisted the encroachment of the new state and instigated rebellion from his base on Mount Sadok until his final defeat in 1861 (Pringle 1970: 129).

Rentap's defeat had three major repercussions on the Skrang and neighbouring Iban areas. First, it established once and for all the power of the white man and his weapons over the indigenous populations. Second, it paved the way for the government's gradual transformation of local customary law (*adat*) into a written system of law that would help to further the twin aims of peace and economic development. The eradication of headhunting was a main element in this process. The *adat* was no longer the province of the elders and their supernatural counterparts alone, it now had powerful white regulators, a lengthy

process of adjustment which has continued under the postcolonial administration. Third, it led to the migration of prominent leaders from the Skrang to the Rejang basin and other areas where the government's grip was still far from firm. By contrast, many of their former Saribas allies stayed on and followed the White Rajah's advice, turning their efforts from subsistence hill-farming and war to trade and later cash crops (Sandin 1994: 196-7, Pringle 1970: 174). The rubber boom that transformed the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago from the end of the 19th century to the 1930s came to the Saribas-Krian area, but not to the war-ridden Skrang (Uchibori 1988: 256).

The troubles persisted in the Skrang well into the 20th century because the government's 'loyal' Iban allies had at times unfinished business of their own. For instance, in 1879 a Dutch Borneo Iban leader misused a Sarawak government spear -- a token of government authority -- entrusted to him. Instead of delivering a message from the Resident, he used the spear to call out a force of Skrang warriors and attack their old common enemies in the upper Batang Lupar (Pringle 1970: 237). Again in 1904, Batang Lupar raiders slaughtered 34 people in the upper Skrang, leading the Resident to bemoan the locals' 'slackness in guarding against surprise and lack of vigour in the fight' (Pringle 1970:229). The traditional solution to overpopulation and political instability, that is collective migration to new areas, was still being practised in the 1930s, when 30 *bilik*-families from 'Nanga Kandis' and dozens of others from four neighbouring longhouses emigrated to Limbang and Niah in search of virgin forests (*kampung puang*). In the case of Nanga Kandis at least, it is important to note that the 'migration leader' (*pun pindah*) took along with him the community's ritual specialists, i.e. the chief augur (*tuai burung*), bard (*lemambang*) and shaman (*manang*), leaving behind but six families and not one ritual specialist, thus paving the way for future missionary work.

After the Japanese Occupation of 1941-1945, Sarawak became a British Crown Colony. The initial thrust of the colonial administration was 'post-war rehabilitation and reconstruction' (Jawan 1994: 175). Later, in the 1950s and 1960s, six community schemes were carried out in Iban territory, including a literacy campaign in the Paku-Saribas (Jawan 1994: 183), but none in the Skrang where economic growth remained sluggish until the 1970s. Indeed in the heyday of rubber, many Skrang Iban had to tap rubber trees for prosperous Saribas Iban to eke out a living (Uchibori 1988:257).

Recent history

In the late 1950s radio arrived as the colonial government encouraged the purchase of inexpensive, battery-operated sets (Morrison 1954). In 1963 a primary school was built by residents of Kandis and nine other longhouses whose headmen had requested it from the Education Department in Simanggang (today Sri Aman). As Table 6.1. shows, the number of pupils declined in the 1980s but increased again in the 1990s. This could be related to the growing economic fortunes of Skrang Iban from the late 1980s onwards. The drop in the teacher:student ratio also signals the increased allocations of public funds to the maintenance of the school, even when facilities have remained basic. Thus in 1998 the school was yet to be electrified, there was no telephone and the living conditions of both teachers and boarders were poor².

In the 1970s, a conjunction of developments in the world and national economy -- affordable air transport, packaged holidays, new roads, longboat outboard engines -

² The official education figures for 1988, unlike those of previous years, reduce Sarawak's ethnic diversity to three blanket categories: Malay/Melanau, Chinese and Dayaks. This makes it impossible to compare the relative performance of the Iban. According to Jawan (1994: 212), this 'statistical deficiency is particularly disturbing since Ibans are always claiming that they are lagging behind in development, including in education'. This Malaysia-based scholar concludes on a cautiously critical note: 'Now, whether or not this is a deliberate manipulation of the statistical data is left to one's imagination'.

- opened up the Skrang to the international tourist industry (Munan 1993:116). The beauty of this river still beguiles the European traveller:

The Skrang river fulfils the best Boy's Own Paper expectations of a jungle waterway: its 20 yard width is vaulted by tall trees: there is the flash of wings as bright kingfishers and brighter butterflies hover over the water's surface; monkeys chatter from the overhead branches; logs float by disguised as crocodiles (Ure 1998).

Year	Teachers	Pupils	Ratio
1963	1	42	42:1
1980	2	119	59:1
1990	4	81	20:1
1996/97	8	101	12:1

Table 6.1. No. of teachers and pupils at Kandis primary school, 1963-1997.

Coinciding with the growth of tourism was the increase of Kandis men on *bejalai* (migrant labour), especially to Brunei, for periods of 6-7 months at a time or longer, up to six years. Those who returned to the longhouse found themselves caught up in a paradox: having acquired modern personas in the urban areas, they were now expected to perform old dances (*ngajat*), some of them recently introduced, in 'traditional' attire (loincloth, bracelets, tattoos, etc) that their parents had abandoned in the 1950s. Today's *bilik* walls are a testimony to a paradox that has survived to this day: portraits of the male members of the household in western dress while on *bejalai* are often juxtaposed to pictures of those same men clad in colourful Iban clothing. This juxtaposition is only possible thanks to another relatively cheap technology increasingly available to Skrang *bilik*-families: the photographic camera.

The 1980s and 1990s ushered in a decline of rubber and the rise of pepper as the chief cash crop in the area. High market prices and the sustained support of the Agriculture Department appear to have been vital in the consolidation of pepper, which in the past had failed to take root as the shift to this cash crop is both expensive and time-consuming (Uchibori 1988:256). As the Kandis

headman put it, '[Our lives] are better nowadays because the government has helped us with the pepper gardens (*[Pengidup kami] nyamai agi diatu laban perintah bisi nulong ba kebun lada*)'. The improved river and road transport has also opened up the markets in Sri Aman and Betong (Saribas) to surplus fruit, vegetable and rice production.

Television arrived in the 1980s, its being purchase closely linked to the disposable income generated by migrant labour and pepper. It does not seem to have altered greatly local patterns of social interaction, though, for reasons we shall explore shortly. The 1990s brought a video set and a parabolic antenna to the headman's *bilik*. Like television, however, they too appear to have had only a limited impact on a community life that still revolves around the longhouse gallery (*ruai*). In 1993 Kandis, for 60 years bereft of ritual experts, became an Anglican Christian community, except for one remaining pagan family. The process of incorporating Christian ideas and practices into everyday life is far from over, as I try to demonstrate in the last section. For Kandis residents, converting to the new faith is an integral part of their strenuous efforts to develop, following the example of Iban from other regions (*nunda ka urang*), especially those among their own people who emigrated in the 1930s whose children are now 'clever' (*udah panda*) and work for the government.

According to the locals, the 1990s have also seen a worrying decline in the number of tourists (*suba bejarit turis, diatu kurang*). The Skrang seems to have lost a share of the market to other 'traditional Iban' heartlands, in particular the Lemanak and Batang Ai. In any case, most Skrang informants think that local life has been steadily improving over the past two generations. The new technologies have played an important role, to judge by their statements, in this improvement.

1. Lots of changes. We used to suffer in the past. We used axes, now it's all [*imitating the sound and motion of a chainsaw*] 'ngggggg'. We had to do it all ourselves, nobody gave it to us (man, 50).

2. We had a very hard time in the past, there were no engines. When I was still a girl we had to paddle to Simanggang. It's nice now that we've got a doctor -- but we still need the shaman (pagan woman, ca. 55).
3. [We were] always hard-up in the past, we had no gardens, no earnings. We were all poor. Food we did have because we farmed *padi*, but we were always short of money (Kandis headman, 46)³.

Nonetheless, people also appeared anxious about the erosion of the local culture and the environment brought about by 'development' (*pemansang*).

1. Youngsters don't want to listen to the old stories [on the radio]. What they want is Malay songs (man, 46)
2. There used to be plenty of boar and fish around here. Not anymore (man, 50)⁴.

The failure of television

Conventional representations of TV in developing countries tend to view its significance in terms of its 'impact' on fragile traditional societies⁵. The Nanga Kandis case shows that it is local conditions, not television in itself, that largely determine the success or failure of this medium. Moreover it is not clear in what sense, if any, Kandis is either 'traditional' or 'fragile'. In this section I argue that the shift from gallery (*ruai*) to family room (*bilik*) as the locus of evening socialising -- to a large extent a product of a regular electricity supply and

³ 1. *Mayuh berubah. Merinsa kelua, kami. Suba ngena kapak, diatu ngggggg. Semua utai pungal, nadai urang meri.*
 2. *Merinsa suba, nadai injin. Kami bekayuh ngagai Simanggang, agi biak aku. Diatu nyamai, bisi lutor, tapi manang agi beguna.*
 3. *Kurang suba, nadai bekebun, rega nadai. Semua miskin. Utai dempa bisi laban bumai, tang belanja kurang-lah.*

⁴ 1. *Bala anak enggai ninga cherita lama [ba radio], lagu Melayu baru 'ka.*
 2. *Kelua mayuh babi, ikan ditu. Diatu kurang.*

⁵ For instance, at a conference on 'globalisation' organized in Kuching by the Sarawak Development Institute (December 1997), I was invited to deliver a paper on 'The impact of television on the rural Iban'.

television -- is a form of 'mass migration' that has transformed many Saribas longhouses but has yet to transform those in the Skrang. Here in the Skrang an economy of very scarce resources hampers the popularity of television. I will single out four kinds of constraints: money, social time, social space and knowledge. Let us study these constraints in some detail through two case studies.

Case Study 1 (first part): Apai Jange and family

Apai Jange (i.e. Father-of-Jange) is in his 50s. He lives with his wife, in her early 40s, and their son Marcus, 4. They have two other children: Jange, 25, who 'coolies' (*bekuli*) in Miri, and Kusau, 14, a secondary school pupil in the Saribas. They keep photos of them in their family album. As the rest of the community, save for one family, they converted to Christianity four years ago, in 1993. Apai Jange is from Nanga Kandis and his wife from a longhouse further upriver. He left school with a Primary 3 education, his wife after Primary 6. Their family heirloom is average by local standards; it consists of 12 glazed earthenware jars (*tajau*), a small number of bronze gongs (*tawak*), bronze drums (*gong*), and metal trays (*tabak*).

They grow hill rice in a farm some 40 minutes away by longboat or, as people around here put it, three gallons of petrol 'away' for the round trip. Their main source of income these days is pepper whose market price is currently high. They also tap rubber, a less profitable activity. At present all families live in makeshift individual houses. When the new longhouse, currently under construction, is completed it is hoped that tourism will again provide them with an extra income.

They normally get up at around 6 a.m., earlier if Apai Jange goes hunting or at peak farming periods such as planting (*nugal*) the hill rice. These days they are busy helping to build the new longhouse, so their labour resources are more stretched than ever. When they work in the fields they usually eat in the farming hut at around noon. They eat rice with vegetables such as *daun ubi* or *changkok*. If the hunt was good, perhaps once a week they will enrich their diet with mouse-deer (*pelandok*), barking deer (*kijang*) or porcupine (*landak*). They return home before sunset and Indai Jange (Mother-of-Jange) prepares supper. Like all other residents, they have their own electricity generator which they have on from roughly 6 to 9 pm if there is something worth watching on TV and have not run out of fuel.

Apai Jange worked as a labourer in Brunei for four years, from 1968 to 1972, when he was still a bachelor. In 1982 he bought his first and only TV set for 400 Bruneian dollars. This colour TV set had served them well for the past 15 years until it 'went quiet' ('*no talking*', says Apai Jange) some two months ago. In spite of this they still watch the news at 8 most evenings. Their favourite programme is the world news. Indai Jange always watches the war reports but it saddens her to see how people suffer in those war-ridden, remote countries ('*Berita perang ka meda, tang kasih meda*'), like those poor black children with flies in their eyes. The news at 8 is the only programme worth watching. They believe television teaches young people how to take drugs, steal, and murder, especially some of the Malay serials shown after the news. Besides, it is not nice to sit in one's *bilik* watching TV. Unlike the Saribas and other downriver areas, they say, people here in the Skrang still come out to the *ruai* after supper to swap stories with their neighbours.

The longhouse is a larger, more loosely integrated social group than the family. It is a network of people in close kinship and physical proximity, 'a local confederation of *bilik*-families, based on cognatic kinship' with 'virtually no property in communal ownership'. In his famous phrase, Freeman (1970: 129) defines the Iban longhouse as 'a street of privately owned, semi-detached houses'⁶. Similarly, Dove (1988: 25) has cogently argued against the romantic idea of the Dayak longhouse as the physical manifestation of an entrenched communal spirit. It is more accurate to locate the mode of economic organisation 'at the level of the household rather than the longhouse community' (Cleary and Eaton 1995: 99). As I argued in chapter 4, this may not apply to ritual and para-ritual periods, but it still holds true for most everyday practices and economic transactions.

