USE OF THESES

This copy is supplied for purposes of private study and research only. Passages from the thesis may not be copied or closely paraphrased without the written consent of the author.
THE POWER OF TRANSCENDENCE;
AN ANALYSIS OF THE LITERATURE ON IBAN SHAMANISM

Penelope Graham

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in the
Department of Prehistory and Anthropology
Faculty of Arts
Australian National University
Canberra, Australia
February, 1983
I certify that this thesis is all my own work and that the sources used have been appropriately acknowledged.

[Signature]
Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank many people, all of whom contributed either directly or indirectly to the writing of this thesis. Dr Charles Coppel and Drs Muhammad Slamet, at the University of Melbourne, provided an opportunity for me to commence the formal study of Indonesian societies. Dr Ross Bowden, at La Trobe University, introduced me to the British tradition of social anthropology. The staff and students of the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, Australian National University, have contributed much to my education as an anthropologist. Special mention must be made, in this regard, of Dr Geoffrey Benjamin, Dr Caroline Ifeka, Dr Howard Morphy and Dr James Urry, who endeavoured to impress upon me the need for ethnology, ethnography, subtlety and rigour.

As regards this thesis, Professor Jamie Mackie and Dr Virginia Matheson offered encouragement and advice. Professor Anthony Forge and Dr James Fox supervised the research and writing of the thesis with conscientious concern. I would like to thank them both for their pertinent and constructive criticisms. Emeritus Professor J.D. Freeman was generous with his time. His knowledge of the Iban and his careful criticism of my work enabled me to avoid a number of errors. This should not, however, be taken to imply, that he endorses the analysis I present, which is a reading of the literature informed by particular anthropological approaches. Like all students of the Iban, I look forward to those further studies of Iban religion, which Professor Freeman hopes to complete in due course.
Finally, my greatest debts are of a personal nature: to my family, Jean and Anne Graham, and to my friends, John Guy and John and Robyn Maxwell, who have always been understanding and supportive of my aspirations, intellectual and otherwise.
Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1 Analyses of shamanism in the literature on the Iban 13

Chapter 2 The ritual language chants of shamanic healing rites 27

Chapter 3 The shaman (manang) in Iban ritual: healing rites (pelian, saut) and initiation rites (bebangun) 52

Chapter 4 The transformed shaman (manang bali) 97

Chapter 5 Iban shamanism in social and cultural context 126

Conclusion 152

Glossary 158

Bibliography 161
Introduction

This thesis explores the cultural logic of Iban shamanism. To introduce the study, I discuss the concept of shamanism, summarize some basic ethnographic data on the Iban and comment on the nature of the source materials and my use of them. I then examine, in Chapter 1, the definitions and interpretive accounts of shamanism offered, to date, in the literature on the Iban. In Chapter 2, I discuss the ritual language chants, which form part of shamanic rites. In Chapter 3, I analyse the actions of the Iban shaman (manang) in a range of ceremonies, including those for the initiation of a shaman (bebangun). This is followed, in Chapter 4, by an enquiry into the symbolic significance of the transvestism of the transformed shaman (manang bali). In the final chapter, I discuss the social and cultural context of Iban shamanism and endeavour to explicate the relationship between shamanism and, what I see as, certain features, characteristic of Iban culture.

I

In its most general usage, the word shaman denotes a specialist in healing, who is thought to have direct intercourse with the gods and spirits and access to the spirit world (Firth 1964:638-639; MacCulloch 1920:441). The term shaman, introduced to Western literature from Russian sources, is said to be derived from the Tungus or Evenk saman, although other etymologies have also been proposed (Firth 1964:638; Siikala 1978:14). In modern ethnography, the terms shaman and shamanism are used to cover
a range of phenomena, reported from many parts of the world, but there is little agreement as to the scope of these terms. Some authors stress spirit possession, 'the seizure of man by divinity' (Findeisen 1957:15; Lewis 1971:18), while others emphasise 'mystical journeys', in which the soul of the shaman can 'abandon his body and ... penetrate the underworld and rise to the sky' (Eliade 1964:174, 182). One study sees these as 'different forms of communication between the shaman and the supernatural' and suggests analysis of the ways in which they 'appear side by side or as alternatives and why' (Siikala 1978:322). Another sees possession — the descent of the gods on man — and shamanism — the ascent of man to the gods — as antithetical processes, with markedly different connotations (de Heusch 1962).

