Strategies for Recognition

Conserving forest and livelihood among the Ibans of West Kalimantan, Indonesia

Henrik Jarholm

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how the Ibans in Sungai Utik are using their self-perceived cultural distinctiveness and forest resources to protect their customary land, and develop their community in the absence of formalized land ownership. The Ibans, a rice-cultivating, longhouse-residing group in the interior of Indonesian Borneo, have been subject to massive transformations in the landscape due to exploitive activities, largely caused by logging and palm oil plantations. The Indonesian state has also been instrumental in changing Iban life in terms of socio-politics, religion and agro-forestry. In order to understand Iban resilience, their success in expressing autonomy and how they have managed to stand up against external hegemonic powers, it is crucial to grasp what the forest means for the Ibans. The forest is linked to a wide range of aspects in the Iban society, such as sociality and values, economy, cosmology and religious practice. On the other hand, their awareness for the forest is also an expression of pragmatism. Instead of selling away land to companies, as many other forest-dwelling communities have done, the Ibans in Sungai Utik consider their forest to be more valuable as a resource for the future. As part of this pragmatic attitude, villagers in Sungai Utik have allied themselves with a wide range of NGOs up through the years. However, actors, ideas, projects and beliefs must resonate with local customs and perceptions to be considered as legitimate by the villagers.

Keywords: Iban, Forest conservation, deforestation, house-based societies, sociality, autonomy, cosmology, perceptions, religion, state, modernity, NGOs.
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1. Introduction, Background and Methods

The Ibans of Borneo

In the north-eastern part of West Kalimantan, Indonesia, there is an indigenous group called Ibans. They are a longhouse-residing group that largely live a traditional life in close entanglement with their forest environment.\(^1\) In the spring of 2015, I went to live with an Iban longhouse community named Sungai Utik\(^2\) in the Kapuas Hulu Regency\(^3\), as part of my extensive fieldwork for the MA thesis in social anthropology. This is the story of their resilience and autonomy in a world of rapidly change. Several forest dwelling communities in Borneo have for decades experienced radical changes in their physical landscape\(^4\), and lost vast areas of forests that have been expropriated for other purposes by government and business interests. These changes have further contributed to challenge the cultural distinctiveness of these communities. However, the Iban community in Sungai Utik represents an important exception, in so far as they have managed to protect their customary land from government and capitalist enterprises, as well as their distinctive way of living. Sungai Utik is also challenged by state intervention, deforestation and the effects of globalization, but has not been subjected to the same degree of cultural loss as neighboring forest-dwelling communities in the region.

The primary question that I will examine in this thesis is: How do the Ibans in Sungai Utik use their cultural distinctiveness and forest resources to protect their customary

\(^{1}\) Borneo is the third largest island in the world. The island is divided between three states. The majority belongs to Indonesia (Kalimantan), while the rest belongs to Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) and the sultanate of Brunei.

\(^{2}\) “Sungai Utik” is the name of the river where the longhouse is located. “Sungai” (or “sui” in Iban) means “river”.

\(^{3}\) In addition to the state, administrative units in Indonesia are as follows: province (propinsi), regency (kabupaten) and city (kota). A regency is further divided into sub-regency (kecamatan). Villages (desa) normally consists of smaller villages or hamlets (dusun). Sungai Utik is one of two dusun that is a part of the village Batu Lintang. The other dusun or longhouse-community that belongs to Desa Batu Lintang is Pulan which is located around 4 km. away. Although desa refers to two different locations, I will not include the other hamlet when I refer to “the village.”

\(^{4}\) “Landscape” in this thesis refers to the general physical environment of interior Borneo, in all geographic locations. “Land” on the other hand, refers to a specific customary entity held by a local community. Tim Ingold (1993: 152) thus makes a distinction of “land” as homogenous and quantitative, while “landscape” is heterogeneous and qualitative.
land, and to create indigenous self-awareness in the absence of formalized rights to land and as people? Also, I look at how the Ibans in Sungai Utik are using these resources to empower and develop their community: Materially, economic, and judicial.

For the villagers in Sungai Utik, the forest is more than just a collection of trees. It is rather deeply connected to their values and sociality, economy, as well as cosmology and religious practice. As their perspective on the society and the forest environment is holistic, so is my approach in this thesis. I attempt to present Iban life in its many aspects, to get a wholeness of the Iban society. I believe narrowing the focus while doing anthropological research, prevents the ethnographer from seeing the larger picture. As Bronislaw Malinowski writes on the importance of holism within anthropology: “An ethnographer who sets out to study only religion or only technology, or only social organization cuts out an artificial field for inquiry, and he will be seriously handicapped in his work” (Malinowski 1984 [1922]: 11).

Focusing on the internal cultural distinctiveness of Iban life is important to sense how the Ibans perceives their natural environment. Equally, I also emphasize the Ibans as actors with agency, that have succeeded in finding their allies in the field of political actors, such as NGOs and rights activists.

Since the 1980s, the Ibans in Sungai Utik have dealt with logging and palm oil companies that want access to their traditional forest areas. Compared to large-scale plantations of industrialized crops, Iban customary land (hutan adat) is organized into a highly complex system of different forest areas such as: collective/individual forests, sacred areas, rubber gardens, and swiddens. The Indonesian government has also been instrumental in categorizing, controlling and exploiting forest areas at the Indonesian resource frontier, which has resulted in “friction” (Tsing 2005, see below) with the Ibans in Sungai Utik. Despite not having any formal rights to their forest areas, the Ibans in Sungai Utik have managed to keep the state and the companies at a distance.

Extensive academic literature has linked marginalization of rural communities to deforestation and environmental change (e.g. Heyzer 1995; Brosius 1997; Berta 2014), but my approach is rather different. I am interested to look into a community that
actually have managed to protect their forest and preserve their traditional livelihoods, despite the massive pressure for giving up their land and customs.

Anna Tsing (2005) uses “friction” as a metaphor for understanding global connectedness, and shows how local responses to global forces are shaped through various forms of interaction. “Friction” is needed to create actions: “Rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick. As a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power” (Tsing 2005: 5). The current situation for the Ibans in Sungai Utik today, is shaped by the different “frictions” as described by Tsing. She proposes that these frictions can be of both “positive” and “negative” character. I argue that we must look at the intersection of the internal cultural field and the transformative political changes that the Ibans have undergone to understand how the Ibans find their place in an increasingly uncertain world.

Figure 1 Kapuas Hulu Regency (in red), West Kalimantan
(Source: Map Data © Google, retrieved May 2016)
Background

The Ibans are a sub-group of Dayaks (or “Dyak” or “Dayuh”).⁵ “Dayak” is a collective and loose term for naming the tribal groups that are considered as Borneo’s native population. There are more than 200 sub-groups of Dayaks, in which Iban is considered as one of the largest. More precisely, this term is used for naming non-Muslim and non-Malay tribal groupings. Malays (or “Melayu”) is the other major ethnic group of Austronesian origin that inhabits Borneo. Malays are not a homogenous group, but in contrast to Dayaks, their main characteristic is Islam. However, many Malays are considered to be former Dayaks that have converted to Islam. There are some disputes concerning the origin of the word “Dayak”, but a common explanation is that it simply means “people upriver” (King 1993: 29-30). The Ibans trace their descents from the Kapuas basin in West Kalimantan, but the largest population is now to be found in Sarawak in Malaysia. There are also some smaller populations in the Sabah region and in Brunei (King 1993: 49).

The Ibans have, like many Indonesian tribal societies, dealt with a history of political change in terms of socio-political conditions, nationalism and the utilizing of their natural resources. As analyzed by Tania M. Li (1999), the Indonesian upland has historically been defined, constituted, imagined and controlled through a wide range of discourses and practices.⁶ There is a common notion of the uplands as being marginal in relation to the centralized lowland. The difference between the uplands and the lowlands, is primarily economic and political (Li 1999: 1). This hegemonic relation between center and periphery, forms the context for intervening with land and people in Kalimantan. If we are to understand the current situation for Ibans today, we must look at how the state has dealt with this gap by its strategy of annihilating differences.

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⁵ “Sea Dayaks” is another term that has been used on Ibans.
⁶ As with the rest of the hilly interior of Borneo, Kapuas Hulu is geographically considered as upland. In this context, the upland/lowland distinction accounts for both the geographic/hegemonic relation in-between locations in Borneo and between Borneo and the national centralized powers (mostly Java).


*Multiculturalism in the Indonesian nation*

After the independence in 1945, the first president and Indonesia’s paternal leader, Sukarno, faced the great challenge of molding all the islands in the former Dutch colony into one nation; a quite challenging task considering Indonesia’s mosaic of ethnic groups, languages and dialects, religions and other distinctive cultural features. To achieve this, Sukarno formulated a set of principles of ambiguous character, named Pancasila (in Javanese/Sanskrit: “The five pillars”). Pancasila works as a framework for the multicultural nation and represents rights and duties for all Indonesians to follow (Pisani 2014: 20-25).

The idea of streamlining cultural features also coincided with the national motto: “Bhinneka tunggal ika” (from Javanese: “Unity in diversity”). This principle was particularly visible in Suharto’s New Order (Orde baru) politics. Suharto, who succeeded Sukarno after a coup in 1965, emphasized diversity, but mostly in terms of folkloristic aspects. This can be illustrated with the *Taman Mini Indonesia Indah* – TMII (“The Mini Indonesia Park”) in East Jakarta, a recreational park representing a synopsis of Indonesian culture. The park, conceived after an idea by Suharto’s wife in 1970, consists of pavilions displaying houses, clothing, dances and other aspects of traditions and daily life from all the Indonesian islands (Kahn 1999: 80). The park gives an indication for how the state has sought to deal with cultural differences throughout the archipelago. Aesthetical notions are emphasized and staged. The state defines the limits of cultural expressions which is projected in the pavilions. “Unity in diversity” for the New Order regime meant non-hierarchical representation of cultural differences that legitimized governmental intervention in the uplands (Li 2000: 149).

However, local customs and cultural notions that challenge the state’s authority and interests have largely been discouraged and opposed by the state. The different ways the state’s ideas and ambitions of streamlining cultural differences are expressed at various interventions, and challenge indigenous customs, are themes I will return to.

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7 The five principles of Pancasila: 1. Belief in one and only God 2. Just and civilized humanity 3. The unity of Indonesia 4. Democracy guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberations amongst representatives 5. Social Justice for all the people of Indonesia.
throughout this thesis. The state’s ideology and foundation on its multiculturalism is essential for understanding the context that these government-led incentives operate within.

**Forest degradation and deforestation trends in Indonesia**

The Borneo rainforest is extremely biodiverse, with a large number of different ecosystems. This includes mangroves, freshwaters systems, peat swamp forest, lowland and upland forests. These ecosystems provide unique habitats for many endangered species, such as the orangutan and the Borneo rhinoceros (WWF 2014: 2-3).

However, the rainforest is in crisis. Globalization and economic development does not just threaten the natural environment for flora and fauna, but also the many tribal groups that depend on the forest’s resources. Extractivism of natural resources has played a major part in the Borneo environmental history for thousands of years. The Dayaks have for instance participated in trade-networks with Malays, Chinese and Arabic merchants (trading goods like rattan, rubber, and birds-nests in return for porcelain jars, weapons, brassware etc.) (Sellato 2002a, 2005). However, since the colonial powers arrived, the Borneo environment has undergone great transformative changes. This development has further been accelerated the last 50-30 years with the commodification and commercialization of rainforest products (WWF Germany 2005: 33).

According to Rainforest Foundation Norway and GRID-Arendal, it is hard to find reliable data on forest statistics in Indonesia, due to huge variations regarding deforestation trends. Still, there is little doubt that deforestation in Indonesia is among the highest in the world (Rainforest Foundation Norway and GRID-Arendal 2014: 59). According to FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), the country's annual forest loss is 6.850 km² (FAO 2010: 21). In the latest 40 years, Borneo alone has lost 30 % of its forested land. The major culprits of deforestation in Indonesia are the establishment of plantations for cash crops such as palm oil and fast-growing timber species. Logging and mining operations have also contributed significantly to deforestation (Rainforest Foundation Norway and GRID-Arendal 2014: 59).
**REDD+**

This thesis is a part of a REDD\(^8\) research group called ‘REDD in Comparative Perspectives: Local and National Government Issues’, a research collaboration between the University of Oslo and Gadjah Mada University (UGM) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and founded by the Norwegian Embassy in Jakarta. Although I am not dealing directly with questions concerning REDD, my thesis explores themes that are essential for understanding the context REDD operates in. REDD+ encompass many of the former and on-going attempts for conserving forests and livelihood in the tropical rainforest. It also exemplifies the many obstacles for improving life and livelihood for the forest-dwelling population in Indonesia.

The initial idea behind REDD+, that was launched by Papua New Guinea and Costa Rica in 2005, was that developing countries with tropical rainforests would be compensated financially from utilizing their forest resources. It was argued that this was a quick and cheap way to reduce greenhouse emissions. However, even though REDD+ has been an attempt to accommodate the problem of forest loss, it also raises new questions that need to be negotiated. Such as: Who should get the payments? How to calculate “avoided” emissions? While these questions have remained unanswered, a wide range of initiatives have emerged worldwide, labelled as REDD+ projects. These accounts for large numbers of private companies and NGOs, that operates on a local or regional scale. Some countries have entered into bilateral agreements, such as between the government of Norway and Indonesia (Rainforest Foundation and GRID-Arendal 2014: 36-37).\(^9\)

According to Arild Angelsen and Desmond McNeill (2012), the idea of REDD+ has proved to be difficult in real life because the focus has changed from reducing emissions by conserving forests, to a multitude of objectives. Several co-benefits have been added,  

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\(^8\) REDD is a global incentive from developing countries, which stands for Reduce Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation. The plus has been added later (at COP 16 in 2010) to include: Conservation of forest carbon stocks, sustainable management of forests, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks: [http://theredddesk.org/what-redd](http://theredddesk.org/what-redd) (acc. 12.09.2016).

\(^9\) The agreement between Norway and Indonesia included a transfer of US$ 1 billion aimed at protecting Indonesia’s peatland forests: [http://www.redd-monitor.org/2010/05/27/norway-and-indonesia-sign-us1-billion-forest-deal/](http://www.redd-monitor.org/2010/05/27/norway-and-indonesia-sign-us1-billion-forest-deal/) (acc. 07.11.2016)
such as protecting biodiversity, reducing poverty and strengthening local livelihoods. Since the stakeholders do not share a common understanding of what the main intentions REDD+ are, the various initiatives can be interpreted in different ways and continually negotiated by international, national and local interests. Because of this, REDD+ weakens its original intention of reducing emissions. While REDD+ has managed to set the agenda for conservation efforts internationally, it has yet to prove to be a game-changer on national forest-policy in Indonesia.

Into the field

_Yogyakarta, Java_

I arrived in Indonesia in the beginning of January 2015. I stayed for about a month in Yogyakarta in Central Java to attend a one-month intensive language course in Indonesian. Although the majority of Indonesians speak their own local languages, almost everyone speaks or understands Indonesian to some degree. Indonesian is considered the only official language and is the language used in television, media and in the state educational system. In order to do fieldwork in Indonesia, it was crucial to learn the language. In Java, I occasionally met people that could speak English, but this was rarely the case in rural areas.

In Yogyakarta, I also met with fellow Indonesian students and researchers in the same collaborative research program, working on REDD+. For instance, we had a one-day seminar at UGM, where I got the chance to hear about ongoing master projects on REDD+ by UGM students. The seminar was important for me to get some more concrete stories and lessons from students that already had experienced the many challenges of doing fieldwork in Indonesia. At that time, I had no idea about where to go. I considered going to Sumatra or Sulawesi. But for some reason I was drawn to Kalimantan. Ever since I started on my studies in social anthropology, I was fascinated by the vast ethnographic works on Dayaks and longhouse-communities in Borneo (e.g. Freeman 1970 [1955]; Helliwell 1993; Sellato 2002b). However, it was REDD+, forest conservation and NGOs that was meant to be my field of study.
It was a couple of forestry researchers that I met with in Yogyakarta, that convinced me to go to Kalimantan. They both worked for CIFOR (Center for International Forestry Research), and had been on several research expeditions in West-and East Kalimantan. They invited me and a fellow Norwegian student to visit CIFOR’s headquarter in Bogor, outside of Jakarta, to meet with other researchers with research experience in REDD+ and Kalimantan. I became particularly interested in West Kalimantan and the Kapuas Hulu-region. This was due to the high numbers of NGOs working in the area, the relatively large areas of forests being conserved, and the many Dayak groups still practicing their traditional way of life. I also heard that there was some activity on REDD+ in West Kalimantan, but not as “sophisticated” as the projects in East-and Central Kalimantan, so it turned out to be more difficult than I thought to find a REDD+ program to follow.

**West Kalimantan, Borneo**

I went to Pontianak, the provincial capital of West Kalimantan in the beginning of February 2015. For approximately three weeks, I lived in the house of a Malay-family together with an Indonesian student from UGM. During this time, we conducted several interviews with various stakeholders, most of them being NGOs, researchers and government officials. This gave me a deeper understanding of the political context that I was operating in. At the same time, I was searching for a village community and an NGO that were willing to let me participate in their field activities. In Pontianak, I first heard about Sungai Utik from a friend of mine, a fellow researcher who was working on Dayak languages in Kapuas Hulu.

Sungai Utik sounded like an interesting place for me to go, but I had my doubts since there was little activity on REDD+ in this village. I also wanted to visit different villages in the region to get an overview of the general situation in Kapuas Hulu concerning forest conflicts and frictions with marginalized groups. In consultation with my supervisor, we agreed that I was not to be too determined on where to go, and rather travel around, meet up with different actors before deciding where I wanted to go.
Kapuas Hulu

After staying in Pontianak for some time, my plan was to go to Kapuas Hulu Regency, close to the Malaysian border, a place that I had been told was a “hot spot” for NGOs and environmental activities. I also thought of Kapuas Hulu as an interesting location due to its status as “conservation district”, with its two national parks (Taman Nasional Betung Kerihun and Taman Nasional Danau Santarum). In Kapuas Hulu, I continued to meet up with local NGOs and accompanied a few of them on shorter field expeditions. For instance, I went together with PRCF (People Resources and Conservation Foundation), to consult and monitor some ongoing projects they had in the southern part of Kapuas Hulu: two Malay villages and a Dayak village. There were several projects in these villages, such as reforestation programs, an eco-tourism project, and a project that aimed to utilize the fruit of the Tengkawang-tree (*Shorea genus*) to extract oil that villagers could sell in return for a good price. The oil could be used as an ingredient in chocolate or cosmetics in Javanese factories.

I also went together with WWF (World Wildlife Fund) and KOMPAKH (Komunitas Pariwisata Kapuas Hulu), Communities for Tourism Kapuas Hulu\(^\text{11}\) upstream the Kapuas River and further up the tributary Mendalam River to a Bukat community, a former nomadic Dayak group. We went there to test out a potential hiking route intended for eco-tourism. In four days, we walked through thick jungle, got covered by leeches and experienced heavy rainfall that created a major flooding that almost made us call off the hike. All we ate was rice and instant noodles (*Indo-mie*), supplemented by a few fried fish now and then. Every night I collapsed into sleep after a hard day of hiking, surrounded by the wilderness. This trip was important for me, since I wanted to get an idea of how the NGOs were thinking in terms of perceiving nature and the forest environment. I was also curious about to what degree these understandings coincided with local perceptions of living in-and-preserving the forest.

It is not my intention to present all actors and NGOs that I met with in Kapuas Hulu, but I want to emphasize that these experiences were essential steps in the process of

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\(^{10}\) Kapuas Hulu was granted status as conservation district in 2003. Approximately 57 percent of the district area (which covers an area of 31 162 km\(^2\)), are forests designated for conservation purposes. The national parks occupy around 30 percent (Shantiko 2012: 1).

