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SEBAYAN: IBAN BELIEF ABOUT THE AFTERLIFE AND THE ANGLICAN MISSION IN SARAWAK 1848-1968

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I. TRADITIONAL IBAN BELIEF IN SEBAYAN

Anglican work in Sarawak began in 1848, at a time of great support for mission agencies in the Church of England, and the first mission in an Iban area was set up in 1851. The Borneo Church Mission Institution (B.C.M.I), set up with Rajah James Brooke's encouragement in 1846, merged with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (S.P.G.) in 1851.² S.P.G sent mission personnel to Sarawak throughout the period of Brooke and colonial rule, and for some years after. In 1968, five years after Sarawak was included in the Federation of Malaysia, the Anglican Church had its first Sarawakian bishop, Basil Temengong, an Iban from the Saribas, and it became fully autonomous when it joined the Church of the Province of South East Asia in 1996.

The major part of this paper records the dynamic interaction between Iban religion and Christianity, as recorded by the Anglican missionaries, from 1848 to 1968. The latter part of the paper is based on how Saribas Iban described their belief at the time when the Anglican Church had its first local bishop.

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When the Anglican missionaries declared to the Ibans their belief in 'the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come' they proclaimed a belief that they already shared in part. Iban belief is that the souls or spirits of the departed continue their life in *sebayan* (the place of the dead in the afterlife). A more comprehensive account is given in Clifford Sather's chapter on Saribas Iban death rituals, based on his work up to 1999, in the Borneo Research Council's Monograph, *Journeys of the Soul*, edited by William Wilder.³ The spirits or souls of the departed reach *sebayan* after crossing a

small narrow bridge from which, if they fall, they return to earth to continue their human life or to be reincarnated, sometimes as a dangerous animal like a snake or crocodile. Once over the bridge, existence in *sebayan* is believed to be similar to that in this world; people are buried with the equipment they will need there, and it is traditionally located by the Iban on the other side of the island of Borneo in Indonesian Kalimantan.

The Iban also believe that there are further stages within *sebayan* until the soul reaches a state of happiness or blessedness in 'the quiet place', *mandai jenoh*. While there, it is believed the spirits of the departed may be able to help the members of their *bilek*-family who are still living, perhaps by providing them with rice charms which help their crops to increase, while families which have poor rice crops are believed to have members who have died but were too bad to reach *mandai jenoh*. From here the Iban believe the soul may be absorbed by the mists of the morning and complete its cycle by being taken up by the growing rice and consumed by the living members of the *bilik*-family. There is thus no clear idea of judgement, heaven or hell in Iban belief, although crossing the bridge to *sebayan* is believed to be a test.

II. THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN ANGLICAN MISSIONARIES AND IBAN RELIGION IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Francis Thomas McDougall, the first Anglican missionary and bishop, 1849-1869

The first B.C.M.I missionary, Francis McDougall, arrived in Kuching in 1848. The mission's aim to work amongst the indigenous peoples of Borneo attracted many in England to support it: described as Dayak head-hunters the idea of a Christian mission engaged on civilising them had a particular appeal to English church people of the mid-nineteenth century. Rajah James Brooke urged the mission to make its work with the Dayaks its main concern. He wrote to McDougall in April, 1850: