

Crossing The Rubicon? Maintenance and Change Among Today's Iban in Sarawak

Peter G. Sercombe

Independent Researcher

Corresponding author: giffard.ps@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Among communities reliant on subsistence agriculture as a means of production, transition to wage work may seem indicative of economic progress. In the 21st century, the Iban in East Malaysia utilise three production modes: subsistence rice farming; commerce; and, waged work, to support food requirements and satisfy consumer needs. Waged work is increasingly important, even replacing subsistence and commerce. This study considers perceptions of maintenance and change among the Iban in the Sri Aman Division of Sarawak. The purpose is to gain perspectives of heads of households about “maintenance” and “change”. Research was conducted qualitatively, via observation and interviews. Maintenance is reflected through ongoing use of the Iban language; the longhouse is seen as being of continuing importance for resident and non-resident relatives, even if no longer bound to ancestral longhouse territory. Changes include new technologies, the importance of money, reduced adherence to Iban traditions, and conversion to Catholicism, among the community studied here. Saliency of these matters lies in Iban understanding of ways in which modernisation is occurring in their community, in a region known for its biological, cultural and linguistic diversity, providing a voice for community members, and their insights about the contemporary Iban world.

Key words: *change, Iban, maintenance*

INTRODUCTION: MAINTENANCE AND CHANGE

It was the 2014 annual harvest festival in *Rumah Panjai* Bungkang (Bungkang Longhouse), a noisy and joyous affair. A can of beer was thrust into my hands as celebrations got under way. *Gawai* (festival) is a significant annual event, held on June 1st, including offerings to deities – *piring*, and giving thanks to gods for a rice harvest. The beer exemplified how shop-bought goods were replacing home-made rice wine. Padoch and Peluso (1996) suggested any study of Borneo's inhabitants or geography must be about change (cf. Hasegawa, 2018; see also, DeKoninck, Bernard, & Bissonnette, 2011; and Tsing, 1993).

Maintenance relates to continuity, while change is about transition (Mortimer, 2014). No society is without some maintenance, while change is constant. “So far as technical inventions are concerned ... no culture is absolutely stationary” (Lévi-Strauss, 1952, p. 39). Some groups appear amenable to social change; Lévi-Strauss (1966) distinguishes between “hot” and “cold” societies, the former being understood as “open”, more likely to accept change, while the latter are seen as more “closed” to external influences.

Western societies are often seen to represent modernity to which other nations aspire, passing through common stages, notwithstanding local variation (Klüver, 2008):

- Traditional societies are overseen by institutions, predominantly families, tribes or clans with members holding ascribed roles, within which production is mainly agricultural
- Increased use of technology results in food surpluses and their commercialization
- Traditional social institutions become less relevant
- Merit tends to replace ascription with reference to social and cultural roles
- Societies manufacture goods and enter (international) trading networks
- Money becomes a standard unit, replacing barter trade, and “development works on the assumption that the introduction of cash is invariably an improvement” (Norberg-Hodge, 2000, p. 143)
- Development is realised through mass consumption, more citizens reside in urban settings and work in industry
- The world’s societies become more integrated via development of global financial institutions (Rostow, 1960; see also Hopper, 2007; and Macionis, 1987)

Detractors suggest that change is not just linear (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Nonetheless, many societies seem to transition from “hunting and gathering” to “agriculture,” towards “commerce” and “industrialisation”, leading “to cultural losses, such as interdependence and collectivism, and cultural gains, including independence and individualism (Greenfield, 2016, p. 84). Processes of modernisation are seen as irreversible (Abdollahian et al., 2012, p. 830), and theories of sociocultural change share the trend of simplicity towards complexity. However, theories do not always reflect reality (cf. Ember & Ember, 2011), as maintenance and change co-occur. A person may farm manually but drive to their field, having previously walked. Consequently, “in the social sciences, there is no generally accepted single explanation of change; rather, there is a spectrum of competing theories which stress economic determinism at one end and cultural determinism at the other” (Trigger, 1998, pp. 9-10).

