
THE ETHNOARCHAEOLOGY OF SACRIFICE : SOME COMMENTS ON THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE WITH RESPECT TO HUMAN CONTACTS WITH THE SPIRIT WORLD IN BORNEO

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Résumé

Dans cet article sont examinés les traces, invisibles à l'archéologue, des rites qui incluent un sacrifice animal comme celui pratiqué par les Iban de Bornéo. La première partie est consacrée à un examen du sens général des rites concernant l'animal dans la religion des Iban. Il est montré que les animaux jouent un rôle important comme intermédiaires entre les dieux et les hommes; les animaux sauvages, en particulier les oiseaux et les reptiles, comme messagers des dieux, et les animaux domestiques, porcs et coqs, comme sujets de sacrifices et comme moyens de communication des hommes vers le monde des esprits. Dans un deuxième temps on examine les conséquences archéologiques. Les hommes contactent les dieux lors des combats de coqs et lors de la consommation de nourritures sacrées et de viande sacrifiée; cependant il est montré que ces activités rituelles concernant les animaux ne laissent pas de traces archéologiques. Les restes de ces activités ne peuvent être distingués de ceux relevant de la consommation quotidienne. Enfin, le troisième aspect évoqué concerne le contexte dans lequel ces activités rituelles se déroulent. La plupart ont lieu dans l'espace domestique. Les vies des dieux, des hommes et des animaux sont étroitement liées, et les établissements domestiques sont les foyers de presque toutes les grandes cérémonies.

A major problem in archaeological analysis is concerned with the reconstruction of ritual activity as opposed to subsistence or other activities in prehistoric societies. This problem is of particular significance in understanding rituals concerning animals. The following comments derive from studies of the Iban of Borneo where many areas of ritual activity occur in domestic contexts and where many human actions are determined by ritual requirements but where there would be no archaeological record of their ritual significance.

Three aspects of this problem will be considered. Firstly, there will be an examination of the general significance within the religion of the Iban of rituals concerning animals. It will be shown that animals play an important part as intermediaries, both as messengers of the gods and as vehicles for human supplication to the spirit world. They act as messengers of the gods in revealing aspects of the gods' wishes for human conduct and the gods are thought to use animals to allow humans to glimpse the future. They are used by humans through sacrifice to enlist supernatural support for human endeavours.

The second area of discussion will develop the archaeological implications of the above. Humans contact the gods through cockfighting and through the consumption of sacred foods and sacrificial meat; however it will be shown that there is no archaeological trace of ritual activities concerning animals. The remains of these activities would be indistinguishable from those associated with secular consumption.

The third aspect which will be considered is the context within which ritual activity occurs. Here it will be shown that most ritual activities occur in domestic contexts. The lives of gods, humans and animals are intertwined and human domestic settlements are the focus of almost all of the major ceremonies.

THE IBAN

The fieldwork on which this discussion is based was carried out in Sarawak, Malaysia, between 1968 and 1970. The Iban (or Sea Dayaks) are primarily shifting cultivators of hill rice and supplement this staple with cultivated vegetables, meat from domesticated animals and wild, hunted and gathered foods. The cultivation of rice appears to date from some four or five hundred years ago when a vigorous expansion of population occurred from a heartland in Indonesian Borneo, spreading north and west into present day Sarawak. This population movement incorporated many hunting and gathering societies which faced the choice of adopting Iban ways -the expansionist, shifting cultivation of rice- or becoming the victims of Iban warfare. This warfare, usually described as headhunting, took the form of raids on neighbouring groups, both Iban and other, in which trophy heads were taken. This taking of heads came