\(^{11}\) KOMPAKH is a local NGO and tour-operator that collaborates with WWF.
gaining knowledge about the field, and also for finding an adequate village community to settle down in. Sometimes it felt time-demanding and frustrating, but, as proclaimed by Clifford Geertz (1973), making “thick descriptions” attentive to detail and context is crucial for interpretation and representation in the ethnographic method. Detail is not, however, an end in itself.

Another important point in terms of getting familiarized with the context and gaining insight into the field, is how we as ethnographers make comparisons. According to Fredrik Barth, “Comparison [...] involves identifying ‘variants’ of the ‘same’ [...]”, also within the context of fieldwork (Barth 1999: 78). From my own understanding, Barth addresses the need for a conscious comparative methodology. Observing and gaining insight into the variables (for instance: places, people, landscape, rituals etc.) gives a better foundation for understanding your field data. Even though I do not include much of my findings from the time before Sungai Utik, my former experiences in other locations gave me a necessary regional context to work with.

Through representatives in AMAN – The National Alliance of Indigenous Peoples (Alliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantera), whom I had previously met with in Pontianak, I was put in contact with Sungai Utik. I first got in touch with an Iban from Sungai Utik named Victor, a man in his late thirties who invited me to stay overnight in the longhouse with his family. On a Sunday in mid-March, I went to Sungai Utik for the first time. It instantly felt like I had come to the right place. I had never felt so genuinely welcomed by anyone before. Together with Victor I went from door to door, sitting down with everyone we met for a cup of coffee, tea or some tuak (“rice wine”). The Kepala desa (“head of the village”) ensured me that I was most welcome to stay in the longhouse for my research. I must admit that I still harbored doubts. Although there was a lot of NGO-activity in the village, there was not an operating REDD+ project. After careful deliberation I decided to put the REDD+ project on the backburner, and I stayed for the following four months in the longhouse community. This proved to be a wondrous and highly exiting place to conduct fieldwork.
Methodological considerations

It became clear to me that conducting fieldwork was not just a “method” for collecting “data” by interacting with people. My fieldwork felt very much like a personal journey that gave me knowledge about what it means to be human. It gave me a chance to partake in other peoples’ “life-worlds” (Wikan 2012), as well as giving me a deeper understanding of the social and political context of Iban life. Though not always being an easy task to achieve in practice, my methodological inspiration throughout the fieldwork has been what Malinowski (1984 [1922]) famously expressed as the overall objective for the anthropologist: “[...] to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world” (Malinowski 1984 [1922]: 25).

Participant observation

In the beginning, I was mostly just interested in what life was like in the longhouse. I wanted to see what preoccupied people, what their interests and concerns were, what their daily activities were, and how they interacted with each other. I tried my best to participate in all kinds of activities to acquire a better understanding of what it meant to be an Iban. This involved fishing in the river, accompanying the men on wild boar hunts, collecting forest products (like rubber, fruits, plants), working in the swiddens and learning how to make a fire with wet firewood. I wanted to know how it felt walking deep into the forest on muddy footpaths during the rainy season or feeling the hot sun while clearing a new swidden. Although I could never become an Iban, I tried my best to get a general understanding of how life unfolded in the longhouse. I dressed like an Iban, left my fancy water-proof blue bag that I had bought in Yogyakarta and rather used the same carrying basket made of rattan like villagers did. Around my waist, I wore a Dayak bush knife, and I even replaced my Gore-Tex shoes with some simple white shoes made of rubber that were easier to clean.

Sharing was another important element of my methodological approach. Sharing a meal and drinking together, having a cigarette with a villager, distributing the meat among the hunting party and sharing of company and friendship were all important activities that created a feeling of interrelatedness and sameness across cultural boundaries. It was mostly the men that shared their cigarettes with me. This sharing of tobacco and
alcohol emphasized the friendship and equality between us. Likewise, sitting on the floor together and eating the same food is much about sharing the same life together, as family, neighbors or friends.

My strategy in approaching the field was to avoid being too determined on deciding what to consider as significant for my research. I woke up early in the morning, morning, had a cup of coffee and went outside to see whoever I ran into. This was usually how an average day looked like. My inspiration came from Malinowski, and how he proceeded during his fieldwork among the people in the Trobriand islands: “[...] to wake up every morning to a day, presenting itself to me more or less as it does to the native” (Malinowski 1984 [1922]: 7).

I occasionally made concrete plans for the day, like when there was a government meeting to attend, a wedding taking place, a ritual being planned or other major events in the longhouse. Many of these events were carried out in the Iban language, and therefore not always easy to grasp the entire meaning of. But it was important for me to participate anyway, despite that I did not always understand everything that was said and going on around me.

I never used my audio recorder and rarely took notes while sitting down with people in Sungai Utik. Conversations in the village were informal and rarely planned. I carried with me a small notebook in case I had to write down statements, important terms in the Iban language or to make illustrations. But my field notes were mostly written down under my mosquito-net in the poor gloom of a flashlight, every evening before I went to sleep. I also tried to keep a separate personal diary for some time, but this proved to be quite difficult, primarily, because I experienced how difficult it was to distinguish the “hard data” from my own personal reflections. Emerson et al. (1995) highlights the difficulty of separating “objective” data from the anthropologist’s own personal reactions and reflections: “[...] such separation distorts processes of inquiry and the meaning of field ‘data’ [...]” (Emerson et al. 1995: 11).12

12 As far as possible, I attempt to be transparent and distinguish between conversation data and observation data by illustrating with empirical examples or including my own participation; whether I was an active participant or gained certain knowledge through conversations. However, a great deal of my field data can be characterized as both conversation data and observation data.
**Positioning**

In my thesis, I attempt to highlight the specific relationship between me and the people I refer to, such as “neighbor”, “friend”, or “government official”. Occasionally I use the term “informant”. But as far as possible, I have I have made an attempt to contextualize my own relationships with people, as well as the context for statements people made and for the observations that took place in the field.

I do not believe it is possible to connect with everyone. However, I made a lot of friends, both inside and outside the village. All along the way, I had a lot of helpers that put me in contact with relevant actors, who opened their homes for me and let me partake in their lives. There is no doubt that my closest relationships were made in Sungai Utik. Generally, it felt easier for me to connect with men ranging from 20-45 years, although many friendships were made across age and gender.

As a young man, it felt easier to relate with the men and to engage in their activities, such as hunting in the forest or hanging around at cock fights. Men would often gather in the evening to drink palm beer (ijok). This was an important arena of gaining knowledge and to get “backstage”\(^\text{13}\). Iban drinking culture was nothing like I was used to. My glass of ijok was rarely empty, and they made sure that I was drinking it fast. Often they would challenge me to finish my glass in one sip, saying “one go!”, in English. Unlike the women of the village, men enjoyed a greater mobility and were always on the move. The men often had some business to do, either deep in the forest or an occasional government meeting to attend.

During my fieldwork, I experienced that humor was an effective tool to get acquainted with people. As described by Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1940), “joking-relations” is a common institutionalized form of interaction between people in South African tribal societies, as a stabilizing form of interacting with each other wherever there is a potential for conflict and competition. Other anthropologists like Hutchinson (1996) and Lien (2001) have demonstrated that humor and the “art” of making jokes can be a way for people in a society to test out newcomers (or the anthropologist), if they are to

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\(^\text{13}\) “Backstage” (as with “frontstage”) is commonly linked to Erving Goffman’s work on self-representation in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1969).
be approved or not. I felt that well-timed jokes and making fun of myself always lightened the atmosphere. It revealed that my informants and I shared some traits as humans, despite all cultural differences. To illustrate this with an example: When the oldest child in my host family, 11-year-old Yosep, was trying to teach me how to dance an Iban war-dance, I tried my best imitating a bird like you are supposed to do. However, I did not feel that my movements were especially graceful. While dancing, I said to my hosting family: “Saya main seperti ayam betina” (I dance like a hen), and they all cracked up in laughter on the floor, unable to stop laughing for about 10 minutes at least.

The family that took me under their care became enormously important for me, and treated me like a son in the house. There were three generations living together in their apartment in the longhouse. For the youngest ones, I became their om (“uncle”) from the first day. Their mother and her husband (“my” brother-in-law), and her two brothers were my saudara (“sister”) and abang or just bang (“brother”). The grandmother and the grandfather I referred to as ibu (“mother”) and bapak or apai (“father”). It is common in Indonesia to use kinship terms on non-cognates at informal settings to show affection and friendship. People rarely used their birth names, but rather entitled people in terms of age, gender and relatedness. I was automatically positioned into this reality, and people would for instance refer to me as their “uncle”, “brother” or “friend” depending on our relationship and I would do the same likewise. Before I came to Sungai Utik, people mostly called me bule (“white person/foreigner”). But in Sungai Utik I was given a status and a “role” to play out. Although, I could never play out this position completely.

There is a recurring methodological question concerning how far the anthropologist can and should go in their attempts to take part in other people’s life. Among the works that problematizes this, we find studies like Jean Briggs’ (1970), Kapluna Daughter: Living with eskimos.
in my fieldwork, my family asked me if I wanted to get an Iban name. I was flattered and immediately said yes, as I thought it was not a very big deal. But, as it turned out, they were arranging a special name ceremony to give me my new name. A small ritual consisted of me giving a symbolic gift to my family (a small tin-made box), whereupon a fowl, that was waved over my head by an elder, got its throat cut and was offered to the ancestors; my new Iban name was now Judan. This was a name taken from one of their ancestors. Had I gone too far? Had I committed myself to these people in some way that I did not fully understand? Although it made me reconsider my position, I do believe I managed to balance my role as a researcher with the necessary distance to the field. Despite the affection that developed between me and my Iban friends and family.

**Limitations and challenges**

There is no doubt that language was the greatest challenge during my fieldwork. Despite not being a native speaker of Indonesian, I felt that my language skills were rapidly increasing throughout my time in the field. Especially after I came to Kapuas Hulu when I was more or less was left to myself. Unfortunately, I never became fluent in Indonesian, but I managed quite well. It was mostly meetings (like village meetings in the longhouse or meetings with governmental officials, NGOs or others) with its loud voices, speeches or protracted monologues that never seemed to end, that were challenging. But whenever there was something I did not understand, I made myself a habit of asking again for an explanation at a later time.

While Iban was their mother tongue, most people in the longhouse spoke Indonesian. Only a few elders could not speak Indonesian. I learned some Iban words and phrases such as “*udah maneh?”* (have you taken a bath yet?) and “*empai*” (not yet). But I choose to focus more on my Indonesian language skills rather than learning two languages at the same time. Speaking the same language, is a way of belonging to a community; of sharing the same life-world, cultural knowledge and ethnic identity. Perhaps if I were able to speak Iban, this would have brought me some advantages, such as deeper and more detailed data. One of my major concerns before entering the field was if villagers were going to be reluctant to share their knowledge with me, as an outsider with limited language skills. The Indonesian language is also closely linked to the national state. Therefore, only speaking Indonesian is not a guarantee for speaking as freely as
necessary with informants in the field. Despite my concerns, I believe I largely managed to go “backstage” with my informants.

The Ibans highlights an ideology equality, solidarity and egalitarianism. As a fieldworker, it is difficult to say whether it was easier to do my research in a non-stratified society compared Dayak communities of stronger social stratification. But I hardly believe it was a disadvantage. However, doing fieldwork in a non-stratified society does not necessarily imply that all members are equal in practice.

Several anthropologists have pointed out that conducting fieldwork is an exercise where the anthropologist observe and produce ethnography by virtue of who he or she is. The fieldworker’s class-background, personality, body, age and also gender, all play a significant part for what data the ethnographer ends up with (e.g. Weiner 1988: 7; Emerson et al. 1995: 2; Van Maanen 2011: 4). While it felt easier for me to hang out with the men in the longhouse, I enjoyed good relations with the women in the longhouse as well. These relationships were, however, more superficial and the close friendships were largely restricted to the women of my family. If I had been able to connect better with the women in the longhouse, I might have gained access to more varied data. Though, it is a part of the anthropologist’s dilemma that ethnography is rarely an objective and a selective process, where the “truth” is presented from certain perspectives. As formulated by Emerson et al: “As a result, the task of the ethnographer is not to determine “the truth” but to reveal multiple truths in others’ lives” (Emerson et al. 1995: 3). Still, this thesis is not a study concerning male Ibans, but the whole community. However, I wish I had more time, data and space in this thesis to include issues concerning gender-and gender roles in the Iban society, as well as women’s knowledge and participation at customary practices.

Conducting village-anthropology, as the classical prototype of ethnographic research, demands a reflection on certain well-known narratives on scale and boundaries. Postmodernism and the crisis of representation within anthropology, have pushed forward a critical re-evaluation of the “isolated” village as field of study, and rather acknowledged the flows and effects of the nation and the global (Jebens 2010). Although being relatively remote, Sungai Utik was by no means an isolated community. During my time in Sungai Utik, there was always a lot of people coming and going. Especially
considering all the men going to Malaysia to work on palm oil plantations. As Gregory Bateson (2002 [1979]) reminds us, drawing limits and borders of knowledge is artificial. However, limits and borders in ethnographic representation are necessary in order to present certain truths about Iban life in Sungai Utik. As far as possible, I attempt to exceed notions of the isolated village community, and demonstrate how the villagers of Sungai Utik take part in a larger national and global context.15

**Ethics**

I have chosen to anonymize all my informants. However, I regard it as impossible and not particularly relevant to anonymize the name of the village where I did fieldwork. Sungai Utik is a quite well-known place in West Kalimantan. Sungai Utik should be regarded as a rare example of a longhouse community that has managed with great integrity to conserve their characteristic way of living. A trait that has given the Ibans in Sungai Utik much fame and admiration throughout the archipelago as well.

It has been an important objective to present Iban life in Sungai Utik without being disloyal to my friends and hosting family, or putting them in a vulnerable situation. There is a political aspect to the story that I am presenting which inscribes a great responsibility into the task of presenting their life and concerns as honestly and trustworthy as I can. I always emphasized that my purpose for being there, was to do research for my MA in anthropology, and that I was going to write about them. So I made sure to explain people that whatever they said could potentially end up in my thesis, and in this way cognizant to issues related to informed consent. People in Sungai Utik, were quite used to external actors like NGO-representatives, activists, journalists and students, so the villagers expressed to me that they felt privileged, that I was going to write about them.

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15 Ideas of the “local” and the “global” in the time of globalization, that exceeds common notions of place and power, have been much discussed in anthropology. See for example Ferguson and Gupta (1997).
Chapter layout

In the second chapter I present the Iban longhouse community. This chapter demonstrates how sociality and values of individuality/autonomy, as well as solidarity and communitarian ideas, are embedded in the house and its architectural divisions. Iban social organization and its principles of sociality, is important for understanding how the Ibans perceives their natural environment, as well as position themselves in the local political reality. In the third chapter, I will look more closely into how people in Sungai Utik manage and categorize their forest. Their way of categorizing and managing the forest is complex and is better understood as different forests within their forest. The forest is also a reflection of the society/longhouse, which emphasizes the deep mutuality between these two spheres. In the fourth chapter, I will give an overview of the religious and cosmological principles among the Ibans. The spiritual domain is entangled with the forest as the place where spirits and ancestors reside. Religion and cosmology reflects values, the past in the present and a sociality encompassing both the living and the non-living. This chapter also addresses how their traditional animistic belief and Catholicism are understood as meaningful categories in different contexts. In my fifth and final chapter, I make a shift to the political dimension of Iban life. Changes have come from many corners and at different times. I look at how the Ibans have responded to these changes, what choices they have made, and what actors they have allied with for gaining rights to land and recognition as indigenous people.
2. The Longhouse Community as a Social Structure

Encountering the Ibans

*It is Sunday morning. I arrive together with Victor at the longhouse for the first time during my stay in West Kalimantan. After weeks of research, travelling on motorbikes along dusty roads and by canoes up muddy rivers, looking for a suitable village-community to conduct my fieldwork, I finally reach Sungai Utik, an Iban longhouse community that I was told to be more or less still traditionally intact. After a few hours drive on the road that connects Putussibau, the largest town in the region with Sarawak and Malaysia, the longhouse appears a few hundred meters from the junction. I am stunned by its size. Built on piles it raises a few feet over the ground. The construction of the house facing front is made entirely of unprocessed wood except from the blue-painted picket fence that partly encloses the verandah on the front. When we step inside the longhouse it reveals a long, dry*
and dark hallway. It almost feels like being under the tire of a windjammer. The planks creak while we walk across them. There is a constant interaction between the people in the longhouse. Someone is always going somewhere. Someone might come from the forests carrying sacks of rice, while others sit down on the floor on woven mats with neighbors and family. I had to come and say hello to everybody. Everybody wants to meet the bule (“white person”). After some socializing we go to the apartment of my companion’s family. To my surprise, the apartment is nothing like the rest of the longhouse that I have seen so far. Inside this apartment there are tiles on the floor, walls made of bricks, corrugated iron as roof, a separate kitchen, television with a DVD-player and all kinds of modern commodities. After having had lunch, sitting on the floor on a woven mat like Ibans often do, we are heading for the apartment of Pak Kades (head of the village). The contrast is striking. It almost feels like we have traveled hundred years back in time. I find myself sitting beside some heavily tattooed Ibans while drinking tea with loads of sugar. The room is smaller and more crowded. It is dark and only a small glimpse of light shines through a small hatch in the roof. There is no electricity here. It got me thinking: As an anthropology student, I have laid behind most of my exotic notions about forest people being more “traditional” and living in perfect equilibrium with nature and cosmos, in opposition to consumption and modernity. I came to Sungai Utik without any expectations about this life, but I was struck by this spatial differentiation of material conditions inside the longhouse itself; between the “modern” and “traditional”.

(Excerpts from field notes March 2015)

In this chapter I will present both the architectural features of the longhouse and its symbolic order. My aim is to account for how this constitutes sociality between residents of the house. The longhouse and its multiple meanings, is crucial for understanding the Iban society in its whole, because the longhouse communicates certain values. Living in a longhouse is an important identity marker that many of my informants expressed with a great deal of pride. Some of them, however, have a fear of losing this form of living and for being “assimilated” into what they regard as mainstream Indonesian society.

The house has its advantages in its materiality with its embedded meaning. Houses are more than just a physical structure on specific locations. They are also homes for the
people who reside in them. They are bearers of meaning and a reflection of those who use them, their behavior and values, world views and their relations to their surroundings. Now for the Ibans the house is not just a reflection of the people who live in the house, but the forest is itself a reflection of the house and vice versa. Understanding the longhouse as a social structure gives some clues about their attitudes and connectedness to the forest. According to Stephen Sparkes (2003: 5), the house as an analytical tool in a Southeast Asian context is suitable due to a common understanding of these societies being considered as “loose structures”, societies with less emphasis on social coercion. In the following section, I will address the house as a material and social entity that constitutes a sense of belonging, obligations, support, network and sharing of resources and food.

The house as a “moral person”

Even though there already had been done a fair amount of anthropological works on the house and its symbolic order (e.g. Needham 1962; Bloch 1971; Bourdieu 1973), it was Claude Lévi-Strauss (1982) who first conceptualized the house analytically within kinship-studies. His theories were built on Franz Boas’ work on the Kwakiutl social organization. According to Boas’, the Kwakiutl had no clear or systematic kin groups or social institutions based upon kin-relations that were reproduced over time. Since principles of their social grouping seemed to be lacking, Lévi-Strauss was concerned about treating the Kwakiutl as a society. He found the answer in the house.  

