

**ERIK JENSEN: *The Iban and their religion.* (Oxford Monographs on Social Anthropology.) xii, 242 pp. front., 5 plates. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.**

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Dr. Jensen's work is on a particularly welcome subject, in the absence of a systematic study of Iban religion, and is relevant both to our knowledge of the society and to the wider study of Dayak and related peoples. After an introduction on Iban social organization, the theme of the book is principally the mythological basis of the Iban world view and the relationship between men and spirits, expressed in ritual. Although the scope is deliberately restricted, the research in long-settled Iban territory in the Second Division of Sarawak invites comparison with that of Freeman on the Balleh region. In this light, certain weaknesses become apparent; for, rather than continuing the analysis of Iban society or exploring the relation of religion to the social order, the book remains largely confined to a description of agricultural myths and ceremonies.

As an ethnographic account of Iban religious belief, however, the book is very interesting. Following on from a brief account of religious sources and personnel, the author examines creation myths and, more important, how mankind learnt from the rice spirits to cultivate hill rice successfully through ritual observances, such as avoiding the personal names of certain kin categories, performing cock sacrifice (*biau*), and the ritual whetstone ceremony. The significance of augury is explained in terms of the relationship between Surong Gunting, the mythical ancestor of the Iban, and his celestial mother's father. For it transpires that the omen birds are actually his mother's sisters' husbands who assist their earthly kin to this day. The universe is then described and the categories of spirit whose territories intersect that of human beings. The stability of this world is conceived as being maintained through *adat*, which is both divine cosmic order and behaviour in accordance with this order. Misfortune is therefore the disturbance of *adat*, which can sometimes be foreseen or diagnosed by dreams, augury, and divination, and can be rectified by ritual or, in the event of sickness, by shamanistic intervention with the spirits. In the final part of the monograph there is an account of the ideal rice cycle ceremonies, followed by a sketchy and incomplete summary of the major festivals, the *gawai*.

The sections dealing with the logic of Iban cosmology are enjoyable. The role of shamans is linked to the view of the world as two bowls, with the earth between, round which the sun circulates. Thus the sun passes through the heaven during the day and Sebyan, the land of the dead, at night. Blindness on earth is associated with sight in the world of spirits, and this is a distinguishing feature of shamans, *manang*, who are able to cross the threshold. A different point is made about *adat* (for which the author draws heavily on Shärer's work on the Ngaju Dayak). There are differing explanations of disorder, which may arise either from the conflicting *adat* of different beings, human or otherwise, or more frequently through deviant behaviour. Misfortune does not necessarily fall on the offender, but may be visited on any member of his family or longhouse; so that belief in *adat* emphasizes a wider moral community and may serve to regulate social behaviour.

A word must be added about the largely unrelated opening section, which can, however, be usefully compared with Freeman's findings in *Report on the Iban* (1955, new ed. 1970). There has been some question of the degree to which the frontier Iban from the Balleh can be considered typical. Jensen's material from Batang Lupar and Lubok Antu on the whole indicates a broad congruence. The most marked differences are the higher rate of longhouse endogamy in the Second Division (even allowing for population size), in the composition of agricultural work teams and the age of farm managers, and in the length and frequency of temporary male migration, *bejalai*.

The merits of the book are that it draws together material on Iban religion in a systematic fashion and demonstrates the degree of internal coherence in indigenous thought and practice. It remains, though, more a description than an analysis of religious symbolism or categories. More seriously perhaps, despite the amount of ethnographic data, there is little attempt at a detailed sociological examination of the relationship between religion and other social institutions, except incidentally. It would have been useful to know more about the social functions of belief and ritual, about the economic and social implications of ritual roles, and the place of religion in channelling or resolving conflict.

The shortcomings of the author's approach emerge more clearly through an examination of some of the book's arguments. For instance, augury is presented as a system of ideas in which differing interpretation is seen in terms of individual cognition (pp. 83-93 and 125-38.). Nothing is said of augury as a ritual institution open to manipulation for secular advantage, nor of its political and social significance, although Freeman had explored the possibility some 14 years earlier. On another point, the study of myth effectively omits consideration of the groups which presumably retell them, and the possible social importance of discrepant versions is glossed over. Similarly, genealogies (frequently extending for over 20 generations) are viewed as documenting descent from the spirit hierarchy (p. 98), but the question of other social functions is not discussed.

Finally, there are a number of small omissions and inconsistencies. It would have been helpful if all local place and river names referred to were on the maps. In the description of ceremonies there is no mention of the harvest of sacred padi (*padi pun* and *sangking*), nor a clear account of the *gawai lumbong* mortuary rites reported for the Iban. Lastly, translations from the Iban appear on occasions to be loose. For example, the common expression *adat kami bumai* is rendered as 'our *adat* is hill rice cultivation' on p. 152. but as 'we farm (hill rice) and live according to the order revealed by the spirits' on p. 5. These defects are to be regretted in a book which is otherwise a valuable contribution to the literature on the Iban,

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