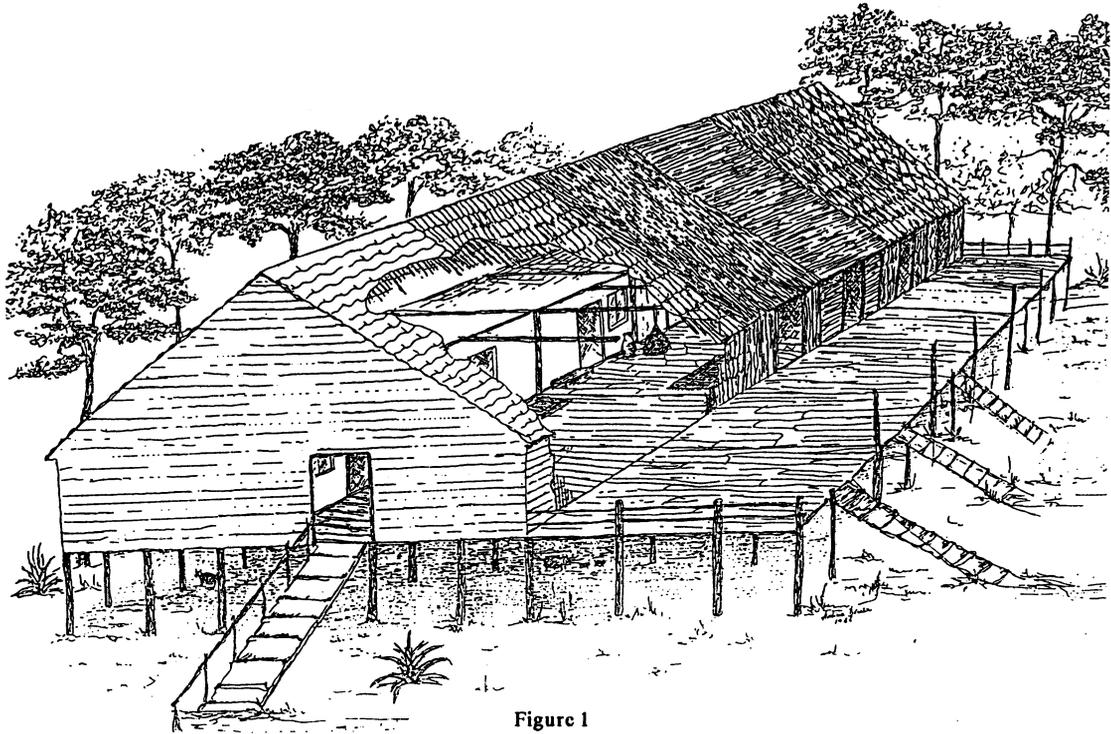


Figure 1
An Iban Long-house (drawn by H. Benson).

to play a significant part in Iban rituals. Headhunting was not directed towards the acquisition of land which had been cleared of trees, although there may have been some ecological advantage in driving other societies away from resources which could be hunted and gathered.

Iban expansion was accompanied by the development of a religion which included a variety of rituals in which humans sought to influence, for their own ends, a world of gods and spirits. The aspects of this support which will be mainly developed relate to the sacrifice of animals - predominantly chickens and pigs which are kept as domesticated animals.

The traditional Iban domestic organisation is focussed on the longhouse which is, in essence, a village under a single roof (fig. 1). Each of the constituent families occupies and maintains its own section of the longhouse and these sections consist of both an enclosed family room (*bilek*) and a covered veranda which runs the full length of the house. This veranda (*ruai*) is the focus of most ritual activities. It is here that hosts and guests congregate to call the gods and spirits (*petara*) to the house to request them to carry out work beneficial to the living. Most of the major ceremonial activities occur within this space; many have a similar overall structure in which a sacred enclosure is established on the *ruai* to which the spirits are summoned and asked to do their work. The example mainly here used is a ceremony which aims to cure sick rice - *Gawai Ngcmali Umai*.

THE ROLE OF ANIMALS IN IBAN RELIGION

Two classes of animals are paramount in Iban eyes as messengers of the gods or spirits (fig.2). Birds, through their association with the skies -the domain of the spirit world- are the connecting link between the ancestral spirits of the Iban and the living. The Iban have an elaborate system of augury based on both sightings and the calls of a number of birds through which they obtain guidance in farming practice and other matters. Reptiles, particularly snakes, frogs and toads, are associated with dark places in the forest where spirits are found which could harm the Iban. In general terms Iban divide the spirit world into two major categories, *petara* and *antu*, each of which may appear as one of the two classes of animals referred to. *Petara* are deities invoked to support human endeavours, and generally dwell in the skies. They often include the spirits from whom the Iban trace their descent as well as the souls of more recently departed ancestors. The word itself probably derives from Hindu *batara*, "lord", or may have sanskrit associations (JENSEN, 1974). The distinction between *petara* and the second type of spirit, *antu*, is not a firm one. The word *antu* is similar to words from other parts of South East Asia, (for example, *Hantu* "evil spirit" in Malay). The Iban associations of *antu* are frequently ones of fear,



