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The Life and Afterlife Crises of Saribas Iban Television Sets

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Introduction

> form of intimacy which is reciprocal in character but which lacks some of the features typically associated with the sharing of a common locale. By contrast, in the case of mediated quasi-interaction, individuals can create and establish a form of intimacy which is essentially non-reciprocal … [--] for example, the relationship between fan and star.

This promising model has one fundamental flaw: it overlooks the materiality of television, radio, and other providers of 'mediated quasi-interaction'. In particular, it overlooks the fact that television and other media lead 'double lives' as *both* communication media *and* artefacts – what Silverstone *et al* (1994:21) call the 'double articulation' of information and communication technologies in culture and economy. As a means of disseminating audiovisual discourse, television is undoubtedly non-reciprocal: producers are blissfully unaware of the reception practices of their audiences, as Ang (1991) has vividly demonstrated. Yet as a mass-produced artefact that is bought, sold, rented, borrowed, etc, in specific locales, a television set inevitably enters into complex social and economic relationships based on reciprocity and exchange. These relationships are arguably more convoluted and ramifying in the rural areas of the Third World frequented by anthropologists.

In this chapter I wish to focus on this second, taken-for-granted aspect of television's double articulation. To do so, I will employ a modified version of Kopytoff's (1986: 67) well-known 'biography of things' approach. Kopytoff believes the biography of a car in Africa would yield

> a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and of those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner's relation to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand and over the years, and in the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains. All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of a middle-class American, or Navajo, or French peasant car.

Partly building on Kopytoff, Silverstone *et al* (1994) have developed an intriguing model of domestic media consumption. They distinguish four main overlapping stages in this process:

1. *Appropriation*

sum, this approach integrates the social, relational and active nature of consumption (Appadurai 1986:31) with the endemic features prevalent in a given locale.

The Iban

The Iban, formerly known as Sea Dayaks, are a people of West-Central Borneo. A majority of them live in longhouse communities along rivers in the interior and sub-coastal areas of Sarawak, in East Malaysia. Many practise shifting hill-rice agriculture and supplement their income with perennial cash crops such as rubber (Sather 1992: 66), pepper and with the remittances of migrant kin.

I undertook field research in Sarawak for a total of 17 months between 1996 and 1998[1]. Out of these, I spent some 13 months in the Saribas area. The Saribas has long had a reputation as an area that experienced early social and economic progress (Pringle 1970: 208). Iban from the Paku branch of this river, in particular, took advantage of a high world demand for rubber in the 1910s and 1920s to amass considerable fortunes. Saribas Iban also demonstrated an 'early thirst for education', and many would travel considerable distances to acquire a mission education (Pringle 1970: 206). Interestingly, Saribas Iban are also widely regarded as taking great pride in the preservation of their cultural heritage. Indeed the rubber boom 'led to an elaboration of traditional ceremonial forms' and public speech-making became a central institution (Sather 1994: 69).

A working television set

Writing in 1951, Derek Freeman (1992: 222) described how, for young Iban men

> going on journeys is the greatest and most consuming interest which life has to offer. The lure of the distant sea and its fabled ports is inducement enough; but added to this are varied opportunities to earn money, and ultimately to purchase a gong, a jar or a shot-gun for one's triumphant home-coming.

Forty years later, the Iban passion for family heirlooms (*pesaka*) seemed to have subsided. Arno Linklater (1990: 45) was commissioned by *Time Life* to write a book about the Iban as a 'colourful, exotic and above all primitive' people'. He found that his co-researcher's photographic work was doomed from the outset. This is what they encountered in a remote longhouse in the Batang Ai area:

> Outboard engines and chain-saws hung from posts in the gallery. Their kitchens were stocked with bright yellow plastic buckets, aluminium saucepans and tins of Milo, a syrupy night-time drink. All this could be minimised but not the problem of their clothes. Sarongs had replaced short woven skirts for the women, and the men no longer wore the traditional *sirat* or loin-cloth originally woven from bark. They found cotton shorts more convenient, and from their work at the timber camps and oil-fields, they brought back baseball caps and T-shirts advertising Camel cigarettes and such folk beliefs as 'Love is never having to say you're sorry'.

Let us now return to the burial episode that opened this chapter. At first, I found it hard to believe that the deceased's son-in-law, a construction worker with a family of 16 to support, had so readily given up their only working television so that the departed member could 'still watch TV over there'. Not long before this burial, I had conducted a door-to-door longhouse survey which clearly demonstrated that Saribas Iban *bilik*-families consider television to be their most important belonging, for reasons I explain below.

