

Walking through the Indigenous Religious Field – A Field Report on Malaysian Borneo –

By Wei Zhang

A. *Objective of Field Trip*

With the intention to observe the characteristics of the indigent religious field in the island of Borneo in South East Asia, and to incorporate their religious experiences into the Asian Religious curriculum at the University of South Florida, I participated in the Fulbright Summer Study Abroad program, and traveled to Malaysian Borneo between the months of June and July 2002. The theoretical interest is to use the field experience to address the conventional academic assessment of the “primal” religions, and possibly, to suggest the degree of relevance of the indigent religious worldviews to our contemporary reflection of the perceived fragmented relation of the universe, cosmos, the world of human and spirits.

B. *Specification of Acquired Information*

The one-month field trip enabled me to observe the locality and physical characteristics of the religious sites where the religious rituals were performed; and the visit and overnight stay in the “longhouse” -- the residence of the indigenes peoples in Batan Ai areas which gave me the opportunity of the face-to-face encounter with the native men and women who have managed to maintain the traditional way of life while embracing the foreign influences and rapid social changes. And the formal and informal conversations with the scholars whom I met at the University of Malaysia--Kuching, and at the International Conference on Borneo 2002, held in the city of Kato Kinabalu, introduced me into a scholarly discipline that has dedicated itself to the study and preservation of the native cultural and religious traditions in Malaysian Borneo.

The visits to Orang Asli Museum in Kuala Lumpur, and the Sarawak Cultural Center in Kuching exposed me to a rich collection of photos and artifacts of the indigenous populations of the past, reinforcing my visual understanding of their religious worldviews

and their way of life. The trip to Tun Jugah Foundation in Kuching, and the conversations with its director Dr. Vinson Sutlive gives a sense of the necessary efforts, put forward by the Western anthropologists, historians, as well as the native scholars to “save” the vanishing native oral traditions and handicrafts. Over all, the field trip provided me with a wide range of the opportunities to interact with the diverse native groups of peoples and communities, and a window to see the indigenous religious world of Borneo where the dynamic transformation is taking place, where the past intersects with the present, and continuity incorporates the change.

C. Information Assessment

For the sake of conceptual clarity, I shall classify and assess the information under the three headings. First, I shall discuss the locations and physical characteristics of the religious or sacred sites of the indigenous peoples, and the worldview and the religious beliefs they represent and embody; secondly, the positive impacts of those views and beliefs on the inhabitants of the indigenous religious field, and their spiritual strength and dynamic capability to preserve the traditional way of life while embracing the modern and foreign influence, and lastly, the contemporary relevance of the primal religious worldviews to our own reflection of cosmological inter-connected nature of our existence and well-being.

First, I will report my observation of the location and the physical characteristics of the religious field or what we call the “sacred” sites, in the indigenous world of Borneo. Usually, if a student or an observer who is instructed to look for a religious and sacred site, he or she is likely to try to find a place called a church, mosque or temple. Yet, there is no place to be found and classified as such in the indigenous religious world in Borneo. Rather, it is the dwelling place of the native people, known as the “longhouse,” and its surrounding areas – rivers, hillside and rice field are perceived as the sacred, and utilized for conducting a variety of the religious ceremonies and rituals. The inhabitants of the longhouse are called *Ibans*, who are the largest group of the native population of Malaysia Borneo, first refereed

by the Dutch colonial officers as Sea *Dyakas*, or the non-Malay natives.¹ The modern longhouses that we visited still maintain the traditional architectural style -- a rectangle structure, elevated from the ground, with one roof covering a dozen or dozens of separate compartments, each is used as the different family dwelling. The longhouse is perhaps the most compacted living arrangement among the tribal societies in human history. There are stairs at the each side, serving as the entrance to the longhouse.

Traditionally, and perhaps it is still now, from the selection of the site, to the construction, remodeling and dismantling of a longhouse, all involve the presence and participation of the gods and ancestral spirits; and it is through a sequence of the complex and elaborate rituals and ceremonies that the spiritual beings are invoked and appeared on the occasions. The location selected to build a longhouse is usually near the river, on the riverbank, partially sheltered by the trees and bushes. There are no land routs leading to the longhouses but only waterways navigated by the longboats, and it is the longboats that transported us to the longhouses that we visited. The river gives the residents of the longhouses quick and easy access to the outside world and other longhouses. The surrounding area of the longhouse -- the land, the river, trees and rice field, “leased” from the gods, and regarded as the “blood and flesh” by the *Ibans*, are also extended and incorporated into the longhouse construction rituals.² Thus, for the *Ibans*, there seems to be no need to construct a separate space from the living and lived ones, to erect a church, mosque or a temple for conducting religious rituals and ceremonies. The longhouse itself is the church, mosque and temple.