Figure 2
Bird and reptile effigies at a hornbill festival.

danger and concern. *Antu rua*, (spirits of waste or extravagance) may derive from the souls of the dead, particularly children, if they are not successfully transported to the afterworld. *Antu* are often, though not exclusively, thought to dwell in the jungle. Cemeteries, which are located in the forest, are populated by *antu* which may steal the souls of the living. The souls of the dead may appear to the living as reptiles which have strayed from their proper place in the forests into domestic contexts. Following such sightings the dreams of humans are interpreted to give meaning to these events. They are frequently thought to indicate that the balance between the human and spirit world is disturbed, that the longhouse is not "cool", *chelap*.

Through the system of augury and from such sightings of reptiles out of their "proper" place the Iban then gain an indication that they must carry out various forms of ceremonial work. They then use their own animals in their transactions with the spirit world, both with *petara* and *antu*.

The Iban have domesticated birds, chickens, which play a vital role in the interaction between humans and spirits. Cockfighting occurs on many religious occasions and is said to please the spirits. Chickens are also regularly sacrificed to propitiate the spirit word (fig.3, illustrates such a sacrifice at a hornbill festival, formerly associated with headhunting, where a hornbill effigy is erected (fig. 2) to gain the support of one of the spirit ancestors, *Sengalang Burong*). Iban also keep pigs and these provide another means of communication. The sacrifice of pigs and the consumption of their flesh by humans are important parts of nearly all of the major festivals (*gawai*). The Iban can also gain some insight into



Figure 3
Sacrifice of a chicken as the spirits are invited to the house.

the future and know whether or not the *petara* are satisfied with their actions through the use of a system of augury based on the examination of the livers of sacrificed pigs.

COCKFIGHTING, SACRIFICE AND THE CONSUMPTION OF ANIMALS

A fundamental principle of the religion of the Iban is the anthropomorphic nature of the *petara*. They can be invited to the longhouse and their help secured by being offered entertainment, food and drink which the Iban themselves also enjoy. This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that the Iban reckon their own descent from some of these spirit beings and that many human ancestors are included amongst the *petara*. The food which is served to guests at festivals (*gawai*) is thought to contain a ritual component which helps enlist the support of *petara*. The same principle applies to cockfighting.

At an early stage of many festivals after gongs have been beaten to summon both human and spiritual guests to the festival, a cockfight is held on the veranda (*tanju*) of the main organiser of the festival. One of the reasons put forward for the spirits' appreciation of cockfighting is that it symbolises the headhunting which was once widely practised by the Iban. When humans fought each other, they were thought to be the fighting cocks of the great spirit ancestors. There are many echoes of cockfighting in headhunting songs. Headhunters are described in ritual chants as fighting cocks of various colours, and cocks are associated with famous headhunters of the past.

On ritual occasions, the first three cockfights are thought to be primarily for the benefit of the spirit ancestors, and then the young men often continue the fights for their own enjoyment. The cocks wear razor sharp metal spurs which are attached to their own natural spurs and usually fight until one is killed. An important point in terms of the archaeological traces of such rituals is that slaughtered cocks become food. In former days, before money was used to place bets on the winner, the owner of the victorious cock was given the defeated cock to eat. Cockfighting then, as now, would leave no record which could be distinguished from consumption in a purely secular context. The metal spurs are treated with great care and would be unlikely to be lost. The spatial location of the cockfight will be considered in the next section. Suffice it to indicate now that it is not held in any specialised place, but rather within the domestic sphere of the organiser of the festival. (Some cockfights are held in purely secular contexts; these are often jointly organised by Iban and Chinese.)

The sacrifice of chickens and pigs is an important part of many rituals. Chickens are sacrificed both in household rituals and in the major longhouse festivals. Pigs are usually reserved for the longhouse festivals; a single family would not be able to eat a whole pig and, as indicated below, sacrificed meat is eaten. Two chickens, under certain circumstances, can be substituted for one pig; it is said that this is because of the equivalence in the number of legs. Pigs are usually sacrificed in conjunction with chickens.