An obvious answer to the mystery was not hard to find. It was both given to me at a later point by the participants themselves and available in Richards' *Iban-English Dictionary*. Before sending an object to the afterlife the Iban must destroy it[2], for their Afterworld (*Sebayan*) is a back-to-front realm where things fall upwards, water is carried in sieves and cracked jars, light is dark (Richards 1981: 30) …and television can only be watched on smashed-up screens. In *Sebayan*, the belief goes, the deceased will be able to make use of the object's 'spirit' (*semengat*) (1981: 336). But the nagging question remained unanswered. Why destroy a valuable television set? Wasn't that an irrational act, a waste of precious technological resources?

The anthropological problem of value

The 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a surge in scholarly interest in the study of consumption and material culture. One important collection of essays, *The Social Life of Things* (Appadurai 1986) challenges what the authors see as dominant Western notions of an atomised, culture-free individual consumer with unlimited needs. In his introduction, Appadurai sets out to overcome the Marxist tendency to define economic relations largely in terms of production by examining more closely the specificities of consumption across historical periods and cultural boundaries. He defines commodities as 'things in a certain situation' (1986: 13) rather than as kinds of things strictly differentiated from those used in gift and barter exchanges. To this anthropologist, what is socially relevant about commodities is not any intrinsic, immutable attribute but rather their exchangeability at various stages in their social careers. In order to understand the shifting social and economic value of commodities, we must study how they circulate in social life, hence the title of the volume.

One of the contributors, Alfred Gell (1986: 110-114), has urged western anthropologists to transcend the utilitarian bias prevalent in their own societies when studying

consumption in other cultures. He supports his argument with the case of the Sri Lankan fishermen whose income rose sharply following the introduction of new technologies of refrigeration (Stirratt 1989). They promptly acquired modern toilets and TV sets and had spacious garages built. Alas, they had no running water, electricity or roads with which to enjoy these modern conveniences. Rather than seeing this episode as an example of peasant naiveté or irrationality, Gell finds that their purchases resemble those of wealthy art buyers in the West. They are the creative, collective act of appropriating a radically novel aesthetics, one not previously available locally.

> It is easy to laugh at such crass conspicuous expenditure, which by its apparent lack of utilitarian purpose makes at least some of our own consumption seem comparatively rational. Because the objects these fishermen acquire seem functionless in their environment, we cannot see why they should want them. On the other hand, if they collected pieces of antique Chinese porcelain and buried them in the earth as the Iban do (Freeman 1970), they would be considered sane but enchanted, like normal

Nine Saribas Iban value frameworks

In a survey I carried out early in 1997, television appeared to be the most highly valued property owned by Saribas Iban, even above their family heirlooms (*utai pesaka*). I asked adult residents of three longhouses which among all their belongings, both family heirlooms and modern objects, were most useful or important to them (*Di entara semua utai ti dikemisi kita sebilik, lama enggau baru, nama utai ti beguna agi?*). The results indicated a clear preference for television, as shown in Table 1.

Possession	***Responses***
1. television set	26
2. refrigerator	14
3. earthenware jars *(tajau)*	10
4. land[3]	8
5. radio set	7
6. gas cooker	4
7. vegetable garden	3
8. motorcycle	3
9. telephone	2
10. car[4]	2
11. all heirlooms	2
12. no preference	2

Table 1: Most value ueg-121

Indai Edut, 28, housewife:

> In our family we find that the most useful thing [we own] is [our] TV, because through TV we can know what has happened around the world: the wars, the floods, the burnt down houses and much more besides.

These survey responses demonstrate that Saribas Iban, unlike Gell's Sri Lankan fishermen, do indeed value television as an information technology[5]. Such a form of valuation derives from recent historical memory, from a sense of having been left behind by those among their urbanised brethren who are now 'clever and rich' (*udah pandai, udah kaya*). However, this is but one way in which they talk about television, one appropriate to the context of a formal survey conducted by a foreign researcher. That is, they stressed the 'serious' value of television over its entertainment (*hiburan*) value. But I wish to argue that there are at least nine kinds of overlapping value frameworks whereby Saribas Iban estimate the worth of television as an artefact-cum-medium outside the rigid confines of a questionnaire.

1. *Market value* (*rega*). Television sets are expensive to purchase yet, unlike family heirlooms (*utai pesaka*), they rapidly lose market value. The market is controlled by the Chinese diaspora.

2. *Exchange value.* Television sets are important exchange items in the regular flow of gifts (*meri*) and counter-gifts with the living and with the dead; they keep people together.

3.

ACQUISITION	DISPOSAL
1. As a gift from rich relations	1. As a gift to poor relations
2. As a local hire-purchase (*lun*)	2. As a collectible (*koleksi*)
3. As an urban cash purchase	3. As a 'stand-by', broken piece of furniture
	4. As a grave good (*baya*')

Table 2. The socially-regulated paths of acquisition and disposal of television sets among Saribas Iban

Let us consider first the three major methods of acquisition. One point of entry of television sets into Saribas Iban homes is as gifts (*meri*) from better-off relations. Many Saribas *bilik*-families cannot afford to purchase their own TV sets. They must rely on migrant kin working in urban areas, timber camps or off-shore oil rigs.

