

# **Knowledge, literacy and media among the Iban of Sarawak: a reply to Maurice Bloch**

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## **Abstract**

Maurice Bloch has rejected Jack Goody's 'autonomous' theory of literacy for being deterministic and Eurocentric. The Merina of Madagascar, says Bloch, have adapted literacy to local purposes. Rather than altering their (oral) knowledge system, bringing it closer to European models, literacy has actually extended this system. In this article I apply Bloch's insight to another Austronesian people: the Iban of Sarawak. While agreeing that his indigenist, 'ideological' approach is helpful in some cases (e.g. Christian prayer books that extend pagan notions of ancestry), it can also blind us to the wider realities of developing countries where literacy is both a ubiquitous ideal and an unevenly distributed resource. To overcome the ideological-autonomous impasse, I suggest (a) closer cooperation between literacy and media anthropology and (b) more geopolitical rigour when comparing social units.

## **Knowledge, literacy and media among the Iban of Sarawak: a reply to Maurice Bloch**

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### **From wet womb to dry tomb**

In 1984, the French anthropologist Maurice Bloch attended a conference in Eastern Madagascar on regional history. The attendants were mostly Malagasy academics and students, although there were a few foreign scholars as well. As is the usual practice in Madagascar, the papers were delivered in French, the language of the former colonial power. There was one exception. Arthur Besy, a renowned regional politician and intellectual, delivered a speech in Malagasy that lasted some two hours -- well beyond the allocated fifteen minutes. The speech dealt with the origin of a local place name. It was traditional in its formal structure, 'stuffed full of proverbs and scriptural illustrations, redolent with repetitions, certain passages recurring again and again rather like the chorus in a popular song'. Besy's academic compatriots, accustomed to more Cartesian renditions, were not overly convinced (Bloch 1998: 155). At certain passages in his speech, Besy boasted about his great accomplishments in life as a diplomat and as a man of traditional learning. He found the work of the young Francophone scholars had its own rationale but lacked the deep historical significance of his own contribution.

According to Bloch, Malagasy culture places great significance on the distinction between everyday language and oratory (*kabary*), which parallels that between the young and the elderly. Young people are 'wet', their bones are not yet hardened, their words and deeds lack wisdom. Knowledgeable elders are different: they have developed a dry, ancestral element over the years. Their oratory prowess is proof that they have the blessing of the ancestors. The process of drying up will be completed after their deaths, when they will have 'lost all wet individuality and will be entirely dry ancestor' (1998: 156). Bloch sees this process as a form of lifelong possession or colonisation: individual persons are colonised by the 'dry coral' of the ancestors, which is all that will remain in their tombs in the form of dry bones. Besy saw his speech as the passing down of ancestral knowledge to a wet audience. He was blessing the hearers with the dry wisdom of his words.

The purpose of Bloch's story is to undermine Jack Goody's (1968, 1977, 1986) 'autonomous' theory of literacy (Street 1993). Goody is usually seen as the chief proponent of the 'great divide' model, based on the notion that orality and literacy are radically different institutions in their social, institutional and cognitive effects. Although Goody has modified his stance slightly in response to his critics (Goody 1986) he is still associated with the idea of literacy as an 'autonomous' institution. Authors of this persuasion are said to 'conceptualise literacy in technical terms, treating it as independent of social context, an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character' (Street 1993: 5). In essence, Goody argues that literacy is a fundamental institution in the history of mankind. It allowed the ancient Greeks to build a democratic state and the rudiments of a modern science. Pre-literate societies bury knowledge in a web of social relations; what really matters in a statement

is not its truth but who says it. For instance, genealogical knowledge is ceaselessly reshaped to fit present interests. With the advent of literacy, people were able to challenge the elders using historical documents. The seed of critical thought had been sown. Over time, literacy allowed the passage from small-scale to complex societies. Against this thesis, which he deems eurocentric and deterministic, Bloch (1998: 153-154) contends that we have to locate literacy within the wider cultural and historical processes of a given society. In Madagascar, literacy did not alter in any fundamental way the indigenous systems of knowledge. When 19<sup>th</sup> century missionaries translated the Bible into Imerina, local leaders reacted by producing their own ‘Bibles’ in which they sought to legitimise their own genealogies and myths of origin. They saw the Bible as a threat not because it brought to the country a new kind of knowledge, but because a new technology was being harnessed to promote the same kind of knowledge. For the Imerina Queen, the missionaries wanted “to make the Malagasy worship the ancestors of the Europeans: Moses and Jesus Christ in order that they stopped worshipping my ancestors: Andriananpoinimerina and Radama”. The Malagasy, a highly pragmatic people, took this and other European technologies and turned them to their own uses (1998: 159-160). As a result, they regard the written or printed word as an extension of oratory. To Bloch, Besy is not a naïve indigene stumbling upon a new medium. He is a knowledgeable elder working within a century-old tradition of Malagasy literature that continues to flourish alongside oral forms.