The ways that the *Ibans* integrate the living space with the immediate living environment as a ritual site can further illustrate the religious worldview that *Iban* community embraces. Underneath the longhouse, elevated from the ground in about five feet, tucked in

¹ See “The Name of Ibans” in *The Ibans and their Religion*” by Eric Jensen, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 19745, pp. 15-17.

² Clifford Sather’s “Land Rites,” conference paper delivered at Borneo in 2002 held at Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, 15-18 July 2002.

the domestic animals – one can find the chicken, pigs and so on. With the hill rice fields standing nearby -- the sacred land leased from the agricultural god, and the ancestors buried across from the river, the *Ibans* lived in an integrated world with the gods, ancestral spirits, animals and the natural world. Hence, the religious rituals were performed in the longhouse, and the nearby rice fields, the riverbanks and the burial ground across from the river as well. For instance, one of welcoming ceremonies that we received from one particular longhouse was performed on the hillside between the river and the longhouse. The headman and his tribal members came out to greet us, as we were climbing up the hill to the longhouse. He sprinkled some wine to the ground, perhaps, a gesture making an offering to the gods for bringing the guests to his community. As we were entering the longhouse, he fired a hunting gun and shot into the sky three times, perhaps, another ritual gesture to announce the arrival of the guests to the gods and spirits nearby.

Entering the longhouse, one sees that the front part is used as a public sitting and dining area, shared by all the families; and the back area is divided into separate compartments where the individual family retires to at night. There are also small cooking area and toilets attached to the individual family compartment.

Inside the longhouses that we visited, there is no specific space preserved for the so-called religious functions and there are no sacred objects to be seen either on the walls or doors; it is in the front common sitting and dining area shared by all the families where the welcome rituals were performed. The headman chanted some sacred verses to invite gods' participation in this gathering and to send down blessings to both the guests as well as the house residents. Afterwards, he held a rooster which he waved above our heads in circles; the rooster, was then sacrificed and the blood sprinkled onto the ground, as an offering made to the gods for the blessing they sent.

Although there were no specific religious/ritual ceremonies performed during our visit and stay, except for the welcoming rituals, and yet, it seems that many aspects of the daily

life in the longhouse are attended with great ceremonial details and social grace. Take the example of food preparation and presentation. From the preparation, cooking to the arranging and serving of the food, every procedure seems to be ceremonial. The women first brought in from the kitchens the three main courses of the dinner: rice, hard-boiled eggs and fried fish. The headman then chanted some sacred verses to invoke the presence of gods and spirits to the occasion. Finishing up the chanting, the headman and other elders began to arrange the food. In a big bowl the three main food items were laid in layers: rice on the bottom, fish in the middle and eggs on the top. The main food items, and the way that they were laid out reflect the lifestyle and religious beliefs of the *Ibans*. For the hill rice farmers, rice is not only the foundation of their live hood, but also a sacred gift from the god to the *Ibans*. Together with the skill of cultivation of the rice, they were specifically transmitted to the *Ibans* from the agricultural god. As the inhabitants of the river valley, *Ibans* live by the water. The river not only provides with them the water resource, accesses to the outside world, but also food items, such as fish, to nurture and sustain the life *Ibans*. Eggs, the symbol of creation in a number of Eastern religions, are one of the three sacrificial items, together with chickens and pigs, is used in all the religious ceremonies and festivals. After the headman and the elders had finished arranging the food in the big bowl, women began to bring out other dishes from the kitchen, in their colorful costume dresses, walking slowly and gracefully to the rhythms of the drumbeats.