Household A: Thomas, 31, supports a family of 8. He used to earn only RM 420 a month as a conductor with STC, the local bus company. Now he can make as much as RM 75 (ca. US$ 13 [6]) on a good day as a construction worker and occasional carpenter. In 1990 or 1993 a cousin of Thomas' who lives in Kuching presented them with their first, and to date only, television set -- a colour Goldstar. Thomas estimates it cost him approximately RM 1000 upfront (US$ 250).

Household B

1000 can be purchased in monthly instalments of RM 100, sometimes RM 80 or less if the family are facing financial difficulties (*suntok*). Black and white sets cost just over RM 300. According to Chan, his customers are happy to buy in instalments. Newly arrived traders are reluctant to offer this service for lack of trust in the local population.

lying close to the market town. Unlike more remote communities devoted exclusively to rice farming and cash cropping in which many everyday tasks are shared by men and women, here in longhouses within the market town orbit, men generally work for wages while women combine farming and domestic chores. These wages allow families to hire-purchase television sets, refrigerators and other costly commodities, making them ever more dependent on the vagaries of a local job market that relies

There is a third point of entry for television sets: as commodities purchased by Saribas migrants for their own uses -- that is, not as gifts. The migratory flow of rural Iban is by no means one-way, and many migrants return to their longhouses when economic circumstances in their home areas permit it, or to retire. Once they have decided to settle back into their home communities, they bring their television sets, refrigerators and other household goods along with them.

Household F. The longhouse headman, 46, is married with three children. They all share a spacious *bilik* with his mother, his sister and her two daughters -- a 9-strong domestic unit. The headman is a driver with the local bus company. His wife, 30, works as a farmer and housewife. His late father was a business associate of Chan's, trading mostly in Skrang heirlooms and Kalimantan cattle. This connection allowed his father to hire-purchase from Chan one of the longhouse's first television sets. He began payment of a 14' black-and-white National set in 1982 at the reduced rate of RM 450. In those days Semak longhouse did not yet have a regular electricity supply, so their television ran on a car battery costing RM 90. The headman's sister used to work as a teacher in Kapit, far in the interior of Sarawak, where she bought an 18' colour National television for RM 800 in

Saribas Iban (Dayaks) that their conversion to Christianity ‘was linked to [an] interest in education, and undoubtedly to the conviction that writing was somehow the key to European power’. An early European missionary related the following incident:

> A party of Saribas Dayaks going on a gutta expedition asked for a copy of the first Dayak reading book, because one of them could read, and thought he would teach the others in the evenings when they were not at work. And this is indeed what did happen, and when the party returned most of them were able to read. The Saribas women were just as keen as the men, and many of them have been taught to read by some Dayak friend. I have myself noticed, when holding services for some Christians in villages in the Saribas, how many of those present were able to use the Dayak Prayer-Book and follow the service and

maintain ties with their rural communities and help them solve problems in such activities as farming, funerals or festivals. Their original home is a place of sentimental value with fond memories of childhood. But it also has economic value because land holdings are still owned by their families and they have rights to them.

The phenomenon is not merely one of a flow of gifts from urban to rural Iban, or vice versa (see Sutlive 1989 on rural Iban support to Sibu squatters), nor is it limited to money given for farming and feasting. In addition, there is a growing *intra-rural* flow of used televisions and other costly commodities-turned-gifts that reflects economic asymmetries derived from an unequal access to waged employment. Giving a television set is both an act of kinship solidarity and an unambiguous statement about the relative position of each *bilik*-family in the race to modernity. Gell (1986: 112) argues that 'very recognizable forms of consumption' studied by anthropologists, such as eating, drinking or sharing the pipe should not mislead us into thinking that 'consumption equals destruction'. Even ephemeral goods such as the food served at a feast 'live on in the form of the social relations they produce'. He sees consumption as 'the appropriation of objects as part of one's *personalia* -- food eaten at a feast, clothes worn, houses lived in'. Be that as it may, in the Saribas Iban case we must make a distinction between the materiality of television sets and that of ephemeral goods. Television is having an enormous impact on the organisation of time and space in the more economically advanced Saribas longhouses (Postill 2000, ch. 4), while foodstuffs and beverages of European origin (e.g. French cognac) readily fit into existing temporal and spatial structures.

A second option available to rural families is to keep the old television set at hand. Some families store them away in the loft (*sadau*), others in the main living area of the *bilik*. As the following case study shows, a long acquaintance with the obsolescence of modern technology, together with influences arriving from the urban areas, is gradually allowing some television sets to inch their way into the new category of 'collectibles' (*koleksi*).