METHODOLOGY

This is an ethnographic study, undertaken through observation and interviews with members of the community, in order to gather Iban/emic views of ways in which life ways have been maintained, and those they consider to have altered or evanesced. The approach here is a form of applied ethnography (Chambers, 2003). Following an initial visit (in 1989), I later spent certain periods in the longhouse, on rice farms, at events (such as *Gawai*), and at the local market, over four stays of 1-3 weeks. During the initial visit, Bungkang longhouse was an hour’s walk from the nearest metalled road, where public transport was available to Sri Aman town, the division’s administrative centre five kilometres away. Bungkang was a traditional wooden longhouse, on stilts without electricity or piped water. Residents considered it to be decaying and referred to it as *temawai* (old abandoned longhouse). It was rebuilt, but destroyed by accidental fire (with no harm to inhabitants). Observations and resident responses to enquiries were juxtaposed and considered to the extent they result from Iban social structure, or on the basis of individual agency.

Maintenance and Change among Iban at Bungkang Longhouse

It is suggested the term, Iban, derives from a Kayan exonym meaning ‘roving stranger’ (Richards, 1981, p. 111). Sather (2004, p. 623) states that “more likely it comes from the Iban word *iban*, meaning ‘a person,’ ‘human being,’ or, more specifically, a ‘layperson,’ as opposed to a ritual specialist.” Since 1970, “Iban” has been universally accepted as a term of self-reference, both officially and by Iban themselves. Ancestors of the Iban, now in western Sarawak, began migrating from the Kapuas River of West Kalimantan in the sixteenth century (Sandin, 1967). Subsequently, the Iban moved into the central Rejang Basin, and beyond, being known for their physical mobility (Austin, 1976) and as the most numerous group in Sarawak, residing in all 11 of the state’s present administrative divisions (see Map 1).



Figure 2: Sarawak (CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University)

Source: <https://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/maponline/base-maps/sarawak>

Residence

The Iban comprise around 30% of Sarawak’s total population and are the numerical majority in Sarawak’s Sri Aman Division. Iban traditionally occupy a longhouse (*rumah panjai*), constructed of wood, raised on stilts (for safety from floods, or attack from enemies). Comprising a single row of family households (*bilik*), generally located beside and parallel to a river (Sather, 1993), longhouses can be small, or may house a hundred or more families. A longhouse is entered by ascending a scored log, leading to a raised, exposed porch, (*tanju*), a space for drying clothes or husked padi. The egalitarian nature of Iban society is invoked by the form of a longhouse roof which is uniform in size and shape, compared to those of other Dayaks (Ting, 2005) that vary in size to reflect social hierarchy. Behind the *tanju* is a covered veranda (*ruai*), a social space, where people undertake craft work and socialize. A longhouse gallery preferably faces east towards sunrise (Sather, 1993), as in Bungkang. Leading off the *ruai* are separate *bilik* (family compartment), where people cook, eat, sleep, and store belongings. Each family’s loft, (*sadau*), is no longer just used for storing rice, but is also a sleeping area. Residence can be in the natal home of the husband or wife, Iban society being utrolocal (Freeman, 1956), as in Bungkang.

According to a resident, Kuling (not his real name, as with the other residents) Bungkang longhouse was said founded by Dong, the original community leader. Dong came from the Skrang River, southeast of Bungkang (prior to the arrival of British adventurer, James Brooke, Sarawak’s first “official” ruler, in the 1800s). Dong’s son was Alak and his offspring, Nichoi, is referred to as great-great-grandparent to a number of Bungkang residents.

There are fewer permanent residents of Bungkang than previously, 24 in 2022 compared to over double that in 1989, similar to many other longhouses as part of a trend of out-migration (Abdullah, 2016). Bungkang comprises five *bilik*, occupants being mostly elderly or below school age. The longhouse, at

ground level, is constructed of bricks and mortar, with a corrugated iron roof and cement floor, these being “cheaper” than natural products, labour being viewed as of higher value than the cash needed to purchase prefabricated materials. The ongoing use of a traditional longhouse layout invokes continuity (see Postill, 2000) of *tanju*, *ruai*, and *bilik*, as with most longhouses in coastal areas nowadays, while construction materials illustrate change.

Social Structure

Before Sarawak came under control of the Brooke family in the 19th century, Iban leaders were not underpinned by state power (cf. Clastres, 1989). James Brooke, the first Rajah of Sarawak (1842-1868), implemented official state roles, including *tuai rumah* (“headman” or, rarely, “head woman”), imposing administrative structure on Dayak societies (Sutlive, 1992), as Iban came under centralized government control following Sarawak’s absorption into Malaysia in 1963.