The Merina are certainly more literate than the English middle classes yet most of their work is like that produced by Besy, though usually shorter. Literacy has not transformed the nature of Merina knowledge – it has confirmed it (Bloch 1998: 161).

### **Iban orality and scholarship**

One is tempted to export Bloch’s suggestive model of Malagasy literacy to Borneo. After all, the island of Madagascar is considered an integral part of the Austronesian world, albeit a remote one (Fox 1993). Like the Merina, rural societies in Insular Southeast Asia

tend to have deep stockpiles of oral knowledge about the past. They typically present such knowledge in public ritual speech performances at such events as the dedication of new villages, funerals, stone monument dedications, and bone-reburial ceremonies. Such occasions call for poetic evocations of a transcendent past, recalled via such spoken genres as rhymed couplet speeches. During these special ritual times, which often go on for several hours, orators sometimes are said to speak “with the voice of the ancestors”, and the living world of contemporary humans momentarily touches the shadow world of dead forebears (Rodgers 1995: 30).

As I read about Arthur Besy, I was reminded of Benedict Sandin, the Iban folklorist and ethnohistorian, widely regarded as ‘the foremost authority on the history and culture of his people’ (Pringle 1970: xiii). Sandin was born in 1918 in Kerangan Pinggai, a longhouse on the Paku river, in the Saribas basin of Sarawak – since 1963 a Malaysian state in Borneo. This area was at the time undergoing a rapid economic transformation following the successful adoption of rubber. After the Brooke ‘pacification’ of the area in the early 1860s, Saribas leaders had turned from headhunting to trade and cash crops.

Literacy spread rapidly, as many learnt from kin who had acquired a basic mission education in more peaceful areas (Sather 1994: 75). The wealth generated by the rubber boom led to the elaboration of ritual and ceremony, and public speech-making became a central institution (1994: 69). As in Madagascar, new technologies and practices, including literacy, were being mobilised to pursue local aims. Like the Malagasy, the Iban distinguish between ordinary and formal language, or more precisely between ‘shallow language’ (*jako mabu*) and ‘deep language’ (*jako dalam*). Sandin learnt deep language from his father, a renowned orator and genealogist, and he himself became a famous practitioner of both crafts after his retirement from the government service.

My father was one of the speakers who was always invited during Iban weddings... Because he was so good at this, I started in the 1930s to learn from him all of the difficult words, that is, the words that have a very, very deep meaning which few people today understand. I wrote down many of his speeches in this deep language... Having studied these things – it is for this reason that I can claim to be one of the few Iban who understands the deep meaning of the Iban language (in Sather 1981: 116).

The last sentence may strike European readers as boasting, but it certainly fits in with the Iban (and Malagasy) association of oratorical achievement with ancestral knowledge. To Sandin, as for Besy, literacy was a way of increasing his own cultural competence as well as the cultural renewal of his people. It was not a radical departure from his origins, as Goody’s model of literacy as an autonomous institution would have us expect. Thus Sandin’s father taught him that he descended from the god of war and headhunting, Singalang Burong, and from the culture hero Salamuda.

By 1930, as soon as I knew how to spell Iban words, I started to collect genealogical trees [*tusut*] from my father, who gave me, for example, the straight line genealogy from Singalang Burong down to myself... As I memorized these *tusuts*, I became interested in learning as much of the genealogies as I could (in Sather 1981: 115).

Sandin was formally educated in the Saribas and in Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, from 1928 to 1933.. In 1941 he became a junior native officer and was transferred to the Information Office after the Japanese Occupation. There he became the editor of the first Iban news publication, *Surat Pembrita*. During this period he began to publish papers on Iban history and lore in the *Sarawak Museum Journal*. From 1952 to 1963 he worked at the Sarawak Museum as a research assistant. In 1954-55 he studied museum methods and anthropology at the University of Auckland. Upon returning to the Museum he embarked on an intense period of fieldwork, recording and publishing genealogies, ethnohistorical narratives, bardic chants (*pengap*) and a Saribas dirge (*sabak*) (Sather 1994: 72-73). He was appointed Curator of the Sarawak Museum and Government Ethnologist in 1966. Soon before this appointment, he began a fruitful collaboration with Robert Pringle, a Cornell historian. Their joint effort yielded two important works of Bornean scholarship: Pringle’s (1970) *Rajahs and Rebels* and Sandin’s (1967) *The Sea Dayaks of Borneo before White Rajah Rule* (Sather 1994: 74).