We should not expect to find, therefore, too many communally owned media in Iban longhouses. This indeed was the case in my field experience, both in the Saribas (see Chapter 3) and in the Skrang. It is the *bilik*-families that own TV, video and radio sets, etc, not the longhouse. Also in the Skrang there is a clear link between migration (*bejalai*) and the purchase of television sets. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, it was expected of a migrant labourer that he should buy a set for his home *bilik* as soon as possible. Most did. At Nanga Kandis, 14 of the 18 *bilik*-families own a TV set. Most were bought while on migration to Brunei during that period. These figures can be misleading, for a quarter of those sets were out of order and most of the others had poor reception. More importantly than the one-off cost of purchase and upgrade, though, it is the ongoing cost and trouble of running and repairing ageing sets that hampers television consumption. The key limiting factor is the cost of electricity. Kandis families have their own electricity generators. The main

6. A useful definition at this point of the discussion, i.e. the economics of longhouse media consumption. As I explain below, however, this is only a partial way of looking at Iban longhouses.

reason to have them on, at the considerable cost of some two ringgit per evening, is either to entertain guests or watch television. Television is a central marker of modernity. Its presence as an expensive commodity in the rural family *bilik* conveys the closely related messages: 'We are informed', 'We are developing' and 'We have money'. The commodity is the message. As a 46-year old man put it, 'Before we had TV we were not very clever here. TV provides [us with] models...we can see the development of people overseas, they're all modern' (*Sebedau bisi tibi kurang pemandai kami. Tibi meri chonto...tau meda pemansang urang tasik, moden magang*). Just as in the Saribas, however, when households face hardship, paying for the electricity needed to watch television can become a burden. Hence, the same conclusion applies here: *Television is a much valued commodity, yet a dispensable medium*. Owning a TV set does not necessarily entail *watching* TV.

A second scarce resource in an upriver community is time. Longhouses have life cycles: they are built new, last a generation or two, and finally have to be torn down and rebuilt. At the time of my fieldwork at Nanga Kandis they were in the process of laying the foundations of a new house and would need at least another year and much collective effort (M. *gotong-royong*) to completed it, despite the contribution of a team of four Chinese builders on contract. This added to their farming and gardening exertions, often leaving them too tired to do much else after supper other than retiring for the night.

A third limited resource impinging on television viewing is social space. Apai Jange's family's scattered nature is typical of the Skrang and other remote areas: in a word, the younger generation have left. Children above the age of six are away at boarding schools, teenagers and young unmarried adults have out-migrated to urban areas. It is likely that Apai Jange's children will never come back to take up residence in the longhouse. By contrast, in Saribas longhouses close to town, as we saw in previous chapters, children sleep at home and many

young people have found local employment, so sizeable viewing groups of mixed ages routinely gather in front of the television⁷. The realities of out-migration call for a more significant visual medium than television in the construction of the Skrang *bilik*-family – photography:

26 February 1998. Talking with Apai Jange's brother and his sister-in-law nextdoor over a cup of coffee. We have moved here to listen to the Bujang Lembau story on the radio. They have a son who has long worked aboard a cargo ship. He's the only Iban crew member. He's seen many countries, including the white man's, and speaks fluently the white man's language (*jaku urang putih*). They show me some of the many pictures he has sent them over the years. He has also bought them three TV sets in tax-free havens. They seldom watch TV, however.

Again as is the case in the Saribas (chapter 4) and throughout the world, cherished photos compress the time-space chasms created by death or by migration. They allow people to imaginatively transcend the physical constraints imposed by place and age.

Another constraint in the social space available for the viewing of television is the institution of *randau ruai*, the evening chats in the longhouse gallery, seen locally as one of the good old traditions that set the Skrang apart from downriver areas, and in particular the Paku/Saribas area. As one woman put it: 'They never come out to the gallery' (*sida dia enggai pansut ka ruai*).

The process of 'domestication' of TV sets and photographic cameras (that is, of how these once-anonymous devices become familiar objects) is radically different, then. Television potentially creates and recreates a daily family audience, an audience much diminished in the Skrang by the demands of schooling, migration and *ruai* life. It is a mass medium whose narratives are the same here and in the nextdoor *bilik*. Indeed they are identical across the nation's low income group, who have little access to more costly forms of entertainment

7. As I argue in Chapter 4, 'watching TV' in such contexts is far from simple. It is a complex practice that may overlap with other practices such as eating, chatting, repairing a fishing net, listening to the radio, etc.

(*hiburan*). Family albums and wall portraits, by contrast, were tailor-made by and for the family group and their social network. They are more efficient media in the task of (re)making the family consciousness across time and space, the family as an 'imagined community'⁸ (the telephone is pressed into the same service in those few wealthy families who own one, none in Nanga Kandis).

Let us now consider a fourth resource that is in short supply: knowledge, in particular cosmopolitan knowledge and traditional local knowledge.

Case Study 1 (continued)

Apai Jange and his wife used to enjoy watching white-man wrestling (*gusti*) and action videos at the headman's, but now that he has satellite TV he doesn't rent videos any longer. Of the two radio sets they own, only the small one works at present, but it crackles too much, so when the adventures of Bujang Lembau, the mythical Iban were-leopard, come on they go over to Apai Jange's brother next door to listen to them. Occasionally they also enjoy listening to traditional Iban music, including *pantun* (sung poems), *sanggai* (songs for social occasion) and *ramban* (love songs), even if they don't always understand the words. Baleh Iban are great *pantun* performers who always get their lines right (*enda nemu salah sebut*). Today there are sadly no *sanggai* performers left here in the Skrang. In the old days they would always sing for the tourists.

Another Iban-language programme they enjoy is the news. 'Do they ever tell lies on the news?' I asked them. 'There are no lies!' Apai Jange replied: 'It is true, say, that a longhouse burnt down... Like the government, if we ask for a project they will give it to us, the ministers.' (*'Nadai bula! Betul rumah angus... Enti kitai minta projek beri urang, bala menteri'*). The same applies to news from Berita Harian, a Malay-language paper Apai Jange occasionally borrows from one of the teachers across the river 'to check the lottery'. Although he trusts politicians, he is not too interested in politics. He prefers the sports, accidents and crime sections. In the crime reports 'evil people are arrested by the police and punished' (*urang jai ditangkap pulis, lalu hukum agi dikena sida*).

Watching television and listening to the radio are complex interpretative activities. Moreover, some genres demand a much higher degree of cultural competence than others. Nanga Kandis residents could enjoy the US wrestling

8. This over-used term is, of course, from Anderson's (1983) celebrated essay on nationalism. The contrast I draw between photography and TV does not mean that specific TV products are not domesticated by families and included in their shared memory. They are. For instance, I know two Iban boys with the same nickname, *Papai*, from the cartoon Popeye they both used to enjoy as toddlers. Often as well certain events (births, weddings, funerals) will be remembered with reference to media events such as football championships or popular TV programmes.

videos because they posed few problems of cultural translation. Indeed American wrestling resonates with Iban notions of physical endurance and invulnerability still current⁹. The CNN news is a different genre altogether. It demands a high command of English and a good grasp of international relations, both beyond the reach of Skrang viewers. The headman's acquisition of satellite TV technology backfired because CNN and the other stations provided too much dialogue in an unintelligible language and too little action. Undeterred by his lack of cosmopolitan cultural competence, the headman himself tried to provide the action:

Nanga Kandis, 14 February 1998. At noon the headman and I were invited over for lunch at a relative's three doors downriver. A veritable feast: smoked fish, salted fish, boiled fish, wild boar, porcupine, *upa* ('cabbage' of palm), and a fruit known as *buah dabai*. Some ten men, no women. The headman, T.R. Gilang, started telling his unlucky hunting tale yet again. As it often happens in dreams, somewhere along the way his story turned into something else: an update on the latest CNN stories – T.R. Gilang owns the only satellite dish in the area. The Japanese prime minister, it seemed, had just held talks on the Iraq weapons crisis with his Chinese counterpart. A tropical downpour of name-dropping followed: Saddam, Arafat, Clinton, Albright...One had the distinct impression that the headman himself had just held crucial talks with each one of them.

In the best Iban tradition of pre-war consultations, the war leaders in T.R. Gilang's version of the events are trying to decide on the best course of action against the rebel, Saddam. This story is structured along pre-television narrative lines¹⁰. The headman's performance also resonates with Iban oratory notions and practices: being able to remember the names and deeds of distinguished ancestors and contemporaries is a skill highly valued on important occasions such as weddings, funerals and government-related ceremonies.

9. My fellow footballers in rural Sarawak were always astonished and disappointed to hear a white man complain of pain or fatigue. An important part of my training as a fieldworker in Iban lands was learning how to feign physical endurance (*nakal, tan*).

10. Sandin (1994: 173) tells the story of the great Saribas warrior Orang Kaya Pemancha Dana who in 1830s led a vast raid against Undup Iban. On hearing that their enemies had fled to a longhouse called Rumah Sureng, Dana asked a local ally for his opinion about an attack on it. This man replied that he had 'complete faith in the Orang Kaya Pemancha and the other Saribas war-leaders and warriors'. Then Dana asked the leaders from the Lemanak, Belambang, Skrang, Seremat, Paku and Ulu Layar. They all swore that 'they would not leave him as long as he was still on the warpath'.

It is not only the intricacies of the Middle East that pose interpretive difficulties to viewers in remote areas. The Malaysian news programmes themselves use a 'deep' (*dalam*), urban language, standard Malay, and deal with issues that are often removed from the life experience of viewers. Rural Iban have faith in the veracity of the news because they have faith in its provider: the government. This is even more so in communities like Nanga Kandis where the residents' formal schooling rarely goes beyond the first few years of primary education. When asked directly, most respondents, including Apai Jange, say they trust the veracity of the news entirely. This 'dominant response' (Parkin 1972) to the news, that is wholly accepting its veracity based on the authority of the sender (the government) results from historical experience. The history of the Iban people as told informally by the Iban themselves is a story of progress from a murderous, headhunting distant past (*dulu kelia*) through a middle period (*dulu suba*) of increased stability thanks to the White Raja's government, and finally towards a literate, developed future (*maia ila*) within Malaysia. In chapter 2, I called it the 'Hobbesian nature' of modern Iban ethnohistory, that is the idea that the state saved the Iban from themselves. As a Nanga Kandis elder put it to me, reflecting on the local history of headhunting and communist (*keminit*) insurgency: 'How can it be right to kill people? Thankfully, nowadays we have a government' (*Ni patut munoh urang? Manah diatu, udah bisi perintah*).

Similarly, a younger informant related to me the history of Rentap, the Skrang warrior who defeated the White Rajah's forces twice but was 'in the end captured by the government' (*ditangkap perintah*). This ending is curiously close to Apai Jange's favourite newspaper reports, mentioned above, in which 'evil people are captured and punished'. It also resembles closely the morality tales of the 1960s Saribas authors (chapter 2) and late 1990s Saribas children essayists (chapter 5). The structural resemblance between many of these accounts is striking. They have a 'narrative skeleton' (Spear in Sather 1994: 46) in which there is a

progression from (1) an early period of strife and/or wrong-doing through (2) the arrival of a powerful organising agent (the government) to (3) a happy ending in which law and order have been restored. This tidy progression from chaos to order probably traces its roots to much older accounts of the mythic world from which an *adat*-governed Iban society emerged,

a still undifferentiated world inhabited, not only by the earliest ancestors of the Iban, but also by the *Petara* [gods] and the *Orang Panggau* [mythical heroes and heroines]. To begin with, it is a world of chaos, characterized by supernatural calamity and disaster. The primal forest is filled with demonic *Antu*. There are storms, disease, and petrification. Fish and turtles come out of the water, their 'natural element', to attack the ancestors of humankind living on land. But out of this chaos eventually comes an ordered, habitable universe regulated by the rules of *adat* (Sather 1994: 31).

Likewise, out of the chaos of distant and recent Skrang history (not clearly separated out in the oral accounts I recorded), a 'habitable universe' regulated by governmental law (*adat perintah*) has emerged. Sometimes war and peace are talked about using the language of shamanic healing. The Iban past was 'hot' (*angat*), like the body of a sick person. Its present is 'cool' (*chelap*), like the body of a healthy person. The shaman (*manang*) is the agent who restores the body to a cool state (Barrett and Lucas 1993). Similar notions are used to account for a longhouse's misfortune, as we shall see shortly. These indigenous narratives are today articulated with the nationalist, developmentalist ideology promoted daily through radio and television, and sporadically through influential rural agents such as doctors, priests and agricultural officers. As we saw in the Saribas, the popular television news programmes in particular reinforce the contrast between a peaceful, 'cool' (*chelap*) Malaysia and war-ridden, 'hot' (*angat*) overseas countries. Here in the Skrang, they are bolstered by the 'independent evidence' provided by a white-man channel: CNN.

There is some scope however in how Skrang *bilik*-families 'read' the news. A second case study will provide us with an interesting contrast in this respect. It

also leads us to the third key genre in the production of family narratives: Malay soap operas.