The Iban have a cognatic or bilateral kinship system (Freeman 1953) without formal institutions of hierarchy (Leach, 1950). The position of chief relies on goodwill in the community from which power ultimately derives. Leaders may be chosen (not necessarily hereditarily) from families seen as influential (Freeman, 1992), as in Bungkang. Iban children are traditionally subject to birth rites, after an initial period of maternal confinement (Sather, 1996), oral literature being used to socialize children, a means to make sense of the world (Appell, 2001). However, Bungkang residents do not nowadays recognise a role for oral literature. Head-of-house, Kumang, says, as echoed by other residents:

“*Maya aku mit, cerita Kumang enggau Keling cuma cerita aja nya aja.*”
“Since I was small, tales of Kumang and Keling have only ever been stories.”

In late adolescence, male Iban normally undertake *bejalai*, initiation through travel, aiming to return home with “trophies” (previously, human heads), and secure a bride. Concomitantly, females demonstrate prowess through production of ceremonial clothes (*pua kumbu*), rattan baskets and mats. Residents say that *bejalai* and *pua kumbu* no longer hold cultural prominence, although leaving a longhouse for employment is increasingly common, for financial (not cultural) reasons (also considered under “work and means of production,” and “cultural matters”). At the end of life, there are detailed death rites, as described by Sather (1993, p. 89-95, regarding Saribas Iban), but these were unfamiliar to the Bungkang residents.

The Iban are described as “aggressively egalitarian” (Sather, 1996: 102) yet “intensely competitive” (1996, p. 74). Any person can determine their existence and express their own opinions (Sutlive 1992). Rousseau (1990) challenges the egalitarian character of Iban society by “stressing that the same individual very commonly holds both the offices of *tuai rumah* and *tuai burong*, exercising strong *de facto* authority over his longhouse’s families,” according to Sellato (2002, p. 73). Iban tend to be less deferential to authority than other Dayak groups, exhibiting greater equity between genders than other Dayak or Malay groups (Davison & Sutlive, 1991), while maintaining internal status differences, but less rigidly than other Dayaks.

The Iban social strata include *raja berani*, ‘wealthy and brave,’ and *mensia maioh*, ‘commoners,’ being linked to success in rice harvests (Sutlive, 1992). Such categories are no longer used or are unknown to Bungkang residents, about which Kuling was assertive.

“*Nadai pakai perkataan macam ‘raja berani’ dan ‘mensia maioh’*”
“(We) do not use words like ‘*raja berani*’ and ‘*mensia maioh*’”

“*Nadai orang ngena Raja Berani maya zaman diatu, tu cerita aja.*”
“People are not familiar with terms of those times, they are just stories.”

The Iban experience increased state control as exemplified by compulsory education, increased legislation and centralisation of state government power: “Changes to the native customary law under Taib's leadership have gradually undermined the position of the Dayaks” (Postill 2003: 189; also, cf. Boulanger 2009). It is also argued that Malaysia “has become more corporate, intrusive, and punitive as it has embraced neoliberal globalization” (Peletz, 2015, p. 144).

Work and Means of Production

Each Iban *bilik*-family is an autonomous economic unit within a longhouse (Sather, 1996), traditionally comprising three generations (Uchibori, 1978) and responsible for its own food production (Sutlive, 1992). Like other settled Dayak groups, the Iban primary means of production was shifting cultivation of hill rice (also, swidden farming), a search for new land occurring when soil is exhausted of nutrients, one year's use requiring around 7 years of fallow, if ‘*padi bukit*’ (Cramb, 2007). Appell (2001, p.: 6) describes the as “an expansive form of cultural ecology that depended on consuming more and more virgin forest.” Successful rice cultivation “has been described as the *sine qua non* for prestige” (Sutlive, 1992, p. 26) among the Iban. Each family maintains a rice seed bank. Sacred rice, *padi pun*, was planted to safeguard a rice crop, at a field's centre, synchronized ripening among families helped reduce a family's losses from insects, birds or animals, allowing for commonly-timed harvest ceremonies. Nowadays, there is no sacred rice. A resident, Kumang, only knew of *padi pun* from her late father.

Surplus rice allows Iban to obtain objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990). This would previously have meant rice used as currency to trade for prestigious brass gongs or Chinese ceramic jars. These no longer have the same symbolic value (Sercombe, 1999). Besides domestic consumption, rice has long since been an aspect of commerce, although many families now depend as much, or more, on cash from employment.