At one of the traditional longhouses, reconstructed and displayed in the Sarawak Cultural Center at Kuching, there was attached a communal “ceremonial hall” at the one end of the longhouse, housing the shrines and alters for the gods and ancestral spirits. In the center of the hall there is a communal fire that is kept burning day and night. Women came here in the morning to fetch the preserved fire to light their home kitchen fire for cooking. Upon the wooden poles that surrounded the central fire, there hung the masks of the tribal heroes and warriors. Along the walls standing the benches for sitting, and there are also farming tools and sacks of communal food items, filed at the corner of the hall. The windows that are made of wood and could be closed from inside when necessary through the control of

a rather complicated robe device, are actually defensive strategic points where the spears could aim and shoot the outside targets while protecting the shooters inside. The communal hall is thus also the military headquarter. The structural and functional arrangement of the ceremonial hall suggest the space is all in one, a storage room for food, tools and communal fire, and a meeting place for the elders to discuss agricultural affairs at the harvest time, and warfare when the enemy tribes threatened the longhouse community, and a military headquarter and strategic points for offence and defense.

The ritual/religious use of the living or lived space by the *Ibans*, typically represents a cosmological worldview of holism, shared by many other indigenous religious traditions. Such a worldview perceives the world of the human beings; spirits and nature are all alive, interconnected in their existence and daily operations. For the *Ibans*, the operation of all the worlds and the interconnection between them are regulated by a natural law, which is called *Adat*. *Adat* does not assume a transcendental status, as the creator God does in the monotheistic religious traditions, but is reflected by and embodied in the world it regulates -- it is immanent to the world it resides. The "will" of *Adat*, is known through divination -- foretelling the course of the future events and spelling out the hidden meaning of the current affairs with the assistance of the super natural signs revealed in dream imageries and the natural events, performed by the headman, the shamans or ritual specialists. The harmonious co-existence between gods, spirits, man and the natural forces is ensured by the proper religious observations and diligence of ritual performances such as sacrifices and offerings.

Next, I would like to discuss the positive impact of such a religious worldview upon the inhabitants whose outlook of the world, life and themselves are definitely shaped by it. As I shall try to demonstrate, there are obvious advantages of the primal cosmological holism, for it grants those who held such a view a sense of all-embracing and interconnectedness, an appreciation for plurality and diversity and the dynamics of utilizing the non-indigenous or foreign elements to promote the self-preservation and growth. Given the fact that over the course of 2,000 years, the various groups of peoples -- Indians, Arabians, Chinese, Europeans

traveled to and through the island -- some settled down and established their religious practices, and others started the religious conversions competing for converts among the native tribes. And yet, according to the statistics as reported at the Conference on Borneo 2002, though there is steady progress of the Christian mission in Malaysian Borneo, the *Ibans* and other native populations are still largely “pagans.” However, this report should not be merely regarded as an index of the degree of success or failure of the missions of the Christian church or Muslim conversion among the Borneo indigenous populations.

It is a telling story of how the natives of the primal religious field not only preserved their own religious traditions and their way of life, but also embrace and incorporate the foreign religious influences, successfully and peacefully. For instance, I have seen in both cities and countryside the co-existence of the different religious presence. From those who have adopted Christian names and received the Western education, I have not detected any signs of anxiety, antagonism or confusing feelings about their new religious identity. Their native religious worldview of cosmological holism seems to have prepared them for a diverse and pluralistic world and equip them with useful tools to select any foreign elements in reconstructing their religious identity and expressions. They do not seem to have to make an either/or choice – to discard their tradition and religion in order to become modernized and Christianized. They operate with ease and grace between the two worlds, serving as the cultural interpreters, and religious mediators between the foreign and native communities. On the one hand, the foreign influence and modernization expose them to other worldviews and provided them with a modern education, hence enables them to reach the outside world and communities, and on the other, the close connection with and constant retuning to their native tribal communities reinforce their self-identity and gives them a sense of belonging. Hence their very presence and daily operation continuously transgress and soften the cultural, linguistic, religious and social boundaries between the native and non-native communities.

One of our hostesses was a native Kelebic woman, a Cornell-educated anthropologist who currently holds a teaching position in a state university of Malaysia. When asked if she

worries about the Christian influence possibly posed a threat to the survival of her native tradition, which it is a reflection of our habitual thinking of religion in exclusivist terms, instead of giving an either/or answer, she provide us with a narrative about how her people came to embrace the Christian teaching. In the story, there were two young men from her tribe, upon hearing the arrival of the new religion, at a time when the latter was struggling with various problems that had threatened the survival of the whole community, decided to reach out and search for the new religious message. They traveled on foot across the rugged mountain ranges for days before they reached the city of Kuching where the missionaries were stationed. Bringing back what they had learned, they taught their people of the teachings of the Christ, and the message was eagerly embraced.

The message of her story is clear: a tribal culture or religion is a living organism that is capable of self-preservation and self-renewing by adopting and selecting what promote its survival and growth; and that any “foreign” elements are always be “imposed” upon the natives, but embraced by the latter once the latter realizes the value of the former. Her statement that “Christianity had saved our people” makes good sense in this particular context.

Our *Iban* interpreter, who also became a Christian, now is holding a position in the local government. Like our hostess, he goes to the church on Sundays, and returns to his longhouse community for *Gawai* – the religious festivals and celebrations. Taking us to his longhouse community, he explains to us about the *Iban*’s religious belief and their gods, demonstrating the traditional ritual dancing and chanting, without feeling any embarrassment that the activities may contradict to his professed Christian faith. He travels back and forth from his longhouse to the city to serve as a cultural interpreter, clarifying any misunderstanding between the *Iban* and the outside communities. Through his presentation at the Conference, we came to understand some of the experiences that the *Iban* community went through during and after the construction of a hydroelectric dame in Batang Ai area, and their spiritual responses to the problematic nature of somewhat imposing modern projects.

According to him, without giving sufficient time to make adequate adjustment, the project moved the *Iban* communities away from their ancestral land, the longhouses and the traditional farming. The sudden change of the landscape and the relocation spiritually devastated *Iban* communities, for, it disturbed the ancestral spirits in the burial ground as well as the ones residing in the longhouses. Such disturbance manifested itself in some tragic incidents such as the drowning of the young members of the tribal community. In *Iban*'s view, the tragic accidents tell that the spirit world is "agitated" and it is now in a "heated stage" that needs to be "cooled down" – to restore the balance of the natural order and harmony. Through his explanation, we became aware of a fact the solutions to the problems caused by the modern projects cannot be only a technological one, or through some economic compensation, but require religious and ritual reconciliation with the nature and the spiritual world – quite a unique *Iban* perspective.

Lastly, I would like to appeal to the relevance of the primal religious worldview of holism to our current reflection of the perceived broken relation between the universe, cosmos, human and spiritual world, and the attempts to restore the balance and harmony to a fundamentally fragmented world.

We will briefly address a common assumption that informs the ways in which the academic study of religions reduced the indigenous religions into that of "the primal" and "animalistic," in contrast to that of "systematic" and "transcendental." Hans Scharer, a Swiss ethnologist in his study of the religions of South Borne, published in 1964, re-stated this common assumption by his predecessors:

...That "lack of system remains characteristic feature of primitive religions, for primitives have as little brought their religious views and practices into a consistent and elaborate system as they are able to give a systematic account of it. It should not be forgotten, in this connection, that the creation of such a system would involve an altogether too high estimation of the mental capacities of primitives."³

³ See the discussion of the various identifications of the primal religions in *Ngaju Religion—The Conception of God among a South Borneo People*, by Hans Scharer, trans. by Rodney Needham, The Hague- Martinus Nijhoff, 1963, 4-7.

The assumption that in the primal religions there is a lack of “system” and “theology,” and hence the subsequent laborious search for the order and develop the system in the natural universe and the world of the religions, all of which reflects the influences of the three mainstream thinking in the West. The Platonic metaphysics identifies Form or Idea as a constant and non-changing presence from which the physical object derives their forms. The subsequent Christian theologies treat God as a transcendental being, and the immovable mover who is beyond and above the movement of the world and universe he creates. The modern mechanical world view conveyed by Newtonian physics sees the physical space as three-dimensional, and immovable, whereas it is only the matter, made of small indivisible particles that came along with “God’s first creation,” that move and change. The belief in the metaphysical Form, the transcendental God and the immovable space render the systematic ordering of the nature and human world into an inter-related and interactive structure necessary and possible. For the forged system provides a network of connection so that the originally unrelated movement and events could interact “regularly” with each other, which in turn, offers a self-explanation in consistence with its ordering. Yet, according to the primal religious worldview of holism, the world movement and cosmic events do not always happen *systematically*, in a sense of *causally, and sequentially*-- unfolding them along the passage of a linear time. But rather, they are concurring *simultaneously*, without necessary causal connections and relations between them.