Iban explain the origin of the various sacrifices which they carry out in terms of events which occurred in the period when the lives of humans and their supernatural ancestors were intermingled. A good example is the myth which explains appropriate ritual conduct in the cultivation of hill rice. A version of this myth is held by Iban from all parts of Sarawak and the core constituents of the various versions indicate that land is under the control of *Pulang Gana* who would not permit the trees to be cut in preparation for farming until appropriate offerings had been made. A common element in these myths describes *Pulang Gana* as claiming the inheritance of the earth when he returned home after a prolonged absence only to find that his father had died and distributed his property amongst his brothers. On asking for his inheritance, *Pulang Gana* was given a handful of earth from the hearth. He enforced this control of the earth when his brothers tried to cut down the forest prior to planting. On the night following the felling *Pulang Gana* made the trees grow again and this went on until the brothers offered him various items of prestige property, jars, beads and so on. It is these items, which are symbolised in the offerings (*piricng*) which are made today when the land is cleared. Present day offerings are made in many contexts and include a variety of ingredients. They frequently contain at least the following elements which are based on the items of hospitality offered to human guests. Tobacco smoking and betel nut chewing items are included, along with various forms of the foods prepared for festivals, such as puffed rice, rice cooked in bamboo and cakes made from rice flour. An egg is usually included, and the request which accompanies the offering is sent to the skies through the sacrifice of a chicken, the spirit of the chicken acting as a messenger (Iban chickens are far smaller and lighter than their western counterparts and can fly fifty yards or more). It was also *Pulang Gana*, who, according to Iban mythology, first determined that sacrifices should be sprinkled with blood. This occurred after a flying cock defaecated on a group which was being instructed in the names of the various forms of life by a spirit ancestor. The sprinkling of the blood is sometimes carried out by cutting the throat of the chicken directly above the offering, but more usually by dipping a feather into the blood and touching the offering with it.

The sacrifice of pigs usually occurs at the larger festivals in which all the members of the longhouse participate, and to which people from other houses are invited. The pigs which are sacrificed are usually eaten, but not all of the pigs killed in festivals are killed in a ritual manner. Many will be killed and simply divided up amongst the members of the longhouse who pay with cash for the pork, which they will give to the guests which eat with them. All parts of the pig (except the eyes and the genitals) are consumed and pigs divided in this way will be chopped up into piles of fat, meat, offal and bone and shared according to the proportion purchased by each family.

A major element of the ritual use of pigs concerns the examination of the liver as a means of divination (fig. 4 and 5). Many festivals use pigs both to provide a blood sacrifice to the spirit world and a glimpse of the future through the examination of the liver. It is interesting that, whilst wild boar is regularly hunted and is a favourite food, its liver is not thought to be suitable for divination.

Most of the major festivals which last for more than one day have a similar basic structure. First of all, a meeting of all members of the longhouse is held to make the necessary arrangements and to decide the date of the festival. A *pandong* (an altar-like sacred enclosure) is constructed on the *ruai* (covered veranda) of the house. This may contain the whet stones for sharpening the axes and knives used to clear the forest prior to farming, sick rice plants if these are not growing well, or a sick person. Various spirits (*petara*) are called to the house to visit the *pandong* and to support the requests of the people. Cockfighting is held to attract and welcome the *petara* and an incantation describes the journey to invite the principal spiritual guests - frequently *Pulang Gana*. Offerings (*pirieng*) (fig. 5) are made to the spirit or visitors to the souls of the dead in some ceremonies. Chickens are waved over the human guests as they arrive and are sacrificed so that no evil influences may contaminate the work of the *petara*. If a pig is to be killed and its liver examined, it must be made the focus of the attention of the spirit messengers.

The following description was recorded in October 1968 at a ceremony called *Gawai Ngamali Umai*, held because the rice was not growing well. The meeting was held on 2nd October and the festival itself arranged for 23-25th October. The decision was taken not to invite many guests from other houses because of the expense of entertaining them. The location of the sacred enclosure (*pandong*) was agreed and it was decided which people (*lemembang*) would be asked to chant the incantation which would invite *Pulang Gana*. The first pig to be killed was simply divided into shares of meat for each of the families in the longhouse. This took place on the night of 22nd October.