The originality of this last work can be best gauged by means of one notorious reaction to it – that of Derek Freeman, the founding father of Iban anthropology. Freeman (1981)

was responding with characteristic vehemence to J. Rousseau's (1980) contention that the Iban are not an egalitarian society (thereby challenging Freeman's established thesis) but rather a society with hereditary strata, comparable to other Bornean societies such as the Kayan. Rousseau was calling for 'an historical approach' to Iban studies and supporting his case with evidence from Sandin. To Freeman this was an unfortunate move, for Sandin was 'in no sense a trained social scientist' but rather an 'ahistorical collector of folklore' (Freeman 1981: 12-13) – one who had always placed 'full credence in the major tenets of Iban belief' (1981: 54). Sandin's writings are, in Freeman's view, marred by 'conceptual paradoxes' such as his usage of the term 'hereditary' to describe individuals who had been appointed to office for the first time (1981: 12). They are also plagued by factual errors. In Sandin's *Sea Dayaks* (1967), says Freeman,

we are treated to a genealogy (Mr Sandin's own) which begins in "the Holy Land in the Middle East" (p. 97), to padi mortars that suddenly fly skywards (p. 51), to the slaying of stars in human form (p. 24), and to numerous other transempirical acts, such as ancestors cutting down invisible spirits (p. 32) and turning their adversaries into boulders (p. 11), in a continuous narrative that ends with the descendants of these miracle-working ancestors becoming clerks in the Government of Sarawak and the Borneo Company Limited (1981: 13).

This is not the place for a Sandinist retort (Postill 1995 was a wet attempt). For our present purposes, suffice to remark that Sandin's *oeuvre* is an outstanding example of ethnohistory, in both acceptations of the term: (i) 'the search for historical data on ethnic groups' and (ii) 'the ethnic group's own representation of their history' (Seymour-Smith 1986: 99). As Sather (1994: 77) has cogently argued, Sandin's shortcomings must be set against his intimate knowledge of lore and history in the Paku-Saribas region. Indeed his work supplements, and often confirms, that of Pringle and other Western scholars whose training, research methods and agendas are very different from his own.

### **Ibangelism**

A more recent example of Iban uses of literacy comes from my own 1998 fieldwork along the Skrang river (Postill 2000, ch. 6). Our historical knowledge of this river is scant by comparison to that of the neighbouring Saribas. Few genealogies have survived, probably as a result of the migration of leading Skrang families and ritual experts to the Rejang basin and beyond during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Sandin 1967: 29). The rubber boom that transformed many parts of the East Indies, including the Saribas, from the turn of the century to the 1930s, bypassed the war-ridden Skrang (Uchibori 1988: 256). The time-honoured solution to overpopulation and political instability, outmigration, was still practised in the 1930s, when numerous families (*bilik*) migrated to other areas of Sarawak in search of virgin forests. Often the 'migration leaders' (*pun pindah*) took along with them the local ritual specialists, i.e. the chief augur (*tuai burung*), the bard (*lemambang*) and the shaman (*manang*). Thus numerous longhouses were left behind without a single ritual specialist. With hindsight, we can say that the way was paved for future missionary activities. In my own chosen field site, a longhouse I shall call 'Nanga Kandis', my best historical informant could not trace the origin of the community further than five generations. Today the Skrang lacks 'that quality of community and continuity' that one finds in the Saribas basin, and especially along Sandin's Paku river (Pringle 1970: 208).

This is ironical considering that tourists from as far afield as Iceland come to the Skrang to experience what is packaged as a ‘traditional Iban longhouse’.

In 1998 Nanga Kandis had 22 *bilik*-families living in temporary houses (*dampa*) while they completed construction of a new longhouse (perhaps too ‘modern’, some feared, to attract future tourists). Five years previously, and having been bereft of ritual experts for 60 years, the residents became Anglican Christians, with the exception of one remaining pagan family. According to D. Bingham (1983: 121), a veteran Catholic missionary from England who works in the Rejang, for most longhouse dwellers who have converted ‘the all important functions of the Christian religion are the family blessings of the [long]house, home and farm’. New converts, he adds, ‘really do feel a great sense of deliverance from the burdens, fears and taboos of paganism...the simple saying of a Hail Mary can be sufficient to give them courage and remind them that God is with them’ (1983: 121-22). This is precisely how Nanga Kandis converts feel about their new religion. As two men put it to me:

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.

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.*

We should be aware however of the strong continuities that characterise many Christian practices in Austronesian societies. Bloch (1998: 87) has this to say about Catholicism among the Zafimaniry of Madagascar:

[E]ven for those most involved in the church, Catholic belief and practice is, and has always been, only an *added* element on top of traditional religious beliefs and practices...Foremost among these traditional beliefs and practices are those concerning ancestors. These seem to remain almost totally unaffected by equally strongly held Christian beliefs.

Similarly, despite the best post-pagan intentions of the priest and his Nanga Kandis deputy, the local lay reader, a close examination of the longhouse's service register revealed that both performed a significant number of rites based on pre-Christian beliefs and practices. Indeed far more kinds of pagan-derived services were officiated (18) than strictly Christian ones (5), and the list could have grown to be even longer, to judge by the contents of the prayer books<sup>1</sup>. This demonstrates the strong continuity of religious practices despite the priest's repeated anti-syncretistic tirades. I shall mention briefly but one of the services based on pagan notions and practices: *sambiang manggol*. *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:

*O, ni kita  
petara aki*

O, where are you  
Spirits of our grandfathers

*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*

Spirits of our grandmothers?  
 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 custom (*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.

In June 1997, I attended a *sampi manggol* officiated by a native Iban Anglican priest on behalf of the headman at Nanga Kandis. Instead of reciting from memory, as a pagan officiator would have done, the father read out of a Catholic book of prayer based on both Iban and Christian notions and appropriately entitled *Adat Kristian* (Marcus n.d.). 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*  
*Kami arap kami ngadap*  
*Ka Nuan, Tuhan Jesus, ti Penebus dunya.*  
*Nuan udah ngalah ka Sitan leboh di-regang*

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.  
 We have trust in you and appear before  
 You, Lord Jesus, Redeemer of the world.  
 You defeated Satan while on the cross.

*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.*  
 (Adat Kristian n.d.: 14, my translation)

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 harvests.

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 without the Holy Spirit. I will not indulge in ethno-theological speculations on the binary and transformative nature of much (religious) thought (see Leach 1976). Yet I need to stress the *continuity* of this prayer with antecedent prayers, whereby Iban notions of ancestry are preserved.

There is however a fundamental political change at work here: 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. Furthermore, it is no longer the *bilik*-family and their closest relations (*kaban*) who perform this most crucial farming 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 trained priests are qualified to delve in the intricacies of the new belief system. All three factors are proof of a power/knowledge shift from the local authority and oral knowledge of the elders to the cosmopolitan authority and literate knowledge of a younger priest. On the larger scale of Sarawak, this shift has been in the making since the arrival of European missionaries over 150 years ago.

### **Flaws in the ideological model of literacy**

I will now turn briefly to the inter-disciplinary field of literacy studies to better situate my argument. Figure 1 provides a sample of works on, or related to, literacy organised by topic (cf. Figure 2) to give some indication of the rich diversity of this problem area. Its practitioners have addressed three main questions:

1. Is literacy a uniform, unilinear phenomenon?
2. Can literacy be studied independently from its social and political contexts?
3. What are the cognitive effects, if any, of literacy? (Cole and Nicolopoulou 1992)

From the 1980s onwards, scholars in education, sociology, linguistics and other fields began to favour 'ethnographic' and qualitative approaches to the study of literacy.

Gradually some scholars developed a perspective opposed to the autonomous model known as ‘the ideological model’. In their view, literacy practices are hugely diverse and always entangled with power relations. They reject any idea of a ‘great divide’ between orality and literacy and explore instead context-specific oral/literate ‘mixes’ in a range of societies, the stress being on how ideology guides literacy practices (Street 1993: 7-13).

The ideological approach enjoys today paradigmatic status within the anthropological subdiscipline. Given this rarely disputed pre-eminence I will now point at three of its flaws by way of a foundational study: Kulick and Stroud’s chapter, ‘Conceptions and uses of literacy in a Papua New Guinean village’, in Street’s (1993) important volume *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*. This volume introduced the inter-disciplinary field of ‘New Literacy Studies’, together with the ideological paradigm, to British social anthropology. It was here that Bloch first addressed the problem of literacy through his Malagasy data.

Culture	Graff 1987, Wagner 1993
Development	Grillo and Rew 1985, Wagner 1993, Robinson-Plant 2001, Street 2001
Education	Spindler 1974, Hanson 1979, Bourdieu 1984, Freire 1985, Collins 1986, Erikson and Bekker 1986, Varenne and McDermott 1986, Bloch 1993, Camitta 1993, Besnier 1995, Doronilla 1996, Hornberger 1998, Aikman 1999
Emotion	Besnier 1995
Ethnicity and nationalism	Gellner 1983, Wagner 1983, Fishman 1986, Grohs 1990, Reder and Wiklund 1993
Gender	Radway 1984, Horsman 1989, Yates 1994, Robinson-Pant 2001
Historical evolution	Havelock 1976, Goody 1977, 1986, 1987, Ong 1982, Harris 1986, Barton 1988, Houston 1988
Identity	Lewis 1993, King 1994, Slater 1998, Sheridan <i>et al</i> 1999
Ideology	Street 1984
Indigenous knowledge	Kulick and Stroud 1993, Aikman 1999
Indigenous resistance	Bourgeois 1986, Grohs 1990, Collins 1998
Power, politics	Spolsky <i>et al</i> 1983, Freire 1985, Grillo 1990, Besnier 1995
Reading	Radway 1984, Boyarin 1993
Religion	Spolsky <i>et al</i> 1983, Smalley <i>et al</i> 1990, Probst 1993
Restricted literacy	Bourdieu 1984, Doronilla 1996
Secrecy	Scribner and Cole 1981, Bledsoe and Robey 1993
Self and person	Besnier 1991, Kulick and Stroud 1993
Social change	Jackson 1975, Thomas 1986, Street 1987, Smalley <i>et al</i> 1990
Social practice	Cook-Gumperz 1986, Prinsloo and Breier 1996, Barton & Hamilton 1998, Barton & Hall 1999, Barton <i>et al</i> 1999, Sheridan <i>et al</i> 1999
Speaking and writing	Shuman 1986, Chafe and Tannen 1987, Sweeney 1987, Finnegan 1988, Chartier 1989, Woolard 1989, Stetter 1997
Trade	Street 1984, Kalman 1999
Witchcraft	Bastian 1993
Writing	Basso 1989, Swzed 1981, Walker 1981, Barton & Hamilton 1999, Barton <i>et al</i> 1999, Fishman 1991, Sheridan <i>et al</i> 1999