The Iban in Bungkang continue to engage in subsistence agriculture, while undertaking commerce, and waged work, where available. Every Bungkang *bilik* has a farm, aiming to produce enough rice to support a family, with surplus to sell. A “hectare can provide enough to feed up to 8 people for a year” (Heyzer, 1995, p. 41). Women continue to have the primary role in cultivation, and remain “custodians of fertility” and guardians of rice (Mashman, 1991, p. 259).

Bungkang residents report that wet rice farming only began replacing swidden cultivation in the 1990s (cf. Sutlive, 1992), a transition well underway among other coastal-dwelling Iban communities there being more swamp-land in this coastal area. With a finite amount of land available, this transition is described as a response to population pressure on resources, requiring changes in agricultural techniques (Padoch, 1982).

“Diatu maioh orang nadai bumai bukit laban kelalu maioh kerjanya orang diatu bumai, padi paya aja lebih mudah diatu dijaga.”

“Nowadays many people do not plant hill rice, because of the work needed to farm this way.”

There is, traditionally, a detailed set of steps for hill rice cultivation (Freeman, 1953; Sutlive, 1992). The contemporary calendar, described by Bungkang residents (see Table 2, below), is attenuated compared to Freeman's (1992, p. 242) ritual-laden growing cycle (cf. Christiansen, 2002, p. 36). Planting was previously punctuated with four sets of rites and adherence to stellar lore, to ensure a safe harvest (Freeman, 1992, p.: 171). Residents now employ government-provided fertilisers to increase productivity, towards the end of the growing cycle when soil nutrients have diminished (cf. Soda, 2001; see also Hansen & Mertz, 2006), *padi pun* being redundant. When asked why, residents mentioned:

- Fewer physical demands, as there is no longer a need to remove large trees from steep slopes when preparing land for cultivation, given “Shifting cultivation is highly labour intensive” (Heyzer, 1995, p. 41)
- A shorter distance to transport harvested rice from fields
- Overall rice yield is larger relative to the area needed for cultivation than for hill rice
- There is no need to search out new plots for cultivation (see also Sutlive, 1992)

However, wet rice farming has reported downsides: no intercropping with other cultivars is possible. Hill rice is considered to have more flavour and, nostalgia arises regarding swidden farming. Hill farms tend to be located in forested areas some distance from a longhouse, often necessitating a journey of hours to a farm hut (where there are tools and basic accommodation). People spend extended periods at farms, clearing land, planting, weeding, and harvesting, are recalled as communal activities, children playing with friends, collecting wild foods to be cooked and eaten together. Nonetheless, evanescence of these is not seen to outweigh benefits of wet rice farming, even if people reminisce about the past.

“*Maya agi mit suba sigi rindu enti maya orang nugul padi bukit, ingatan ti – pemadu manah.*”
 “When small, before, people really enjoyed planting hill rice, it is a lovely memory.”

Kumang describes her farming year as commencing with planting of rice seeds around mid-August, needing a week to complete this. She replants seedlings to her main field around mid-September, completing around 2 acres in a fortnight. She harvests in March, taking about a month to complete.

Table 1: Current calendar for wet rice cultivation in Bungkang (cf. Freeman, 1992, p. 242)

January	Little rice field work	
February		
March	<i>Ngetau</i> (harvest)	Harvesting period
April	Little rice field work	Selection of rice strains for planting
May		Clearing and cutting in preparation for planting
June		
July	<i>Manchit</i>	Spraying weedicide
August	<i>Nanam benih</i>	Sowing
September	<i>Ujung bulan bertambak</i>	Replanting of seedlings to main field
October	<i>Mantun</i>	Weeding
November	Little rice field work	Weeding (hill padi only)
December		

From March until August, rice fields are fallow, when harvested rice is dried and stored, to consume throughout the year, share with relatives, or sell, depending how much excess there is. Kumang obtains up to 50 gunny sacks of rice per year (1 gunny is around 50 kgs), from the 6 rice varieties cultivated, around half the number she planted a decade ago (cf. Christensen, 2002, p. 59). Varieties would be even fewer, Kumang maintains, but for commercial motives, as each variety has a different flavour and colour, appealing to diverse consumer tastes (cf. Janowski, 2005). The farming cycle remains, but there is no longer an “inauguration” or other rice-farming associated rites (see Freeman, 1992).