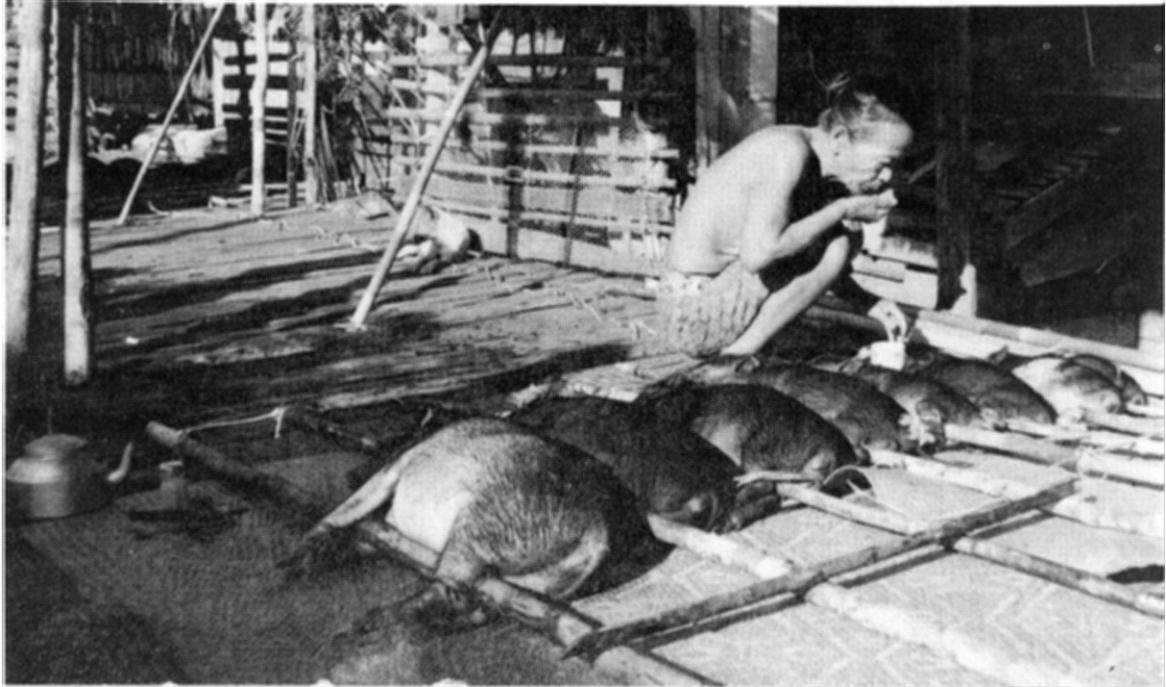


Figure 4
Preparing pigs for sacrifice and augury.

The pig was taken from its pen under the longhouse, washed in the river and its throat was cut on the river bank. The blood was collected in a bucket and coagulated with salt and this too was divided amongst all of the families of the house. Later that night a strong alcoholic beverage was made by heating rice, sugar and water in an old oil drum and the distillate was collected. At 11 p.m. that night, gongs were sounded in the house to indicate that rice should be soaked in preparation for making sticky rice which would be cooked in bamboo the next day. Eating and drinking continued in the longhouse for much of the night; most men were drunk and many were vomiting by 4.00 a.m. when the last went to bed. On the next day (23rd October) rice plants were brought from the farms to the longhouse. At 11.30 a.m. the man appointed to lead the festival carried a cock around the house to announce the construction of the *pandong*. This consisted of a threshing box, suspended from the roof beam, and into it were placed a variety of offerings, including sticky rice, cakes made from rice flour, betel nut, tobacco, bananas, an egg, cooking oil and salt.

At 1.00 p.m. gongs and drums were carried around the house to announce the ritual washing of the *padi* plants. The plants were taken to the river (about a hundred yards from the house) preceded by a flag and a chicken. A prayer was spoken and the chicken killed a little upriver from the place where the *padi* plants would be washed. The plants were then washed in the water, now coloured with the blood of the chicken, and taken back into the longhouse and placed in the altar (*pandong*).

About an hour later, the men (*lemcambang*) who were to chant the incantation to summon the *petara* arrived. Offerings of sticky rice and rice flour cakes were placed on each step of the notched log ladder leading into the house. The purpose of this was to guide the *petara* into the house. The *lemcambang* chanted for about two hours inside the house, carrying a chicken which would later be killed. On completion of this chant, the pig which would have its liver examined, was combed and a dialogue took place between householders describing the benefits which would accrue after the combing of the pig and its later sacrifice (the pigs illustrated in fig. 4, at the hornbill festival have just been combed).