According to Lévi-Strauss (1987), there were apparently no abstract principles that made descent and marriage practices in societies that scholars had understood as “cognatic”, bilateral or “undifferentiated” systematically analytical. He suggested that opposing categories like patrilineal/matrilineal, descent/alliance and hypergamy/hypogamy might be “reunited” or “transcended” in the house (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 184). In these societies, that he labeled “house-based societies” (sociétés à maison), the house can be perceived as a “moral person”, or as “a corporate body holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth” (Levi-Strauss 1982: 174).

16 These ideas were further developed through a series of lectures given at College de France in 1978.
Several notable works on house-based societies in Southeast-Asia have been inspired by Lévi-Strauss notion on the house as a “moral” community. Some of these works have also moved beyond Lévi-Strauss analytical limitation of “loosely structured” societies, to consider also stratified societies or societies that to some degree follow strong principles of descent. Among these are About the house: Lévi-Strauss and beyond, edited by Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones (1995). This volume attempts to bridge the disciplines of architecture and anthropology for a better understanding of the relation between material culture and sociality. Inside Austronesian Houses: Perspectives on domestic designs for living, edited by James J. Fox (1993), uses Austronesian houses as comparative delimitation to examine the spatial organization of these houses, and to see how their domestic designs relate to the social and ritual practice of the groups that inhabits them. But one of the most significant works on Austronesian houses is The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in South-east Asia by Roxana Waterson (1990). The title of this book captures how important domestic architecture is for shaping socio-cultural life as well as those who live in the house. This coheres strongly with the Iban longhouse. In the same way, the longhouse is a strong identity marker for Iban, and the house itself is understood as something living that also, potentially, can “die”.

Many house-based societies in Southeast Asia are characterized by a certain balance between moral values of autonomy, equality and fellowship. They practice a high degree of personal autonomy through a system of “open aggregation”. These societies are often described as anarchic, but also express a form of social solidarity at the same time (Gibson and Sillander 2011: 1). The question is, what binds these members together as a community in the absence of strong principles of cohesion? As with other anarchic societies in Southeast-Asia, the Iban emphasize their personal autonomy and is highly competitive, but also expresses a strong sense of solidarity and fellowship. This is manifested both in the architectural features in the house, as well as in the various relations between people of the longhouse. To grasp the relation between the material and the symbolic house, I will begin with the Iban family, which is the most important social unit in the longhouse community.
The *bilik*-family

Inside a longhouse, there are private apartments for families called *bilik* (meaning “room” in Malay). The *bilik* refers to the spatial dimension of the family dwelling, but also to the family members that reside in the *bilik.*\(^{17}\) The *bilik* was first conceptualized as an analytical category by Derek Freeman (1961) in *On the Concept of the Kindred.* As stated by Freeman, there are no segmentary descent systems with lineages and clans. Instead, it is the *bilik*-family that stands out as the most important unit in terms of social, economic and ritual life (Freeman 1961: 2011). I will return to the architectural dimension of the *bilik,* but first I will draw attention to the *bilik* as a social unit.

The *bilik* usually consists of two-three generations living under the same roof. In Sungai Utik, approximately six-to eight people were a common number of members within a family. Heirlooms like Chinese jars, bronze gongs, several types of rice grains, farming tools, weapons, and ceremonial clothing are shared property for the members in a *bilik.* The *bilik* is an overlapping spatial and social term, which emphasizes how social categories are embedded in the house.

Normally, only one child takes residence in the natal *bilik* to establish his or her own family with their parents, while siblings find spouses and establish families in other Iban communities. There is no favoring of having only boys or girls in terms of continuation of the family. Neither is there any favoring in terms of age. The basic principle is that someone has to take this role to continue the family as a corporate group without any regards to who it might be. The Ibans are commonly understood as an egalitarian group. As stressed by Freeman (1970 [1955], 1961), the Ibans are neither patrilineal nor matrilineal and they do not take a strong interest in tracing their genealogical links many generations back, but do stresses the continuation of the family group itself. Members who leave their natal *bilik* lose their right to inherit land and heirlooms from the *bilik.* The “house” or in this case the *bilik* is often a symbol of continuity, both in

\(^{17}\) The *bilik* is technically a specific room in the family apartment, but the word is commonly used among Iban to name the whole dwelling and the family that live in it. For simplicity reasons, I will use the terms “*bilik*”, “dwelling” and “apartment” interchangeably in this thesis if nothing else is stated. When referring to the “house”, it refers to the whole longhouse with all its dwellings and members. Also, “family” and *bilik*-family are terms that I use interchangeable.
terms of the “structure” that outlives an individual or a generation, and its heirlooms (Sparkes 2003: 9). These are the basic principles of inheritance and continuation for the bilik-family. But, from what I experienced, it was not uncommon for an unmarried adult to continue to reside in their natal bilik. This despite partition having been expected long before, and another sibling already had established himself with a spouse and children in the same bilik.

The family that I lived with in Sungai Utik, consisted of a grandmother and a grandfather (in their 70s), a son (40 years old), and a daughter with a husband (around 30-35 years old) and their two sons (11 and 5 years old). An elderly sister of the grandmother (75 years old) was also living in the bilik. The oldest son was still living as a member of the family, and had not been able to find himself a wife. Instead it was the daughter in the family that had settled in the bilik with a husband and a new generation of children. Her husband came from the Kenyah tribe, another Dayak group living close to Pontianak. They had been living in the bilik as husband and wife for about ten years, had two children together and were expecting a third. I observed some mockery towards those adults in the longhouse who had not been able to find a spouse. Even though often expressed in a joking manner, they face a strong social pressure for partition. The sister of the grandmother that also was living in the bilik is an anomaly. She was childless, divorced and used to live in another bilik with her ex-husband. Her role in the family was of a slightly more peripheral character. She mostly did the cooking together with the grandmother, seldom said anything and mostly sat in the outskirts when there were guests in the house. She was also regularly exposed to mockery from the children in the bilik and did not share the same “natural” given status as an elder like her sister. The ambiguous state of this woman reveals certain important aspects of the Iban longhouse society. Even though they do not put much weight on tracing descent through lineal succession, continuation of the bilik-family through the offspring is important.

Having a numerous family is also favorable because the bilik-family is also an economic unit. The Ibans in Sungai Utik are primarily rice-farmers who practice swidden agriculture. This is a labor intensive and time-demanding activity that needs a great deal

\[^{18}\text{The grandfather was married into the family. There was also another son (39 years old), that had departed from the bilik, and was now living with his own family in Putussibau.}\]
of participants. Even though siblings who move out from the bilik have no formal obligation to participate in farming activities or have rights of inheritance, they might return during the most crucial agricultural periods to help their natal family. Partition releases the individual from all formal obligations, but it does not imply that this former connectedness to the bilik is forgotten.

Architectural divisions in the longhouse

While the majority of the inhabitants in Sungai Utik live inside the longhouse (rumah panjai), the exact number of people residing in the longhouse was not easy to estimate, because many families have family members that temporarily stay abroad due to labor migration. At the time I stayed in Sungai Utik, the overall number of people living in the village was 308, while the longhouse consisted of 28 biliks. The longhouse might seem like a single structural unit, but in fact it is a set of “houses” within the house. The longhouse in Sungai Utik was built in the mid-70s and was constructed mainly of hardwood, but the families are free to use other kinds of materials for building their own apartments. The longhouse stands on pillars around one-and-a half meter over the
ground and is approximately 170 meters long. Jennifer Alexander (2003) gives some explanations for the shape of the Dayak longhouse:

A functional explanation for the siting of the longhouse on piles has been sought in the protection it provides from flood and heat in a tropical monsoon climate. It is also ecologically effective in that household waste ends up beneath the longhouse where it is disposed by foraging pigs and poultry; and economical because a longhouse requires less time and material to construct than separate dwellings (Avé and King 1986: 56). A second and perhaps more compelling argument lies in the defensive and security aspects of the structure. Numerous ethnographers [...] have pointed to the importance of the length of the longhouse in providing against enemy attacks. (Alexander 1993:31)

The longhouse is also a social structure, connecting kin and neighbors to a wider social whole through a shared understanding of affection and solidarity. The longhouse is divided into four main sections with its sub-sections: Bilik, sadau, ruai, and tanju.

Figure 4 Architectural divisions in the longhouse
**Bilik:** The *bilik* is the core of the Iban society. The *bilik* is actually just referring to the first room that guests enter when they pay a visit to a family. Physically the *bilik* is located on the inside of the longhouse structure, while the *dapur* (“cooking heart”) is on the outside of the longhouse, pointing out like uneven pillars on the backside of the longhouse. Traditionally the Iban apartments consists of these two rooms, and the Ibans still make this spatial division. But the apartments might also consist of other rooms like sleeping rooms, a living room, storage etc. The *bilik* is the place where a family welcomes visitors, serves them *tuak* (rice wine), coffee or tea, as well as the place for socializing. The *bilik* has a special position of continuity and tradition for families, and is the place where heirlooms are kept.

**Ruai:** Like the *bilik*, the *ruai* is another part located inside the longhouse. The *bilik* and the *ruai* are being separated by the “dog's wall” (*dinding udok*). The *ruai* is a wide and open roofed gallery that to some extent can be seen as equivalent to the “public sphere” in a traditional western context. It is the space for daily interaction and socializing between the members of the community, and many people use this space as a workplace. Women might sit here and weave mats while men repair their fishnets, knives and other tools, or binding the bracelets they sell to tourists.19

**Tanju:** Along the longhouse on the outside follows the *tanju*, the verandah. This area is mostly used for drying rice in the sun, chopping wood and all kinds of activities that are a bit too messy to be done inside the house. Children also use this area as a playground. There is also a small and roofed corridor between the *ruai* and the *tanju*, called *kaki lima*. This is not a part of the traditional structure of the Iban longhouse, but has been added in recent years. Between the *tanju* and the *kaki lima*, people normally store firewood, hats to wear while working under the sun, fishnets and mats used for drying rice. Above the *kaki lima*, there is also a storage room called *sadau tanju*.

**Sadau:** The last of the major sectors that divide the longhouse is the *sadau*, the loft. The *sadau* covers both the *bilik* and the *ruai* inside the longhouse. The *sadau* is a part of the apartment belonging to the *bilik*-family. Normally, the *sadau* is entered from the *bilik*,

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19 The impact of tourism will be further explained in chapter 5.
but some families had their own entrance from the ruai. The sadau is mostly used as a storage room for different kinds of rice, mats, bronze gongs and ceremonial equipment.

In the initial description about my first encounter with the Ibans and the longhouse, I highlighted the spatial differentiation between families in their bilik, and between the bilik and the longhouse as a whole. I was surprised to see how different the living standards were in each bilik, both in terms of consumer goods and the materials used to construct the dwelling for the family. When seeing the longhouse from its back, the size and the length of each apartment vary. While some just have a small wooden apartment that stretches a few meters out from the longhouse, others have their bilik made with bricks and corrugated iron roofs. Some have windows with glass while others just have a few small and open hatches on their wall. On the inside, some of the most modernized dwellings look more like typical Indonesian village houses with its touch of modest modernity. Simple, yet they are clear signs of changes in consumption and materiality. The apartment of the family that I lived with was the biggest in longhouse, and one of the most “modern”. This family seemed a bit more resourceful, as both the father and the mother worked in the school system.

On the inside of this particular bilik, there were for instance tiles on the floor, pink drapers in front of the windows, a glass cabinet, blue plastic chairs and a glass cabinet with cups and bowls. The family also had consumer electronics like laptops, television, DVD-player and a radio, and on the floor there was a big plastic carpet with a motive showing LEGO-figures appearing as superheroes instead of the typical Iban mat made from the bemban plant (Donax canniformis). The children of the family, Yosep and Daniel, often played games on their father’s laptop. This family was also different since they had more access to electricity. When the dark came, most families lit up their apartments with oil lamps and flashlights charged with solar energy which gave some sparse light. From time to time, my host family would get electricity from a diesel-powered generator. This allowed them to charge their mobile phones and stay up a bit longer while watching films, soap operas and game shows on the television before going to sleep.
Although the effects of modernity are becoming more evident in the longhouse, this has not led to a total transformation of the Iban society. The grandmother would still sit hours upon hours in the apartment weaving mats and ceremonial clothing, and when it was time for a meal, an Iban mat was laid on the floor with bowls of rice, fish, vegetables, thick sambal (spicy paste) and other dishes while the family sat around on the floor, as the custom was. There might be a material transformation in the family dwellings, but the spatial division is still maintained and embedded within an existing ethos that highlights the bilik-family as an autonomous unit. There is a greater freedom for a family to express modernity, consumption and economic development in their own bilik, while the longhouse with its wooden material and structure, remains an expression of tradition and living in a collective community.

Some anthropologists, like Freeman (1970 [1955]; 1961) and Sutcliffe (1978), have stressed the autonomy of the family as a central value among the Ibans, and this is reflected in the bilik as a “private” domain, while the ruai is more “public”. Christine Helliwell (1993) criticizes this understanding of the spatial division in the Dayak longhouse as an interpretation that reflects western assumptions. Instead she pays attention to how spatiality in Gerai20 longhouses exhibits a division between “inside/outside”. In a wider context, the family’s inner room represents the whole community (Helliwell 1993: 48). The roofed gallery is in a sense a “public” sphere, but also represents the world outside, and the domain of non-Dayaks. According to Helliwell, putting too much emphasis on the autonomous and open-aggregated aspects in the non-stratified Dayak communities, such as the Ibans, neglects the existing sociality between the members in the longhouse (Helliwell 1993: 45). Instead there is a balance between expressing autonomy and being a member of the community.

The bilik has a double meaning by representing the continuity of the family, as well as the whole society. On the other hand, the outer part of the apartment (dapur) is both materially and socially separated from the rest of the society. Despite being physically enclosed from other biliks, there is not much privacy for a family in the bilik. You are constantly reminded of your neighbor’s presence, which can be heard through the thin

20 The Gerai Dayak community is located in the kabupaten (sub-province) Ketapang, in West Kalimantan (Helliwell 1993: 45).
walls. Some *biliks* even have hatches in the wall that serve as alternative routes to enter an apartment. “Openness” is important, because people are living close together. Having too solid walls or locking the door would block the flow and interaction that is considered as important to be a good neighbor. The hatches between apartments are normally open through the day, but closed during the night.

**Going bejalai**

Autonomy is not just expressed by families, but also by individuals. The original objective for the *bejalai* (“journeys”) was for the young men to embark on adventure to seek wealth and return with items like Chinese jars, bronze gongs, brass-ware and other valuable objects that would become the common property of the family (Freeman 1970 [1955]: 226). Most families have such items placed in their *bilik*. Almost all families have their glazed Chinese jars lined up by the wall when you enter their apartment; some of them now antique. Today, men of all ages still go on *bejalai*, but mostly for money through labor migration. Many men travel to Sarawak in Malaysia, where the majority works in the logging industry or on palm oil companies. Most families in the longhouse are dependent on the remittances from the family members. A family can almost get everything they need for minimal subsistence from the forest, but they need money for certain consumer goods like coffee, cigarettes, oil, sugar, building materials, clothes and gasoline for their motorbikes. However, most families I spoke with would stress that their biggest expense and motivation for earning money was to secure their children’s schooling. This could be quite expensive. Especially when moving up from SMP – Sekolah Menengah Pertama (junior secondary school) to SMA – Sekolah Menengah Atas (senior secondary school), which entails school fee, learning materials, school uniform and living costs.

Paid jobs in or around Sungai Utik were scarce, and just a handful of families had a family member with a permanent job. In my host family, the father, Fransiskus, worked in the SMA school administration in Martinus. Therefore, people have to find other ways to earn money. Among other economic sources were the rubber gardens, but, due to the high fluctuation in the global market, crude rubber prices had been quite low for some time. They also had a lot of *tengkawang*-trees with fruits that could be used to extract
oil. They used to collect and sell these fruits, but at the time prices were low for this resource as well. Sungai Utik was also a part of a credit union (CU) that had been established between eight dusun (sub-villages) in the Embaloh Hulu sub-district. This CU offered loans with low interest rates, and was important because it contributed to strengthen the local economy and increased the access to capital for the locals.

Ibans going to Malaysia to work would normally send back money to their bilik-family, but my neighbor told me that working abroad also was an opportunity to accumulate personal wealth. He had gone to Sarawak to earn money for his daughters’ schooling, but was able to earn enough to buy a motorbike. Salaries in Sarawak were said to be relatively high, but at the same time living costs were high. I was told that it was common to stay with friends and kin while working in Sarawak. Often they would pay their host by helping out in the swiddens during their spare time, typically on Sundays.

When a young man comes back from a bejalai, he does not just return with money and wealth, but also reinforces his status as an Iban. The bejalai marks the beginning for men to start tattooing themselves. Tattoos reflect status and masculinity for men, and a man’s status may increase with the number of tattoos on his body. Most of the young men had traditional Iban-tattoos, but some also had other tattoos of Dayak-inspired motifs, Christian motifs (like Jesus or the cross), Chinese designs like the dragon, or whatever they liked. Some of the elder men had random tattoos like an airplane, birds or a fish hook. But in general most of the tattooed men preferred the traditional Iban motifs like bungai turun (the “Borneo rose”) on the chest under each collarbone. Other traditional motifs are representations of fruits, crabs, vegetables and other nature symbols that men wear on their back and on their legs, but these were most prominent among old men. Some men also had a tattoo on the front part of their neck that went over their larynx.

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21 When headhunting was common, men who had managed to get a trophy head (antu pala) would receive tattoos on his hands which manifested his status as a great headhunter, but today none had these tattoos (at least not because they were headhunters). A few women also had tattoos, but only a chain-like motive on their lower arm. This was a symbol of being a skilled weaver. Tattoos of this kind are also referred to as tengulu tattoo, which signifies bravery.

22 Back in the past, this tattoo was said to protect from getting your head cut off by the enemies.
Sources of sociality

The Ibans have been described as a highly egalitarian group in contrast to other Dayak groups that practice strong principles of social stratification like the Kayan/Kenyah Dayak group, that traditionally divide their society into tree classes: slaves, commoners and nobles (Sellato 2002b: 74). Unlike stratified societies, the Ibans are an open-aggregated group, practicing flexible membership. As described above, autonomy and individuality are important values in the Iban community. But at the same time, there is a strong sense of solidarity between the members in the longhouse. In this part, I will look at how sociality and solidarity in the longhouse community are constituted in different contexts, such as sharing of food and drinks, rituals, farming activities and collective work.

Sharing of food and drinks

The consumption and sharing of food and drinks as defining categories for sociality has been examined by several anthropologists, such as Christine Helliwell (1993), who points out that the dichotomy between “inside/outside” is not just constituted through the spatiality of the house but also through the sharing of food. The division between “inside” and “outside” is an ethnic marker that creates the boundaries between Dayaks and Muslim Malays, or those who can eat pork and those who cannot. Signe Howell (2003) demonstrates how sociality is manifested through the sharing of food among the Chewong, in peninsular Malaysia, and how it can be understood within a cosmological frame. She characterizes the Chewong as an “immediate-return society” that highlights a strong egalitarian ethos of sharing and not storing food. This is further emphasized through Chewong-myths (Howell 2003). Monica Janowski (1995) have made similar observations among the Kelabit Dayaks of Sarawak, and highlights the importance of food as a mediator of sociality, and especially how kinship is socially constituted through “rice-based” relations among the Kelabit Dayaks in Sarawak. The importance of rice cannot be emphasized enough. In Iban society, rice is itself the essence of life. It is seen as an animated resource that contains its own “rice spirits” and always plays an important part during rituals in the form of liquids or as food for offerings to the spirits and the ancestors who inhabits the house and the forest. Several ceremonial activities are centered on the cultivation of rice, and the Iban year is organized around the
different phases of cultivation, from the clearing of the swiddens to the harvest and the ceremonial feast that follows after. This will be further elaborated in the next chapter.