Commerce is largely related to wild and cultivated vegetables, fruits, rice, and commodities, grown for sale, e.g. rubber, cocoa, and pepper, to supplement subsistence with cash (Soda, 2001). Many Iban turned to cash crops in the in the early 20th century, or before (Jensen, 1966; see also Postill, 2000), with the rising significance of cash (Jensen 1974; cf. Soda, 2001). Flora cultivated for commerce opened new means to wealth (Sutlive, 1992), but the price of commodities is influenced externally over which Iban (as with other Dayaks) have no control. Commodity cultivation has increased under state influence.

‘Subsidy schemes — the planting of rubber, pepper, cocoa, and oil palm on a commercial basis to encourage cash cropping — have been extensively employed as a tool for persuading the Dayak communities to abandon subsistence agriculture’ (Ngidang, 1995, p. 306).

Kumang has two three-acre plots of rubber trees, extraction of sap being possible all year round, providing a small but steady income. She also has eight durian trees; a bundle of three durian sells for approximately US\$ 2.50, and is sought-after as a delicacy, yielding between 1 and 2 crops per year. Kumang goes to Sri Aman open market most mornings, to sell produce. She sold around 26 gunny sacks of rice, at US\$2.50 per kilo in 2021. Sutlive (1992) suggests rice accounts for up to 50% of a longhouse Iban’s diet. Kumang estimates that commerce accounts for around 70% of her household income, as she has no wage employment (cf. Sather, 1996; and Soda, 2001). Other residents estimate that revenue from the sale of foraged and cultivated produce provides around 30% of income and waged work the other 70%. Residents considered that rice farming is more important for those in the interior, than for those in coastal areas with road access to towns, while Cramb (pers. comm) suggests “the reverse may be the case. Closer to the coast Iban have access to land for wet rice cultivation which gives them a good return for little labour, whereas many upriver longhouses have given up on hill rice cultivation and rely on cash crops and/or remittances” (see also Abdullah, 2016, p. 178).

A further change is a decline in craft production. Residents say they continue to produce fishing nets, baskets and mats, but for personal use. The latter two may also be constructed from shop-bought plastic strips, requiring cash; and, jungle knives (*parang*, ubiquitous tools), are now often shop-bought, rather than being forged domestically. Weaving of decorative and ceremonial cloth (*pua kumbu*) no longer occurs at Bungkang, although one family keeps a loom in their loft, for sentimental reasons, they say, as can also be said of musical instruments, bezoar stones, wild boar teeth, and hornbill beaks. Production and sale of woven cloth is not seen as a viable income source, in the face of commercial production at lower cost in Indonesian Kalimantan. However, production of *pua kumbu* has become institutionalized in Sarawak, and supported by the Tun Jugah Foundation (TJF) in Kuching, where Iban women produce *pua kumbu*, that the TJF helps to market (Sather, pers. comm): <http://tunjughafoundation.org.my/textile-museum-gallery/>.

Work opportunities, beyond subsistence, have increased considerably since the Iban were attracted to Brunei after oil was first discovered in 1921 (Sercombe, 1999). The topic of employment generated much discussion among residents about living costs. Bungkang residents view employment as replacing subsistence farming and commercial agriculture for males, while matters are less clear for females. A paid job is an aspiration explicitly stated by male (and some unmarried female) residents, a regular income being the attraction.

“*Maioh perempuan Iban bejalai sekarang ‘sangat moden...’*”

“Many women work away nowadays and this is seen as ‘very modern’.”

Those with qualifications, or relevant skills choose paid work (ahead of commerce and farming), and participation in the wider economy. As mentioned, *bejalai* is no longer culturally prescribed (Kedit, 1991; cf. Clastres, 1989), but a matter of perceived need, referred to as *kerja*, i.e. ‘work,’ in the form of “wage labor” (Soda, 2001). The coast of Sarawak is more urbanised, where Iban are generally closer to wage work opportunities (Arenz et al., 2017, p. 14) than those upriver. There has been an “increase in female out-migration” (Soda, 2001, p.: 94; see also Girard & Hindstrom, 2015) among the unmarried. No *bilik* in Bungkang still relies solely on subsistence (see also Iskandar & Ellen, 1999; cf. Soda, 2001). Subsistence, and sale of wild and cultivated produce, are not sufficient to sustain a household without other means, i.e. a wage, or salary. Each Bungkang household has one or more family members in employment, not necessarily resident at the longhouse (as in Table 3 below). Rice is seen as purchasable, although the civil servant and his nurse wife view rice cultivation as a way to maintain links with

tradition. Money earned from employment is of more value than the time expended to cultivate rice over one cycle. Cash is thus seen to allow greater choice over resources use.