Case Study 2: The last pagan household

Apai Uchak is 38. His wife, Indai Uchak, is 34. They have two children in their early teens who study in the Saribas and come home every other weekend. The other members of this 6-strong household are Apai Uchak's parents, grandmother and younger brother. They are the last remaining pagan (*pengarap Iban*) family in Kandis: 'We refuse to abandon our traditions. The minister himself, what's his name...Gerunsin Lemat from [the Council for] Customary Law, said people shouldn't throw away their customs -- I heard it on the radio'¹¹: ('*Enggai muai adat. Ari sapa namanya...Gerunsin Lemat empu, ari Adat Istiadat, enda ngasoh muai adat, bisi aku ninga ba radio*).

Apai Uchak left school after Primary 5: 'I was lazy, didn't want to go to school. [I was] stupid.' ('*Malas, enggai sekula. Beli*'). His wife could not go at all because they lived 'very far upriver'. Today they are, in the main, pepper cultivators but also grow *padi* for their own consumption. Apai Uchak worked as an off-shore coolie in the Bruneian oil industry four times in the 1980s, for six to eight months at a time. In Brunei he could not practise his religion, as the ingredients required for the offerings (*piring*) were hard to come by in the strictly Islamic sultanate and he did not have a car to reach the outlying forests.

Their family heirloom consists of some glazed earthenware jars (*tajau*), bronze gongs (*tawak*), metal trays (*tabak*), China plates (*pinggai lama*), a set of small gongs (*engkerumong*), and a small gun (*bedih*). They own a colour TV set Apai Uchak bought in Brunei in 1980. Fortunately it still works well, as spare parts of old models are hard to find. Their favourite programmes are the CNN news at 10 on TV3 and wildlife documentaries (*urang ti mansik-mansik jelu*). Most TV programmes and videos are best avoided, they argue, as they teach young people to steal and distract them from their work. Pointless stories, like those Malay soaps after the news, can make us stupid (*ngasoh kitai beli*). Their own children are not allowed to watch them.

They normally listen to radio in the evening, mostly the Iban Section of RTM and are particularly keen on the news at 7.30, personal messages (*jaku pesan*), traditional music, health, and farming programmes. Seldom do they tune into Cats Radio because it is meant for teenagers (*M. remaja*¹²). Once a month Apai Uchak reads the Iban-language edition of the

11. Lemat died in 1995, as recorded in Langub's (1995) obituary of this quintessentially Saribas Iban progressive traditionalist. He was the first Iban broadcaster (see chapter 2), Head of the Council for Customary Law, and the first Sarawak-born State Secretary (Pringle 1970: 209). Radio audiences vividly remember his extraordinary voice, command of 'deep' Iban (*jaku dalam*) and vast knowledge of Iban custom (*adaf*).

12. The informant used the word *remaja* at first, indicating it was a Malay term, and then offered the closest Iban equivalent: *urang agi punga laki*. I encountered this kind of linguistic self-monitoring time and again in the field, especially among older or more traditionalist informants. Language usage is always contextual. In the context of a taped interview with a foreign student of Iban culture, native actors strove to prove their own competence in the Iban language through a discourse purified of Malay borrowings (*jaku Iban tulin*). Such language games were complicated by an ingrained habit, that of speaking bazaar Malay with non-Iban interlocutors, and by a competing goal: to prove one's competence in standard Bahasa Malaysia. Was my friend's self-correction, then, an elaborate, semi-conscious way of declaring: 'I am competent

Farmer's Bulletin published by the Information Department (*Opis Pemadiah*). The trouble is the good developmental news always seems to come from other parts of Sarawak. Besides, working on a new oil palm plantation for 8 ringgit a day is not exactly what he would call *maju* (M. 'progress'). The key to true development, he thinks, is education. One has to believe not so much in God as in one's own brain (*arap ka untak-untak diri empu*). Nowadays all Iban think of is money. They have forgotten their origins.

Here again we can see the high regard in which Skrang Iban hold information (*berita*). Yet there is a significant difference in approach. If the previous informant gave a 'dominant response' to the government-controlled news, this informant provides us with what Parkin (1972) calls a 'subordinate response'¹³ which indicates 'general acceptance of dominant values and existing social structures, but the respondent is prepared to argue that a particular group - blacks, unemployed, women - within that structure may be unfairly dealt with and that something should be done about it' (Watson and Hill 1993: 61). Apai Uchak does indeed criticise some of the official propaganda, but he does so within the framework of a developmentalist idelect very much in line with the government's ideology -- and supported by the powerful indigenous narrative structure identified above (from lawless chaos to law-abiding order). Even his desire to remain a pagan he supports with the authority of a prominent government official and a reputed governmental medium ('I heard it on the radio'). *In rural Iban society today, there is a general consensus that development is both inevitable and desirable; there is no epistemological space for an articulated anti-development ideology (cf Abu-Lughod 1997 on Egypt, Mankekar 1993 on India).*

Biography is one of the clues as to why. Apai Uchak's low educational attainment did not prepare him for a successful career in Brunei. Only as an adult did he appreciate the economic value of education. Like so many other

both in Iban and in standard Malay?'. I think it was. On more relaxed occasions 'off the record', established Malay terms would be used more frequently.

13. What Hall (1981) calls a 'negotiated code'.

rural parents, he wants to spare his children the misery of poorly paid, low-skilled work. It is in this context that his fear that TV, and in particular the Malay action dramas, might be a corrupting influence can be understood. In terms of the ideolectal model I used in chapter 5, we can say that it is here that the ideolect's hinges creak. Skrang Iban, too, would like to reconcile their local traditions with the influences arriving from the outside world. They, too, want to believe in the Malaysian dream of 'unity in diversity', in the compatibility between an egalitarian locality and a stratified polity. The urban soap operas call into question the feasibility of this collective project.

One major theme emerges from both case studies: the relationship between family media practices and the deadliest threat to the viability of Skrang families, namely the migration to urban areas of its younger members. Distance from town areas where secondary schools are concentrated, and the widespread migration to urban areas of young men and women make for this plain demographic reality. All three modern media genres discussed so far -- family photography, mass media news and Malay soap operas -- give us precious clues as to this perceived threat to the local reproduction of families. Among Iban from all rivers, the extinction of a *bilik-family (bilik punas)* is a disastrous affair, and 'every effort is made to avoid so ignominious a fate' (Freeman 1955:16). The traditional threat was a childless marriage which usually led to adoption, an unproblematic and widespread practice. Thanks to this practice, extinct families were very rare indeed. Today's rural-urban drift, in contrast, is a mass phenomenon of potentially devastating effects for the long term survival of rural families and communities. Skrang parents find themselves caught up in a dilemma, one common to parents across the developing world. On the one hand, they want their children to do well at school so that they will secure a regular income, preferably 'working for the government' (*gawa perintah*) and escape the poverty trap of the rural areas. On the other hand, if they do find a job in town (even a poorly remunerated one) they might never return to live in the longhouse

and the family line will eventually die out. Strife-ridden urban dramas on television clash with the 'Iban dream' of a peaceful, prosperous future for their families. This is why they reject them so forcefully.

In sum, television is a marker of modernity. Each TV set stands in a part-whole, metonymic relationship to 'modern society'. To the locals, it is tangible proof -- together with the outboard engine, the chainsaw, the fertilizers, etc -- that modernity has finally arrived in these remote riverbanks. In addition, it is seen as an educational window to the developed world. Ownership of a television set supports the dominant local prescription '*We (Skrang) Iban must develop like others have done*'. Viewing television is more problematic than owning a television, though: reception is poor, it is unsocial, expensive, tedious, difficult to understand, and it brings into the home unsolved questions about the more sinister aspects of development and migration.

The success of radio

The core of programming in the Dyak/Iban language has changed little since Morrison's (1954:390) pioneering visit in the mid-1950s, mentioned in chapter 3. In the caption to a memorable photograph in which men and women in traditional dress appear mesmerized with the talking box, she adds:

Programmes are put out in several languages, including Dyak, and the people are encouraged to purchase cheap but efficient battery-operated receiving sets... [In this photograph, t]hey listen with interest to their own songs and stories and to talks on hygiene, education and agriculture given in their own language -- and to the latest prices for rubber and pepper.

From its very inception, the Iban Service had an ambiguous role as both a collector and repository of Iban folklore and as an agent of development (chapter 2). In relation to the latter role, there is however one programme missing from Morrison's useful summary: the news. In both areas listeners expressed a preference for the news programmes, storytelling, traditional music and listeners'

messages (*jaku pesan*). Yet this conceals an important fact: the much greater popularity of Iban-language radio in the Skrang, where television has only been incorporated into everyday life patchily, as I argued earlier.

The longhouse is today, more than ever, the symbolic centre, the reified epitome of Iban culture at a time when this institution has been pushed to the margins of political and economic life (Sutlive 1978). It is celebrated in the tourist brochures and during Gawai Dayak, the pan-Dayak festive day, by Iban politicians and broadcasters alike. Radio acts as a cheap, portable carrier of 'memory traces' (Giddens 1984) from the ancestors, even when 'the ancestors' (*urang kelias*) are somebody else's, for seldom does the broadcast folklore originate from the Skrang. The most appropriate place to listen to the folklore programmes is the *ruai*, the longhouse gallery, 'a public space, symbolizing the longhouse as a whole and its membership in the larger regional society of which each longhouse is a constituent unit'. The *ruai* was also in the past 'the chief setting in which oral narratives were recounted and preserved' (Sather 1994:25). For older Iban the *ruai* can at times be a quiet refuge from a *bilik* turned by the younger generations into an 'urban'¹⁴ space blasted by taped music or TV shows, especially during festive periods. At Kandis, the arduous task of building a new longhouse had altered the social dimension of radio listening during my stay, as strictly speaking there was no *ruai* at the time. Still people felt the need to gather together at night, so some evenings they would do so in the building site, along a *ruai*-to-be. Other evenings they would gather in clusters of ten to fifteen souls along makeshift, *ruai*-like verandahs to talk and/or listen to the radio. The *ruai* was the longhouse's phantom limb.

14. Or, as they would put it, *setedi*, from the English 'steady', meaning here 'cool' (in the youthful sense of the word).

The Iban Section has helped to preserve some dying traditions half-alive since its birth in 1954. Both the traditional music (*main asal*) and oral narratives (*pengingat tuai*) furnish radio listeners with cultural materials that are uniquely Iban. If listening to the news -- whether on radio or TV -- is seen as a modern must and a civic duty, part of the dominant developmentalist ideology, listening to the folklore programmes is a duty to the ancestors, part of a subordinate traditionalist ideology: 'I listen so that this ancient knowledge won't disappear' (*enggai ke penemu lama tu nyau*), said one informant. It is important, however, to distinguish between *main asal* (traditional music) and *pengingat tuai* (oral narratives). Listeners of all ages, not only the young, often confess that they do not quite understand the ritual significance or poetic language of the *main asal*. Very few listeners are competent performers of this music in either the Saribas or the Skrang -- although some state agencies have organised workshops to improve such skills in the Skrang, where the tourist industry is of great importance. By contrast, the oral narratives (*pengingat tuai*) are easier to follow as there is little *jaku dalam* in them, literally the 'deep language' employed by bards (*lemambang*) and other ritual specialists in their sung performances. Another obstacle in the way of the *main asal* is that they are usually broadcast late at night, while the 30-minute *pengingat tuai* is broadcast on Thursdays at 8.30 pm and repeated on Fridays at 5 pm (residents of Nanga Kand's normally retire for the night no later than 9.00 or 9.30). A 30-year old man sums up the contrast between the two mediated art forms:

On Friday I still want to listen to the storytelling (*pengingat tuai*) again. I hardly ever listen to the traditional music (*main asal*) because it's on too late. I have a young child who has to sleep... Besides the *pengingat tuai* are good, one can learn a lot from them (*mayuh pulai ka pelajar*).

The popularity of broadcast storytelling sets the Skrang apart from the Saribas. Take the following incident at Nanga Kandis:

12 February 1998. In the evening we listened to the story of Bujang Lembau, the mythical Iban wereleopard, on the radio¹⁵. Somebody compared him to Tarzan, always willing to help the needy. The oil lamp-lit *ruai* was well attended by both men and women. Everyone was really engrossed in the story, enjoying every minute. How different from most TV viewing!¹⁶ They had a good laugh when an old relation of Bujang Lembau's was reluctant to perform the *biau* [a rite involving the waving of a fowl] for fear of getting it wrong and heating things up. The storyteller, Thomas T. Laka, a veteran RTM broadcaster, is much admired by the locals. After the story I asked them about local kinship terms vs. Saribas terms. Suddenly, half-way through the lesson a bright object flew past us, over the rooftops, creating an uproar. Only two of us failed to see it. They assured me it was a *pulong*, a small demon sent out to harm an enemy [see Richards 1981: 289]. We were lucky this time.