Each family will produce rice in its various forms for its own consumption. How much rice they will produce each year is determined by the number of members in the *bilik* that are able to contribute with their labor force and how many mouths they have to feed. The number of swiddens that are cleared each season varies, but an average number is two to three swiddens for each family. A family may decide to use a swidden for another season if the soil proves to be fertile enough, but normally no longer than that. In these agricultural respects the Ibans are far from a society based on “immediate-return,” like the Chewong described by Howell (2003). The rice will be stored in the family’s rice chamber on the backside of the longhouse or in the loft inside the apartment. The goal of the agricultural activity is to make enough rice for the entire family until next harvest time, but the *bilik*-family will cultivate and harvest much more than they need, and they will never be empty for rice in the chamber. Most families I talked with did not know the exact amount of rice they had harvested that season, but one man told me that his family had collected around hundred sacks of rice from their swiddens that year.23

A *bilik*-family needs to have enough rice for subsistence, ritual purposes, when receiving guests and for organizing feasts with family and kin. Not being able to contribute with rice during offerings and festivities would be unthinkable. Today guests would normally be served coffee or tea, but according to Dayak custom, and not just among the Ibans, guests should first be served *tuak*, and then cigarettes and betel nut, or leaves of betel nut. In contrast to other traditional drinks that lack symbolic significance, *tuak* has a more spiritual quality and is connected to the ancestors, as well as Iban hospitality. *Tuak* is always an essential component during feasts, rituals and for making a *piring* (offering plate) to spirits and ancestors that “consume” these offerings.

Another common traditional drink is *ijok* (sugar palm beer). Many families have a sugar palm standing behind the apartment behind the longhouse. The men climb 15-20 meters

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23 The Ibans do not measure the volume of rice being harvested, but rather uses a measure called *kulak* which measures the areal of rice ready to be harvested.
up the three to make a hole, from where they can tap the liquid into a jerry-can. It takes about a week before the jerry-can is full. The *ijok* is clear to drink and readily fermented before being tapped. *Ijok* is mostly something men drink while gathering in the evening after sunset when all the daily activities are done. These drinking-gatherings were something the men with much amusement referred to me as *kantor* ("office"). After having my daily evening bath in the river just after sunset, the men would shout to me: "Ayo! Kita ke kantor. Sudah buka" (Come on! Let's go to the office. It's already open) or "Malam ini, sibuk di kantor" (It's busy at the office this evening). In the light of prevailing anti-state sentiments, I understood such phrasing as a kind of mockery. Such statements make the men laugh, but it also reflects a deep distrust of the government and its bureaucracy that they feel is not working in their favor. Joining for *kantor* is mostly a male activity, and a space where men can socialize without women. But, drinking together has a double meaning. *Kantor* empowers the men, and emphasizes them as political actors, brought together in a shared space of drinking, solidarity and equality. Politics was mostly a subject discussed during formal meetings in the longhouse or in other forums, but my impression was that the drinking-sessions in the evening was a context were the men spoke more freely and informal about their fears and concerns in regards to political issues.

As these examples show, food has both the power to create distance and to strengthen relations. Sharing of food in the longhouse is based upon strong principles of reciprocity. A *bilik*-family has obligations to share food and drinks, but also labor and participation at collective ritual occasions.

**Collectivism and solidarity in labor**

Families put a lot of effort in their farming activities throughout the year. All family members from old to young will participate in the tasks needed in the swiddens almost daily in the most intensive periods. The *bilik*-family is an autonomous economic unit, but it is not uncommon for several families to organize themselves in work groups during the most labor-demanding processes. The number of families involved in these collective arrangements varies. 3-5 families participating in the same organized workgroup was a common number, and work parties could be organized during any of the phases from *nebas* (the clearing of undergrowth) early in the summer to the last
phase of njembi (sun-drying of rice on the tanju) before storing (bersimpan) in March/April.  

The bilik-family is the core of the Iban society, but the people in the longhouse also stressed the importance of the extended family or “the big family” (*keluarga besai*). A family also has obligations to kin at certain occasions, especially at weddings, funerals and other ritual festivities. I often observed this form of reciprocal relations at Catholic ceremonial occasions. For instance, there was an occasion where the whole community went to the Catholic graveyard to cement the graves for the ones that had passed away but not yet had a cemented fundament built over their grave. To cover the graves with a cement structure is customary in Catholic graveyards. For this, all the kin of the deceased participated, but kin and family members who lived in other longhouses also came to help out. After this, the living descendants of the *bilik* that once was the home of the deceased were provided with *tuak* and a hot meal. When everyone had eaten, the head of the village initiated a prayer before sprinkling some holy water over the attendants that crossed themselves immediately. Occasions like these – when the living are in contact with the domain of the dead – demands certain purification rituals like a collective prayer. Before leaving the graveyard, all attendants had to take a bath in the river, as this is understood to have purifying qualities. Involvement in this work, in terms of sharing food and drinks and praying together manifests the relations and the affection between the living kin and the deceased family member, and between those who are living.

*The staircase*

In general, all individuals have obligations to the longhouse society as a whole. Each member represents their *bilik*-family, and each household must be represented in tasks that concern the whole community. While most parts of the longhouse are owned by a specific *bilik*, a few things in the longhouse are collectively owned. Among the most distinctive parts of collective ownership are the staircases that serve as the entrance to the longhouse. During my time in Sungai Utik, it was decided that they would replace the

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24 In chapter 3, I will give an example of how Iban families organize in work groups during the process of cultivating rice.
staircase in the downstream (ili) end of the house with a new one. For this work, every bilik-family sent a representative to participate.

The men went downriver to collect a thick log that was stuck in the mud under water. It took the whole day to dig it out. While digging, they had to watch out for baby snakes that lurked in the mud. When it eventually came loose, the steps were cut out directly in the wood with a chainsaw. The next day it was brought to the longhouse and a head with clear female characteristics where carved out on the top. A typical form for the staircases used in Dayak longhouses. A bit less traditional where the pair of breasts that were carved out beneath the head. I asked Renang, who was given the responsibility to carve out the nipples of this creature, if he had come up with any name for her: “Her name is Madonna”, he laughed. I was told that the gender of the staircase could be “gendered” as a man or a woman, and the staircase could represent the Iban and their hospitality. But it can also be seen as a representation of the ancestors and how they still inhabit the house as spirits. This emphasizes certain egalitarian aspects of the society.

When the time came to initiate and raise the staircase, almost everyone in the village rushed to the downstream end of the longhouse to participate in offering rituals that was led by the tuai rumah (literally: “The old in the house”), the traditional headman and the customary leader of the longhouse that knows adat (customary laws). When adding new elements to a longhouse such as a staircase, certain rituals must be performed in order to prevent bad things from happening, like attacks from malevolent spirits. The tuai rumah made the required amount of offering plates and placed them in certain locations to be consumed by the spirits. A small offering was also put in a little basket that was hung up over the staircase. Three types of rice covered the steps of the stairs: puffed rice, glutinous rice cooked in bamboo sticks and rice cakes. Young girls dressed in their traditional Iban dresses with chains of coins hanging from their waist and sparkling, silver-colored headdresses were the first to walk up the new staircase. This can be seen as a way of emphasizing the feminine attributes given to this staircase. On the top stood an elderly Iban with a fowl in his hands that he waved over the girls’ head as they passed him. On the topmost step they were served some drops of tuak that they first had to pour on the ground for the ancestors to drink, before they got a glass to drink for themselves. Then the rest of the women followed before the rest of the community
could enter. When all the people in the village had walked up the staircase, the fowl was sacrificed by cutting its throat. The blood was poured on the head of the staircase. Ultimately, a feather was taken and dipped in the blood, and all the people involved in the ritual had to touch the feather.

Touching the feather marks the collective and connective aspects of the ritual, as an act that involves all attendants. The feather was then stored in the basket above the staircase. During the whole initiation-ceremony for the staircase, two women were playing on gongs. This was meant to scare away any spirits of bad character that can appear as omens, normally in the shape of birds.

![Figure 5 Top of a staircase after the initiation ceremony (Photo: Author)](image)

**Conclusion**

The longhouse is embedded within meaning that both express certain values of autonomy/individualism, as well as the value of living together in a shared collective. This distinction is evident in architectural divisions of the longhouse. Family dwellings referred to as *bilik* expresses the autonomy of the family, while open “public” spheres
like the *ruai* and the *tanju* are spheres of interaction that to a greater extent emphasizes the shared sociality between the members in a longhouse. Iban society exhibits traits of what other scholars (Gibson and Sillander 2011) have referred to as “anarchic solidarity” typical in Southeast Asian contexts, where values of both autonomy/individualism and fellowship are expressed through daily life. The house as a “moral person” unites these seemingly opposed categories both as a physical and social construction. Individuality and autonomy for families is for example expressed through farming activities, and the institution for young men to go on a *bejalai* in search for fame, wealth and status. But there are also ties that bind the members in the longhouse together as a community. The shared solidarity between the members in the longhouse is constituted at different context like participating in rituals, sharing of food and drinks, and in organized labor between families.
3. Forests within the Forest

Multiple meanings of forests

A forest is more than just a collection of trees. In Sungai Utik, the forest is the basis of life in its many aspects. It is deeply connected to religion and cosmology, economy and sociality. Like the longhouse, which has several houses inside itself, the forest encompasses various types of forests and landscapes. As opposed to the state that classifies forests in terms of their function, the Ibans classify their forests according to a highly complex system. Iban forest classification and practical engagement with the forest environment, emphasizes the forest as a holistic concept that contains more than trees, plants, birds and animals. It is embedded with sociocultural meaning, and is vital for how the Ibans perceives themselves as an ethnic group. The forest can be seen as a reflection of the society, with its inherent values of both autonomy and the idea of being a collective. Likewise, the longhouse as a physical representation of the society, is embedded within forest symbolism.

Iban identity is closely linked to the natural environment. However, the forest is far from an untouched domain. It has rather been changed and cultivated by human interaction throughout generations. The close and practical engagement that Ibans have with their natural environment is much the same as their ancestors had. This continuity from past to present is expressed through various actions like clearing new swiddens, collecting logs for house improvements, or making offerings to forest spirits in the sacred forest areas. Iban relations with the landscape, resembles what Tim Ingold (1993: 152) calls the “dwelling perspective” of landscape. According to him, rather than seeing the landscape as a neutral background of human activity or as a cognitive symbolic order of space, landscape is constituted by the lives and works of those who have lived in it, and in doing so have left something of themselves in it.

State forest classifications

In Sungai Utik, as with Indonesia in general, forests can be seen as “contested spaces”. As defined by Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga and Setha M. Low (2003):” [...] geographic locations
where conflicts in the form of opposition, confrontation, subversion, and/or resistance engage actors whose social positions are defined by differential control of resources and access to power” (Lawrence-Zúñiga and Low 2003: 20). These conflicting schemes of land are evident in the Indonesian legislation.

Officially, the Indonesian state gained control over the country’s land and resources through *The Basic Forestry Law from 1967*, that classifies 73 percent of Indonesia’s forested area as state forest. This led to an uncertain status for the indigenous, rural communities that were dependent on their forest, while companies on the other hand were granted concessions for logging and industrial crops like palm oil (Hansen 2012: 52). According to article 33 in Undang Undang Dasar 1945, *The Fundamental Law of Indonesia*, natural resources are controlled by the state and should be utilized for the good of mankind to prosper (Hansen 2012: 10).

In Indonesia’s forestry legislation, forests are divided according to their functions. Main forest classifications are: **1. Production forests** – These are primary forests meant for producing forest products (such as timber, rattan and rubber). Production forests are further sub-divided into *permanent production forest* (in which the whole area is allocated for production purposes) and *limited production forest* (where only parts of the area is allocated for production) and *convertible production forest* (reserved for other land use purposes). **2. Protected forests** – The function of these areas are to protect life supporting systems and water source. **3. Conservation forests** – These are forest areas meant for protecting wildlife and biodiversity (Indrarto et al. 2012: 2).

*The Forestry Law from 1999* gave some recognition to customary forests governed by rural communities. This law differed between “state ownership”; on land that bears no ownership, “rights forests”; land with ownership, and “customary forests”; land entitled to communities under customary jurisdictions. In Indonesia, less than 40 percent of the land is held under private ownership, ranging from companies to individuals, while the rest is held under informal and customary tenure. Historically, rural communities have been dismantled by the Indonesian government, which regarded these communities as isolated and backwards. Through government programs of resettlement and education, these communities were subjected to reintegration programs to become part of the
national mainstream. Land rights for indigenous rural communities are limited in the Indonesian legislation, and are largely ignored for the benefit of development programs and business interests. Additionally, *The Forest Law from 1999* defines “customary forests” (*hutan adat*) as state forest (*Kawasan hutan Negara*), which is understood as “forests with no rights attached” (Hansen 2012: 10).  

Land ownership in Sungai Utik is informal, based upon customary ownership (*adat*), and is officially recognized as state forest. A constitutional court decision from 2013 ruled that customary forests are not to be considered as “state forest”, but this has yet to prove to be effective in practice (Rainforest Foundation Norway and GRID-Arendal 2014: 60). The Ibans have been connected to their land and forest long before declaration of the Indonesian state in 1945. Still, despite the absence of formalized rights, villagers in Sungai Utik have managed to protect their forest environment from both the state and companies that have attempted to exploit their forests.  

### Conceptualizing “nature”

“Nature” alone, is a problematic concept for understanding Iban relations to the forest environment. The main problem is the difficulty concerning the boundary between nature and the cultural domain/society. The longhouse is located in the middle of the Borneo rainforest, which makes the distinction between society/longhouse and nature blurred in itself. But also in terms of Iban mindset and how they perceive their world, this distinction stands out as less meaningful.  

According to Howell (1996: 127), the division between “nature” and “culture” derives from the Cartesian separation between “mind” and “body” in Western moral philosophy, where the “mind” is understood as superior to the “body”. Within this scheme, the “mind” as the source of intellect is deeply connected to society and culture, while the “body” belongs to the domain of the nature and animals. Additionally, maleness is often put in connection to “mind” while femaleness is more connected to “body”.

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25 *The Forestry Law from 1999* (Article 1) defines a forest as: ‘an integrated ecosystem within a landscape containing biological resource, dominated by trees in harmony with its natural environment inseparable from one another’ (Indrarto et al. 2012: 1).

26 This will be further examined in chapter 5.
In the case of the Chewong people in Peninsular Malaysia, these distinctions do not create meaningful categories in the way they perceive their world, humanity and personhood. Howell gives three main reasons for this; firstly, the Chewong do not put humans above animals as unique species in contrast to spirits, animals, plants and things. Secondly, the separation between mind and body, thinking and feeling is not meaningful for them, but rather interwoven. Thirdly, their forest environment does not create an opposition to the cultural world. However, the Chewong make a distinction between the forest and the feared outside world of the Malays and Chinese (Howell 1996: 128).

Howell’s description of Chewong relations to the natural environment coheres with how the Ibans perceive their forest environment. Based on my own field observations, I do believe that the Ibans experience a difference between nature and society in the way they perceive their world, but I am hesitant to make a sharp boundary between these two domains.

The society and its coherent values are embedded in the forest; physically in the landscape in the way Ibans classify the forest, and through practical engagement with the forest. Iban men might enjoy a greater mobility and freedom to interact with the forest environment, but in terms of labor in the swiddens, men and women are seen as equally important in the process of cultivating rice. Both sexes interact with the forest somehow on a daily basis. Without putting too much emphasis on the Ibans as “nature dwellers” living in harmony with their forest environment, I would rather suggest that the Ibans are entangled with their forest environment.

The general Indonesian term for nature is alam. I never heard any of my informants use this term. Sometimes, they used the term utan (“forest”). But even more common was to use directions, such as ulu (“upstream”) or ili´ (“downstream”), or refer to the specific forest categories, such as ladang (“swidden”). For practical reasons I will use “forest” or “forest environment” when I refer to the physical environment around the longhouse they consider as their traditional forest areas.
Forest symbolism in the longhouse

The forest can be seen as a reflection and an extension of the longhouse and the society. Equally, forest symbolism is reflected and embedded in the longhouse as the material manifestation of the society. The longhouse is almost entirely made of hardwood except from the bilik-apartments, which residents are freer to use more “modern” materials. The vertical logs used to construct the longhouse are not randomly positioned, but placed in the same position as the tree that it came from, the bottom of the trunk pointing down and the tip pointing upwards.

The longhouse is always located by the river. The river is the bathing place (penai), the source for fish and other water living animals (like frogs, toads, shrimps, turtles) and also used as transportation route to the forest. Both the longhouse and the river are metaphorically understood as a trunk (betang) having two ends, a tip (ujung) and a base or source (pun).27

Pun is a term that often occurs metaphorically in the Iban society. According to Sather (1993), pun is often referred to as “founder” or “initiator” and incorporates a sense of origin and continuity, both in terms of the longhouse and the bilik-families and how the continuation of life flows from one generation to another. Similar to the “trunk” as a botanical metaphor, pun represents a process from initiation to end, from “stem” to “tip” (Sather 1993: 75-76). The river is also said to have a source or a base that is located upstream (ulu) and a tip downstream (ili’). When referring to the different ends inside and outside the longhouse, people would often locate it ulu or ili’. For instance, if I asked someone in the longhouse where I could find a person I was looking for, they might say: “She is upstream”, while pointing towards the upstream end.

This indicates how spatial directions and certain botanical metaphors are relevant for understanding how Ibans relate to their forest environment. The house as a material manifestation of the society cannot be separated from “nature” and the forest environment. The trunk as a metaphor is also a dynamic term which gives a sense of movement; like a tree with its branches and roots that grow deeper, or the streaming

27 Another name for the longhouse (rumah panjai) is rumah batang (“trunk/log house”).
water in the river that gives life for generations to come. This applies for the house and the community as well. Family offspring in a bilik-family are metaphorically seen as “tip”, which take up residence in the bilik and ensures the continuation of the family and the longhouse. The house in itself is also understood as something living and dynamic that can grow, as new biliks are added to the house.

The house can “die” as well. In the past, it was not uncommon for a whole community to leave their longhouse to take up residence in a new location. One reason could be that many deaths had occurred in the longhouse, which would make the house “hot” and put it in a vulnerable state. Also, natural disasters (like flooding or years with poor harvests) would be reasons for villagers to leave the house and let it “die”. Migration history in Sungai Utik provides evidence for a semi-nomadic past, when it was rather common to settle in new longhouses after a period of 20-50 years. Still, reasons could be many. Population growth and land scarcity, were other common reasons to resettle in a new location.

Each family will choose a head of the family who is referred to as pun bilik (“the source of the family”). Mostly it is the oldest married male member of the family that holds this position. For instance, Pak Ramin in bilik no. 3 was pun bilik in his family, but when his wife suddenly died, this position was given to his son Doni. Without a spouse, his status as the head of the bilik-family had to be transferred to the next generation that would ensure the continuation of the bilik-family. This indicates that the core family is also the core of the bilik.

Every family also stores a certain type of rice grains that Ibans refer to as padi pun, “old rice” or “initial rice”, which bears strong connotations to origin and continuity from the past. Padi pun is a portion of the rice that was grown by the ancestors and further inherited from generation to generation. Padi pun is especially linked to the ancestors, the spiritual world and considered as “sacred” heirloom for a family. In the swiddens, there is a special spot where padi pun is planted and grown. On this spot, a family will perform the mandatory fertility rituals after the rice is planted in a new swidden. When building a new family dwelling in the longhouse, padi pun will be brought from the natal bilik of the founding couple, to the new bilik. In the case of the bilik that I was living in
during my fieldwork, the bilik was built in 2007 and considered the latest extension of the longhouse. The grandmother, who originally came from bilik no. 24, brought some padi pun from her natal bilik, which highlights the importance of having roots and a past to be able to grow. This act shows the mutuality between "tip" and "pun". This rice will be planted in the swidden as a “starter pack” for the new household.