“Duit sigi paling berguna maya ke diatu, tong beras enggau nangkap jelu nginti ikan enggau sayur liar pan agi penting amai arinya sida boleh duit.”

“Money is most important nowadays, but rice, game, fish, wild vegetables are also means to obtain money.”

No resident denigrates subsistence cultivation. The Sarawak government has long seen “shifting cultivation ... as an obstacle to development since the exploitation of timber resources and subsequent conversion to oil-palm plantations” (Hansen & Mertz, 2006, p. 136). Two household heads are in full-time employment, one a lorry driver, the other a government-employed administrator. The latter’s wife is a nurse, they are not permanent resident, but live in government-provided accommodation in Sri Aman, returning at weekends. This exemplifies what Soda (2001, p. 99) describes as a “new trend of mobility from the longhouse to urban areas”.

Table 2: Paid occupations by bilik (household), Bungkang Longhouse: ‘n-r’ = non-resident; ‘r’ = resident; ‘f’ = female; ‘m’ = male

		<i>Bilik</i> (Household)				
	A	B	C	D	E	
Work type	1. Civil servant (m); (n-r)	1. Coolie (m); (r)	1. Lorry driver (m); (r)	1. Occasional work (m); (r)	1. market seller (f); (r)	
		2. Soldier (m); (n-r)	2. Soldier (m); (n-r)		2. Electric company employee/coolie (m); (r)	
	2. Nurse (f); (n-r)					

A longstanding, ongoing aspect of paid employment includes remittances to longhouse family members from relatives working elsewhere. Four Bungkang heads-of-household say remittances are pivotal for livelihoods, echoing Inglehart and Baker’s (2000) claim about the ongoing role of the family for survival in pre-industrial societies (cf. Griffin, 1978), and the obligations of offspring to take care of parents via financial support.

“Ibu bapa pilih siapa tinggal Anak ti bekerja di tempat buhai ia ka agi bujang enggau dara nadai nguan apai enggau indai anak ti nguan apai enggau indai sigi diau bak bilik nya nyaga semua reta.”

“Parents choose who will remain ... (The) child who works elsewhere who is still single does not look after (their) mum or dad (but they send remittances), it’s the child who remains who does this.”

Support is reflected materially, e.g. in home interiors that invoke pride in relatives and new types of cultural capital facilitated by family remittances (Zharkevich 2019), as stated by residents, as well as reproducing kinship “across time and space” (2019, p. 884) through these practices.

Culture-Related Issues

This is necessarily an amorphous topic, concerned with matters raised by the Bungkang residents, not solely about “work,” “residence,” or “social organization” (although inevitably interconnected). Among perceptions, material infrastructure is significant, and was mentioned more than other matters:

- Piped water from a central supply; reduces labor demands, ensures near-constant availability, enhancing hygiene, health, and convenience
“Ai paip datai bak kampong Entulang Bungkang taun 2009.”
 “Piped water arrived at Kampong Entulang Bungkang in 2009.”
- Mains electricity (installed in 2012) and benefits accruing from this, e.g. lighting, as well as use of white and brown goods
“Api karan datai bak Kampung Entulang Bungkang taun 2012”.
 “Electricity arrived at Kampong Entulang Bungkang in 2012.”

Every Bungkang *bilik* has electricity, fans, a refrigerator, a stereo system, and a television. Postill (2008) claims television has resulted in less socializing, but I did not notice this, as people talk over broadcasts, as if they are background. Stereos have largely replaced bards at festive occasions, being cheaper, besides there being few people with the relevant musical skills. There is at least one mobile phone per household, important for maintaining social relations, especially via WhatsApp. Each household uses a gas cooker, bottles being delivered by lorry, monthly, although open fires are used when cooking outside in bamboo, especially if game meat is obtained.

In 1989, there was no personal motorised transport at Bungkang. Now, there are 2 cars and 3 motorbikes, among the 5 households, 1 *bilik* being unable to afford personal transport. The standard rate for the ride to Sri Aman is around US\$0.80. Residents state personal motorised transport is essential to access paid work and for getting goods to market. People do not have the capital to purchase vehicles outright, taking out loans, reinforcing a need for cash. Private transport ownership appears to have increased in inverse proportion to the decrease in local public bus services.

