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IBAN AGRICULTURAL AUGURY

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INTRODUCTION

In Iban cosmological thought a great many living things, most notably birds, animals, and insects, are believed to have connection with the spiritual world. For this reason they are frequently interpreted as omens and their behavior is carefully observed for signs of warning, or indications of spiritual favor.

Augury refers to divination by means of omens. Omens represent for the Iban the principal means by which the gods and spirits make known their will to man through indications revealed in nature. Augury allows man to read and correctly respond to these indications, and so, together with adat and ritual, makes possible, the Iban believe, mutually favorable relations between mankind and the inhabitants of the natural and spiritual worlds (cf. Jensen 1974: 126—27). In consequence augury constitutes a major focus of Iban religion and its practice permeates virtually every facet of Iban life.

The present paper is concerned with Iban agricultural augury. Rice farming is the most sustained of all Iban undertakings (cf. Sather 1977: 67) and a major share of Iban augury is directly involved with the cultivation of rice. While the general features of Iban augury are well known (cf. Freeman 1960; Jensen 1974: 125—140; Richards 1972; Sandin 1980: 93ff; Sather 1980a: xxxiff), the details of its practice are still inadequately described in relation to specific undertakings. Of these, rice farming is by far the most important.

Particularly inadequate is our understanding of the ritual side of augury. For this reason the present paper focuses primarily on augural ritual and deals in particular with a specific augural rite known as *pudas* (v.f., *mudas*). The chief purpose of *pudas* is to insure the propitious outcome of a type of omens called *burong laba*. These include the most potent of all farming omens, and *pudas* itself represents for the Iban the most significant form of propitiatory ritual observed in connection with agricultural augury. My main purpose here is to explore the beliefs and practical concerns that underlie the performance of *pudas* and to relate these to more general features of Iban religion and agricultural practice.

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Background

First, before taking up these issues, it is necessary to say something of the role augury plays in the farming economy of the Iban.

The principal centers of Iban population in Sarawak are in the districts drained by the Saribas, Batang Lupar, and Rejang river systems of the Second, Third, Sixth, and Seventh Divisions. Although present in both rural and urban areas, the Iban continue to be heavily concentrated in the countryside, living chiefly in longhouse settlements along the main rivers and smaller side-streams of the interior and subcoastal districts, where they make up roughly half of the total agricultural population of Sarawak.

The present paper concerns the Saribas Iban of the Paku tributary of the main Saribas river. The Paku Iban number some 4000 persons and inhabit 33 longhouses located along the main Paku river and its principal side-streams, the Anyut, Bangkit and Serudit (Sather 1977, 1978, 1980b; Kedit 1980: 39–104)¹. For a more general account of the Paku Iban, and an overview of their present day farming economy, the reader is referred to two earlier papers of the author (Sather 1977 and 1980b) which deal with related aspects of farming ritual.

The materials presented here derive from fieldwork carried out intermittently between 1976 and 1983, mainly at Kerangan Pinggai, a small longhouse of six families located on the middle reaches of the Paku river, just below its confluence with the Anyut². I am deeply grateful to the late Benedict Sandin, my longhouse host, and T.R. Renang, the headman of Kerangan Pinggai, for their unstinting hospitality. Both provided invaluable help in gathering and interpreting the material presented here. I would also like to thank Bugak anak Duat of Matop for a detailed account of *pudas* augury.

The invocational prayer that appears later in this paper was recorded from the late Lemambang Gana anak Rabong of Bangkit (Kemantan), Paku³. I am deeply indebted to Benedict Sandin, to whom I dedicate this paper, for his help in transcribing and translating the text of this prayer.

Iban Augury

Augury is the most significant of several forms of divination practised by the Iban (Freeman 1960: 74–77; Sather 1980a: xxxi)⁴.

At its core are two fundamental notions. The first of these posits that the physical world in which man lives (*dunya tu*, or “this world”) is separate from the unseen world of the gods (*menoa petara*), but is shared by mankind (*mensia*) with the natural species of plants and animals (*utai idup*, the “living things”), and with the spirits (*antu*). Within this scheme of things, each being has its proper place, and contacts between them, and from one world to another, are charged with power and are mediated when they occur through different orders of being.

Augury represents for the Iban one of the chief means by which such contacts are effected. Through augury the gods are able to communicate with man by making use of plants, animals and other objects of the physical world (*dunya tu*) as tangible symbols of the meaning they wish to convey⁵.

The purpose of this contact is essentially beneficent. By means of augury the gods are said to equip man with foreknowledge (*meri nemu dulu*) — in the form of warnings and advice. Thus the birds, animals, and other living things that act as omens are thought to be essentially benign by