According to Sather (1994) the longhouse represents the setting of biographical events, scenes of vital activity, both seen and unseen, rather than an inert physical structure, as Freeman (1955) would have it. Television viewers are shut off from river and forest as their eyes roam foreign lands, whereas radio brings people together in the poorly-lit *ruai*, in proximity to the natural and supernatural forces that have shaped Iban thought for centuries. Radio links disparate Iban spaces, past and present: *bilek* and *ruai*, man and woman, human and demon, longhouse and forest, community and community, river and river, rural area and urban area¹⁷. This naturalised medium spreads across time-space, throughout Sarawak and into the Indonesian province of West Kalimantan, a uniquely Iban worldview. More precisely, it spreads the aural/oral dimension of that worldview¹⁸. The incident with the flying demon, and the collective interpretive effort that followed it, could not have taken place inside a family room dominated by a loud, flickering television set and its urban narratives. Radio

15. This community, like most other Iban longhouses in Sarawak, has long lost its own accomplished storytellers and must rely on RTM for their weekly supply of stories.

16. As attentive as Ejau's 1960s characters above listening to the local news.

17. Bujang Lembau and other culture heroes featured in radio broadcasts before him, such as Ruma, Rimung and Keling, embark on *bejalai* adventures that take them across a variety of regions, both 'natural' and 'supernatural', to put it in non-Iban terms.

18. At the same time, radio helps TV spread a uniquely *Malaysian* worldview, especially through the news bulletins, translated from the English original, and other channels of Federal government information and propaganda. I have not been able to confirm reports that Indonesian Iban listen with interest to the Iban Section of RTM.

contributes to the maintenance and renewal of the aural and oral aspects of the Skrang Iban idiolect a great deal more than it does to the Saribas one.

The supernatural dimension of some Iban radio listening suggests a marked cultural difference with more secularised societies. Tacchi's (1998) work on radio 'soundscapes' in English homes is again pertinent here (see chapter 4). Her starting point is Needham's (1967) struggle to understand the relationship between percussion and rites of passage within anthropology, a notoriously 'deaf' discipline. Tacchi (1998: 26) distinguishes between 'the mundane context of domestic media consumption, and the ritualised use of percussive sounds in *rites de passage*'. Radio sound, she adds,

creates a textured 'soundscape' in the home, within which people move around and live their daily lives. Rather than connecting with other worlds in a supernatural sense, these sounds, on both a social and a personal level, can be seen to connect with other places and other times.

Some Iban radio listening practices do fit this description, for example listening to the news programmes or the pop songs. Others are closer to the 'percussion' end of the spectrum, for instance the evening storytelling. On one level, these stories connect the listeners with the other times and places of 'the ancestors' (*urang kelias*). On a 'deeper' (*dalam agi*) level, they connect them with hidden meanings (*reti*) and associations not available in their everyday waking lives (cf Barrett and Lucas 1993).

The Bible is hot, the prayer book is cool

The reader may recall a truncated episode from Andria Ejau's morality novella *Dilah Tanah* (1964: 21) quoted in chapter 3. At this stage in the argument, we can recount the episode in its entirety:

...Biul lalu deka bejako meda sida sama udah sampal datai.

'Anang guai dulu, agi mending ka berita menoa,' ko Enchelegi bini Manang Ula.

Sida sama bela jenoh, batok enda meh tau. Sida ke mit-mit bisik-isik di tisi pen dianu Ensingut. Berita menoa panjai lemali nya, lalu siti ari berita nya nusoi rumah panjai orang di Batang Kara

Tunsang udah angus malam dulu. Tembu berita menoa nya, dia Ensingut bejako. Nyadi ko iya: 'Nyelai bendar, sekumbang udah bisi Opis Radio di menoa kitai tu, rumah panjai tak selalu angus. Apin bisi radio menya nadai ga rumah sangat kelalu ngenyarit nya angus, nyangka tak ngasoh menoa angkat radio nya kini,' ko tuduh Ensingut

'Amat munyi ko igat Ensingut,' ko Manang Ula. 'Amat selalu angus rumah orang sekumbang radio udah didudok ka di menoa kitai tu. Nemu nya bakanya ga radio orang ka tasik kin kini,' ko iya

'Enda nemu meh kitai, sama nadai kala udah ka tasik kitai sarumah tu,' pia ko sida bukai.

...Realizing that everybody was there, Biul tried to address the gathering.

'Hang on, we're still listening to the news,' said Enchelegi, the wife of Shaman Ula.

Not a word could be heard, even coughing was not allowed. The little ones who were whispering on the fringes were promptly scolded by Ensingut. The news was unusually long that evening. One of the reports said that the longhouse at Batang Kara Tunsang had burnt down the night before. After the news, Ensingut remarked: 'This is really odd. Ever since we've had a radio station in this country, longhouses keep going up in flames. Before we had radio they didn't burn down one after the other like they do now! *Could it be that radio heats up the country?'* asked the poor Ensingut.

'You're quite right, Ensingut, my son,' said Shaman Ula. 'It's true that longhouses are always burning down ever since we've had radio. Perhaps people who've been abroad already know this', he said.

'How would we know?', replied the others, 'none of us in this longhouse has ever been abroad'.

What can we learn from this episode? A great deal, for Ensingut's question (my emphasis) cuts across a number of Iban domains of experience and interpretation. For our purposes here, I will simply select some salient aspects and develop them further below. First, although Ejau's aim is undoubtedly to enlighten his newly-literate peasant readers, a shortened version of this anecdote has been told and retold in Sarawak for over thirty years now in the form of a joke. As such, it would appear superficially to be yet another instance of urban Iban ridiculing their rural brethren's pagan innocence and primitive logic. In traditional Iban thought, when a longhouse or territory is in a dangerous state following misfortune (e.g. fire, illness, or deaths) it is said to be 'hot' (*angat*) and in need of certain rites that will 'cool it down' (Barrett and Lucas 1993). Ensingut's attempts to grasp the significance of the new mass medium with pre-modern concepts are comical to urbanites who 'know better'. The joke's enduring appeal, however, springs from three other sources: (a) it is pregnant with pagan meaning ('hot' vs. 'cold' states) in a society noted for its syncretism, (b) it highlights a great concern of middle-aged Iban, both rural and urban: the reputedly negative effects of modern media on Iban society, and (c) it hinges on

indigenous notions of causality and the spread of misfortune; in other words, on a folk epidemiology of evil agency (cf. Sperber's 1996 armchair 'cultural epidemics', see Parkin 1985).

It is often said that only Germans explain jokes. In this section I will act like a German and try to explain Ejau's joke within the framework of Nanga Kandis ideas and practices that have been influenced by Christian print media. I argue that two key Christian media -- the Bible and the prayer book-- are involved in a complex cycle in which repeated bad news from television, radio and other sources are often transformed (through talk, dreams and other narrative means) into worrying interpretations that threaten the well-being of the community. It is in such situations that the prayer books are in turn mobilized, for instance to pray to God that an inauspicious dream will cause no harm.

In a nation where Islam holds a monopoly over religious broadcasting on television, it is the print media that are routinely transformed by the Christian agents in their rural work. This example from an upriver community in the Paku exemplifies the approach:

Rumah Jauh, 16 October 1997. Went upriver for a service with the Anglican priest, Father Sayok. A two hour walk in the forest from the road. After mass we all sat in the gallery for a long *randau ruai* [chat]. Father Sayok is good with words (*nemu bejaku*). He pokes fun at the old Iban narratives, like the one about a man called Beji who once upon a time built a very long ladder because he wanted to meet God. Alas, before he reached his destination the ladder collapsed and Beji had a great fall. Some say he turned into a boulder that can still be visited today¹⁹. 'You

19. Notice again the oneiric process of metamorphosis at work (see chapter 5). See also Benedict Sandin's *Gawai Pangkong Tiang* (1976) in which Beji wanted to meet with Prophet Muhammad. In another Sandin piece (1967:37), however, it was God he was anxious to meet 'in the latter's own house'. Either way, fragments of the ladder fell into all the rivers used by the Iban in their migrations across Borneo. The story of Beji has inspired many an accomplished weaver (for a beautiful example of a 'Beji's Ladder' woven blanket, see Sandin 1967:37). Beji hailed from Ketapang in what today is West Kalimantan, Indonesia. His genealogy can be found in Sandin (1994: 315). Legend has it that his great-granddaughter, Ragam, taught Iban women how to tie thread for *ikat* weaving. In turn Ragam's son, Manang Jarai, taught his uncle Telichu how to avert the attack of evil giants by burning the bark of the *lukai* tree.

The Iban teacher and author, Philip Langie, believes Beji should not be seen as a failure, for he was a visionary who made use of the means available to him at the time to reach a noble goal: finding the true God. It is this vision that many generations later allowed man to land on the

see, that's the problem with us Iban', says the Father, 'we like telling fantastic stories, while other races actually build rockets and reach the moon!'

Later on in the evening, he tells his flock how all the disasters that have hit the region in recent times -- the Coxsackie-B epidemic, the huge forest fires, the cyclone in Sabah -- were foretold in the Bible. And he reads aloud from his Iban Bible to prove his point.

'Do you know what caused the cyclone in Sabah?' he asks everybody, closing the holy book. Silence. Then he adds: 'All that mixing of...'

'Of races? You mean all those Filipino and Indonesian immigrants?' somebody suggests.

'No, no, no! The mixing of heathen beliefs and Christian religion!', he retorts.

As usual, the Iban father used the authority of the written word to provide an explanatory model for events that worried his flock, all of them repeatedly brought into the longhouse via television and radio²⁰. He also shrewdly allied himself to the forces of progress with his interpretation of the well-known story of Beji's great fall. Somewhat paradoxically he did it by excelling at the age-old practice of *randau ruai*, the longhouse gallery evening chats. One could arrange the priest's performance episodically: 1. A series of recent news reports on TV and radio alarms the community (1997 was a tragic year for Malaysian Borneo). 2. The priest undermines orally the Iban reliance on oral narratives by contrasting them with a concrete achievement by the white race. 3. In so doing he is explicitly reaffirming the superiority of the written word, the white man and his science. 4. He then reads from the Iban-language Bible to make sense of the TV and radio disasters. 5. In so doing he is (a) providing his audience with a meta-narrative with which to analyse fleeting media narratives, (b) privileging the written word over the spoken word, (c) implicitly reaffirming the superiority of the white man and his religion, (d) further undermining the credibility of local knowledge, (e) preaching against syncretism while practising it (see below), and ultimately (f) 'heating up' the longhouse (see below). Deploying a combination of materials from the electronic, oral, and print media the priest frames and

moon, says Langie (personal communication, 1998). This kind of syncretism has been reported in many societies, e.g. the Cambri Bible case mentioned in chapter 5 (see Gewertz and Errington 1991).

²⁰ Similar tactics are deployed in other Asia-Pacific nations. In the Solomons, 'some fevered priests and evangelists told people that the cyclones were their punishment, sent airmail by God, for clinging to their belief in sorcery, paganism, and other sins of tradition' (LiPuma and Meltzoff 1990: 81).

discusses the community's fears. It is at this strategic location, in this 'field of discursive action'²¹, that the priest systematically situates his authority, working to disentangle discursive knots (e.g. the equation oral narratives = knowledge) and steer his flock towards institutionalised Salvation. Inevitably he is tying other knots in the process. For example the conflation of science and religion as mighty institutions mastered by other races but available to those Iban who learn discipline and diligence.

For a majority of longhouse dwellers who have converted 'the all important functions of the Christian religion are the family blessings of [long]house, home and farm' (Bingham 1983: 121). A veteran Catholic priest from England, Father Bingham (1983: 121-2), puts his side of the story elegantly:

There is no doubt that newly baptised Christians really do feel a great sense of deliverance from the burdens, fears and taboos of paganism. No longer are they obliged, in the midst of vital farm work, to down tools and stay idle at home for a day or two because someone has heard an unlucky bird call; no longer need they feel depressed and even terrified by an apparently threatening dream; the simple saying of a Hail Mary can be sufficient to give them courage and remind them that God is with them.

Indeed this is precisely how Nanga Kandis residents, who converted four years ago, feel about their new religion. As two men put it,

1. *[Jalai pendigup kami diatu] manah agi laban nadai penanggul, terus kerja, nadai jaku mali-mali, nadai burung-burung.*
2. *Nyamai nyadi keristen: nadai mayuh pengawa.*

1. [Nowadays our way of life] is better because there are no longer any hindrances, we can get on with our work, there's no talk about taboos or omens.
2. It's nice to be a Christian: there's not much [ritual] work to do.

Yet I have two objections to Bingham's remark. First, although it is true that dreams can be menacing, the father fails to mention the creative potential of these mental narratives. To him and other Christian agents, dreams are 'threatening'; they hamper the spiritual and economic development of rural Iban. But dreams can also

21. To expand the old sociological concept of 'field of action'.

be a source of knowledge and social change among pagan Iban. Freeman's (1975: 284-85) words, based on his post-War fieldwork in the Baleh, spring to mind again.

At daybreak, he reminisces, there are groups of people

dispersed along the gallery of the long-house, talking together with rapt attention. They are discussing their dreams of the night just ended, interpreting them, and deciding how to be guided by them. Further it is almost entirely from dream experience that the myths, religious beliefs and practices of the pagan Iban have been, and are, derived...[D]reams produce not 'ordered pattern', but *innovation and change* [emphasis added].