Hence, to a great extent, the imposition of an order and structure to the seemingly chaotic and un-structured events is a form of ontological and epistemological violence committed to the former. The negative impact of imposing an order and structure to the unfolding world events have been critically evaluated by the post-modern philosophers, theologians and quantum physics in the contemporary West.⁴ To provide an overview of this

⁴ One may read some of the post-modern critiques of the modern traditions in *Ngaju Religion—the Conception of God Among a South Morneo People* by Hans Sharer (translated by Rodney Needham): The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963, pp. 4-7.

body of critical literature is beyond the scope of this paper, but there is one thing that I would like to suggest here, that is, though, the postmodern critiques of the modern epistemology, had successfully undermined the modern ontology and epistemology, it does not seem to be able to provide effective methodological alternatives to see and narrate the originally “un-systematic” or “chaotic” world order and events. The primal religious worldview of holism and some of the ways that the indigenous peoples used to describe the simultaneous happening of the world events, without depending on a system or external metaphysical presence, could give us some hints here.

First of all, the indigenous belief in the natural law, or *Adapt*, which is not a unchanging presence beyond or above, but immanent to the world it issues laws and orders, allows the *Ibans* to see the world as *it is*, i.e. as it unfolds on its natural course, without a structure or a system. Since *Adat* is always and already embedded in the universe and world it resides and governs, and there is no ontological difference between the order of *Adat* and that of the world events, and hence there is no need to impose a different order or system other than that of the world events themselves, because any events, cosmic, supernatural and human, unfolding in any sequence, assumes the same order and structure of the *Adapt* Itself.

For instance, the absence of the need of imposing an order or structure on the multiple events happening simultaneously in the actual life scenes allows the *Iban* ritual specialists to give parallel narratives to the seemingly unrelated events in the same ritual chanting. For instance, on the occasion of the invocation of the gods to the festival or *Gawai*, there are also narratives about the maidens waiting in the chambers for their lovers to come, and about women preparing the ritual food and so on.⁵ In the *Iban* bards -- the stylized chanting for various occasions, such as the one for the preparation of the warfare, there appeared the seemingly un-related scenes, such as forging the sword for the warrior, and the conducting of the farming activity, and there are words of malediction against the enemy tribes are

⁵ Dr. Sather described to us this fascinating narrative structure in the ritual texts at our conversations on the campus of University of Malaysia at Kuching.

arbitrarily inserted into the chanting.⁶ The seeming random and unintelligent dream images and supernatural signs, which are usually treated as merely sub-conscious or un-conscious phenomena, and dismissed by the rational analyses in the modern sciences, are taken seriously and frequently used by the *Ibans* as the telling signs of the working order of *Adatt*.

At large, for the *Ibans*, religion is synonymous with an ordered existence, which is life itself, living or dead, seeing or unseeing, intelligible and obscure. The religious life was intimately linked with the meaning and activity of the daily life that take place in the living and lived-space, and it is intertwined with almost every part of the living activities -- from domestic agriculture to the tribal warfare, from life passage of pregnancy, childbirth to the healing of the sick and burial of the dead, and from the choice of the farm field to the construction of the longhouse, regulated by the belief in an all-pervasive and all-inclusive law of nature. Religion as a way of life is accumulated and preserved in the layers of the culture, traditions and customs, which do not have to subject themselves to a process of formalization or institutionalization, for they are inscribed in the living memory of the members of the community, transmitted from one generation to the next, one shaman to the other and one ritual specialist to his successor. There is indeed a longevity and resilience inherent in these indigenous religious traditions, as we have discussed earlier.

Religion as a way of life, and the sacred is secular -- the cosmological and holistic worldview of gods, spirits, man, and natural forces certainly mirrors the brokenness and fragmentariness that characterized our current existence and social conditions, and it point some directions for us to cultivate the awareness of the interconnectedness or a sense of wholeness between the spiritual, natural and human worlds, living or dead, and seen or unseen. I hope in this limited space that the paper allows, I have made an attempt to demonstrate that there is much to be learned from the seemingly primitive beliefs and practices, for they may illuminate some of the blind spots in our efforts of overcoming the

⁶ James Jemut Masing, *The Coming of the Gods*, vol. 1, Canberra, Australia, The Australian National University, 1997, 81-83.

negative impacts of thinking religions in dualistic and exclusive terms, which certainly contribute to the divisions of the human societies, and the self-inflicted suffering that gave rise to the hostility, violence and wars between ourselves and our religious neighbors.