Household G. Three generations share this wealthy *bilik*. Indai Rita, 33, is married with two children. Her husband works as a well-paid lorry driver along the logging tracks of the interior. Her sister, 30, also has two children and is married to a laboratory technician who lives in a small town a four-hour drive away. Their father, Emmerson, 56, is a retired policeman. He joined the Police Field Force in 1963, the year Sarawak joined Malaysia, and was soon involved in skirmishes with the Indonesian army along the border. In the 1970s he took part in anti-communist operations in the Rejang and in 1983 he fought off

Ilanun pirates who were raiding Sabah from bases in the Southern Philippines. Transferred back to his native Saribas in 1996, he was promoted from corporal to sergeant before retiring. These days he looks after a large pepper garden with his wife, a profitable activity owing to prevailing high market prices.

They first acquired a television in the late 1970s, a black-and-white model Emmerson bought while he was based in the divisional HQ which they brought back to the longhouse in 1996 as a 'collectible'. It is now gathering dust at the far end of the *bilik*, next to their family heirlooms. 'It's part of our collection (M. *koleksi*)' says Indai Rita, laughing, 'Who knows, one day it may fetch a high price as an antique!'. The television they currently use, a 16' colour Singer, was hire-purchased by Indai Rita's sister for over RM 1000 in the late 1980s. 'It's an old Malaysian model. Nowadays there are lots of models to choose from: Panasonic, Fischer, Toshiba, you name it...I reckon the one at Beng's coffee-shop is at least 36 inches. Now the screen at the laser-disc shop[9], that's even bigger'. The family have built a small house by the pepper garden where Emmerson spends most of his time. There he has a 20' colour Toshiba he hire-purchased in the mid-1980s here in the Saribas.

by means of a single, non-Iban word. After all, humour and insight alike are based on the meaningful reunion of two disparate items of common knowledge. Miller (1994: 396) argues that through artefacts 'we give form to, and come to an understanding of,

irreversible state of 'decommoditization' (Kopytoff 1986:65) as part of a set of grave goods (*baya*') that will eventually achieve immortality. Commodities, we said earlier, following Appadurai (1986: 13) are 'things in a certain situation'. Thus in most societies women reach the peak of their commoditization at marriage, while paintings do so during an auction (1986: 15). Television sets smashed up at an Iban burial have reached the lowest point of their monetary value as worldly commodities, and yet they are at their highest level of value in terms0.4(a)10.5(k)-13(i)2.81es

literacy and financial stability; that of a timber-camp lorry driver indicates risk and uncertainty.

Second, television sets (or their absence) tell people whether certain wage-earners are fulfilling their duties towards less fortunate *bilik*-family members or relations, dead or alive. A good son will bring back to his parents' household a new television set as soon he has earned enough money in an urban area, oil rig or timber camp. Similarly, a dutiful wife will allow her departed husband to take their television with him to the afterlife. These exchanges/gifts (*pemeri*) reproduce the moral economy of the household as well as the qualities of personhood associated with it, such as continuity (*nampong*), respect (*basa*) and compassion (*kasih*).

Television sets are therefore bound up with a parochial ideology or 'ideolect' (Postill 2000, ch. 5) which favours a balance between development (*pemansang*) and custom (*adat*) – or, in the context of the *bilik*-family, a balance between individual acquisition and the long-term reproduction of the family line (cf Bloch and Parry 1989). This balanced representation of the ideal Iban person is routinely reproduced through a variety of means and agents, including school essays, longhouse speeches, gossip, and the material exchanges themselves.

In terms of Thompson's (1995) model of interaction and self-formation outlined in the introduction, the Saribas Iban case study demonstrates the paradoxical nature of television as both a non-reciprocal medium of self-formation and as an artefact fully embedded in local networks of reciprocity. It is this 'double articulation' in a non-reciprocal mass culture and a reciprocal local economy that has allowed television and other domestic media technologies to slip through the finest analytical nets.

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Thompson, J.B. (1995)

Notes

[1] This research was part of a PhD thesis with the Anthropology Department at University College London supervised by Dr Simon Strickland and Professor Chris Tilley. I was officially attached to both the Council for Customary Law (*Majlis Adat Istiadat)* and the Sarawak Museum in Kuching. Field research was supported by the Anthropology Department and Graduate School at University College London, the Evans Fund of Cambridge University and the Central Research Fund of London University. I am most grateful to these institutions and to others such as the Iban Service at RTM, Bahagian Teknologi Pendidikan, Tun Jugah Foundation, Betong District Office, State Planning Unit, as well as to innumerable individuals and families in the Saribas, Skrang and Kuching areas for their generous support.

[2] Hoskins (1998: 21) reports that the Kodi of Sumba, in Eastern Indonesia, break some of the deceased's ‘significant possessions’ on the grave. She does not, however, attempt to explain this practice.

[3] It is quite possible that many respondents did not consider land as a 'thing' they owned (

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