Second objection. In a society experiencing rapid change and acculturation, facing one's fears may not be as simple as the 'saying of a Hail Mary'. Development brings with it real threats to the prosperity of *bilik*-family and longhouse: out-migration, drugs, alcohol, the spread of infectious diseases, etc. Rural residents are constantly reminded of these threats by the developmental agents themselves - notably the politicians - through television and radio. The negative views on some television dramas held by many rural Iban are a reflection of these deep-seated, routinely reawakened, anxieties about the future.

In upriver communities far from the church, much of the success or failure of Christianity depends on the talent and drive of the lay reader, the priest's local representative -- on his ability to give people something that lies at 'the heart of the Christian revelation' (Roberts 1997: 264): hope. His strategy consists of helping his neighbours to incorporate Christian beliefs and practices into their working/ritual cycles while preserving the best of their customary law -- an ongoing process of *adat* change with a long history in Sarawak:²²

23 February 1998. Apai Lang, the lay reader, told me that the Christian religion brings development (*pemansang*) to the community. They are no longer hindered in their work by bad omens (*burong, punggu*) or bad dreams, and have no use for shamans (*manang*). He has total

22. Writing about Charles Brooke, the second White Rajah's, early experiences as an outstation officer in the 1850s, Pringle (1970: 174) notes: 'Slowly and cautiously Charles had moved to eliminate some aspects of local custom, both Iban and Malay, which he considered bad, and this process continued down through the years under his officers'.

faith in the written word. The Bible, he says, has not changed since it was first written. Iban oral tradition is different -- it can be tampered with. Only now that the likes of Thomas T. Laka, the RTM storyteller, have bothered to write them down, can one believe in some Iban narratives. To explain to me the difference between *adat* (custom) and *pengarap* (religion) he draws a pie chart in my notebook representing the *adat*. There are noxious practices you can slice out and throw away, e.g. the lucky charms, the interpretation of dreams and the offerings to the spirits, there's no use for them any longer (*nadai beguna agi*). But others you should retain, such as the system of *tunggu* (fines) and the cultivation of *basa* (respect, good manners)²³.

The vital medium in this process of religious change is not the Bible, but rather the Iban-language prayer booklet, an adaptation of Iban agricultural and shamanic *adat* to the Christian project. According to Jensen (1974: 195) traditional Iban perform four main categories of rites or celebrations (but see Sather 1993). First, the agricultural year is marked by a series of rites (*gawai*). Among the most important are those connected to the ritual inauguration of the new season, such as *manggol*.

Second, there are special ceremonies usually confined to the family. They may be related to sickness, fear of sickness, bad dreams, omens, going on an expedition, joining the army, etc. Third, there are festivals such as *gawai kenyalang* formerly associated with warfare and headhunting, but today associated with success in other fields. Finally, the Festival of the Dead (*Gawai Antu*) is held in honour of the community's ancestors.

1. Christian rites

baptism
spiritual communion
holy communion
All Souls' Day
Christmas carolling

2. Secular rites

Dayak Festival Day
Midnight Prayer (Dayak Festival Eve)
birthday party

²³ Datu Temenggong Jugah, the late Iban leader, used more poetic language to describe the same process at an *adat* conference in Simanggang in 1961: "We must look after the good rambutan tree. Those branches which no longer bear fruit or whose fruit is not sweet, should be cut off, and the tree will continue to prosper" (Jensen 1966: 31). On the natural symbolism of Iban collective representations, see Davison (1987).

3. Pagan-derived rites

3.1. Agricultural rites

rite to commence the farming year	<i>manggol</i>
rite for blessing the <i>padi</i> seed	<i>merekat ka benih</i> ²⁴
rite to 'wash the farm ashes'	<i>bebasu amau</i> ²⁵

3.2. Healing rites

rite for the sick	<i>sambiang ka sakit</i>
prayer following an inauspicious dream	<i>sambiang mimpi or penangi ati</i>
prayer on account of troubling thoughts	<i>sambiang compline</i>

3.3. Life-crisis rites

prayer for a woman upon giving birth	<i>sambiang indu udah beranak</i>
prayer for child who is starting school	<i>sambiang anak ti skula</i>
praise the Lord (soldier)	<i>puji Tuhan (soldadu)</i>
prayer for new government servant	<i>sambiang kerja perintah</i>
prayer for new outboard engine	<i>sambiang injin perau ti baru</i>
prayer for the newly wed	<i>sambiang nikah</i>
wake for the dead	<i>nyenggai orang mati</i>
rite to sever all ties to dead person	<i>ngetas ulit</i>

3.4. Longhouse-building rites

prayer upon 'breaking the ground'	<i>sambiang mechak tanah alai rumah</i>
rite for blessing the longhouse site	<i>merekat ka tanah</i> ²⁶
prayer upon 'piercing' the post holes	<i>sambiang nebak lubang tiang</i>
prayer upon moving into new <i>bilik</i> /longhouse	<i>sambiang nguan bilik/rumah baru</i> ²⁷

Table 6.2. The provenance of Christian rites at Kandis longhouse: a breakdown of the service register.

24. In pre-Christian idiom: *gawai benih*, 'rites for blessing the padi seed' (Richards 1981: 40).

25. Probably related to or an adaptation of *gawai basu arang*. 'wetting charcoal', in the house, when an offering incl. oil, water, and charcoal (*arang*) is set in a coconut shell by the principal pillar, *tiang pemun*, a cock killed, and *sampi* said to ask for (wet) weather, *mintu hari*, to help padi grow: the [*umai*, farm] may not be walked on' (Richards 1981: 410). The Christian version contained in the prayer book *Adat Kristian* (n.d.:143) is called *sampi bebasu arang* and requires the replacement of plain water with holy water (*ai Kudus*).

26. Derived from *tabak*, 'Offerings made at longhouse...site'. In a pagan context, the phrase *ngabas tabak* stands for 'inspect the [*tabak*] and divine (*tenong*) from their state and that of a container of 'water' (*tuak*?) whether use of the site is confirmed or denied' (Richards 1981: 358).

27. This service was probably held when Nanga Kandis residents moved out of their old longhouse and into the makeshift houses they occupy today.

Despite our lay reader's best post-pagan intentions, a close examination of the community's service register revealed that both the Anglican priest and himself performed a significant number of rites based on pre-Christian practices. In Table 6.2., I have grouped all services under three major categories: Christian rites, secular rites and pagan-derived rites (but bear in mind that in the register no such distinctions are made; they are all grouped together under the English term 'service'). I have (a) further subdivided Jensen's vague category 'special ceremonies' into 'healing rites' and 'life-crisis rites' as these are quite distinct practices and (b) added an extra category of special importance at the time of fieldwork: rites connected to the building of a new longhouse.

As the table shows, far more kinds of pagan-derived services were officiated (18) than strictly Christian ones (5), and the list could have been even longer, to judge by the prayer books²⁸. This demonstrates the strong continuity of religious practices despite the priest's repeated anti-syncretist tirades. I will mention briefly but three of the services based on pagan notions and practices: *sambiang manggol*, *sambiang mimpi* and *sambiang compline*. *Manggol* is a term traditionally reserved for 'the rites and technical actions that mark the commencement of the annual rice-farming cycle' (Sather 1992: 109). The first rites are known as *mantap*, literally to slash or cut, and they centre on slashing the undergrowth that occupies the site of the *bilik*-family's 'seed pillow' (1992: 117). In pagan families they are followed by a *mantap* invocation (*sampi kena mantap*). The one recorded by Sather in 1984 took place in the Paku area and was recited by the farmer's brother-in-law:

28. The number of pagan-inspired Christian prayers is potentially much greater. The book *Adat Kristian* contains 61 such prayers (*sampi* or *sembayang*). In the Preface, the Catholic Bishop, A.D. Galvin, makes no bones about their mixed provenance, quite the contrary: 'We are happy that this book, *Adat Kristian*, follows both the Iban customary law of our ancestors [lit. grandfathers and grandmothers] as well as the wording of Christian prayers' (*Kami gaga ati ka surat 'Adat Kristian' tu nitih ka adat Iban ari aki ini menya, disereta ka dalam leka sampi kristian*). In addition, the Bishop encourages his readers to further adapt the contents of the book to local custom if they feel the need to do so (*Sampi ti dalam surat tu itong ka chunto aja, tau diubah*).

O, ni kita
 petara aki
 petara ini?
 Ti dulu kalia ke dulu nubah
 tanah mungkal menoa tu.
 Kita ka dulu berumpang,
 besawang,
 berimba,
 ngaga temuda dulu kalia?
 Kami tu anak,
 telesak,
 uchu ambu kita,
 Deka bumai dalam menoa tu.
 Nganti tulong urat
 kita ka dulu menya
 Nya alai kita enda tau enda
 ngemata,
 lalu ngintu pengawa kami tu
 Laban kami tu meh uchu
 ambu kita,
 Darah getah kita,
 nampong nerujong,
 Ngintu bilik penaik kita.
 Nya alai kita enda tau enda
 nulong nukong aku dalam
 umai tu.
 Beri penglantang ngagai aku
 baka kita ka dulu kalia

O, where are you
 Spirits of our grandfathers
 Spirits of our grandmothers?²⁹
 You who long ago opened the
 bountiful land of this domain.
 You who first felled the jungle,
 Cleared the land,
 Cut down the virgin forest,
 Who first created an estate of farmland?
 We are your children,
 Your offspring,
 Your favourite descendants,
 Who wish to farm this land.
 We take your place,
 You who have long ago gone before us,
 We attend with care to the work
 Which you have entrusted to us,

Because we are your beloved
 grandchildren,
 Your flesh and blood,
 your true descendants,
 We carefully look after your legacy.
 Therefore help us so that I do
 not suffer unhappiness while I
 work this farm.
 Bring me spiritual contentment
 such as you enjoyed in former times.

(Sather 1992: 118-19)

This invocation, as interpreted by Sather (1992: 119-20), serves two purposes. First it establishes the family's legal right, in accordance to the local *adat*, to the cultivation of land secured by their ancestors. The family members are, after all, the ancestors' 'favourite descendants'. Second, the invocation asks the spirits of the ancestors (*petara aki, petara ini*) for protection from misfortune and the assurance of farming success. On June 24th, 1997, I attended a *sampi manggol* officiated by the Anglican priest on behalf of the headman at Kandis. Instead of reciting from memory, as a pagan officiator would have done, Father Ayok read

29. Here 'spirits' (*petara*, cf. Sanskrit *pitr*, 'ancestors' [Richards 1981:281]) is meant in the sense of 'divinities' or 'gods' rather than *antu*, a term used to address *padi* pests at an ancillary invocation; a contrast is thereby established between 'essentially malevolent as opposed to benevolent supernaturals' (Sather 1992: 120)

out of a Catholic³⁰ book of prayer based on both Iban and Christian notions and appropriately entitled *Adat Kristian*. The following is an extract from that prayer:

*O Allah Taala aki, Allah Taala ini
Allah Taala apai, Allah Taala indai
Apai Jesus Kristus ti di-regang ka kitai
Kami bepanggai betuai
Ka Nuan siko aja Allah Taala*

O, God grandfather, God grandmother
God father, God mother
Father of Jesus Christ who was crucified for us
We have faith in you and follow
No other than you, the one and only God.

*Kami arap kami ngadap
Ka Nuan, Tuhan Jesus, ti Penebus dunya.
Nuan udah ngalah ka Sitan leboh di-regang
Lalu Nuan udah besemaya
Deka ngubah samoa dunya nyadi baru,
Nudok ka perintah ti manah,
Endor samoa orang deka nitih ka ator
Apai ti di serega
Endor nadai laya, nadai apa nama;
Endor senang, endor lantang,
Endor tanah lemak, tanah luchak
Endor padi, endor puli.*

We have trust in you and appear before
You, Lord Jesus, Redeemer of the world.
You defeated Satan while on the cross.
You promised
To make the world anew,
To build a just Kingdom,
A place where all men will abide by the laws
of our Father who is in Heaven
A place free from strife and sorrow;
A place of peace and joy,
A place where the land is soft and rich ,
A place of abundant harvests³¹.

(*Adat Kristian* n.d.: 14, my translation)

This prayer does not simply invoke a new Christian God in replacement of the old pagan gods or spirits. It actually calls on a manner of 'Holy Sextinity' consisting of three paired divinities: (a) the 'spirits of our grandfathers and grandmothers' we met in the pagan prayers, now turned into manifestations of God (Allah Taala), (b) two new parental divinities, and (c) two members of the Holy Trinity, namely Jesus Christ and his/our Father 'who is in Heaven' -- but

30. According to two priests I interviewed separately, the process of indigenising the Anglican Church in Sarawak has only just started. They both agreed that the Catholic Church has been more successful in adopting indigenous elements. Indeed the Christianized Iban prayers used by Anglican agents were in fact produced by the Catholic Church. *Manggol* (or *manggul*) has also been transformed by the methodists, prevalent in the Rejang basin. Vinson Sutlive (personal communication, 13 April 1998) recalls how the Methodist Church 'did a lot in the early '60s with [the] adaptation of rituals, such as *manggul*. We did also a little work on hymnology'. On the indigenisation of Christianity by Chinese and Indian Malaysians in the Peninsula, see Lee (1986).