Forest taxonomy

As stressed above, forest symbolism is embedded in the longhouse and the society at large. Equally, the society and its values are reflected in the forest. The forest is far from untouched, but has been shaped and cultivated by human interaction for hundreds of years. The forest is closely connected to the ancestors, which is manifested physically in the landscape and through the collective memories of the living. Working and moving in the same landscape as the past generations did, expresses continuation from past to
present. This section deals with how the Ibans perceive and shapes their forest environment, and how these manifestations in the landscape reflects sociality values in the Iban community. As in the longhouse, equality and autonomy are evident in Iban relationships with the forest environment. Families have their own autonomously owned swiddens and forest areas. But as in the longhouse, ideas of solidarity and being a collective society, are equally reflected in the forest.

**Primary forests:**
Most of the forest areas in Sungai Utik are considered to be collectively owned by the whole community, and regulated by customary laws (*adat*). The forest is divided into a number of different categories according to *adat* understanding. These areas are mostly primary forests or thick jungle (*rimba*). Around 70 percent of the total customary land areas in Sungai Utik (9.4525.2 hectares), are primary forests. According to Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), primary forests are defined as forests that have not been logged, and developed following natural processes; while secondary forests are forests that have been logged and recovered naturally (cbd.int).28 Primary forests are divided into three categories according to *adat* in Sungai Utik:

1. **Kampong taroh**

This type of forest is intended as forest reserve and is heavily regulated. It is intended as protected area for wildlife and water supply. No hunting is allowed in this area, and it cannot be converted into swiddens (*ladang*). Also, no logs can be taken from here.

2. **Kampong gelao**

This area is also considered as a protected forest reserve, but it can be used for specific purposes such as gathering medical plants, firewood or timber for making *sampan* boats (traditional canoes). Use of this area is still strictly regulated.

3. **Kampong endor kerja**

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28 [https://www.cbd.int/forest/definitions.shtml](https://www.cbd.int/forest/definitions.shtml) (acc.13.05.2016).
Also regulated by the community, but this area is considered as production forest. If a family wants to collect a log from here, one must ask the village for permission first, in which case there will be held a public meeting (*baum*) in the *ruai* with all *bilik*-families present. According to customary laws, a log must be at least 80 cm in diameter if someone wants to collect it. This as a principle of sustainability to indicate the age of the tree. Each family cannot take more than 30 logs each from this area every year. Still, it is quite unlikely that a family would need that many logs. Normally, a family collects 2-3 logs each year. A family also has their own private forest areas, located near the swidden, where they can take as many logs as they need.

**Pulau (“islands”):**

The Ibans also operates with a system called *pulau* (literally meaning “island”). Generally, these are forest areas for specific purposes, and the term “island” emphasizes that these areas are enclosed forest types that lay scattered in the landscape. A *pulau* is normally located around a family swidden that is being used (*ladang*) or a swidden fallow (*damun*). In the case of family ownership, a *pulau* is commonly used for collecting logs, rubber trees, for honey trees, and for planting fruit trees (such as jackfruit, durian, rambutan, coffee). A *pulau* can also be collectively owned by the community. These forest areas are for instance graveyards and sacred forests where certain rituals are performed. In these forests as well, no trees can be collected.

Collectively owned *pulaus* includes:

1. **Pulau api**

This area is used when a member in the community dies. The deceased’s family will gather on this spot to light a fire for three days. The flame represents the “inner flame” of the deceased. Some people say that the spirit of the dead may manifest itself in front of his family while burning the fire. After three days, the flame will be lit by the spirit that rules in the Realm of the dead (*Sebayan*).

2. **Pulau Pendam**
A graveyard (pendam or rarong) is often located as a pulau in the forest. Back in the past, it was common to bring the dead out to the forest to be buried on sacred ground. Entering a graveyard on your own is considered as taboo, and whenever the community has been to the graveyard, all members must be ritually cleansed in the river. Forest graveyards are not actively used anymore since most of the Ibans have converted to Catholicism and are buried in the Catholic graveyard not far from the longhouse. The few Ibans that still consider themselves animists will get buried in the forest.

**Tembawai (former longhouse locations):**
The forest is also a place of stories and memories of people and places of the past. *Taba* denotes the area that is chosen as location for a longhouse. The location of a former longhouse that has been left is referred to as *tembawai*. As mentioned earlier, there are several reasons for leaving a longhouse, but these places of former longhouses are not completely abandoned and forgotten. Instead they are cared for by the community as gardens where they plant fruit trees. In Sungai Utik, as much as 15 former dwelling sites are traceable and known by their name.

**Utan keramat (“sacred forests”):**
Sacred forests are divided into two main categories. *Tanah mali* is used to perform rituals that are meant to purify taboos that have been broken. For example, if someone has committed adultery, a purification ritual might be performed on this site. The second category is *tanah endor nampok*. These sites are sacred forests in a more positive way. Spirits and ancestors are said to be especially connected to this place. Here, certain rituals during *gawai* (the harvest feast) are performed to ask the ancestors for future wellbeing and for abundant crops in the following year.

**Ladang (“Swidden”) and damon (“fallow”):**
*Ladang* is a swidden currently in use by a family. A family may use it for one to two years, as long as the soil still proves to be fertile. A ladang can either be a flat field (*umai pantai*) or cleared on a hill (*umai bukit*). Earlier, people also utilized wetlands (*tanah kerapa*) for wet rice cultivation (*umai payak*), but this is not practiced any longer, mostly because this method was more exposed to flooding and crop failure. When the field becomes a fallow it is referred to as *damon*. Soon after being left, a field gets covered by...
thick shrubby growth before the secondary jungle grows up. *Damon* is further characterized in terms of how much re-growth there is in the field. When the trees have grown tall enough, the field can once again be converted into a *ladang*. The cycle of fallow takes around 10 years, before being used again as a swidden.

**Kebun ("gardens"):**

1. *Kebun karet*

These sites are the rubber tree gardens. For many years, rubber tapping has been an alternative source of income for villagers. While I stayed in Sungai Utik, most people did not put much effort into this activity since crude rubber prices were at an all-time low. But the rubber trees were occasionally compared to having money in a bank. Some might collect rubber while waiting for the prices to rise high enough to make some profit. Rubber trees were planted in gardens (*kebun*) that could be collectively owned by families or individually owned by a family.

2. *Kebun engkabang*

Families might also have some areas with *tengkawang*-trees. *Tengkawang*-fruits can be used to extract oil, but due to fluctuating prices, people did not put much effort in collecting these fruits either.

3. *Redas*

These are small gardens with fruits, vegetables, coffee and other crops for subsistence use. Families might have them closer to the longhouse.

**The process of cultivating rice**

The Iban year is centered on the cultivation of rice (*padi*) as the most important crop. A time-demanding and intensive process, which takes around a year from clearing the
land until the rice is stored. During the cultivation process, the whole family will help out with various tasks as long as the family member is competent enough to do it. Children and elders do not participate in the heaviest tasks. But parents often expressed the importance for children to help in the swiddens. This is for the younger generation to get familiarized with this work at an early age. As mentioned, a family needs as many hands as available to produce a suitable amount of rice for the coming year. Families may organize in work groups with other families during the most intense periods. This has its practical reasons, being an effective way of working, but there is also a social dimension of showing solidarity and helping your kin and neighbors. A distinctive aspect of the cultivation process is the sexual division of labor, despite the strong emphasize on egalitarianism in the Iban society. I will demonstrate this empirically by going through the most important stages of rice cultivation.

During my fieldwork, I joined my family for some tasks in the swiddens. When I first arrived in Sungai Utik in March 2015, people were about to finish the harvest. Later in my stay after the harvest festival (gawai) around May/June, with all its necessary rituals to “open” a fallow to be used as a swidden again (buka ladang baru), it was time to start over again in a new location. The clearing of a new swidden is initiated around June and ends in late July/beginning of August, while it still the drying season (musim kemarau). The first thing a family does before clearing a new swidden, is to build a small hut (langkau) on the outskirts of the new field. This hut is used to store farm tools and later, sacks of padi after the crop has been harvested. The hut is also used as a shelter and the place for resting while working in the swiddens. Inside of it, there is a fireplace for cooking meals.

On my first day in the swidden, it was raining heavily. When we arrived at the new field after one hour walk from the longhouse, all our clothes were wet and had to be dried over the fireplace. The grandmother made us some coffee while we were getting ready to clear the field. I remember that small bats hung in the beams under the ridge in the langkau. The grandfather in the family quickly grabbed his bush knife, killed them and

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29 During my fieldwork, I was able to participate in and observe the rice cultivation process from the harvest in March until the felling of trees in late June. The other stages were explained to me in detail by my informants.
threw them in the fire since bats can eat the crops. Some people keep a cat in their farm hut to avoid the crops being eaten by mice, rats and other animals. Some wastage of crops is expected due to wild animals. Especially monkeys, boars and birds were considered as a big problem. Sometimes people set up traps to minimize the loss.

The first process of clearing a new field is *nebas*, the cutting of undergrowth. All family members participate in this process. The land is cleared using large bush knives. Before we could begin this process, the grandmother collected all the knives and put them in front of her, then poured holy water over the blades and said a quiet prayer. At first, they were skeptical to let me participate in this process, but for me it was important to contribute, and frankly it would have been too boring if I were just to sit on a tree stump, taking photos and watch them work all day. I was told: "*Tidak harus, tidak bisa*" (You don’t have to, you don’t know how). I had to be quite insisting to prove my capability. So without saying anything further, I just grabbed a bush knife and started cutting the undergrowth like they did. It seemed to surprise them a bit, but after watching me for a few minutes, they seemed pleased with the result.

Once all of the undergrowth had been cut down, the trees were felled. People had just started to fell trees when I left the field. This process is called *nebang*, and is mostly considered a task for the men. After the trees were felled, branches were cut off, which is called *ngeredak*. 
Then, in August the swidden is ready for *nunu*, the burning. Before they can burn, each family will ask the spirits of the wind to make a good burn, to leave no spot unburnt. A good burn is crucial for the soil to be fertile. Burning a swidden takes about a day. After *ngeradak*, the field remains blackened with just a few tree stumps left. *Ngebak* is the process where they cut down the remaining trees and bushes that have not been completely burned.

In August/September the field is ready for the sowing of *padi*. A family or a work group walk in a line, with the men in front, carrying a stick to make holes in the soil. The women follow after with grains of rice that they plant in the holes. This is called *nugal*.

 Altogether, the whole community is using around hundred different types of *padi*, but I was told that single family will use around 20 types. For instance, there are red rice (*padi merah*), glutinous rice (*padi pulot*) to be cooked in bamboo sticks or to make *tuak* (“rice wine”), and everyday rice used for cooking meals. A family will also have their “sacred” or “old” rice (*padi pun*) that they grow on a specific spot in the swidden. After
the sowing, the family will perform certain fertility rituals on this spot. Later out when the *padi* starts growing, there might be need for some weeding (*mantun*), which is considered a task for women.

After three to four months, from December to March, it is time for *ngetau*, harvesting. It varies from each family, whenever the *padi* is ready to be harvested. The *padi* is cut directly from stalk and put down in large white sacks that are temporarily stored in their *langkau*, before bringing the *padi* to the longhouse.

After this comes the process of *nonkoh* (“threshing”). During this period, I remember that some families in the longhouse had organized into work groups for this task. I also helped out during a *nonkoh* which is performed in the *ruai* outside the *bilik* of the family that a *nonkoh* is held for. This was in mid-April. *Nonkoh* is a messy activity due to all the dust that fills up the air after stamping the rice. Tarpaulins were hung up in the *ruai* in order to avoid further mess. A sort of rack with a laying bamboo strainer was used. People took a sack with readily harvested rice on top of the strainer, jumped up and started stamping the *padi* with their bare feet while holding on to some ropes that were tied to the beams in the ceiling. Shortly after, rice grains started to fall through the strainer, and piles of rice were slowly building up under the rack. This is a very physical and heavy task that only the men take part in. The air was hot and dusty, and my feet felt sore for days after following this event. The hay that is left on top of the rack went for a second round of stamping and pressing, which is done on the floor by women who repeats the process with their feet while holding on to a stick in each hand. A last fine-separation of the grains from the axis were made with hands and a smaller strainer by a few elder women. The family that the *nonkoh* is arranged for will provide copious amounts of *tuak* for all the families involved, and serve *makan siang* (“lunch”) inside their *bilik*. When the *nonkoh* is finished for one family, the process is repeated for the next family in turn.

**Land-use and technology**

Land use for the Iban is dependent on long-term relations to land, their knowledge and skills. Still, certain limitations in terms of typography, climatic conditions and access to
capital limit their possibilities for modernizing, expanding and increasing the production of *padi*.

As noted above, use of technology in the swiddens is simple, and the process of cultivating *padi* is quite time-demanding. Just in a few cases that the Ibans have replaced their methods and tools with modern equipment. For instance, their hand-axes have been replaced with chainsaws. The Ibans cultivate their *padi* more or less similar to how this process was described by Freeman (1970) in 1955. He highlighted how simple the technology was for cultivating *padi*. Like in the case of threshing, which is more or less identical to the way they perform *nonkoh* today:

In discussing threshing with the Iban I often asked why it was that they did not adopt the more speedy method of using flails. Almost all Ibans are familiar with this technique having seen it, when on their travels, being followed by Chinese and others. Their reply was always the same: ‘We Iban simply dare not (*enda kempang*) strike our *padi*, for if we did so the *padi* spirits (*antu padi*) would take offence, and in danger desert us’. (Freeman 1970 [1955]: 212)

As it appears in Freeman’s description, there is a general consensus on respecting the *padi*, which further has implications for the use of technology. I often experienced myself how carefully villagers would treat the *padi*. For instance, after the harvest when the *padi* is being sundried on the *tanju*, it is considered taboo to step on the rice, even though this is not completely unavoidable. However, people will try their best to walk with light steps while working on the *padi*.

I never heard them say anything about the rice spirits getting angry if they did not threat the *padi* carefully (ibid). However, it became clear to me that cultivating rice has a strong link to the spiritual world and the ancestors, who cultivated on the same fields as they do today. Ancestors and spirits are for example given offering plates with various types of rice in return for their blessings and protection at certain ceremonial occasions. Improving techniques and making radical changes to rice cultivation practice in the rice in the swiddens (using pesticides, tractors, machining techniques for harvesting and threshing etc.), would have been a violation to *adat* and the ancestors.

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30 The importance of rice at religious contexts will be further examined in chapter 4.
Scholars have demonstrated how the use of western technology as an expression of progress and modernity has a great potential for change in small-scale societies. Among the most radical and well-known examples are Lauriston Sharp’s (1952) *Steel axes for stone-age Australians*. Sharp describes how the introduction of steel-axes among the Australian Yir Yoront, an aboriginal group in the Cole Cape Peninsula, led to a total collapse in the social hierarchy. Stone axes were rare and connected to male masculinity, but steel-axes were distributed to all members in the society. This further led to a confusion of sex, age and kinship-roles. A more recent example comes from Tania Li (2014), who describes how social relations, landscape, diets, houses, movement and patterns of consumption rapidly changed among the Lauje in Central Sulawesi with the modernizing effects of agricultural improvements. From being shifting cultivators with their own system of organizing labor and land use, the relation to land and between people changed when people got money to invest in industrial crops, like cocoa and cloves, and with the privatization of land. While some prospered, others lost their land and struggled to provide for their families.

For the Ibans, cultivating land in the same way as the ancestors did represents a counterpart to modernity. Forests can both be individually owned or communal, but there is an important principle of using and cultivating the land on equal terms. Families operate their swiddens as an autonomous economic unity, responsible for their own crops, but their autonomy takes part in a wider social system of solidarity and being a collective. Families can do whatever they want in their swiddens, but there is a general consensus of using the land like your ancestors did. Families cannot start “opening” swiddens before they have the ancestor’s permission, and it is not allowed to start burning the land before the family has the permission from the whole longhouse community.

**Personhood and landscape**

Memories, identity and personhood are embedded and manifested in the forest landscape. When villagers plant fruit trees in the *tembawai*, former dwelling sites, the place is being reproduced as part of the collective memory of the ancestors. Equally,
graveyards, *pulaus*, swiddens and other areas that have been cultivated and used by the Ibans for generations, connects the people and practices from the past to the living and the present. For instance, many elders in the longhouse did not know exactly how old they were, but they knew at what time during the cycle of cultivating rice they were born. As it appears, personhood is not separated from the forest landscape.

The forest is full of reference points and markers. After spending much time in the forest since childhood, people I spoke with knew about every tree and rock, and have more or less created a mental map of the forest. Occasionally I heard someone say things like: “This tree was small when I was a child, now it has grown huge”. Natural reference points like streams, rocks, wet-land and tree stumps also work as informal property markers. Every time I asked about the ownership for a specific land area, I would get an answer like: “That is the land of number 17 (*bilik*-number in the longhouse), the river stream here marks the border and behind the rubber trees over there is my land”. Moreover, all villagers must know what the different types of forests are being used for. It is important for maneuvering in the landscape, for knowing ownership (private or collective), knowing what the forest can give (fruits, timber, rubber etc.), the limits of use and in case the place is connected to certain taboos (like graveyards and sacred forests).

From what I experienced, the forest is not a particularly male domain, but in general men spend more time in the forest. Except for the work in the swiddens, where all family members take part, men are obliged to provide for their families. Collecting forest products, fishing and hunting are the responsibility of male members in the *bilik*. Especially the young boys are given the task of fishing in the river. Women have a stronger connection to the longhouse and the *bilik*, through domestic activities like cooking meals, taking care of the children and looking after the livestock. Women have a lot of knowledge about their forest environment, but as the providers of the families, men enjoy greater mobility and gain more knowledge about the forest.

As previously mentioned, the forest is also bodily imprinted in the form of tattoos on men, which emphasize their mobility and status. Forest symbols like fruits, birds, crabs and flowers were given to men after they had returned from a *bejalai*, or in the past,
after a successful headhunt. These examples show the inter-connectedness between personhood, identity and the forest landscape. The past and the ancestors are embedded physically in the landscape, and maintained by the community through their movements, practices and collective memory.

Conclusion

Iban relations to their forest environment contrasts sharply with the state’s classification schemes in terms of forest functions. The Ibans do not retain any formal ownership to their forest environment. Customary ownership is distributed between autonomously owned forest areas and collective forest areas, which reflects certain values of Iban sociality in the longhouse. Making a sharp distinction between the longhouse/society and the forest environment is problematic because these spheres of Iban life reflect each other. This further emphasizes the forest environment as holistic concept that permeates a wide range of aspects in Iban life.

Iban subjectivity, are equally connected to the forest environment. The forest represents a place of memories, identity and personhood that is physically manifested in the landscape, and maintained through practical engagement and the collective memory of those living in the longhouse.

If we are to understand how the Ibans position themselves in relation to external actors like the state, business interests and NGOs, it is fundamental to understand how the Ibans perceive their forest environment, and what it means to them. Ideas, beliefs and values must resonate locally to be considered as legitimate in the eyes of the Ibans.
4. Iban Religion and Cosmology

In this chapter, I will focus on Iban relations to the spiritual world, their cosmological principles and religious practices. The spiritual world permeates a wide range of aspects in Iban life and work as guidelines for what it means to be a good Iban: such as cultivating swiddens and making offerings to the ancestors, avoiding breaking taboos, and making yourself a name to be remembered in the afterlife. As with the forest environment, society is not separated from spiritual life. There are certainly boundaries between humans and the spiritual world, but there is also a strong mutuality between the visible world of the humans and the invisible world of the spirits and ancestors. As I will demonstrate, the spiritual world of the Ibans has a ubiquitous relationship and coexistent with current expressions of Catholicism.
Both historical sources and more recent scholarly work on Iban religion readily note its “syncretic” appearance within a larger Southeast Asian context, but authors have differed in their emphasize on the significance of its animistic composition. Iban religion is a form of animism, where the forest is understood as a socialized domain. Spirits and ancestors have anthropomorphic qualities and can take on different shapes and appearances of beings of the forest. They can be encountered in stones, plants and animals. In daily life, the spiritual world is interacted with through dreams, food taboos or during larger ritual contexts, such as shamanistic séances and ceremonial offerings.