**Figure 1.** A sample of contributions to literacy studies by subject-matter

Kulick and Stroud question the notion, widespread amongst both missionaries and their secular critics across the Pacific, that literacy ‘constitutes a kind of potent, active force in itself, and that it acts as an “agent” of “linguistic, religious and social change” (1993: 31). To these anthropologists, such a notion resonates with the autonomous scholars’ thesis that literacy transforms ‘cognitive processes, social institutions and historical consciousness’. True to the ideological spirit, Kulick and Stroud, ‘rather than stress how literacy affects people, [...] want to take the opposite tack and examine how people affect literacy’ (1993: 31).

They argue their case on the basis of field research in Gapun, a small village in the lower Sepik area of Papua New Guinea (henceforth PNG), in 1986-7. While local children usually attend school for three to six years, Gapun adults use literacy in two broad ways: in relation to Christian teachings, and to aid interpersonal relations, e.g. to write messages requesting assistance, list names, or record deaths (1993: 33). For instance, Kulick once received a note written in the form of a compressed, flowery speech asking for his help towards financing a conciliatory feast. The authors interpret this note as an extension of vernacular forms of oratory – the anthropologist was being ‘orated at’ rather than written to. In a society where interpersonal relations often verge on conflict, such notes avoid embarrassment as they tread the thin line between asking and ordering (1993: 50-52). Significantly absent from Gapun, certainly when compared to Sarawak longhouses, was the modernist belief that everybody should learn how to read and write (1993: 32-33). Gapun’s worldview is millenarian, and modern schooling is seen as a way of one day learning ‘the secret of the Cargo’. The only non-religious texts local adults ever read are glossy brochures from US mail order firms.

Proclaiming triumphantly that they have finally found the ‘road’ they have been seeking, young men sit down and write brief letters to the addresses they find in the front of the brochures, requesting that the Cargo be sent to them forthwith (1993: 41).

Kulick and Stroud’s reach the conclusion that Gapun villagers have been ‘active and creative in their encounter with literacy’, turning it to their own uses. They have ‘their own ideas about reading and writing, generated from their own cultural concerns’ (1993: 55). This ‘ideological’ analysis – very close, of course, to Bloch’s -- is marred on three counts. The first flaw has to do with the authors’ notion of ‘creativity’. In this connection, it is useful to outline Richard Rorty’s (1991: 94-5) theory of belief acquisition. Rorty distinguishes between ‘paradigms of inference’ and ‘paradigms of imagination’. Paradigms of inference occur when our logical space does not change, that is ‘when no new candidates for belief are introduced’, e.g. when we add up a column of figures or run down a flow-chart. Paradigms of imagination, by contrast, include giving new meanings to old words, inventing beliefs, and colligating ‘hitherto unrelated texts’. Gewertz and Errington’s (1991) PNG ethnography on the Chambri offers us a good example of an imaginative indigenous colligation of texts. In the course of fieldwork, 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 (just like the Imerina leaders had done in the 19<sup>th</sup> century). In an ethnographic twist that echoes Borges’ (1995) classic tale, *Pierre Menard*, some passages from his Bible read exactly like the Catholic original, whilst other passages were more imaginative. The aspiring evangelist soon ran into

difficulties, albeit not on account of his plagiarism. The elders, who were otherwise proud to see their traditions preserved in writing, would not relinquish the deeper levels of their knowledge to him. As they saw it, having done so would have allowed the literate young man to subvert their egalitarian system of knowledge (1991: 166). In terms of Rorty's theory, the elders skilfully managed to prevent the man from introducing 'new candidates for belief' into the local pool of beliefs, thereby protecting their own claims to ancestral knowledge.

We are told of no equivalent manoeuvres in Gapun. As we can glean from Kulick and Stroud's (1993: 35) own description, the place has been caught up since at least WWII in a long process of socio-economic and ideological 'involution' (cf. Geertz 1963), a half-century marked by recurrent outbreaks of millenarian activity -- in the 1940s, 1950s, 1965-6, and as recently as 1987. All along some Gapun villagers have acquired literacy skills, yet they have turned them to cargo-related and other local uses that offer them few insights into the political economy of PNG and beyond. Unlike the Chambri evangelist, Gapun cargoists operate under a paradigm of inference wherein imported materials and skills, including school literacy, leave the local ideological space largely unchanged. In stark contrast, parents in other parts of PNG do see schools as roads to the wider world. According to Sillitoe (2000: 210-211) many are rejecting pilot school projects in local vernaculars (*tokples*) as second-rate and demanding that their children be taught in English. Like parents in Sarawak (Seymour 1974) and other developing countries, they see an English-language education as their best chance for upward mobility. Meanwhile *nouveaux riches* in Wewak and elsewhere are sending their children to 'international' schools originally built to cater for colonial expatriates. Armed with the cosmopolitan literate knowledge acquired at these schools, some have even won newspaper-run English poetry competitions to celebrate Mother's Day (Gewertz and Errington 1999: 71). Therefore in marginal Gapun, with its 'specialized mythology' (Appadurai 1986: 48) we can only speak of *inferential* creativity, tight ideological parameters, and political impotence. Indeed, although Gapun residents suspect that the Catholic clergy and national government are concealing the secret of the cargo from them, 'all the villagers can hope to do is read and reread the texts they possess...hoping that someday they may stumble onto a clue that will reveal to them the 'true' meaning of the words contained in their books' (Kulick and Stroud 1993: 55).