"You are combing the pig. Your work is good. You will be prosperous without difficulty. You will get things whilst falling asleep, while walking and while eating. Your life will be long and you will have good health. The *petara* say that nothing bad will happen to you and all of you holding this ceremony will have a good harvest."

At about 10 p.m., the guests who had been invited were given the strong alcoholic beverage to call their own *petara*. A small portion of the drink was poured through the slatted bamboo floor for the spi-



Figure 5
Examination of the liver of a sacrificed pig.

rits, and a large glass drunk by the guests. This clearly illustrates the general principle that the spirit benefactors appreciate what humans enjoy, and that the way of gaining their co-operation is through human consumption.

Shortly after this the main chant began and continued until 8 a.m. the next morning. The primary purpose of this was to invite the *petara* to cure the unhealthy rice. When this chant by the *lemembang* had been completed, preparations were made to kill the pig which had been combed the night before. The pig was washed and a length of cotton was tied around its neck. It was forced to eat an offering which had been placed near its head. A chicken was killed whilst above the pig and its blood allowed to fall onto the pig. The throat of the pig was then cut with a spear and its liver cut out and placed on leaves (*daun sabang*). The liver was examined by a number of people and the conclusion reached that *Pulang Gana* had visited the house and that the *padi* would be cured.

THE CONTEXTS OF ANIMAL SACRIFICE

In all of the rituals described here, the main foci are domestic contexts and human consumption of special foods is the means by which the spirits are contacted and their support obtained. None of the sacrificial material is buried and the offerings (*piriang*) are either left on the open verandah (*tanju*) of the longhouse to be consumed by birds or thrown to the ground beneath the longhouse where they will be eaten by chickens or pigs. Iban domestic animals are usually allowed to roam beneath and around the house during the day, and collected into pens at night. It is seen by the Iban as fitting that these domestic animals should consume offerings because of their own role as intermediaries between the world of humans and the spirits.

There is a small number of rituals which occur in non-domestic contexts. These are mainly held in locations where land is currently being farmed. However, because of the nature of shifting cultivation, they would not be visible archaeologically. There are, for example, some rituals in which sacrificial pigs are buried at the junction of a path to a newly cultivated farm with an established path (I did not myself observe any such burials although Jensen (1974, p.171) does describe such a burial. In the equivalent rituals which I observed, sacrificial animals were always eaten by the human guests at the ceremony).

Cockfighting at *gawai* is held on the open verandah (*tanju*) of the festival organiser. Many Iban festivals are, at one level, clearly aimed at demonstrating both the capacity to produce a surplus from agriculture and the organisational skills of its main protagonist. The location of many of the rituals in the festival reflects this, in that they are held within the domestic space of the main organiser. The *pandong* for example is erected on the organiser's *ruai*. It is this emphasis on the use of domestic space for ritual purposes which would make Iban religious practices impossible to detect archaeologically. The contexts of most rituals, together with their emphasis on human consumption as the major means of supernatural communication, render them invisible.

This paper has attempted to show that little of the wide range of Iban sacrificial activity would be visible to the archaeologist. Animals are of great significance in the religion of the Iban; wild animals, in particular birds and reptiles, as messengers of the gods and domesticated animals pigs and chickens, as the subjects of sacrifice. However as has been shown in the second section, the end product of these efforts to contact with the gods and spirits is human consumption. The Iban give their gods human attributes and then ask for their support through feasting and cockfighting. In the final section it has been shown that the contexts of Iban religious activities mitigate against their visibility as distinguishable from subsistence activities. Traditionally the domestic animals beneath the house consumed the evidence; Iban frequently joke that a favourite food of the pigs is pork (human faeces are a close second). As a result of recent Western influences pigs are increasingly kept in pens, in order to reduce the transmission of parasites. The containment of the pigs would assist archaeological reconstruction as the absence of their scavenging under the house would render much of the feasting on the *ruai* far more visible. Food remains and offerings would be undisturbed when they fall through the slatted floors to the ground beneath. However these Western influences may have improved the health of the Iban but they have also reduced the Iban commitment to their traditional religion. Fewer ceremonies are held as the Iban become more integrated into cash economies.

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