Although the Ibans have maintained their local beliefs and religious ritual-practice (adat meaning “tradition”), they are not unchallenged by processes of change. In Sungai Utik, almost everyone considered themselves Catholic, but for a long time, the majority of Ibans opposed the Church. The head of the village told me that missionaries first arrived in Sungai Utik around 1913, but many did not convert until the 1950s. Still, there is a handful in the longhouse that have not converted.

Catholicism constitutes a strong force in the Iban community, challenges local beliefs, and has decried some Iban practices as paganism. Certain cultural characteristics and practices of the Ibans, such as having elongated earlobes or exposing trophy heads from headhunting in the open gallery, were seen as savage traditions by the clergy. Yet, and even though marked by friction, the Church has largely been tolerant of Iban religious practices. That is, tolerant in the sense of accepting such practices as adat. However, the boundaries between adat and agama, (official “religion”), as significant practices have far from weakened, but is maintained by both the Church and the Ibans themselves.

Contextualizing religion in Indonesia: Adat and agama

Both adat and agama influence Iban everyday life. A vital difference between the two is that Catholicism falls under the category of agama, and is acknowledged as “religion” by the Indonesian state, while adat is not.

31 “Syncretism” refers to the practice of mixing and blending religious elements with each other (Mulder 1992: 3).
32 Trophy heads are still of ritual importance, but are kept in the loft in Sungai Utik.
Anderson (1983: 110) notes how one of the “problems” of post-colonial Indonesian nationalism was figuring out how to (re)constitute the territory left by Dutch colonialists in a way that could also (vaguely) correspond to any pre-colonial domain. Religion became an important rallying point for integrating cultural diversity, as expressed by the various groups and tribal communities across the Indonesian archipelago, into one nation. The importance of this is also apparent in the state’s national ideology, *Pancasila*, where the first principle is: “Belief in one and only God” (*Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*) (Antlöv 1995: 37). In Indonesia, only five religions are acknowledged by the state: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism and Hinduism. Since the birth of the Indonesian nation in 1945, all Indonesian citizens must belong to one of these official religions as stated in *Pancasila*.

Even though *agama* has a great impact on Iban life, it is *adat* that stand out as the more significant concept on a daily basis. *Adat* also refers to laws and practices, like what trees people can fell in the forest, when they can start burning their swiddens and the sanctions following the breaking of a taboo. Although being an encompassing concept of Iban social life, it is especially significant to what we may regard as religious practice. In Sungai Utik, people did not consider their rituals, offerings to ancestors, and shamanism as “religion”. These were all articulated as being *adat*.

While *agama* is largely about citizenship, *adat* has a more holistic position in the Iban society. Following Dumont (1979: 279), *adat* can be seen as “an ideology that valorizes the social whole and neglects or subordinates the human individual”. Although people in Sungai Utik would not describe their own traditional believes as animism, Iban religious practice can be understood in these terms, and exhibit similarities to other tribal societies that practice animism throughout Borneo and Southeast Asia. I will return to the contextual boundaries of *adat* and *agama* empirically later in this chapter.

**Southeast Asian perspectives on animism**

According to Kaj Ärhem (2016: 16), most cases of animism in Southeast Asia would be considered to be of the hierarchical type, while the egalitarian venatic animism, as exemplified by the Chewong, is rare in the Southeast Asian context (See Howell 1984,
In prototypical animism, which Iban animism in important respects seem to resemble, societies are often characterized by village-based farming that grows rice and holds livestock, where domestic animals have replaced the ritual significance of wild game. Hierarchy is often articulated by sacrifice. People sacrifice domestic animals (in the past also human heads) to ancestors and spirits. The sacrifice expresses dependence and submission to superior beings of the spiritual world, and humans depend on their blessings and benevolent actions. This presence of ancestors defines Southeast Asian cosmologies. In death, the dead are commonly being realized and transformed to become ancestors (Århem 2016: 19-20). The living are dependent on the support of their ancestors, and seek their guidance and protection. These ancestors are commonly understood to live parallel lives of the living, dwelling in the house or the forest.

Worshiping the ancestors for their benevolent blessings is at the core of Iban religious practice. While both Sather (1994b) and Wadley (1999) downplay the significance of animism in Iban religion and rather treat it as a “cult of the ancestors,” I agree with Véronique Béguet (2012: 246) who argues that the process that creates ancestorship among the Ibans is the metamorphosis of invisible entities into animals:

> These practices do not in my view represent a “cult of the ancestors”, but rather, the core of Iban animism, which involves the capacity to establish proper relationships with immanent invisible beings of human and non-human origins. The dreams and augury, as much as the rituals, are all means of creating and maintaining such relationships, personally and collectively. (Béguet 2012: 247)

Béguet emphasizes that the Iban petara (constituents of the Iban pantheon) are attributed as “ancestors”, understood as important personalized historical figures of the Iban people, but she further suggests that it is the transformation of the ancestors that connects the Iban to animated beings of the forest environment (Béguet 2012: 247).

Another fruitful approach to understand Iban relations to the spiritual world is found in Jon Henrik Ziegler Remme’s (2016) work on the Ifugao of Northern Luzon Philippines. Remme describes the Ifugao’s cosmology in terms of “onto-praxis”, meaning that instead of treating their religious practice as a context-free system of belief, Remme highlights the processual practical engagement with spirits. That is, instead of constituting an unsituated body of knowledge about spiritual beings or a “cosmological map”
(Willerslev 2007: 156), Remme locates this dimension in practice. In the case of the Ifugao, there is a shared sociality between humans and the spiritual world, although being treated as separate spheres. There is always a potential for actualization between the world of the living and the spiritual world, which can be of good or bad character, but a total actualization would mean death in the Ifugao world-view (Remme 2016: 149).

What Remme suggests is that in the case of the Ifugao, we must both consider knowledge about cosmology, what the world looks like, and how the humans and the non-humans relate to each other. But it is equally important how people themselves enact and interpret their encounters with the spiritual world. This processual and dynamic approach is what Remme refers to as “onto-praxis” (Remme 2016:139). With the Ifugao, Remme shows the dynamism of human-spirits encounters, and how these are actualized, but actualization is always dependent on the context. A bird can potentially be a spiritual omen, or it can just be a bird without any divine significance (Remme 2016: 144).

Similar to the Ifugao, the Ibans relate to a highly complex system of knowledge about the cosmos and the spirits that inhabits it, but interpretation and the practical engagement is always taken into consideration.

**Becoming an ancestor**

In this section, I will outline the process of how to become an ancestor, and how the spiritual world is both entangled with and separated from the life of the living. The transformative process of becoming an ancestor and how the Ibans classify beings of the spiritual world (as malevolent forest spirits, ancestors or deities in the Iban pantheon), are more profoundly expressions of values and moral. In death, there is a hierarchical classification between the ancestors. Even though this differs from the highlighted ideology of egalitarianism, equality and solidarity in the longhouse, it is also connected to how people are expressing autonomy, individualism and what it means to be a good Iban.
In addition to being understood as deities in the Iban pantheon, previous scholars have described *petara* as “all supernatural beings who have benevolent intentions towards human beings” (Masing 1997: 18). Sather (1994a: 119) defines them as “ancestors with cosmic attributes”. This opens up for a wider interpretation of the concept of *petara*. In a general sense all deceased can be described as *antu* (meaning “ghost” or “spirit”), but in daily life this specific term is used to describe malevolent spirits (Jensen 1974). Another term for the dead can be found in *antu Sebayan*, meaning “spirits of the underworld” (Jensen 1974: 102).

Ethnographic accounts often reflect the ambiguity of terms and how these are used interchangeably by Ibans, which also resonates with my own experiences in the field. The way in which we as anthropologists conceptualize the beings of the supernatural world makes room for different interpretations of how people relate to the spiritual world. Based on how I experienced people’s engagement with the spiritual world, I choose not to see the *petara* solely as “deities” in the Iban pantheon, but rather as a general term people use about their ancestors. However, the godlike mythical heroes are regarded as the highest ranked ancestors, and are thus at the top of the spiritual hierarchy,

There is a potential for all spirits of deceased community members to transform and be acknowledged as an ancestor, but people make certain distinctions between malevolent spirits and those spirits that become acknowledged as ancestors by the community. While *antu* is understood as a potentially dangerous force that can harm human beings, *petara* are often seen as benevolent forces which protect, guide and help humans. A *petara* is also a “ghost” or “spirit”, but differs from the general understanding of *antu* as malevolent spirits. Iban *petara* is in practice a spirit of the underworld that has been identified, personalized and acknowledged by the community as a good spirit. This is what gives status as an ancestor.

Becoming an ancestor is a process. When people depart from the world of the living, the human soul (*semangat*) goes to *Sebayan* (Realm of the dead). According to Jensen (1974) some Ibans claim that after some time in *Sebayan*, the *semangat* becomes the dew that feeds the rice (Jensen 1974: 108). This rice is then ingested by the living, and in this way rice is a transubstantiation of the ancestors. This is reflected in the statement
“rice is our ancestors” (“padi aki’ ini’kami”) (Sather 1994a: 130). Sather (1993: 111) points out that some Ibans claim that the souls of the dead do not leave the longhouse, but rather that they and Sebayan exists beneath the floor in the longhouse.

At certain occasions, the Ibans will pour some drops of tuak through cracks in the floor, but this is most frequently in relation to ritual feats such as the harvest feast (gawai) and the festival of the dead (gawai antu). This practice is integral to a conception of the living drinking with the ancestors. Some Ibans also say a small prayer to the ancestors while pouring the tuak with meri’petara ngirup (“give the ancestors drink”) as a common phrase. Pouring and praying only occurs when drinking tuak, which is made from rice, indicating that that the act is not just symbolical, but can be understood as an act involving the animated ancestors themselves.

As I have mentioned, Iban animism is hierarchically organized. At the top are “the great petara”, mythical heroes of great importance for the whole Iban community. These have godlike characteristics and are often considered as founders of customary laws. In the Iban pantheon, they are identified as seven specific petara that occasionally show themselves as omen birds. If seeing one of these birds, the petara representing this bird shows itself for the humans with a message to the living. When I went with the men in the forest and an omen bird appeared in our presence, they would watch it closely. They would look at how it moved, listen to hear if it sang in a particular way, and try their best to interpret its behavior. This would tell something about future events.

Ancestors who are acknowledged as meaningful pioneers of the whole longhouse community are also petara. These ancestors do not have “godlike” features like “the great petara” and they are not acknowledged by all Ibans, but are worshiped by the members in the community they once lived in. Some people also have a personal petara from their own kin. Sometimes individuals worship these at smaller personal

33 The named godlike heroes that are acknowledged in the Iban pantheon as “the great petara” are: 1. Sengalong Burong, the god of war and protection 2. Biku Bunsu Petara, the female high priest 3. Sempulang Gana, the god of agriculture 4. Selamppandai, the god of creation 5. Menjaya Manang, the god of health and shamanism 6. Anda Mara, the god of wealth 7. Ini Andan, the god of justice.

cereonies. Through prayers, when calling for petara, they will add the name of their personal ancestor guardian. These ancestors can help the living to gain wealth and status, ensure good health and abundant crops of rice.

In dreams or as real lived experiences, spirits and ancestors can show themselves in the shapes of animals. Ancestors appearing as animals explain certain personalized food taboos. During my time in Sungai Utik, I got the chance to taste a lot of the Iban cuisine. A common meal during the day would include rice, vegetables, fish from the river and occasionally pork and mouse deer meat. They are not particularly picky on what to eat (seen from my perspective). Among other things that I was offered were monkey (meat or brain), turtles, toads and frogs, “jungle cats”, and lizards. One evening when I sat with a group of villagers in the evening, drinking tuak, I asked if there were some animals that they were forbidden to eat. Pak Inam said:

We cannot eat orangutan, snakes and crocodiles, because they are our ancestors (using the Indonesian term for “ancestors”, nenek moyang). Maybe they do in other Iban villages, but we do not. We cannot eat dogs either, because they are like friends, our guardians and hunting companions.

I actually saw people eating snakes at some occasions, which surprised me after hearing how there was a taboo on eating snakes. Would it not be the same as eating their own ancestors? I later found out that these animals are not necessarily the ancestors for the whole community, but for some people an animal like a snake can be their own animated ancestor that works as their tua (literally meaning “the old”), personal protectors for families or individuals. For one family, relatives may show themselves as snakes while in another family it could be crocodiles. These taboos have emerged because these animals appeared in front of them (physically or in their dreams) and the people have interpreted their appearance to be their ancestors.

Antu are mostly seen as malevolent supernatural beings that potentially can harm the living. There are also sub-groups of these spirits, but the most common and feared is

35 I never came across any Iban term for “taboo”. Villagers simply used the Indonesian word “tabu” during our conversations.
“the huntsman”, *antu gerasi*. This spirit is seen as a giant that hunts for human souls. Individuals that dies in a brutal way will probably become malevolent spirits. These souls do not go to the *Sebayan*, but in a separate domain in the sphere of the non-living.\(^\text{36}\)

Personal status while being alive is also motivated by gaining a name to be remembered in the afterlife, but the world is an uncertain place and as with many other aspects in life, death cannot be completely controlled. Dying in a brutal way can potentially transform the individual into a malevolent spirit that attacks the living rather than becoming an ancestor. Iban rituals are largely centered on trying to gain control in an uncontrollable world, to have success in life, to receive abundant crops of rice, to secure good health and to maintain order in life by putting the living above the dead.

While highlighting egalitarianism and solidarity as important values in the Iban society, there is a strong social differentiation in death. As I argued for in chapter 2, emphasizing values of egalitarianism and solidarity does not necessarily stand in opposition to expressing autonomy and accumulating personal wealth, but in death individuality and personal achievement while being alive is decisive if one is remembered or not. What makes people remember their ancestors varies. For instance, it could be those who took many trophy heads (*antu pala*) through warfare, who came back from their *bejalai* with many precious items or those having success in their swidden farming activities. Those ancestors who are especially important for the whole longhouse community are those whose personal achievement affected the whole community, such as pioneer longhouse founders, famous *adat* leaders, shamans and headmen. These people will be remembered through legends and stories, people’s collective memories, manifestations in the landscape like the forests they cleared. Also, materially with all kinds of valuable items they collected while being alive (such as trophy heads, bronze gongs, Chinese jars, brassware, knives, guns, farming tools). According to Århem (2016: 19), these items are also manifestations of spiritual power, though showing the prosperity of the family as a result of the benevolence of the ancestors towards those holding these items.

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\(^{36}\) Among these are women that had died in childbirth. They would become feared spirits called *antu koklir*, that especially attacks men.
The mourning ritual

When someone dies, the relation between the living and the dead is unveiled. The house is said to become “hot” (angat) that puts the house and its inhabitants in a vulnerable state. The whole longhouse community needs to follow certain taboos during the mourning period. During my time in Sungai Utik, the man considered to be the oldest member of the longhouse community suddenly died. The mourning ritual of “cutting” the grief shows a sociality towards the spiritual domain and within the society itself.

The mourning period for the whole community (ulit) takes about a week. During ulit, people are not allowed to leave the village or to do any farming activity. There is a great tranquility in the longhouse among the people. There is no use of electronic devices such as television and radio. People are not to talk too loud, and women are not allowed to wear jewelry and fine clothing. All people in the longhouse need to follow these sets of rules. If anyone breaks some of these taboos, the individual is obliged to pay a fine. The amount of this fine will be discussed and decided by the other members in the longhouse, based upon the severity of the taboo violation.

The mourning for the whole longhouse-community is ended with a ritual that has the purpose of lifting the mourning or to “cut away the grief” (ngtas ulit). For this ceremony we all gathered in the ruai outside the door to the apartment of the deceased. It bears similarities with a typical memorial, but it is performed some days after the burial. People express their grief and some people say some well-chosen words. The formal task for lifting the mourning is always given to a young man of the deceased kin that newly have returned from a bejalai. The harvest-feast had recently been held in Sungai Utik, so many men had come back from their bejalai.

The task was given to Uyub, a young man around my age. Back in the past, he would have been required to collect a human head, but nowadays Uyub instead goes hunting for some hours in the morning. For this hunt we were several men participating. A successful hunt is not required, but we managed to get one boar. Back in the longhouse for the ngtas ulit, Uyub went into the apartment of the deceased relative with a shotgun. On the back of the house he fired the shotgun in the air. He then returned to the ruai where all the attendants sat waiting while some men at the center were preparing some
offering plates. The people told me that these offerings were given to the deceased so he could eat on his journey to the Sebayan. Uyub then cut a lock of hair from everyone who was attendant (me included). The hair was put on the offering plate and a chicken was waved over the plates before being waved over all the people present. Then he cut throat of the chicken and dipped some feathers in the blood. Back inside the ruai, all people had to touch the feathers by their hand, forehead or footpad. The feathers were put on the plate and the plate was thrown outside. After the ritual, a meal that had been prepared by the women in the early morning hours was served. All of these rites are expressions of preparing the dead soul for his journey into the afterlife, as well as lifting the grief from the house and the people that are being “cut” away from the deceased. The shot and the sound of the shotgun is the ritual climax, when the spirit departs from the world of the living.37

For me, the ritual revealed itself as an ethnographic “peak-hole” for the transition of a member in the society to the spiritual domain. It is a starting-point for the departure from the world of the living to the Sebayan. The ritual elements, like presenting an offering plate for the departed spirit of the deceased, confirms the transition of the spirit, but is not a full completion of ancestorship. The mourning ritual marks the distinction between the world of the living and the individual that no longer are with them. At the same time, imposed ritual acts like “cutting” the grief and prohibitions during the mourning period are imperatives that the whole society must adhere to. It reveals a sociality both vertically towards the spiritual hierarchy and horizontal within the society itself, between, neighbors and friends, family and kin. Death does not only mean that an individual is dying, but it invokes the whole society by making the longhouse “hot” and putting all the members in a vulnerable state.

*Mimpi* (‘dreaming’)

Dreaming is another way to understand the Iban relation to the spiritual world, and Iban sociality as involving both the living and the non-living. The soul (*semangat*) is said to leave the body when people are asleep, and can go on journeys to faraway places.

37 The use of sound through shotguns, drums or gongs are generally applied as a way of to call upon the ancestors or to scare away bad spirits.
According to the Ibans, this is what causes dreaming. When the soul leaves the body, the soul is in a vulnerable state and at risk of being attacked by spirits.

Dreams are also filled with meaning and occurrences that must be interpreted. Seeing a snake in the dream can be a relative with a message or an encounter with a bad spirit, and it is up to the dreamer to interpret the dreams. Dreams may also work as guidelines for how people ought to interact and relate to each other. I remember one occasion when a relative of Edmundus, the grandfather in the bilik that I was living in, had a bad dream about him. I did not know what the dream was about, or who it was that had dreamed this dream, but Edmundus' family approached the incident with great seriousness. We all gathered in the kitchen, and Pak Simon from the neighboring apartment came to initiate a prayer for Edmundus and his family. After praying and reading a verse from the Bible, he sprinkled some holy water over all the members in the family.