The second flaw in the ideological ethnography under consideration derives from the authors' impoverished notion of agency. Recall that they reject the popular idea that literacy can be an "agent" of change (1993: 31). To them, social agency is the sovereign monopoly of humans. Here we can refer to a growing number of studies exploring the agency of non-human entities, including institutions (Douglas 1986), art objects and images (Gell 1998), biographical objects (Hoskins 1998), homes (Miller 2001), television sets (Postill n.d.), broadcast discourse (Spitulnik 1996), religious beliefs (Boyer 2000), websites (Miller 2000) and even the agency arising from an 'abeyance of [human] agency' during certain ritual stages (Miyazaki 2000). As these studies suggest, we should pay much more attention than we have so far to 'forms of agency that do not necessarily privilege the autonomy of human agents' (Miyazaki 2000: 31). Ironically then,

proponents of the ideological model reject the autonomy of literacy only to exaggerate the autonomy of human agents.

The third flaw concerns geopolitics. Kulick and Stroud are all too eager to contrast their micro-sociological rural data with broad assertions about literacy among ‘Euro-Americans’:

Meaning in Gapun is...the responsibility of the listener or the recipient of speech. In this sense, village communicative expectations differ importantly from those common to middle-class Euro-Americans, among whom the burden of successful communication is seen to lie with the speaker, who is expected to strain to ‘get across’ his or her viewpoints and thoughts to the listener (1993: 54-5).

Contrasts of this type do not help us to understand the geopolitical dimensions of Gapun literacy. In fact they cloud our vision by positing a sharp West-Rest dichotomy rather than comparing the histories of literacy in commensurate regions, say, Western Europe and Melanesia, as well as the distinctive *national* histories that are still unfolding within those two culture areas. Moreover, we are offered a contrast between a small Melanesian village and a vague socio-economic category (‘the middle class’) spread across two continents. It is more fruitful, in my view, to compare and contrast like with like. For instance, Lewis (1993) has written an insightful essay on the modern history of literacy in the Horn of Africa by comparing Somalia and Ethiopia. In the Gapun case, we would have benefited far more from a comparison with other localities in PNG, both rural and urban. In the current post-colonial order, largely built on North Atlantic principles, two central expectations are the universal provision of school education and the eradication of illiteracy. When certain groups within a nation (e.g. Wewak elites) embrace modernist forms of literacy, others negotiate them (e.g. the Chambri), and still others, such as Gapun villagers, reject or are unaware of such forms, this all makes for fertile comparative ground – as well as having urgent practical implications. Literacy may not have greatly altered Gapun’s cultural traffic sub-system, but it is undoubtedly central to the growing disparities in the distribution of cultural capital through the PNG system.

### **The anthropologies of literacy and media**

The ideological model of literacy betrays a form of ethnographic reductionism that also afflicts other anthropological discourses on near-global institutions, including money (e.g. Bloch and Parry 1989), clock and calendar time (e.g. Gingrich 1994), and television (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1997). To be sure, these different problem areas have varied histories but they all share a commitment to celebrating micro-cultural diversity at the expense of geopolitical and historical comparison. In this respect, the parallel histories of literacy and media anthropology are instructive. While the former was shaped around a rejection of the optimistic technological determinism of ‘autonomous’ scholars, media anthropology has reached its own ‘ideological’ consensus through rejecting what was seen as the *pessimistic* determinism of the Frankfurt School regarding the impact of mass media technologies (see Ginsburg’s 1993, 1994 search for a third way). The reasons for the continued separation of these two anthropological subfields deserve a study in their own right. After all, the points of contact and overlap are numerous, not least having to

contend with neighbouring disciplines that have eagerly taken ‘ethnographic turns’ in recent decades. Consider, for instance, the work on women’s popular literature (Radway 1984), Indian cinema turned into Nigerian novels (Larkin 1997), video-films and sermons in Ghana (Meyer 2002), teleported texts on Aboriginal television (Michaels 1991), foreign correspondents in Central America and elsewhere (Pedelty 1995, Hannerz 1996), computer software production in France (Born 1997), internet relay chat (IRC) and pornography (Slater 1998), etc. Most of these media ethnographies entail not only a study of orality, literacy and textuality, but also of the relationship between textuality and *visuality*. The local oral/literate mixes identified by literacy scholars are often oral/textual/visual mixes of increased complexity as more media technologies are appropriated in local and occupational settings around the world. It is therefore more pertinent today to speak of ‘oral/media mixes’ than of ‘oral/literate mixes’.