31. Here I am following the latter part of Richards' (1981: 289) translation of the pagan prayer '*ngambi kami bulih ringgit, bulih duit, bulih padi, bulih puli*', namely 'grant us wealth and riches, and abundance at harvest', further proof of the appropriation of pagan notions and terminology into the Christian prayers.

without the Holy Spirit. This is not the place for ethno-theological speculations on the binary and transformative nature of much (religious) thought (see Leach 1976). Suffice to stress the *continuity* of this prayer with antecedent prayers, whereby central Iban notions of ancestry are preserved, yet with a fundamental *transformation*: it is no longer the farmer's ancestors who are called upon for spiritual help and legal recognition, but rather the divine ancestors of all mankind. Similarly, in the context of present-day kinship networks of reciprocity, it is no longer the *bilik*-family and their closest relations (*kaban*) that perform this most crucial agricultural ritual, but rather an outside agent on behalf of the new Divinities. A third related development is the sheer *complexity* of such syncretistic notions, a fact that can be overshadowed by the apparent simplification and shortening of ritual practice introduced by the Christian agents. Only highly literate, trained Iban are qualified to delve in the intricacies of the new ideology. All three factors are proof of a rapid power/knowledge shift from the local authority and oral knowledge of the elders to the cosmopolitan authority and literate knowledge of younger priests.

Another example of syncretism built into a print medium is how the Christian agents handle dreams. From 1995 to 1997 the lay reader at Nanga Kandis held a number of *sambiang mimpi* (lit. 'dream prayer') and *penangi ati* (lit. 'heart fear'³²) at the request of fellow residents who had been troubled by inauspicious dreams. Specifically he made use of a book of private devotion entitled *Salalu Sambiang* (n.d.) containing the following syncretist prayer:

Udah mimpi ti jai

Tuhan Allah, Petara ti pemadu bekuasa, kasih ka aku ti takut laban mimpi ti jai. Saup aku ingat ka pengrindu nuan ti ngintu aku, awak ka aku tau tentu nemu nadai utai ti tau nganu aku tau ka ngerusak aku enti aku arap bendar ka nuan; olih Isa Almesih Tuhan kami. Amin.

32. *Nangi* is another word for *takut* (fear, afraid). These rites are modelled on *gawai mimpi*, as in Richards' (1981: 226) example: '*ia begawai-ka mimpi laban n[angi]-ka antu*, he held a ritual feast on account of the dream for fear of the spirit (that appeared or gave commands)'

Following a bad dream

Lord God, the mightiest of all Deities, have mercy on me for I have been troubled by a bad dream. Help me to remember your love and care for me, so I can be sure that nothing will harm me if I have faith in you; in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Here the pre-Christian Iban name '*Petara*' (Deity), of Sanskrit origin (*pitṛ*, Richards 1981: 281) is juxtaposed to the Christian '*Tuhan Allah*' (Lord God). Again there is both continuity and change at work here: the new God is incorporated into a pantheistic domain where He reigns supreme. Yet notice the contradiction with the previous prayer in which Lord Jesus was described as 'the one and only God' (*Nuan siko aja Allah Taala*).

Finally, *sambiang compline* (E. 'complaint') were performed during the same period whenever a number of longhouse residents complained of feelings of anxiety or fear (*ati enda senang*). According to the lay reader, these were often caused by alarming TV or radio reports on the Cocksackie-B virus, AIDS, the forest fires, etc.

In traditional Iban idiom, a longhouse is said to be ritually 'hot' (*angat*) when a series of worrying events (e.g. bad dreams, fires, illnesses, deaths) occur in a short space of time. In Christian longhouses, ominous dreams and other occurrences that may threaten the spiritual well-being of the community are no longer dealt with by the shaman (*manang*) and other traditional ritual experts, but by the priest or his deputy, the lay reader. Pagan Iban employ ritual charms known as *ubat penchelap* to 'cool down' the longhouse (Barrett and Lucas 1993: 584). Christian agents employ not charms but print media such as *Salalu Sambiang* and *Adat Kristian* to pursue the same end -- hence they are still operating within a pre-Christian field of existential problems. Thus a precarious cycle is routinely completed: the Bible provides a meta-narrative that further undermines the community's local knowledge base -- already severely eroded by schooling, migration and modern media --, raising the level of anxiety and

ultimately 'heating up' the longhouse. At critical junctures, the prayer book is pressed into an entirely different service: it is a spiritual trouble-shooting manual aimed at 'cooling down' the community³³.

Let us insist that the new faith is good news. Recent Iban converts often say that life is 'much better' now that they need not perform elaborate, exhausting rites (*Diatu nadai mayuh pengawa*, or, 'These days there's not a lot of work/ritual'³⁴). Alas, in their efforts to spread the faith through literacy and simple rituals, the fathers and their assistants have undermined the longhouse's ritual and epistemological (oral) self-reliance. Christian Iban are paying a high price for their newly acquired set of good news and simple rituals, says Bingham (1983: 122):

A source of disappointment for many new [Iban] Christians is the failure of the Christian festivals to provide the colour, conviviality and ceremony of the old pagan festivals. This, of course, is true. Christian festivals are solemn liturgical celebrations, lasting at most an hour or two. They are not designed to see some hundreds of people through 24 hours of non-stop feasting and ceremony. The new Iban Christians who approach a Christian festival, keyed up with the same expectation as for a pagan *gawai*, soon experience a distressing sense of anti-climax, in which an idle day is passed away in excessive drinking and gambling.

³³ Marshall McLuhan's (1969) famous distinction between hot and cold media would not work very well in an Iban setting. McLuhan argued that radio and print media are hot media because they are high in information and low in audience participation, whereas TV is a cool, non-linear medium low in information and high in audience involvement. In the case of recent Iban converts, it would appear that the genre (the news), rather than the medium, is the message. Levi-Strauss' (1966 [1962]) equally well-known distinction between hot and cold societies (the former are advanced societies in constant transformation, the latter more isolated, stable societies) is closer to Iban actualities. The accelerated pace of change in rural Sarawak wrought by new 'hot' technologies and social institutions demands new media practices that will help local agents retain a sense of balance and continuity with antecedent practices.

³⁴ The term *gawa'* can be translated as either work or ('the essential part of any') ritual (Richards 1981, Sutlive and Sutlive 1994). Ritual and labour are inseparable in the context of Iban agricultural practices (Sather 1992: 108-9).

Conclusion: the need for a folk epidemiology of the media

In this chapter I have argued along an organisational axis that took us through an examination of media-related practices within three Skrang Iban social organisations: family (*bilik*), longhouse (*rumah panja*), and church (*gerija*).

Television has been faced since its arrival in the 1980s with a number of serious constraints to its popularity as *the* family medium. Among these are the cost of family-run electricity generators, lack of time and energy due to the demands of agricultural and construction work, the scarce social space for viewing allowed by out-migration and *randau ruai* ('gallery chats'), and finally the lack of cultural competence to enjoy and make sense of television's urban narratives in Malay and English. Television is thus more significant as a modernity marker and maker than as a source of information and entertainment for Nanga Kandis residents. This prestigious, migration-linked commodity supports the well-established prescription 'We (Skrang) Iban must develop like others have done'. In the previous chapter I argued that today's Saribas Iban feel 'left behind' by their successful urban relations. Skrang Iban feel they are behind not only the educated urban residents, but also rural Iban in areas which developed earlier, most notably the Paku-Saribas basin.

In contrast to television, which arrived in the 1980s, the Iban-language radio service has remained since its advent in the late 1950s the chief means of information on the outside world in general and Iban society in particular. Radio is closer to local concerns and fulfils a dual role: apart from its developmental/informative role it provides Skrang listeners with folklore materials that are uniquely Iban as well as with news from other longhouse communities and migrant relations. If television is the *bilik* medium *par excellence*, radio is a portable medium that can be and often is enjoyed by a *ruai* (gallery) audience, a key feature that sets the Skrang apart from the more urbanised Saribas

longhouses, whose residents seldom gather in the *ruai*. Cultural competence, however, also affects the consumption of some Iban radio genres: the language of sung poems and other *main asal* (traditional music) is too 'profound' (*dalam*) for most listeners to understand. Many justified their listening efforts as a way of following the prescription 'We (Skrang) Iban must preserve our traditions' at a time of rapid acculturation.

Except for one family, Nanga Kandis residents converted to Christianity in 1993. This ongoing process of cultural engineering -- an important part of the community's efforts to develop -- is fraught with media-related ambiguities. A close examination of the service register for the 1995-1997 period showed a strong continuity with pre-Christian notions and practices in the Catholic prayer books employed by the Anglican priest and his local deputy. Paradoxically, the priest made systematic use of his oratory skills as a *randau ruai* performer to attack the survival of heathen ideas and practices among Iban Christians. Supporting his tirades with the authority of another print medium, the Bible, he created a meta-narrative whereby puzzling, worrying television and radio stories (on AIDS, the forest fires, etc) all could be explained in terms of the sinful acts of part-pagan men: a developmental cautionary tale meant to steer his flock towards institutionalised salvation through the twin activities of truly Christian prayer and hard work. In indigenous terms, the two main Christian print media are at two ends of a media-regulated cycle of spiritual health: the Bible undermines local confidence, thereby 'heating up' (*ngasoh angaf*) the longhouse, whereas the prayer books are used to 'cool it down' (*ngasoh chelap*) after inauspicious dreams, illness and other incidents, often following 'media panics' such as AIDS or the forest fires. The Christian media are therefore deeply implicated in the problematic prescription 'We (Skrang) Iban must develop like others have done, while preserving our traditions', e.g. the system of fines (*tunggu*) and the cultivation of good manners and respect (*basa*).

The unique geographical and historical circumstances that distinguish the Saribas from the Skrang are reflected in the contrasting sets of media technologies locally used in the late 1990s. On the other hand, the similarity between their ideolects is striking. Both findings alert us to the need for a 'media epidemiology' that combines 'etic' models of the spread of news, ideas, and practices (e.g. Sperber 1996, Debray 1996) with indigenous notions of such spreads. An intriguing starting point in the Iban case could be what we might call the 'ritual management of information'. According to Richards (1981: 265), spreading news that has the potential to upset the ritual order of the longhouse is a punishable offence (*pemali*). For instance, entering another's longhouse when bearing news of a death can be seen as an offence against the community, while 'spreading disturbing rumours' is categorised as a personal offence. In both cases, a fine (*tunggu*) will be demanded from the offender. Another example is the restriction on watching television and listening to the radio following a death in the longhouse, discussed in chapter 4. Exactly how the customary law (*adaŋ*) is interpreted, modified and applied in different Iban rivers to accommodate the new technologies is a province full of ethnographic promise. Mary Douglas' (1984: 47) contention that information is not a commodity, but rather 'whatever is newsworthy' is only partially true in an Iban setting. Information can also be a source of danger, for it has the ability to transgress ritually bounded social spaces.

Chapter 7

Summary and Conclusion

Summary

A major preoccupation running through this project was the need to go beyond a narrow focus on a single medium, genre, locality or social organisation (e.g. the family) of the kind that characterises much research in media studies (Spitulnik 1993: 299). Instead, I have striven to capture some of the diversity that makes up contemporary Iban society as more media come into habitual use. Heeding Marcus' (1995) call for a 'multi-sited ethnography', the inquiry proceeded from an initial analysis of the history of media production in three urban centres (Kuching, Sibuan and Kuala Lumpur), through a three-chapter focus on media practices in the Saribas area ending with a comparative study of the Skrang area.

Chapter 2 studied the centrality of literacy – much neglected in the media literature -- in relation to a very different set of Iban media practices: those of literate media producers in urban centres. The early phase of media production (1954-1976) was dominated by two complementary media – radio and books – arising from the same social milieu: mission-educated Saribas Iban men relocated to Kuching, the capital of Sarawak. With the creation of Malaysia in 1963, the 'politics of difference' (Comaroff 1996) in Sarawak gradually shifted to a wider neo-national context. The second phase of media production (1977-1999) was characterised by a diversification of media and geopolitical sites of production. In addition to radio and books (the latter now mostly in Malay rather than Iban or English), television arrived from West Malaysia and a thriving pop music industry developed in central Sarawak. Over the years, Gawai Dayak, the annual festival invented in 1965, became a controlled explosion of mediated jubilation aimed at 'filling in' a hollow ethnic

category (cf. Levine 1999: 172 on Papua New Guinea). The media used on this occasion include television, radio, newspapers, cards, posters, hoardings, public-address systems, festival programmes, video cameras, and photographic cameras.

In chapter 3 I argued that television and radio sets are now integral parts of the multidirectional flows of artefacts binding together Iban of all walks of life and death in a complex exchange system. Television sets are much-valued objects: they are expensive, obsolescent, sophisticated, useful, and entertaining. Their obsolescence makes them ideal second-hand gifts to poorer members of one's *bilik*-family or kin group (*kaban*). In turn, their loud presence in the recipients' *bilik* is a daily reminder both of their debt and of the growing economic inequalities that are eroding rural Iban society's egalitarian ethos. In some cases, a television set becomes so closely associated with an individual viewer that upon his or her death it will become a grave good (*baya*). Together with the other 'biographical objects' (see Hoskins 1998 on Sumba), it will be destroyed at the burial so that the deceased can still make use of it in the Afterworld (*Sebayan*) -- a mirror image of our world where light is dark, objects fall upwards, and smashed-up television sets are in perfect working order.