The Bungkang Iban, also have a wider diet choice of manufactured goods, with more disposable cash, besides a rise of fast food outlets in Sri Aman town. Processed foods are more common, e.g. dried noodles sometimes eaten straight from a packet by children as a snack. Tinned meat is also common and relatively cheap, e.g. sardines (*sadin ikan*); and pork (*sadin babi*). *Sadin*, adapted from English, “sardines”, is often uttered with a modifier, e.g. *sadin ikan*, meaning “tinned fish”, specifying what the tin contains. Frozen meat is relatively newly available, but more expensive than tinned meat, requiring cold storage, with less dependence on foraging, but a greater need for cash.

Non-Material Cultural Matters

Religious beliefs have long pervaded Iban life, being holistic and “polytheistic” (Freeman, 1960, p.76), with four main spiritual authorities, including *lemambang*, “priest bard”, *manang*, “shaman”, *tukang sabak*, “soul guide”, and *tuai burung*, augur (see Appell, 2001; cf. Graham, 1983). However, Iban beliefs have been “reshaped,” in that Bungkang residents converted to Catholicism in the 1990s, influenced by head of household, Kuling. When asked why, residents hoped they might benefit in ways similar to western people, becoming modern, better-educated and wealthier, rather than offering spiritual reasons. Many Iban initially had become Anglican Christians in the Sri Aman area (Sather pers. comm). No one in Bungkang appears to attend church, pray, own a bible, talk about their religion, or show other outward signs of being institutionally religious. Bungkang residents did not become Christian following an epiphany, and have not greatly changed their lifestyle (Hasegawa 2018). Chua (2012) argues conversion to a mainstream religion can catalyse ongoing links between traditional ways and the new religion, in this case Catholicism, by which conversion is part of a continuum of experience not an end in itself. Nonetheless, Iban conversion does appear as if a shift from polytheism to monotheism. Kumang said:

“Hari Gawai agi penting ...sigi agi penting bagi bangsa Iban ti diau bak rumah panjai.”
“Gawai is still very important for people in the longhouse.”

Two film examples show alternative perspectives about change, exploring perceived challenges of the Iban transition to “modernity.” These include: *Bejalai* (1989), selected for the Berlin film festival, and “the first to be made in the Iban language in Sarawak ... concerns the conflict between the ancient and traditional life and the destruction of that life by deforestation and the flooding caused by massive hydroelectric projects ... told through the eyes of Rentap, a young man who finds the only work available to him as part of the crew that is cutting down the forests of his home”: <https://www.allmovie.com/movie/bejalai-v176109>.

There is also the “story of Tonny Anak Iman featured in a short social film, *Pengidup Aku* (‘My life’) which focuses on the effects of urban migration of Indigenous People in Sarawak rural area (East Malaysia). It shows how communities living in the traditional longhouses are affected by the COVID-19 outbreak and how they will prepare to celebrate the annual ‘Harvest Festival *Gawai*’ (in June 2020) in the midst of Covid-19 lockdown: https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/stories/fading-iban-longhouse-culture-east-malaysia_mt

DISCUSSION

The article has gathered Iban emic views of ways in which life ways appear to have been maintained or altered. The Iban in Bungkok have sustained themselves as distinct, while adapting in response to changing circumstances, especially economically. Traditional societies tend to be overseen by family institutions, tribes or clans with members holding ascribed roles, within which the main mode of production is agricultural. The Iban in rural areas are described as having experienced slower socioeconomic development than those in urban areas (Jawan, 1994; and J.S. Sercombe, 2008). A longhouse’s location is likely to, at least partially, reflect community circumstances; those in more rural (non-coastal) areas tend to have less easy access to facilities (e.g. medical clinics), but this is changing, especially with expansion of logging roads. The Bungkok longhouse remains a focal place, valued by residents, including the civil servant, Hugo (who lives mostly elsewhere), as a place people come from, where they return at key moments, particularly *Gawai*, New Year and Christmas, if able to.

“Rumah panjai ami agi penting ... Keluarga agi penting.”

“Our longhouse is still important ... family is still important.”