A good example of a thick oral/media mix can be found in Georgina Born’s (1997) ethnography of an artificial intelligence (AI) music research centre in Paris. This organisation is constantly buffeted by the conflicting agencies of hierarchical programming codes, intricate musical scores, obsolescent software and hardware, powerful US multinationals, a demanding local management, and a team of post-1968 libertarian programmers. Faced with baroque, poorly documented ‘ancestral’ programs, the local AI researchers often have to fall back on two ancient human achievements in order to decipher them: orality and sociality. In other words, they have to find veteran colleagues who are willing and able to translate their half-forgotten encoded knowledge into oral discourse. Born faced severe practical problems of her own: not only did she have to translate from the ‘corporate culture’ of AI experts into that of AI-deprived anthropologists – she first had to attend to the myriad kinds of translations that went on *within* the organisation. These involved at least four ‘literacies’ -- alphabetic, numerical, musical, and cybernetic – and a number of specialized ones, notably the many programs and codes used over the decades. It is to Born’s credit that she has handled this cybernetic Babel with great dexterity. Her case study suggests nonetheless the need for media and literacy anthropologists to undertake team research in increasingly multi-textual and multi-mediated locales that defy the capacity of any single fieldworker. This could extend, of course, to non-anthropologists. Eric Hirsch’s (1994) collaborative work with media theorists on information and communications technologies (ICTs) in British homes has set a worthy precedent in this latter category.

If literacy and media anthropologists are to cooperate in future they should, at any rate, address a major methodological issue downplayed by the ideological model: how to define, research, and compare oral/media mixes in commensurate geopolitical units such as villages, social networks, companies, nation-states, or culture areas (cf. Barnard 2000:57). It will no longer do to contrast a Melanesian village with ‘the Western middle-class’. As a symbolic step in this direction, in Figure 2 I sketch out one of the hidden geographical dimensions of literacy studies.

Reder and Wikelund 1993		
ARCTIC		
Havelock 1976, Basso & Anderson 1977		
Hornberger 1998		Crump 1988
Walker 1981 Woolard 1989	Bourdieu 1984, Thomas 1986	
Fishman 1991	Dombey 1988, Houston 1988	
Graff 1987	Chartier 1989, Sheridan <i>et al</i> 1999	
AMERICAS	Davies 1986	
Camitta 1993, Slater 1998,		
Collins 1998		
	EURASIA	
		Smalley <i>et al</i> 1990
	Robinson-Pant 2001	Doronilla 1996
		Sweeney 1987
	Wagner 1993	
Bourgois 1986		
King 1994	AFRICA	
Kalman 1999	Goody 1987, Bledsoe & Robey 1986	
	Bastian 1993, Probst 1993	
Aikman 1999	Yates 1994, Meyer 2002	Jackson 1975, Spolsky <i>et al</i> 1983
		Duranti & Ochs 1986, Besnier 1991, 1995
	Grohs 1990	OCEANIA
AMERICAS	Bloch 1993	Meggitt 1968
		Gewertz & Errington 1991
Hornberger 1998		Kulick & Stroud 1993
		AUSTRALIA
		Michaels 1991

**Figure 2.** A sample of contributions to literacy studies by geographical area

### The geopolitics of Iban literacy

At this juncture my ethnographic account has to part ways with that of Bloch and other ‘ideological’ authors. It would not be difficult to rummage through my field notes and find further examples of how the Iban have appropriated literacy in their own, non-Western terms. For instance, I could talk about the young man in the Bintulu area whose services are much in demand as a ghost writer of love letters in poetic Iban. Or I could analyse the letters from a labourer (*kuli*) to his *bilik*-family apologising in formulaic terms for not being able to fulfil his ritual obligations owing to work pressures (cf. Besnier 1993 on Polynesian letters). Or focus on that same migrant labourer’s notebook; especially on his use of literacy for a variety of ‘traditional’ purposes, including the recording of a plaintive poem (*pantun sabana*), a minor rite (*biau pengabang*), home remedies against stomach ache, tuberculosis, poisoning, etc, as well as a variety of charms intended to woo a lover, humble a proud woman, appease an irate wife, break up a marriage, and so on. I could also study the massive annual sending of Dayak Festival greeting cards containing a standardised, neo-invocatory message (*Selamat gayu guru, gerai nyamai*, etc), or analyse the script of a longhouse quiz show on Iban lore I once attended. Alternatively, I could trace the metamorphoses of segments of Iban discourse

as they travel in and out of the oral/aural and textual domains. For example, local legends as they are initially told to Thomas T. Laka, a popular broadcast storyteller, who then records, transcribes, edits, proofreads and reads them out on air so that they can return, in a new form, to the oral/aural domain where they originated – or more precisely, to thousands of clusters of listeners across Sarawak (cf. Spitulnik 1996 on Zambian radio). I could also try to assess the influence of literacy on ‘deep’ (*dalam*) speech-making, as more and more orators today commit their thoughts to writing before their nervous performances in front of a longhouse microphone (when many literally feel ‘out of their depth’).