Given these various phenomena do not always appear together, it seems essential to differentiate between them, as is now commonly done, using the following terms:

(1) spirit possession: 'a set of practices and ideas based upon belief in the entry of a spirit into the body of a human being ... so that the actions of the person affected are thought to be either those of the spirit, or to be immediately dictated by the spirit' (Firth 1964:689);

(2) spirit mediumship: 'a set of practices and ideas based upon belief that a specific human being possessed by a spirit ... can serve as a means of communication between other human beings and the spirit world' (Firth 1964:689);

(3) shamanism: a set of practices and ideas based upon the belief that certain human beings can pass, at will, 'from one cosmic region to another' (Eliade 1964:259).
These distinctions are vitally important in the case of the Iban, for whom shamanism entails neither spirit possession nor spirit mediumship. The very notion of spirit possession is one the Iban found both foreign and puzzling, when it was put to them by the anthropologist, J.D. Freeman (Freeman, pers. comm., 15 December 1982). It is not surprising, then, that the only etymology given in the literature for the Iban term *manang* is consistent with this concept of a shaman as an actor, rather than a medium. Kern (1920:347) says *manang* is 'a word properly meaning "one who exercises power"'. I translate *manang*, following Freeman (1967), as shaman, using that term in the restricted sense defined above.

II

The Iban are a people of the north western region of the island of Borneo. Some genealogies (*tusut*) and origin myths suggest, that ancestors of the Iban migrated from the Middle East to Sumatra and thence to the Kapuas River basin in western Borneo (Sandin 1967:2). It is likely, however, that these sources indicate significant cultural influences, rather than population movements (Freeman 1981:10; Jensen 1974:18). From the headwaters of the Kapuas (in what is now Kalimantan Barat, a province of the Republic of Indonesia), the Iban spread into Sarawak in a series of irregular migrations, which ceased about the beginning of the eighteenth century (Sandin 1967:1-28). Further expansion across Sarawak and into the adjoining states of Brunei and, to a lesser extent, Sabah, took place during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Pringle 1970:247-276; Black 1969).

The traditional subsistence economy of the Iban was based on the shifting cultivation of hill rice (Freeman 1955). This was supplemented by hunting, fishing, gathering wild vegetables and cultivating tubers,
Map 1. Distribution of the Iban in Sarawak

Map 2. Southeast Asia

(Source: Jensen 1974)
and by collecting forest products for trade (Sutlive 1978:21). During the past century, some Iban have moved into the deltaic plains, where they grow wet rice, rubber and pepper, and into the towns of Sarawak, where they work for wages (Sutlive 1978:2).

The term *Iban* is said to mean 'roving stranger' (Richards 1981:111). It is thought to be a borrowing from the Kayan *ivo*n: immigrant or wanderer (Hose and McDougall 1912:11. 250), or the Kayan *div*n: son-in-law or any younger person not related by blood to the speaker (Richards 1981:111). Jensen (1974:17) says that, among the Iban themselves, the word can be used in three ways: first, to distinguish an Iban from a member of any other ethnic category, such as Kayan, Land Dayak, Chinese; second, to mean 'anyone/someone' in conversation; and third, to mean an ordinary Iban, as opposed to a shaman (*manang*). The Iban first became known to Europeans as Sea Dayak, a term attributed to the Malays (St. John 1863:i. 4), with whom certain Iban were engaged in coastal piracy at the time of the first British contact with them in the 1840s. This term was used by the Brooke Raj and later by the British colonial administration in Sarawak. It is, however, misleading, as 'the vast majority of the Iban have always been a hill people living many miles from the coast with an economy based on the cultivation of dry rice' (Freeman 1960:160 n.1).

The Sarawak census for 1960 recorded approximately 240,000 Iban, forming the largest single ethnic group and making up about one-third of the total population (McKinley 1978:16-17). Iban in Kalimantan number approximately 7,000 (King 1979:24). Ethnic classification of Bornean peoples is notoriously difficult, given the historical processes of cultural interpenetration and differentiation among them. These processes stem from 'indigenous movements in the context of swidden agriculture, trading contacts, differential population growth and inter-group feuding and
Figure 1. The traditional longhouse

(Source: Sutlive 1978)
warfare', as well as 'the spread of Islam and Malay culture' (King 1979: 2). This problem of identification is less marked with the Iban, whose language—described as 'a Malay dialect' which differs considerably in certain respects from the others spoken in Borneo (Cense and Uhlenbeck 1958:7)—and social organisation—characterised as 'endogamous personal kindred, exogamous house group, absence of rigid class stratification' (Leach 1950:68-69)—set them apart from their neighbours (Leach 1950:54). Furthermore, Iban culture and social institutions have not been 'appreciably affected by Islam' (Freeman 1958:15). Nevertheless, this relatively clear ethnic identity masks an extensive history of incorporation of non-Iban peoples through their assimilation to Iban culture (McKinley 1978).