Dreams exemplify the shared sociality between the living and the non-living beings in the world. The Ibans do not distinguish between encounters with the spiritual domain in dreams and encountering a physical spirit in the forest in the shape of an animal. Both domains are equally seen as lived and real experiences.

The enigma of the shaman

If someone has fallen ill, a shaman (manang) is called for to heal. Sickness is commonly understood as being the result of an attack by a malevolent spirit. The soul (semangat) has been possessed and must be recovered by the shaman who has a special ability to look into the spiritual world.

Ethnographic accounts of Iban shamanism have characterized the shaman as someone that in many ways differs from the average Iban. According to Graham (1987: 16-26), the shaman is often seen as a trickster and a charlatan. The shaman has also often been understood as ambiguously gendered, containing or capable of articulating both male and female characteristics (ibid 1987: 90-91). Barret and Lucas (1993) describe a shaman as being in an “intermediate position” which is reflected in the different attitudes people has towards the shaman: “The disparities in ethnographic accounts
mirror the ambivalence of the Iban themselves, who treat *manang* with a mixture of skepticism and belief, derision and awe” (Barret and Lucas 1993: 588).

The shaman in Sungai Utik was indeed a very different character compared to the rest of the people in the community. A bit “shy” and quiet, he rarely mingled with the others in the longhouse, did not have a wife and rarely joined in “manly” tasks. But he was neither seen as a transvestite, slacker or a fraud. People seemed to respect him and put their faith in his words. The liminality of the shaman, as being positioned in-between the living and the non-living, makes him an interesting figure that can help us better understand how people relate to spiritual encounters during shamanistic experiences. As with dreams, there is an interpretive aspect of shamanism which is emphasized by the relationship between the shaman and the people attending a séance.

Shamanism is a tradition under pressure, especially encroached upon by modern medicine and Christianity. But as with all other aspects of spirituality in the Iban society, shamanism takes place in a social context and reflects certain principles of sociality and values. People in Sungai Utik did not have much money to spend on modern medicine and would therefore seek help from the shaman, but in serious cases like cancer and chronic diseases, people were aware that a séance was not sufficient and that they needed treatment from modern medical practitioners.

The shamanistic séances are performances where attendants act as friends and kin showing sympathy for the sick. They are also helpers for the shaman, as well as being an audience. Séances usually last for several hours, starting in the evening and ending early in the morning. The rituals in a séance vary depending on the kind of sickness being treated, and if it is held for an adult or for a child. A séance is chaotic and filled with immense symbolic meaning. During my own experiences, I felt it impossible to see all the actions of the shaman and to grasp the complete meaning of it. Due to space limitations, I will not go through a fully detailed explanation on how shamanic séances are performed, but mention some of the main acts and methods during a healing ritual.

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38 When a shaman dies, his soul *does* not travel downstream the river to the Sebayan as with other people. In the Sebayan, there is also a special realm for shamans.
My descriptions of Iban shamanism are based upon several observations. Despite my limited language expertise and the many symbolic references, my aim is nevertheless to grasp some crucial aspects of Iban shamanism. What I find interesting is to focus on the séances as a sphere of meaning and interaction between the living and the spiritual world through the shaman.

The séance

Whenever there was a séance there was always a lot of talking, laughing, smoking and chewing of beetle nut leaves among the attendants. From time to time a tray with *tuak* or coffee was offered. A lot of people came and went. For me, this indicated that shamanic séances also are seen as a sort of social event. This is not to say that people did not relate to the rituals with seriousness, but there is a distance between the shaman and the attendants. The attendants are not the ones having insight in the sickness, for them the séance itself is an enigma.

When I attended a séance, it was difficult for me to understand all the acts and their specific significance. This was, I thought, largely due to me being and outsider, and I presumed that all attendants knew the meaning of everything the shaman did. It became clear to me, however, that this was not the case. Shamanism shows that knowledge about the spiritual world is not given and clear, but is revealed through practical engagement and interpretation. The shaman interacts with the sick and the spiritual world, but it is up to the attendants to interpret his acts during the séance. People were not active participants throughout the whole séance, but the attendees were more engaged at certain moments that stood out as “moments of truth” when the essence of reality revealed itself. One such moment was when the shaman carried an offering plate for the spirits to feed on to the outside. At such moments of special significance, people had their eyes attached to what is going on, and some would play drums and gongs to protect against further spirit attacks.

For me the atmosphere during a séance always felt very tense, or even mystical. Only the dim light from the fire lit up the dark room. The shaman sat in the middle of the room at a shrine called *pagar api* (literally “fence fire”). This is a post covered in branches with leaves, which makes it look like a tree. By the foot of the *pagar api*, the shaman had the
tools he needed to look into the spirit world, including stones, herbs, charms, rice for offerings and a bottle of *tuak*. During the healing process, the shaman sang a set of “cooling” chants called *pelian*. From what I could hear, these chants sounded like a mix of wordless humming and verses with cryptic meaning that made no sense to me. The first time I attended a séance a man beside me said: “He sings in a language that only he understands”.

From what I could discern there are three main stages during a séance. This progresses from finding the source of the sickness (meaning finding the spirit that causes sickness so the soul can be recovered), the healing, and protecting the patient and her family against further spirit attacks. Shamans can use different methods for finding out what makes the person ill. Reading in stones is one method. Stones are said to be animated by spirits. Stones are associated with “coldness”, while the body of the sick that is attacked by spirits is said to be “hot”. The role of the shaman is to recover the state of coldness in the body of the patient, but also the state of society and cosmos. The healing ritual is primarily orientated towards the patient, but as the séance progresses, the family of the ill and also the whole community itself is incorporated as something that is threatened and must be restored. This elucidates how the individual can be an image and a reflection of the community. The task of the shaman is to regain human control over the spiritual world. During the healing process, the shaman will try to reclaim the patient’s soul back from the grip of the spirit, by singing the *pelian*-chants. The soul is retrieved during a state of trance or occasional faints that the shaman goes into alone or with the patient.

When the shaman from Sungai Utik himself fell ill, a female shaman from the neighboring longhouse came to perform a séance. At the end of this séance, she and the patient went into a state of trance together. When they went into this state, they had to cover themselves with a protective cloth, to avoid further attacks from spirits. All of a sudden, they woke up simultaneously, looking a bit dizzy and dazed. “When they go into this state they go on a journey together to a place far away. We do not know where they go, but it is like dreaming together”, said Pak Kades, the village head. He emphasized to me that this was only his interpretation and that only the shamans would know since they are the ones with the insight into the spiritual world. “*Hanya dia tahu. Dia yang bisa lihat*” (“only she knows, she is the one that sees”), he said.
At the end, when the shaman has found the source of the sickness, the sickness or the spirit possessing the victim will be driven out. The first time I attended a séance, the shaman made an offering plate that he carried outside. A black cloth covered the door. Then the shaman started dancing around the *pagar api* while some men would play on drums and gongs. He carried a large bellows plant called *mayus* that he also uses for reading into the world of the spirits, holding it in his arms as if it was a newborn child. His dance was more like walking while rocking back and forth, clockwise and then turning. Suddenly he screamed and ran out the door. The “audience” ran after him. When I came back on the outside, the plate was on the grass. It was not quite clear to me what happened here. It is a part of the enigma that the shamanic ritual is supposed to be. In my interpretation, the spirit was driven out from the body of the patient by offering it rice and rice-wine that is carried outside like bait for the spirit. The family and their dwelling are protected by the clothing in front of the door that is connected to the benevolent spirits of the ancestors.

**Meaning in Iban religious practice**

As with Remme’s (2016) description of Ifugao cosmology as “onto-praxis”, interpretation is an important aspect of Iban religious practice. The Iban people distinguish between deep (*dalam*) and shallow (*mabu*) meaning in speeches and contexts that demands interpretation, like dreaming and shamanism. Shallow meaning refers to the concrete, clear and obvious meaning, while the deep meaning refers to the hidden meaning open for interpretation. Deep speech may include archaic words and phrases that are connected to the origin of the Ibans, and are therefore understood as powerful. Deep/shallow meaning is found in a wide range of situations. For example, the word *hati* in a shallow sense means “heart” or “liver”, but in a deeper sense it refers to “emotions”, “desire” or “intentionally” (Barret and Lucas 1993: 574). During gawai this distinction is for example evident in several offering rituals, such as when they will offer a domestic pig for reading the future of the community. After the pig is killed, the liver is taken out and put on a plate. The plate is sent around and the attendants will observe the liver closely, to look for deformations, what color it has, lines and other markers in the liver that gives indications about the future.
The same applies for other situations when the Ibans need to read signs in their natural environment to discover messages from the spiritual world. When seeing an omen bird, in a shallow sense it is just a bird but in a deep sense it carries a message to interpret. When having a dream, it is not just an internal psychosocial sensory experience, but in a deep sense experienced outside the body in contact with the spiritual world. Experiences like dreaming and seeing an omen bird, are interpreted as something real. Meeting a bad spirit may cause illness or death, and seeing your anthropomorphic ancestors can be a message. The consequences of interpreting the message wrong can therefore be quite severe.

In his influential essay on the Balinese cockfight, Geertz (1972) suggests a distinction between what he calls the “deep play” and “shallow play” in performances. In situations of “deep play” the stakes are always higher, and only performances involving “deep play” are likely to raise questions on the fundamental cultural codes and ideas among the performers and the audience. This somewhat sharp deep/shallow distinction has, however, been criticized by Bruce Kapferer (1984) who argues that in “deep play” both performers and audience are so deeply involved in the performance that a self-reflexivity is less likely to occur. It is rather ritual configurations which also include a dimension or aspect of “shallow play” that can afford the self-reflexivity needed to touch and possibly reorder “deep” cultural notions. In Iban shamanic séances, as with Iban religious practice in general, it is the performance together with the practical engagement and interpretation which are the core aspects. The Ibans alternates between deep/shallow play, involving deep/shallow differentiation of meaning. The “deep” and the “shallow” are both present at religious contexts such as a shamanic séance. Both are needed to grasp the meaning out of religious events.

**Catholic impacts on adat**

Although the Christian universe of meaning is to a great extent intertwined with Iban religious practice, Christianity lacks the interpretive aspect of cosmos and encounters with the spiritual world. Even though Christian elements occasionally are fit into Iban notions of perceiving the world, Catholicism as agama and Iban adat are mostly kept apart as separate discursive fields and applied in different contexts.
When the priest arrives at the longhouse or people gathers for mass in the church, the men cover their tattooed bodies with trousers and their finest batik-shirt while women wear skirts that cover their knees, and put up their hair. Flip-flops are tolerated. At weddings, the bride and groom might dress up in a traditional "western" white and fluffy wedding dress and a tuxedo. After the “official” ceremony in the church, there is normally a gathering in the longhouse where the bride and groom dress up in their traditional Iban costumes. The bride is dressed with glittering headwear (*sugu tinggi*), and a hand-stitched cotton dress (*kain kebat*) with chains of coins hanging down her waist. The groom is adorned with long feathers on his head, a rectangular loincloth (*sirat*), a west (*kelambi*), and a bush knife (*mandau*) tied around his waist. There is also a traditional ceremony with offerings and sending *tuak* (“rice wine”) around in a Chinese porcelain jar that all guests must drink from. This is the *adat* sphere.

The Catholic priests presiding the “official” wedding ceremony are also present for this subsequent ceremony, but they normally sit quietly and do not interfere with the ritual performance. At weddings that I attended, I noticed that those who were in charge of the *adat*-ceremony made sure to emphasize that this was *adat*, this was their traditions. At other *adat*-rituals, I observed that if there was no clergy present, there was no need to emphasize that it was *adat*. Distinct but interconnected, *agama* in the form of Catholicism, also resonates with local ontological concepts and practices. During *gawai* in Sungai Utik, the Ibans performed several rituals to ask the ancestors to open new swiddens, in both upstream and downstream direction. Most of these rituals are of ancient origin and considered as *adat*, I was told, but during *gawai* there was also a ritual of newer origin they referred to as *upachara katolik* (“the Catholic ceremony”). It follows the same logic of asking the ancestors for permission to open new swiddens, but the ancestor being petitioned is regarded as the first Iban in Sungai Utik that converted to Catholicism. The ritual exemplifies their attitude towards Catholicism, not characterized by rejection, resistance or re-orientation of belief, but rather how *adat* and *agama* are both considered as meaningful concepts without leading to religious creolization.

I attended this ritual the first day of *gawai* during my stay in Sungai Utik. It started with a procession from the longhouse to an individual graveyard not far from the village. Gongs were sounded to scare away bad spirits, and a living pig, tied to a bamboo pole,
was carried between two boys. All people attending crossed the river. There we all had to take a stone from the river and carry it with us. Inside the forest, an old tomb came to sight. A mossy stone-cross stood alone in a small clearing surrounded by bamboo trees. I saw people laying down the stones from the river by the stone cross. The cross was already surrounded by a large pile of river stones that had been placed there during previous years. I did the same with the yellow stone that I found at the river bottom.

Following the principle of letting the ancestors drink first, *tuak* was sent around so all participants could drink, but only after a few drops had been poured on the soil around the grave first. Then some women in turn took a bundle of twigs and a living chicken and led it clockwise on the ground like it was a broom.

Chickens and eggs are symbols that recur in different Iban rituals and offerings. The meaning of these as symbols is not entirely clear to me, but I was told that eggs and chickens have connections to fertility, rebirth and motherhood. They also serve as mediums to connect with the ancestors and the spiritual world.\(^{39}\)

Also in the graveyard, a little beyond the stone cross, some men sat by themselves on a mat and made an offering plate that was placed on a bamboo rack by the tomb. On the offering plate, these men put on variations of rice (puffed rice, glutinous rice cooked in bamboo sticks, rice cakes and rice vine) with eggs, dried fruit, tobacco and betel nut leaves. The offering plate reflects Iban sociality, their hospitality and substances of importance for the Ibans. The pig’s throat was cut above the grave, so blood was spilled directly unto grave. The liver was exposed and sent around so people could read in it how the future was for farming activity. Every household had also brought a chicken that got its head cut off and then laid down by the cross. Feathers were dipped in the blood and sent around for people to touch them, before they were laid on top of the cross. The stones that covered the tomb were put back and Armando, a local school teacher, read a verse from the Bible and initiated a prayer that ended with sprinkling of holy water over the participants that instantly crossed themselves.

\(^{39}\) One time when I sat in the *ruai* and discussed the meaning of chicken and eggs with some of the men, someone said: “Using a chicken or an egg is like sending an SMS to the ancestors” (“*seperti kirim SMS ke petara*”).
This case shows how elements of Catholicism are adapted into already existing ontological frame. It reflects a certain change in Iban society where Catholic elements might be seen to have more space, without amounting to “syncretism”. Despite referring to the ritual as a “Catholic ceremony”, the ritual follows the same logic of asking an ancestor for permission to clear new swiddens. Although the ritual has incorporated certain Catholic elements such as reading a verse from the Bible at the end, there is no radical re-orientation of adat. The ritual suggests how the boundaries between adat and agama are being kept apart while occurring within the same event.

But how does the Catholic Church relate to adat and local beliefs? From what I experienced, the Catholic Church are also adapting to adat, but mostly by incorporating folklorist notions of Dayak and Iban culture. I will illustrate this with a case from a visit to the Catholic priest seminar in Pontianak. There I was guided around the chapel by Pastor Rafael, a Filipino priest, that showed a great interest in Dayak culture. The visit in the chapel exemplifies the process of inculturation in the region.

The Chapel was named Penabur, meaning “The Sower”. Above the door leading in to the chapel was a board carved out in wood that pictured a hand that dropped some grains of rice down into a hole in the soil. This had clearly connotations to “God” or “Jesus” and emphasized the agricultural aspects of Dayak relations to land as rice cultivators. Inside the nave, there were several figures of birds. As with many other Dayak groups, birds are important figures in the Iban animism that works as omens sent by the gods. The bird imagery might possibly also be a link to Christian/Catholic symbolic tradition and reverberate with the dove and the Holy Ghost. Along the wall were several war-shields in typical Dayak style, oblong with pointy ends and ornate fronts. While observing these shields closely, Pastor Rafael expressed: “The lord is my strength and my shield”, referring to the Book of Psalms 28:7; a radical re-contextualization of a war symbol with its origin back to the times when Dayak groups were in armed conflicts with each other. Another figure that got my attention was a large cylinder-shaped figure carved out in wood that was placed on the pulpit. It showed a family working together through the different stages of cultivating rice in the swiddens, highlighting family and

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40 Inculturation refers to a policy resulting from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), and regulates the integration and use of local practices and ideas in the preaching of the gospel in areas that are still in the process of being converted (Howell, in press).
communitarian values of working together. According to Pastor Rafael, the rice was metaphorically a symbol of Jesus himself, because as with Jesus, the rice grain has to die before its resurrection.

The policy of inculturation is evident in the Church room, but despite the effort of adapting and incorporating elements of adat into the church room, it only represents the aesthetical and folklorist aspects of adat. The Church approaches adat by using symbolic notions of Iban and Dayak culture, but there is far from a deep interaction and adaptation of adat meaning that is being integrated into the Catholic sphere. As with the example of the “Catholic ceremony” in Sungai Utik, the boundaries between adat and agama are not weakened even though both incorporates certain elements.

**Conclusion**

Iban religion and cosmology reveals how people perceive their world and position themselves in it. Cosmology and adat as religious practice, expresses certain values and principles of sociality that stand out as strong imperatives for the living in the longhouse. Iban religious practice and cosmological principles are hierarchical unlike the expressed ethos of egalitarianism and equality, as communicated in the longhouse. Ancestors and spirits are classified in accordance to their importance, spiritual powers and benevolence or malevolence. The living are also dependent on their ancestors’ benevolence for their guidance and protection to (re)gain control in an uncontrollable world of spirits that can cause harm.

Iban religious practice also shows how the forest is understood as a spiritual domain. Ancestors have anthropomorphic qualities that can be experienced through physical encounters in the forest or in dreams. Malevolent spirits are likewise understood to reside in the forest environment. This dualism in how the Ibans perceives the spiritual world, reveals certain attitudes towards the forest environment. The forest is seen as the basis for life, but can at the same time be seen as a dangerous and capricious domain in which the Ibans attempts to exert control.

Similar with how Remme (2016) describes Ifugao relations to the spiritual world as “onto-praxis”, Iban religious practice is not something given and fixed that can be read
as a “cosmological map”. Knowledge about the spirits and ancestors is not solely given, but rather produced through people’s practical engagement with the non-human sphere.

The Ibans in Sungai Utik are officially recognized as Catholics in the eyes of Indonesian state, while local religious practices are veiled through the encompassing concept of *adat*. In contrast to Catholicism, *adat* is a holistic concept that permeates a wide range of aspects in Iban life. *Adat* involves more practical engagement, interpretation and personal involvement to the spiritual world than Catholicism offers. Despite being acknowledged as Catholics, it is *adat* that stands out as the most meaningful concept that Ibans relate to more intimately and on an everyday basis. Although there are signs of adaptation and incorporation of elements in both the *adat*-and *agama* sphere, there are clear boundaries between these spheres of belief.

In accordance with the national ideology of Pancasila, the Catholic Church can be seen as a representation of the state. As with the Indonesian state, the Church contributes in defining the acceptable limits of cultural expressions. At the same time, Catholicism has to resonate with local beliefs and practices to be considered legitimate. This is an important principle for all kinds of projects and incentives coming from outside actors. In the next chapter, I move further to the political aspect of how the Ibans have related to various actors up through the years.
5. State, Capitalism and NGOs

The wider impact of the Indonesian society

Sungai Utik is not isolated from the world outside. So far, my main focus has been on local customary practices in the Iban society, and their values and orientation in the world. In this chapter, I widen the scope to include perspectives on the wider Indonesian society, that largely represents modernity and the mainstream society, and how the Ibans are enclosed by the national community, and affected by external forces. I will demonstrate how this relation between center and periphery is manifested at three different levels: 1. the state, 2. capitalism, 3. NGOs. Although these hegemonic forces exercise their power differently, they are all representations of national and also global character that must be seen in relation to each other. A common denominator for all three aspects is that they all have a strong will to interfere with (and occasionally improve) rural life in the Indonesian uplands. For instance, the Indonesian state has been instrumental in giving out concessions to capitalist enterprises. While a large number of environmental NGOs and activists have evolved as a response to the massive destruction of forests and marginalization of indigenous communities. Since early 1990s, several NGOs have been involved in Sungai Utik through various projects with the aim of protecting the forest and improving the livelihood for villagers.