As numerous ethnographic studies show, social relations are often produced during 'highly structured occasions of commensality, drinking bouts, sharing the pipe, and so on'. Yet, according to Gell (1986: 112), this does not mean that 'consumption equals destruction'. Even ephemeral items, such as the food served at feasts, 'live on in the form of the social relations they produce'. Gell (1986:113) concludes that consumption 'is part of a process that includes production and exchange, all three being distinct only as phases of the cyclical process of social reproduction, in which consumption is never terminal'. This general observation certainly applies to the destruction of Iban televisions at the grave, for the destroyed set will 'live on' in the new social

relation established with the dead family member. In exchange for the ritual sacrifice of a valuable object, it is hoped that the deceased will not disturb those who survived him or her. Gell's observation does not, however, apply to a different kind of media destruction documented in this thesis: the mass burial and cremation of Bornean print media in 1977. This event shows that his 'cyclical process of social reproduction' suffers from an old anthropological ailment: an implicit preference for homeostatic, ahistorical models of society over diachronic models (see Fabian 1983). When the Federal authorities decided it was time to put a stop to the development of modern literatures in indigenous languages other than Malay, they found little opposition from a divided Iban and Dayak political class (Jawan 1994:124). Empirical reality is 'a special case of what is possible' (Bourdieu 1998: 2, following Bachelard). Taking advantage of a favourable political climate, those who ordered the burning opened up new possibilities of expansion into Borneo for the national language agents and their media. At the same time, they effectively closed a rival field of media production, narrowing the scope of what is *culturally* possible today for a new generation of Iban. Ginsburg (1994: 14) urges anthropologists to study not only how people make sense of the world through the media, but also how the media allow them to construct new worlds, e.g. as indigenous producers. The Iban case shows that we should also pay attention to the irreversible destruction of certain mediated worlds, of unwanted pregnancies of meaning.

The social lives (Appadurai 1986) and afterlives of individual Iban television sets are both contingent on the unique circumstances of the social networks through which they journey and regulated by local ideolects. As educated, well-connected Iban secure higher incomes than those of their illiterate and semi-literate kin, they face an uncomfortable bind: how to reconcile the growing cultural and economic capital they have accumulated within a hierarchical national system with the egalitarian 'custom' (*adañ*) of their natal longhouses. Giving television sets, co-financing costly ceremonies,

supporting one's parents, etc, are ways of achieving a provisional reconciliation. Under the guise of 'gifts' (*pemer*), television sets help to reproduce the expanding structures of inequality that accompany rural Malaysia's race to modernity.

Another way of addressing the problem of Iban inequality is through the art of oratory. An analysis of public-address speeches in the Saribas (chapter 5) showed some of the rhetorical strategies adopted by local leaders. By stressing the essential compatibility between modernity and tradition they are furthering their own implicit claims to legitimacy. However, a subsequent study of television commentaries reveals that their followers are less convinced of this compatibility. Viewers reject soap operas in which 'rich Malays eat in expensive restaurants' and yet they enjoy watching even more luxurious white-people soaps (*cherita urang putih*) such as *Dynasty* or *Dallas*. This seemingly odd distinction is a result of the different geopolitical identity ascribed to Malays and Whites. The Malays are part of a local 'system of commensurate differences' (from Gewertz and Errington 1991) whereby the achievements of Malaysia's major 'peoples' (Ib. *bansa*) are compared and contrasted. The exploits of rich urban Malays contradict the national and local ideology of a multiethnic nation marching together 'along the path to prosperity', as shown daily on a colourful television spot. The Whites, who live in a semi-mythical land of abundance and progress, are beyond this national system. In other words, they are incommensurate. As one Iban woman put it, 'The way they act in *Dallas* is different [from that in the Malay soaps]. They are truly developed (*maju endar*)'. The Malays, according to Iban viewers, 'want to follow the white people' but can only achieve shoddy imitations of the genuine article.

Chapter 4 centred on the annual cycle of activities in Saribas longhouses culminating in Gawai Dayak. I argued that day-to-day life in these communities is to a large extent regulated by radio, television and school

textbooks, and that the 'chronometric' dimension of these media is by now a fully naturalised component of social life. In other words, Saribas Iban are entirely dependent on these media for the organisation of their social time and space. This point is evident from a close analysis of a Gawai Dayak at a Saribas longhouse located within the market town orbit. The climax of the festival was not a ritual in the strict sense of the term; that is, it was not a set of practices with supernatural efficacious intent (see Parkin 1992:14). The revellers were not seeking to communicate with the other world; they were bridging the abstract watershed separating May and June. Two media were pressed into this secular service: the public-address system and the wristwatch. This gathering was a local adaptation of an elite-designed festival aimed at claiming symbolic and temporal parity with the two dominant ethnic groups in Sarawak, the Malay-Melanau Muslims and the Chinese. It was a media-rich celebration *through and of* modern clock and calendar time (cf Anderson 1983).

Ginsburg's (1993) adoption of the 'multidirectional flow' metaphor to understand Aboriginal media productions may be appropriate for Australia in the 1990s, but it would not take us very far in Sarawak. Here, the flow of cultural influences is largely 'unidirectional' and top-down, from the urban mediocracy to the rural populations. Globalisation in Sarawak is taking the form of a 'two-step westernisation', as cultural brokers in West Malaysia appropriate media products and ideas from the West (especially the US), and re-export them to East Malaysia in the form of school textbooks, television programmes, newspaper articles, etc. A case in point is the reading contest held at a Saribas longhouse prior to the 1997 Gawai Dayak festival (chapter 4). Here, a number of children were rewarded for their competence as end-consumers of Malay-language versions of stories by Walt Disney, Mark Twain and others. In terms of Bourdieu's (1998) theory of culture, they were being rewarded for their early accumulation of the cultural capital considered essential to master urban Malaysian culture as adults.

Skuse (1999: 25) has compared mass communications to Mauss' (1954) classic analysis of the gift in that they are 'structured by the giving, receiving and reciprocating of meaning'. Media producers, he adds, depend on letters, focus groups and other forms of "audience feedback" for their work. However, in the centralised, hierarchical Malaysian system, little or no feedback is needed from marginal consumers in rural Sarawak for the programmes or textbooks to be produced. All that is needed is their invisible compliance.

In our contemporary world, diverse media practices are regulated by powerful human agents working within hegemonic ideologies. Politically weak rural communities in postcolonial nations make sense of the world in terms of 'ideolects' (parochial ideologies) derived both from the urban mass media, including school textbooks, and from local oral traditions. Rural Iban in the Skrang and Saribas areas speak and practise similar developmentalist ideolects. Comaroff (1996: 169) argues that in our global 'electronic commons' (from Kurtzman) national governments have lost the ability to control the flows of information and money that cross their borders daily. Although this may be true of urban intellectuals and businessmen who can now use the Internet freely, rural inhabitants operate with tighter resources. Against the notion of an emerging global culture, I have insisted on the need to concentrate on the key agents, media and practices involved in the making of postcolonial *national cultures*.

Rural populations in Southeast Asia largely depend on their national governments to provide them with school textbooks, radio programmes, television news, developmental leaflets, etc. In turn, the region's authoritarian governments have used these media to 'fill in' hollow national categories such as 'Malaysia' and 'Indonesia' with primordial symbols and narratives and, more importantly, with a national language and culture. As Gellner

(1983:140) puts it, one central slogan of nationalism is *one state, one culture*. Malaysia was created in the 1960s to contain Indonesia's expansionism and preserve British interests in the region, as 'a hasty amalgam of Malaya, Singapore and the Bornean regions of Sarawak and Sabah' arranged by Whitehall (Anderson 1998). However, this is not how rural Iban imagine their nation. Thanks to the government-shaped news reports and local speeches, they routinely contrast a peaceful, rapidly developing Malaysia with a war-ridden, impoverished 'abroad' (*menua tasik*). Television and other media have, in a few years, transformed a hasty colonial invention into an undisputed empirical reality (cf. Wilk 1993 on Belize, formerly British Honduras).

Chapter 6 dealt with a unique set of familiar media: the Christianised Iban prayer book, and its relationship to the Bible, radio, television and other media. At a time of rapid economic, demographic and religious change for the Skrang Iban, these media are used in ways that could not have been predicted by their producers. The prayer book has replaced indigenous charms and rites as an object with the power to protect the community and heal the afflicted. In Iban terms, it can 'cool down' (*ngasoh chelap*) a longhouse in danger of becoming spiritually 'hot' (*angaf*), that is, open to misfortune. Yet its full significance can only be grasped by reference to the uses local people make of the other media. These routinely bring into the longhouse reports of war, disease and famine. In 1997, the danger was closer to home: there were forest fires in neighbouring Indonesian Borneo, a mysterious new virus known as Coxsackie-B, and a financial crisis affecting the whole country. Troubled by these reports, the local residents turned to their literate Christian agents and their new prayer books for ritual succour.

The contribution of this thesis

The contribution of this thesis to wider contemporary debates and discussions on the significance of media across the world can be broken down into the following propositions:

- the history and ethnography of media are inseparable
- postcolonial nation-building is an ongoing, mediated process
- the unequal spread of literacy is central to this process
- watching television is but one of many media practices
- most media practices are *not* ritual practices
- media practices are constrained by cultural, economic, ritual, political and other factors

The history and ethnography of media are inseparable

In the early 1990s, the editors of the *Borneo Research Bulletin* called for the urgent investigation of social change in Borneo, including the influence of 'foreign media' on the 'attitudes and behaviour of men and women in Borneo' (Appell and Sutlive 1991: xxvii). In this study I have heeded their call while steering clear of any 'global impact' metaphor of the kind identified earlier with Comaroff (1996). Indeed it is not so much the 'foreign media' as national and sub-national media agents and practices we should carefully examine. There is no 'pristine Iban culture' (Freeman 1980) suddenly being struck by a wave of global media spearheaded by television. The remedy against such presentist models is to step back from the contemporary worlds that emerge from direct experience, including fieldwork, and incorporate into our ethnographic analyses historical materials. Through interviews with media producers, library research and the life histories of media consumers I have tried to rectify the 'synchronic essentialism' (Carrier 1992: 13) of most fieldwork-based studies.

Postcolonial nation-building is an ongoing, mediated process

The greatest challenge facing media anthropologists working in so-called developing countries is not how to assess the impact of the supposedly global television or the Internet (a modernist project) or how to voice the concerns of marginal agents/consumers (a postmodernist project). The challenge lies in how to integrate 'the study of mass media into our analyses of "the total social fact" of modern life' (Spitulnik 1993: 293). By this 'total social fact' I understand the unfinished task of building modern national cultures across ethnically diverse territories, a process which includes the harnessing of transnational media products, ideas and practices by urban brokers and their rural agents. At critical points in this thesis I have used Bourdieu's (1998) theory of cultural and economic capital to integrate the domestic, local, subnational, national and global levels of analysis. The Iban are today no longer a widely scattered network of self-governing longhouses in Western Borneo. With the advent and consolidation of European and, at a latter stage, West Malaysian rule, Sarawak Iban are now defined as a Malaysian race or people (*M. bangsa*). In other words, they are now a reified national minority. In the nationwide 'race to modernity' led by Malay leaders in Kuala Lumpur, Iban parents throughout Sarawak are eager to see their children accumulate 'cultural capital' that is largely generated by the urban mediocracy.

In this study I have attempted to integrate the following strands into a subnational 'social totality': (a) the Iban faith in literacy and the print media as the keys to prosperity and modernity, (b) the social economics of media artefacts, (c) the ubiquitous, taken-for-granted use of clock and calendar time technologies, and (d) the seeming uniformity of largely media-derived ideologies and ideolects despite (e) a growing diversity of media products and practices.

The unequal spread of literacy is central to the process of nation-building

More specifically, Iban parents want their offspring to 'know book' (*nemu surat*) so that they can transcend their rural background, now defined as an obstacle (*penanggul*) to social and economic well-being. In this respect, the print media, particularly school textbooks, are the most significant media across the developing world. They therefore demand the urgent attention of both social anthropologists and media researchers. Building on Goody's (1987) work on the spread of literacy in West Africa, I have argued that rural Iban are now 'sorted out' during their school years into levels of cultural competence, with a minority classified as 'clever' (*pandai*) and a majority as 'beli' (*stupid*). In turn, this classification affects the way rural Iban evaluate their own competence, and that of others around them, as television viewers, radio listeners, newspaper readers, etc. "What would we know?", replied an Iban woman when a younger neighbour asked her about the causes of the forest fires in Kalimantan. This is not the kind of reply one hears from middle-aged urban Iban men who are both, I would argue, more competent news analysts and, *feel* that they are more competent. Similar differences have been reported in other societies, such as Egypt (Abu-Lughod 1993) and India (Mankekar 1993). However, these anthropologists, in their haste to promote marginal viewers, have neglected the inequality in the access to legitimate cultural competence that accompanies, and indeed facilitates, the mediated transition from colonial territory to modern nation. Most anthropologists, including students such as myself, are today constrained in their analytical practice by a charitable ideology that is oddly reminiscent of the Iban ideolects shaping longhouse speeches. Gellner has called it the problem of the 'charitable anthropologist'. In their professional careers, anthropologists are acutely aware of the need to accumulate specialised cultural capital through the setting of research priorities, selection of 'relevant' materials and authors, networking with the leading figures in their subfields, and so on. In a word, they work within a highly competitive, hierarchical system based on

specialised literate knowledge – a system similar to that of urban professionals in Sarawak. On the other hand, in their public discourse (through lectures, papers, book chapters, etc), they consistently promote cultural relativism and the richness of the pre-state oral heritage of small-scale societies.