All these instances of indigenisation, and others, merit further study. However, if considered by themselves, in their micro-settings, they may distract us from more pressing ‘macro’ actualities. More concretely, they may conceal the political truth that Sarawak is, and has been since its inception in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, a state built on an ethnic division of labour and knowledge. Whilst the Iban and other Dayaks form a predominantly poor rural population, most ethnic Chinese are urban and have a much higher average income and level of formal education. The government is, however, in the hands of the tiny Melanau Muslim minority, in competition with the Malays who, although the majority at national level, represent but one fifth of the population of Sarawak (Jawan 1994: 189-223).

To sketch out the geopolitics of literacy in Sarawak it is useful to revisit the work of no other than Jack Goody (1987:3) who carried out his field research into orality and literacy in rural West Africa. In the early days, he reports, some people in the region used literacy to communicate with supernatural agents. Being illiterate was not shameful then. Yet with the consolidation of a colonial administration, success in life was increasingly associated with those who ‘know book’. In Ghana, legal innovations in the 1930s put pressure on the native chiefs to become literate. The country’s first native parliamentarians, elected in 1951, were school teachers and clerks, not traditional chiefs. The illiterate were effectively barred from the new corridors of power. The arrival of radio kept the elders informed of developments in the national arena, but it could be no substitute for ‘know book’ (1987: 140-3). To Goody, literacy has had a profound impact on rural identities in West Africa, for ‘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. The Iban equivalent of the Ghanaian term ‘know book’ is the identical *nemu surat*, a phrase frequently used by older illiterate farmers to describe the brighter longhouse youngsters, or the new generations as a whole. By contrast, they themselves ‘don’t know book’: *Enda nemu surat*. 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.

He 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 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 'our wretched lives as farmers'.

The life histories of two middle-aged residents of a Saribas longhouse – let us call it 'Semak'<sup>2</sup> -- confirm Seymour's account of the rural primary school as a manner of occupational sorting office.

1. Apai Dora ('Father of Dora'), 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 an unmarried 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 at an early age 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*) (Postill 2000: 194).

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 of Radio Sarawak (later RTM) 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. 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, the 'secondary orality' of radio (Ong 1982) was no substitute for knowing book<sup>3</sup>.

Chronologically speaking, the third influential post-War institution in the lives of many rural Iban was *bejalai* or *pegi* (cf. Kedit 1993), 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 the longhouse 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 migratory 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 on, increasing numbers of young women have migrated 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*. She obliged, 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.

Both Apai Dora and Sulah 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 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*) potentially available to rural Iban who have completed their secondary education: the lower ranks of the government service comprised of clerks, nurses, teachers and others. The dream of a 'nice' (*nyamai*) life employment in the public sector has remained a central component of the Saribas ideology 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, 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 those who are hard-working *and highly educated*. According to Berma (2000), however, in 1990 the Iban remained a predominantly agricultural population (72.7%) with a very high percentage of people lacking any educational qualifications (78.1%) and a negligible proportion of university graduates (0.2%). This discrepancy between ideals and perceived achievement is a continued source of resentment and low self-esteem among the Iban.

## **Conclusion**

*Literacy has not transformed the nature of Merina knowledge – it has confirmed it (Bloch 1998: 161)*

Literacy has both confirmed and transformed the nature of Iban knowledge. There is no paradox here. In some social practices, such as Christianised farming invocations, it serves pre-state indigenous purposes (while furthering the aims of an imported organisation, in this case the Church). On other occasions, for instance in a classroom setting, literacy primarily serves to turn rural children into a Malaysian underclass. In the rural areas, parochial ‘ideolects’ contain folk ideals about literacy partly derived from Western blueprints. These ideals have been routed for generations through regional centres of ideology production (missions, district offices, ministries, radio stations, etc). They assert that success in life belongs not to those steeped in the oral past but to those who know book. It is only bookish Iban, the belief goes, who can help their brethren catch up with the more advanced races. Bloch’s ‘ideological’ theory of literacy is a potent antidote against teleological approaches to literacy. . It is good to do ethnography with, particularly in the Austronesian world, and to defend the work of indigenous scholars like Sandin or Besy from overly positivist anthropologists such as Freeman. Yet it can only take us part of the way. By considering only local appropriations of literacy, Bloch and his ideological colleagues fail to map both the uneven distribution of literate knowledge and the traffic in pro-literacy ideas that characterise most developing nations. Goody’s autonomous approach remains an essential guide to the second leg of the journey.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> 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] and 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*). The Bishop also 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*).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Semak’ is the Iban word for ‘nearby’. I am using pseudonyms for persons and small localities.

<sup>3</sup> H.D. Lyons (1990: 421) describes a similar ideology in Nigeria, West Africa.

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