Continued use of a traditional longhouse layout invokes continuity and the values that reflect this. Iban appear a hot society (Lévi-Strauss, 1966), ready to embrace economic, technological and religious change, these also being catalysts for community, e.g. remittances (Inglehart & Baker, 2000), and mobile phones, while also retaining practices that explicitly uphold a sense of community, such as *Gawai*. While New Year and Christmas fulfil similar functions, they do so as a result of attributing community to these, especially when celebrated in the longhouse. Maintenance of internal relations and symbiosis remain, exemplified in small ways such as residents frequently bringing small gifts of food to neighbours, a hand of bananas, a bundle of ferns, a bowl of snails, invoking a sense of community, and this appears to endure (cf. Davison & Sutlive, 1991). However, game food has long since grown in commercial value, an exception being if people hunt in a group (when game obtained is shared). Otherwise, sharing is voluntary. As elsewhere in Sarawak (and not just among the Iban), “sharing” of perishable resources is not comprehensive. Wild boar meat is sold, if caught, due to its scarcity and financial value. One kilo fetches around US\$5 (cf. Hasegawa, 2018).

“Enti maya orang bisi bulih jani haya diatu orang nadai berbagi ka nya. Zaman diatu orang nadai berbagi ke utai. Enti nuan ka makai nya nuan mesti meli enggau duit.”

“If a person catches some wild boar, they do not share with other people. Nowadays, people do not share things. If you want to eat this, you need to buy with money.”

There is increased national presence in many areas of life, as the reach of state and national governments is extended in economics, education, and media, the latter being either owned or controlled by the state in Malaysia (cf. McDaniel, 2002). An Iban university academic, Ngidang, argues (1995, p. 1) that “a variety of reasons have been used to explain the peripheral role of the Iban in the socioeconomic development of Sarawak today,” in that “Iban’s mode of existence does not operate within dynamics of market economics” (1995, p. 12), although one can argue Iban modes are appropriate at the local level (cf. Clastres, 1989). Conversion to Catholicism initially appears as if a fundamental shift in beliefs, but this seems more in line with socioeconomic advancement than a fundamentally different spiritual outlook. During visits to Bungkang, residents unilaterally talked more, and longer, about material and monetary issues than all other topics combined, indicating these were uppermost in people’s minds. No resident is penniless, and food resources appear sufficient. Focal issues were work and work types, i.e. farming, commerce and, primarily, the importance of wage work. The Iban in Bungkang appear to be between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (cf. Tonnies, 2001). Symbiosis and institutionalised internal relations among family are still the norm, i.e. *Gemeinschaft* (with the sale of game being an exception), but those who work (and also reside) outside the community undoubtedly enter a more impersonal, transactional *Gesellschaft* world compared to those in Bungkang, returning to community, *Gemeinschaft*, generally at key events (that maintain and reinforce community). Change includes: new technologies; the importance of money, as suggested by Steward (1972; and Sahlins & Service, 1960), linking community with larger society; reduced adherence to Iban traditions and conversion to a mainstream religion, proposed by Sahlins and Service (ibid) are influenced by wider society and impact on a sense of community.

CONCLUSION

In today’s world, change (and the speed of it) seems more normal than continuity (Greenfield, 2016). Change tends, nonetheless, to be a prerequisite for improvement, but by itself certainly does not inevitably lead to improvement. Bungkang residents see some changes as progress, such as conversion to Catholicism, and wage employment. Economic aspects of contemporary material culture (motorised transport, piped water, mains electricity, and white goods) are more prominent and valued than previously significant symbolic artefacts and beliefs, as the pragmatics of economic necessity, tied to a change in beliefs have superseded other concerns. There are necessarily interconnections, e.g. ways technology facilitates social relations, a form of “spill-over” by which one area of life influences perceptions of another. What one might conclude for Bungkang and its residents is that “A main characteristic of our society is a willed coexistence of very new technology and very old social forms” (Williams, 1980, p. 191). This article has inevitable omissions in that it only considers a small community of downriver Iban. The article does not aspire to generalise findings. The range of social and cultural variables involved, and their interconnections combine in stochasticity, and make simple conclusions unrealistic. Of the **characteristics that distinguish modern from traditional society, exemplified by Hall and Gay (1996; see Appendix 1), two seem highly applicable to Bungkang residents. “Economics,” and a “rise of rationalist, cost-benefit ways of looking at the world”** appear to have overtaken other values, while not entirely replacing them given the ongoing importance of community and place. These push society in several directions simultaneously, invoking multilinearity. Bungkang is still overseen by longhouse institutions, while commercialisation has greatly affected the world of work in that resident’s value paid employment over self-employment where this is viable.

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