Is there a way out of this charitable conundrum? I have argued that there is one: to relate our studies of social change to the expansion of mediated nationwide systems based on cultural and economic inequality. The oral, parochial heritage may provide rural dwellers with rich sources of wisdom, insight and identity, but it is wholly inadequate as a guide to the complexities of an increasingly literate, secularised, specialised world economy and its national structures of inequality.

Watching television is but one of many media practices

This study has sought to identify and analyse the key media practices that have shaped Iban society since the advent of radio in the 1950s. An anthropological approach to the study of media demands that we remain open to the unique combinations of media practices likely to be found in different localities and social settings. Watching television is but one among many subtly interrelated Iban media practices. These include producing a radio programme, reading a school textbook, making a telephone call, speaking through a public-address system and consulting a wristwatch.

One of the most interesting developments in the field of media studies has been the 'ethnographic turn' to media consumption in the domestic sphere taken by Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley (1994). Their work greatly influenced the preparation and subsequent fieldwork for this study by offering a rich sample of empirical case studies and theoretical insights based on research in English households. Extended fieldwork in Sarawak (17 months in total)

gradually showed that the Iban *bilik*-family is a key site of cultural production and reproduction (Freeman 1955). However, the anthropological imperative of actively participating in social events as they arise, often regardless of one's immediate research plans, led to the study of media practices (or the lack of them) in other social settings as well, notably the rural school, farm hut and longhouse gallery, but also the church, office, coffee-shop, conference, seminar, car, bus, longboat, etc.

Most media practices are not ritual practices

One worrying contemporary trend in media and anthropological research is the post-structuralist use of attractive metaphors of process, flux, agency, creativity, and so on. Thus Hughes-Freeland (1998: 8) seeks to transcend the limitations of structuralism by considering the 'ritual process' to be 'a form of practice, in which agency, creativity, structure and constraint become simultaneous, rather than distinguished in time and space'. In chapter 4 I took issue with this 'simultaneous' lumping together of concepts which are potentially useful to understand how human groups organise their social time and space. The near-universal spread of modern clock and calendar time permits human agents to segment social time, and thereby social space, into manageable units. Rural Iban today are severely constrained in their everyday and holiday activities, including their rituals, by the demands of an inflexible labour market and school system. At the same time, the chronometric and literate skills they acquire in these modern institutions allow them to coordinate more efficiently their collective endeavours over time and space. For example, an easy access to telephones in longhouses lying close to a market town allow their residents to swiftly inform wealthy migrant kin of an impending funeral or celebration in which their financial and rhetorical support will be required. The capitalist time regime and its allied media technologies, therefore, curtail certain areas of pre-state Iban agency (e.g.

staying at home upon having an inauspicious dream) and open up others (e.g. reminding migrant kin of their obligations).

In sum, I am arguing for a continuum of practices that goes from the analytical pole 'everyday routines' to that of 'large-scale rituals and ceremonies'. We should be wary of exoticising everyday practices such as watching the morning news on television by considering them to be 'domestic rituals' (e.g. Silverstone 1988: 26). Watching television may be a daily routine for many people, but it is not a ritual in the strict, religious sense of the term, that is a set of practices with supernatural efficacious intent.

*Media practices are constrained by cultural, economic,
ritual, political and other factors*

These reservations about metaphors of agency, creativity and the like can be extended to other spheres of Iban media practices in which *constraints* are all too apparent. Thus in many longhouses, a depressed local or regional economy reduces the amount of time local residents can afford to run their electricity generators to watch television, not to mention their chances of purchasing a new set. The result is more hours of radio listening (cf. Skuse 1999 on the rationing of radio listening in an impoverished Afghanistan). Another constraint is ideology. In some Skrang longhouses, the traditionalist elements in the local idelect prevent individual residents from literally turning their backs on the evening gatherings in the communal gallery to watch television in their family *bilik* (chapter 6). An anthropological approach to media can help to identify some of the Western presuppositions that inform much of the research within the media studies tradition. For example, the presuppositions that the household will have electricity, or a regular influx of cash to pay for it, that the family members are literate, and that they have access to a rich set of non-governmental media. In poor Third World

communities, we are more likely to find severe constraints in the distribution, acquisition and consumption of media.

Future research into media and social change in Borneo and other Southeast Asian regions should focus on how urban elites struggle to 'nationalise' their own territories through a wealth of media -- a collective project which is far from completed. Striking metaphors such as 'the global electronic commons' (Comaroff 1996) or the 'rural cosmopolite' (Abu-Lughod 1997) only distract us from more pressing tasks with greater comparative potential. There is an urgent need

- to investigate the ways in which elites in multiethnic societies promote developmentalist and nationalist ideologies through various media
- to examine the diverse media practices of less powerful agents in those same national territories
- to trace historically the spread of literacy and the print media, and their long-established role at the centre of the race to modernity
- to analyse the inter-relation between all three domains, in particular the role of media in the local reproduction of national and international structures of inequality.

Appendix 1

Household questionnaire (Iban version)

The bilik residents

1. Pintu tu, lumor berapa?
2. Berapa iko diau ba bilik tu?
3. Sapa urang ti diau dalam bilik tu (apai-indai/bini-laki/menyadi/anak...)?
4. Nama pengarap kita sabilik?
5. Nama bansa nuan?
6. Dini alai nuan ada?
7. Berapa umur nuan?
8. Ni naka pelajar nuan ba sekula?
9. Nama pengawa nuan diatu?
10. Suba nama pengawa nuan?
11. Nama bansa bini/laki nuan?
12. Dini iya ada?
13. Berapa umur iya?
14. Ni naka pelajar bini/laki ba sekula?
15. Nama pengawa bini/laki?
16. Berapa iko anak nuan?
17. Berapa umur sida?
18. Dini alai sida diau?

Family property

1. Dini alai umai kita sabilik taun tu?
2. Berapa gantang (umai kita)?
3. Bisi tanam buhai?
4. Nama utai dalam pesaka?
5. Kati kita sabilik bisi kereta?
6. Peti ais?
7. Perio karan?
8. Injin basu?
9. Computer?
10. CD?
11. Talipaun?
- 13a. TV?
- 13b. Taun berapa meli TV?
- 14a. Bisi video?
- 14b. Taun berapa meli video?

How possessions are valued

1. *Di antara semua utai ti dikemisi kita sabilik, lama enggau baru, nama utai ti beguna agi?*
2. *Nama kebuah utai tu?*

How media incorporated into interviewee's routines

1. *Kati ka nuan selalu meda TV?*
2. *Dini alai nuan meda TV?*
3. *Eggau sapa meda TV?*
4. *Nama cherita TV dikerindu ka nuan?*
5. *Nama kebuah?*
6. *Kati ka nuan selalu meda video?*
7. *Dini alai nuan meda video?*
8. *Eggau sapa?*
9. *Nama cherita video dikerindu ka nuan?*
10. *Nama kebuah?*
11. *Selalu ka nuan ninga ka radio?*
12. *Dini alai nuan ninga ka radio?*
13. *Eggau sapa?*
14. *Nama cherita radio dikerindu ka nuan?*
15. *Nama kebuah?*
16. *Selalu ka nuan macha surat kabar?*
17. *Nama surat kabar dibacha nuan?*
18. *Nama kebuah surat kabar tu?*
19. *Nama bansa berita pengabis manah ka nuan?*
20. *Nama kebuah?*
21. *Dini alai nuan macha surat kabar?*

Views on television

1. *Ba runding nuan, TV manah ka enda manah ka kitai?*
2. *Nama kabuah manah/enda manah?*
3. *Baka ni jala pengidup nuan/kita serumah apin bisi TV?*

Household questionnaire (English translation)

The bilik residents

1. What's your door number?
2. How many people live here?
3. Who are they (father-mother/husband-wife/siblings/children...)?
4. What religion do you practise?
5. What ethnic group do you belong to?
6. Where were you born?
7. How old are you?
8. How long did you attend school?
9. What's your present occupation?
10. What was your past occupation?
11. What ethnic group does your spouse belong to?
12. Where was he/she born?
13. How old is your spouse?
14. How long did he/she attend school?
15. What's your spouse's occupation?
16. How many children do you have/
17. How old are they?
18. Where do they live?

Family property

1. Where are you farming this year?
2. How much rice do you produce?¹
3. Do you grow anything other than rice?
4. What does your family heirloom (*pesaka*) consist of?
5. Do you own a car?
6. A motorbike?
7. A refrigerator?
8. A cooker?
9. A washing machine?
10. A computer?
11. A CD player?
12. A telephone?
13. A television?
- 13a. What year did you buy your television?
- 14a. Do you own a video?
- 14b. What year did you buy your video?

¹ The Iban question –“*Berapa gantang (umai kita)?*” – refers specifically to the average harvested rice output measured in *gantang*, a 'standard measure for retail of rice, etc, holding about 6 *kati*', i.e. approximately 8 lb.

How possessions are valued

1. Out of all your possessions, both new and old, which are the ones that you value most?
2. Why?

How media are incorporated into interviewee's routines

1. How often do you watch TV?
2. Where do you watch it?
3. Who do you watch TV with?
4. What are your favourite programmes?
5. Why?
6. How often do you watch videos?
7. Where do you watch them?
8. Who do you watch them with?
9. What kinds of videos do you like best?
10. Why?
11. How often do you listen to the radio?
12. Where do you listen to it?
13. Who with?
14. What are your favourite programmes?
15. Why?
16. How often do you read a newspaper?
17. Which newspaper/s do you read?
18. Why this paper in particular?
19. What kinds of news are you interested in?
20. Why?
21. Where do you read the paper?

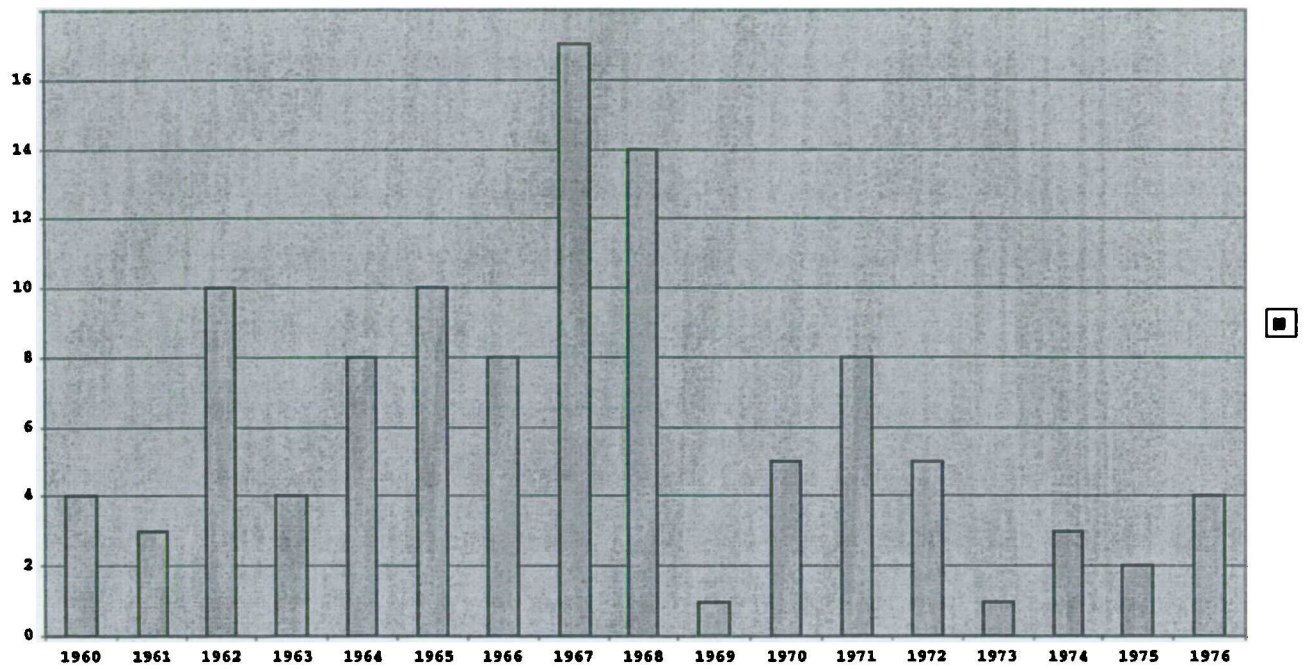
Views on television

1. In your view, is television good or bad for us?
2. Why is it good/bad?
3. What was your (longhouse's) life like before television?

Appendix 2

New Iban titles printed by the Borneo Literature Bureau from 1960 to 1976

Source: *Borneo Literature Bureau Annual Reports.*



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