The traditional social organisation of the Iban has been documented and analysed by J.D. Freeman (1958, 1960, 1970). Each Iban community resides in a single longhouse, consisting of a series of separate family apartments (bilek: living room), each owned and occupied by a family group (bilek-family). The bilek-family typically consists of three generations—grandparents, a son or daughter and his/her spouse and their children—and membership may be by birth, marriage or adoption. The bilek-family is perpetuated by one child of each generation remaining in the natal bilek after marriage. Virilocal residence and uxorilocal residence occur with almost equal frequency. The bilek-family is the basic social and economic unit of Iban society: it owns and occupies a single longhouse apartment; it cultivates land to provide for the subsistence of its members; it owns heirloom and ritual property, including its own special strain of sacred rice. It is also a distinct ritual group, performing its own rites (gawai) and following its own set of ritual prohibitions (pemali).

The longhouse community is an autonomous entity, not subject to any higher authority. It is an open group, whose families are joined
in free association and a good deal of movement occurs, year by year, from one longhouse to another. Each longhouse community contains a core-group of bilek-families linked by close cognatic ties, generally descended from the founders of the community, and other bilek-families related cognatically to this core-group or, at least, to one other family in the community. The Iban term kaban refers, not only to an individual's cognates and affines, but also to all of his/her friends and acquaintances. Within this broad category, the Iban distinguish cognatic kin (kaban mandal), affinal kin (kaban tampil) and other people (orang bukat). The kaban mandal is identical with the individual's personal kindred: all those persons to whom relationship can be traced consanguineally through both male and female links.

An interlocking aggregation of such kindreds was formally the basis of the tribe—a diffuse territorial grouping of longhouse communities dispersed along the banks of a major river and its tributaries. Although this tribe entirely lacked any overall political organisation, it was a grouping within which disputes could usually be settled, through the mechanisms of kinship, and within which individuals did not take one another's heads. Under the colonial government, this diffuse grouping was largely superceded by a series of administrative districts, under officially appointed Iban leaders called penghulu.

The Iban are this-worldly people, whose religion 'is oriented towards the enhancement of the good things in their present mode of existence' (Uchibori 1978:299-300). Their conception of the spirit world is contained in a rich oral tradition. Jensen (1974:64-71) describes this tradition as falling into two parts, one of which concerns 'the origins of Iban custom, the rice cult, augury and social organisation', while the other consists mainly of legends from the heroic past, which serve to
entertain, but whose primary purpose is to explain 'Iban behaviour and the potential consequences of wrong behaviour'.

Iban religious functionaries are those individuals, who have specific roles in relation to rice cultivation, augury, social order and ritual life (Jensen 1974:39-64). They include the tuai burong (augur), the tuai rumah (house headman), the lemambang (bard) and the manang (shaman). More than one of these functions may be vested in the same person. The tuai burong is called on to guide the community, through seeking and interpreting omens, especially those concerning rice cultivation. The tuai rumah administers adat (customary law). The lemambang intones the ritual invocations (timang or pengap), which form a central part of major ceremonies (gawai). The manang, a healer of individuals, is the subject of this thesis and his/her role is explored in the chapters that follow.

The Iban concept of petara (gods) is one of benevolent supernatural beings: 'petara nadai enda manah; bisi utai ditulong sida' (petara cannot fail to be good; they are helpful in many ways) (Jensen 1974:101). Some of these named gods appear as remote ancestors in Iban myths and putative genealogies (Jensen 1974:83-86; Uchibori 1978:284). The mythical heroes (orang Panggau), to whom supernatural powers are attributed, are also thought to use their powers, 'even if selectively, for the benefit of mankind' (Masing 1981:31). While petara (gods) are, thus, thought to be well disposed towards men, antu (spirits) can be benevolent or malevolent, so evil or unfriendly spirits are always termed antu (Jensen 1974:100-103).

All life, or rather, as Jensen (1974:106-109) notes, all life which is 'significant in Iban experience', be it human, animal or vegetable, is credited with a physical and a spirit side: the physical, mortal, visible body (tuboh) and the spirit counterpart or soul (semengat). The Iban
theory of semengat is summarized by Uchibori (1978:296) as follows:

As long as a person is alive, the semengat works as a live principle and, being combined with the physical aspect (body), constitutes the person's totality. Its separability from the person as a physical and visible entity is the most important attribute of the semengat, originating in dream experiences and shamanic trances. In this sphere of psychic experiences the semengat assumes the role of the second-self of the person, though it is distinguished from the conscious self while the person is still alive. Death is regarded by the Iban as the permanent departure of the semengat from the physical person.

The semengat of the dead spend an indefinite period in the land of the dead, before they are 'extinguished and dispersed in the end to become dew or mist', the destiny of which is 'transformation (or absorption) into rice plants' (Uchibori 1978:250-253). The semengat, as a separable soul, is intimately tied up with shamanism. Only the initiated shaman is deemed able to see and recognise individual semengat and to have control over his own semengat, such that he can set it abroad in the spirit realm at will (Uchibori 1978:15).

These shamanic states are considered homologous with dreams, except that, where the shamans exercise control, the ordinary Iban have no control over their semengat, when it 'enters directly into the realm of spirits' (Freeman 1967:317). It is in this way, that revelation is thought to be communicated by means of dreams, which are interpreted 'as oracles from the gods' (Howell 1909:14). As a result the Iban 'in all their pursuits... are guided by dreams' (Howell 1909:14). Freeman (1975:284) has described how, 'among pagan Iban, there can be seen at day-break, groupings of individuals, dispersed along the gallery of the longhouse, talking together with rapt attention. They are discussing their dreams of the night just ended, interpreting them and deciding how to be guided by them'. He (1975:280, 284-285) gives examples of ritual variants and new conceptions of the spirit order, which stemmed from the dream experiences of individual
Iban, in order to indicate, 'the fundamental importance of the dream in the religious life of the Iban, and the remarkable extent to which dreams produce not "ordered pattern", but innovation and change'. Masing (1981:86) also cites examples, which attest to a pragmatic and innovative approach to ritual by Iban, who may, and do, 'either alter the well-established rites or simply ignore their performance'. This historical and regional variability in the Iban ritual corpus is unevenly documented in the literature. It must, however, be kept in mind in any analysis, such as the present one, which seeks to delineate the underlying assumptions, that inform the way individual Iban elaborate their religious beliefs and practices.

III

Just as it is difficult to give due weight to both the variability in and the assumptions underlying Iban ritual, so it is difficult to depict what is uniquely Iban, without considering similarities of cultural form or content, which are reported from other societies in the Austronesian-speaking world. It is, however, quite beyond the scope of this thesis to do so. Shamanism, head-hunting, ritual language, hot/cool symbolism and botanic metaphors for the human person all appear in the literature on other Austronesian peoples (see, for example, Benjamin 1979; Rosaldo 1980; Fox 1971a; Forth 1981; Fox 1971b). In this discussion, however, I am limiting myself to the Iban, following the principle, that detailed analysis of individual societies must precede comparative studies of the common cultural heritage within a 'field of ethnological study' (see Fox 1980).

While the literature on the Iban is extensive, it is by no means of uniform quality, ranging from the observations of European missionaries
and administrators in the nineteenth century, through to the detailed analyses of trained anthropologists in the period since the late 1940s. Although the literature spans the last one hundred and thirty-five years of socio-cultural change, in general, it provides a series of pictures taken at different times in different places, and only rarely, do the authors seek to place the synchronic image in diachronic perspective (but see Freeman 1970, 1975; Uchibori 1978; Sutlive 1978; and, of course, the historian Pringle 1970). There is, then, a real problem in the use of this wide range of source materials, which span time and space, but which are not adequate for 'an historical approach' (Freeman 1975:276) to the study of Iban shamanism. I have, therefore, transgressed against this principle, at least in Chapters 2 and 3, to the extent that I have drawn on all the available materials in my analysis of the Iban shaman (manang), placing reports from different periods and different regions alongside one another. While such an account, written in the essentially fictional ethnographic present, has obvious weaknesses, it is reassuring to note how often the different sources both reinforce and illuminate one another, when it comes to explicating the ideological features of Iban shamanism. At the same time, I have sought to bring out historical and regional developments, where these can be deduced from a comparative study of the literature on the subject.

Finally, I have chosen a style of exposition, which is intended to distinguish clearly the data and interpretations given in the sources, from my analysis of that material. With this in mind, I have, especially in Chapters 2 and 3, not so much propounded an argument with supporting evidence, as critically reviewed the source materials, deducing my argument from them as I do so.