In this chapter, I will look at how people in Sungai Utik position themselves in relation to outside actors that represents these forces. Without any formalized rights to their land and forests, the Ibans are living with much uncertainty for their future. Their agency, as well as their ability to make allies, have been important for how they have managed to keep the state and corporations on a distance.

However, the external actors with their ideas, concepts and beliefs, must resonate with the local reality if they are to be considered as legitimate partners. To understand how the Ibans have related to various external actors, I will rely on the concept of social separation, between “inside” and “outside”. This dichotomy is applicable to distinguish

41 In this context, “mainstream society” refers to cultural ideals emphasized by the Indonesian state. 42 I use the term “capitalism” intentionally to emphasize that capitalist enterprises, namely logging-and palm oil companies, are also representations of global forces.
between stakeholders who are considered as legit (“inside”), and thus illegitimate (“outside”) by villagers.

**Governance in the Indonesian upland**

*Pemerintah* (“the state”) is an omnipresent force in Iban life. As explained by Li (2007: 5), governing is the “conduct of conduct”\(^{43}\), in which the state exercises its power to shape human behavior by calculated means. The well-being for the population at large is the primary concern for the government. By all means, it is not possible to control every individual and regulate their actions. Instead, the state needs to designate institutions and policies that regulate people’s desires, habits, beliefs and aspirations.

The Indonesian state’s approach for governing and controlling its rural inhabitants in the Indonesian upland can be characterized through its homogenizing policies and the expected effects of these policies. Since the state defines the limits of acceptable cultural expressions, ethnicity and cultural diversity can be seen as a threat to the national unity communicated by the Indonesian state (Li 2000).\(^{44}\) In this section, I will give some brief examples of how governmental policies have affected and transformed the Kalimantan upland, with the aim of governing rural life.

**Structuring village life**

In the years of Suharto and the New Order regime, the state did not operate with the term “indigenous”. The government only acknowledged one people (*bangsa*), and tribal communities were defined as “isolated communities” (*masyarakat terasing*) that had yet to be incorporated into the Indonesian mainstream society (Persoon 1998: 281).

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\(^{43}\) Tania Li gets this notion from Michel Foucault and his essay “Governmentality” (1991), based on a lecture he gave at Collège de France in 1978. However, despite the expression “the conduct of conduct” is commonly linked to this work, the expression does not appear in this form in his paper.

\(^{44}\) For instance, the Indonesian state has dealt with several separatist movements as in Ache and East-Timor, that more or less have gained autonomy and independence. In the case of West Papua, that was colonized and integrated into the nation between 1961-1963, separatist movements are still striving for independence.
In accordance with this policy, the government did not approve the ways Dayaks organized their life and villages. During the reign of Suharto, several state programs were implemented to incorporate Dayaks into mainstream society. The Ministry of Social Affairs stood behind some of the most explicit policies. The attention was for instance paid to religion, food, clothing, housing, body decoration and art to mention some aspects of tribal societies that did not meet the standards of the Indonesian modern society. Among some of the objectives and policies imposed by the Ministry of Social Affairs were: permanent settlements into villages with uniform design, increased consciousness of the nation and the state, and the rejection of local traditional beliefs in favor of the five acknowledged religions (Persoon 1998: 290).

**Desa and dusun**

The present village structure in Indonesia was formulated in the *Law on village governments from 1979*. Officially, the aim for the state was to standardize the many local variations of structuring villages and local political authority. Another objective was to bring village affairs under the supervision of higher authorities (Antlöv 1995: 43). Villages were also divided in accordance with the Javanese model of structuring villages into *desa* ("village") with its sub-villages or hamlets (*dusun*). Sungai Utik is considered as one of two hamlets belonging to the *desa* of Batu Lintang, together with the neighboring *dusun* Pulan. Each village-level has an appointed leader, *kepala dusun* ("head of the sub-village") and a *kepala desa* ("head of the village"), appointed by the government. The local community leaders are officially recognized as government employees, and receive a uniform (often beige or green) along with a small salary of approximately 100 000-rupiah pr. month (7.58 USD). Village leaders act as middlemen between their communities and the government, and are obliged to report back to the local authorities.

Once, there was a government meeting for all the village leaders in the Embaloh Hulu sub-district. I attended with Pak Kades, the administratively leader of Sungai Utik (and also Batu Lintang). I did not reflect much upon it at that time, but when we were heading back to Sungai Utik on his motorbike he said: “Did you notice that I did not wear my

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45 Currency converted 01.05.16.
uniform like the others”? I thought it just was not mandatory, but as it occurred to me, not wearing the uniform at a government meeting as the appointed head of the village was a rather deliberate act of expressing resistance to the government.

Similar acts of distancing from the government can be seen in relation with a wider social separation between “inside” and “outside”, that I mentioned earlier. I will demonstrate this concept empirically with a case from a village meeting concerning the electricity situation in Sungai Utik. But first, I will explain how separation is constituted as a concept among Ibans as with other Southeast Asian tribal societies.

Inside/outside: Separation and boundaries

Separation is present in Iban life in a wide range of contexts. For example, in the way Ibans make distinctions in their longhouse between the “public” ruai and the more intimate sphere of the bilik. However, the bilik is not equivalent as a “private sphere”, but should rather be seen as a representation of the Iban society. The ruai on the other hand, is interpreted as a representation of the “world outside”. Separation is also evident in matters of spiritual encounters. As shown in chapter 4, there is a strong mutuality between the humans and non-humans, between living Ibans in the society and the spiritual domain. However, the spiritual world is seen as a dangerous and capricious domain that needs to be controlled and kept separate from the living.

During my fieldwork, I did not reflect much on this contextual separation. However, it became clear to me that this is a dynamic concept of great importance for understanding how the Ibans position themselves in relation to all kinds of external actors. The “inside” refers to the Iban community with its inherent values, adat and other cultural features. The “outside” on the other hand refers to non-Ibans, the Indonesian state, capitalism and all kinds of actors and elements that can be seen as posing a threat to Iban life. This distinction largely corresponds with the notion of “us” and “them”.

In Christine Helliwell’s (1993) interpretation, the “public” sphere as a representation of the “world outside” is connected to non-Dayaks, and mostly Muslim Malays that cannot eat pork.
Making distinctions between the “inside” and “outside” is common among other traditional groups in Southeast Asia. As demonstrated by Howell (1996: 14), the Chewong do not distinguish between “nature” and “culture”, nor between “body” and “mind”, but they do distinguish between “us” and “them”. Similar descriptions have been made about the Orang Rimba in Sumatra by Øyvind Sandbukt (1984) and Steven Sager (2008). The Orang Rimba identifies themselves strongly in contrast to people they consider as “outsiders”, meaning people living outside the jungle (Sandbukt 1984; Sager 2008).

Although the Ibans have been living relatively remote in the Borneo interior, they have not been isolated to the same extent as the Orang Rimba or the Chewong. The Ibans have for a long time engaged with the “outside” and non-Ibans like colonial authorities, merchants, missionaries and more recently, government officials. Especially among the men, engaging with the world outside the village has been a cultural feature through the institution of going on a bejalai, to go on journeys in search for wealth, status and fame. The boundaries between “inside” and “outside” can be blurred and are not always easy to grasp. Rather than being seen as fixed markers of boundaries, this dichotomy is meaningful in the light of how the Ibans act and position themselves in relation to external actors.

From my experiences, the Ibans do not wish to live separated and isolated from the state and mainstream society, even though they strongly express their autonomy. What they wish for are services and opportunities on the same equal terms as other Indonesians. During my fieldwork, the provision of electricity in the longhouse was a particularly heated topic, which can be added to the longstanding friction between villagers and the government.

**Electricity in the longhouse**

Electricity was limited in the longhouse. After sunset, people used oil lamps and flashlights charged by sunlight during the day. Some families had diesel-fueled aggregates, but the use of it was restricted. Some years ago, Greenpeace facilitated solar-cells for lightening the open gallery inside the longhouse, but this system was highly unstable during my time in Sungai Utik. For a long time now, villagers have asked the
government to extend the electric cables to Sungai Utik. The cables stretch as far as to Pulan, the neighboring longhouse located 4 km. south of Sungai Utik. Since 1997, there has not been any further expansion of the electric cables. According to villagers in Sungai Utik, after countless of meetings the answer has always been the same. There is no money. Most people I spoke with in the longhouse suspected that there were certain government officials who had personal reasons for blocking any further expansion of electricity cables. According to villagers, these officials were either jealous, or they simply just disliked villagers from Sungai Utik and their strong will to express autonomy.

The meeting in Martinus

Unequal access to infrastructure may lead to discontent and increase the already existing gap between the government and villagers. The case concerning facilitating electricity to Sungai Utik, exemplifies how the concept of separation is manifested in people's actions and attitudes towards the government. Prior to the upcoming election for the bupati (the provincial leader) and the walikota (mayor), there was held a meeting in Martinus where all village heads in Embaloh Hulu sub-district were invited. Pak Kades, the village head from Sungai Utik had also made an appointment to discuss the situation of electricity after the meeting on the election. Despite that it would have been sufficient to just send a few representatives from Sungai Utik, they ended up sending 28 men, one from each bilik. I was regarded as the representative from “my” bilik-family.

None of the men from Sungai Utik said anything during the election meeting. They just sat silently on the back row in the room with arms crossed and emotionless faces while a government official underwent the election process with the help from a PowerPoint-presentation. When a tray of coffee, tea and cakes to grab was sent around, none from Sungai Utik accepted this act of hospitality. I took a piece myself, and could not figure out why all the others seemed so tense. However, it became clear to me that this was an act of resistance and rejection for the upcoming election that villagers in Sungai Utik were planning to boycott. With the high number of villagers that attended this meeting, this act appeared quite powerful.
After the meeting it was time for lunch. Most people took a plate and stood in line to be served from the table were a big pot of steamy rice and all the other dishes were lined up on a blue oilcloth. Villagers from Sungai Utik did not follow the others. Instead, they walked out demonstratively and sat down at a warung (a small café and eating stall) and had some teh es (“ice tea”) in the heat outside.

Later, I went back inside again with Pak Kades for a second meeting concerning the electricity situation in Sungai Utik. After hearing the same old story that there was no money for it, I walked out from the meeting room to wait for Pak Kades in the canteen. A group of government officials that were sitting at a table in their olive-green uniforms, waved me over while they shouted: “Belum makan? Makan dulu! Harus makan di sini” (“haven’t you been eating yet? Eat first! You need to eat when you are here”). This was a great dilemma to me. They were only trying to be nice and polite, and I felt a strong pressure to accommodate this hospitality, but I could not allow myself to do it. As a guest in Sungai Utik, I had to follow their lead. I answered: “Terima kasih, tapi saya belum lapar” (“Thank you, but I am not hungry yet”). The men in the uniforms just shook their head and still insisted that I had to eat. I felt terribly rude, which is in this social context. Suddenly, Pak Kades came out from the meeting room. The government officials said the same thing to him, but instead he went to the pot of rice, took a few grains of rice in his mouth and then handed his hand over to me to signal that I had to touch his hand. Then, we walked out to the others at the warung, where they also had to touch his hand as a symbol of accepting the hospitality, but at the same time saying no-thank-you.

Rice, rejection and resistance

Pak Kades’ act in the example above, is a common custom in West Kalimantan for rejecting food politely, especially in the countryside. If you are being offered something to eat or drink, but not feeling for it, you can just tap the plate or the cup lightly with your hand. Taking a few grains of rice from the rice pot has the same meaning. The symbolic meaning of rice is of tremendous importance, not just among Ibans and other Dayak communities, but also throughout Indonesia. As I have demonstrated, Iban life is centered around cultivating and consuming rice. Eating or drinking substances made of rice, whether it concerns the family, kin or neighbors, are expressions of shared sociality
in the longhouse. In certain contexts, rice is directly connected to the ancestors as founding figures in the Iban community. Such as with the padi pun.

Everyone who visits Indonesia will shortly notice that it is all about the food, and that a meal can rarely be seen as complete if there is no rice. Elizabeth Pisani (2014) uses rice as a metaphor on the Indonesian nation. Traveling around in the archipelago, with its diversity in people, customs, religions, food traditions etc., Pisani asks what are the means that connects all of these elements together into a nation. When all of these elements are being cooked together, like a pot of rice, it all becomes a sticky mass – or a “unity in diversity”. This is a metaphor that reflects government policies of streamlining cultural features into acceptable expressions of diversity. When Pak Kades rejected food offered by the government, it was also a meta-act of rejecting what the government stands for, its policies and as a representation of the national community. However, it is not a total rejection but an act made within an existing system of values and etiquette.

According to Ted C. Lewellen (2003: 113), the state holds the legitimate monopoly for using power, but if power means the ability to affect others and their decisions, it gives those at the bottom of the hierarchy many other alternatives for exercising power. Rejecting rice as a symbolic act of rejecting the government and the nation, coheres with James Scott’s (1985) *Weapons of the Weak*. Scott demonstrates how subordinate groups such as Malay peasants show resistance against hegemonic powers. Instead of turning to rebellion, it is rather common to demonstrate resistance by subtler means (such as minor sabotages, gossiping, or working slowly). Villagers in Sungai Utik cannot reject the government totally. While they are expressing a strong sense of autonomy, they are dependent on it for schooling, provision of welfare services, infrastructure and more. Demands for electricity and formalized land ownership, are also struggles that need to be addressed by the state in order to gain recognition as an indigenous group as well as Indonesians with equal rights. A few times, some of the village-leaders in Sungai Utik spoke about rebelling against the government authorities, or blocking the main road like the nomadic Penans did during the 80s and 90s (see Brosius 1997). However, I believe these statements were only said in the heat of the moment, and never represented a probable alternative. For that, there are too much at stake.
Frontiers of Capitalism

While extractivism has been a part of the Borneo environmental history for several decades. However, capitalist enterprises are the main actors that have transformed the island into a frontier of capitalism; mainly the logging and palm oil industry. These industries have connected the rural and resourceful Borneo interior to the Indonesian economic machinery, as well as the global market.

Concession logging and illegal logging

Logging in Borneo was not commercially exploited until after World War II. For a long time, Malaysia played the leading role in exporting timber to the global market while Kalimantan followed in the late 1960s (De Koninck et al. 2011: 25). Following The Basic Forestry Law from 1967, Suharto handed out several logging concessions to companies throughout the archipelago as part of his national development program. Local claims to land and forests were largely ignored. During the heyday of concession logging in the 80s and 90s, companies were operating with broad state-supported authority (Eilenberg and Wadley 2005: 24). Legal concession logging has led to massive destruction of forests and livelihood in Borneo. However, this trend has increased dramatically with the rise of illegal logging following the Asian economic crisis in 1997 (krismon). After the crisis, that forced Suharto to resign, a longstanding power vacuum emerged, despite the implementation of regional authority in 2000 (otonomi daerah) (Eilenberg and Wadley 2005: 20).

Several studies have linked the subsequent political situation of regional autonomy to the increased illegal logging that followed (e.g. Casson and Obidzinski 2002; Dudley 2002; Smith et al. 2003). These studies have focused on the multi-dimensional character of the illegal logging, such as increased corruption, lack of enforcement, and the economic situation for communities. However, I find it equally important to investigate this topic empirically, and look at how communities have dealt with the logging industry locally. I will return to this, to see how people in Sungai Utik have dealt with logging (in addition to palm oil) activities.
Agricultural expansions in West Kalimantan

Agricultural expansions in Borneo are connected to the overall agricultural development in Southeast Asia, as part of the “Green revolution” in the 1960s. These developments increased productivity in food and industrial crops, as well as energy-intensive capitalization of agriculture (De Koninck 2011: 1).

In Kalimantan, the palm oil industry started in 1975 in West Kalimantan. The provincial governor wanted to utilize palm oil plants onto “critical lands”, generally swidden fallows with secondary growth. With the introduction of palm oil, the government wanted to target Dayak communities by integrating them into the agro-business, limiting their land base and bringing “development” into a province that was considered as backward (Potter 2011: 163).

Palm oil companies have often allied themselves with local government officials and employed them to “socialize” (sosialisasi) villagers into the benefit of selling land areas in return for some hectares of palm oil. According to the land classification policy from 1980, palm oil concessions are supposed to be utilized in areas classified as “conversion forests”, while “production forests” are intended for logging concessions. The boundary between these two forest categories has been disputed. Normal procedure for re-classification is to apply to the Minister of Forestry, that holds the formal authority. This process takes time, and therefore, it is not uncommon for local district government to override this authority for their own benefit. Especially after the decentralization in 2001, when substantial parts of the governmental power were relocated from the centralized Java, to the provinces, districts and sub-districts (Potter 2011: 168-170).

Local experiences with logging-and palm oil companies in Sungai Utik

The Ibans first encounters with capitalist enterprises were in the 1980s with the logging companies. Palm oil companies came later in the 1990s. These were mostly companies from Malaysia and Singapore, but some were also Indonesian. Many villagers told me that on several occasions, government representatives came to Sungai Utik to “consult” about the future plans for companies that already were given land concessions in Sungai Utik.
Although being an imminent threat, it never came to the point that the army was set in to “persuade” the Ibans to give in. In the years of Suharto and the New Order, this was a common practice against unwilling villagers. This was confirmed to me by several NGO-representatives, as well as the head of Sungai Utik. Most men carry guns on their back when they go to the forest, for hunting, or in case the *padi* field is under attack by wild animals. Men told me that it had also been used as a scare tactic against loggers and government patrols, by utilizing their own reputation as fearful Dayak warriors. Given the context of riots and ethnic violence between Dayaks and Madurese transmigrants in 90s, it is easy to imagine the psychological effect this would have.47

Neighboring hamlets and villages had already given access to foreign companies, before these companies turned to Sungai Utik. It did not take long before villagers in Sungai Utik observed how destructive the logging activities were for the environment. Nor did it improve the economic situation for these communities. Villagers would receive cash as compensations for their forests, and salary if they were employed as wageworkers for the companies. But when the companies withdrew, so did their income from the logging and the plantation work. When the forest was destructed, their food chamber, source for timber and ancestral ground was gone as well. Villagers could not hunt wild boar anymore, since the primary food for the bearded boar is the fruit from the *dipterocarp* tree (*Dipterocarpoideae*). Still today, the damages that were left after the logging-and palm oil companies are overwhelming. When passing these areas, there is not much forest to see. The landscape mostly consists of dry fields of scarce secondary growth. With the money that was given from the companies, villagers “improved” their longhouses with concrete and corrugated iron roofs instead of traditional materials like ironwood. However, it is quite noticeable today that these houses have been marked by the ravages of time.

In the case of Sungai Utik, villagers did not oppose the companies in the beginning, knowing how difficult it was to oppose the companies and the government without any formal land rights. But after observing the situation in neighboring villages and longhouses, the people in Sungai Utik made some demands to the companies, which

47 For further readings concerning ethnic violence in West Kalimantan and its connection to resource access, see for example van Klinken (2008).
these had to comply with if they were to be given access to Ibans customary land. These demands included infrastructural improvements, such as facilitating electricity, improving water systems, and constructing village roads. From what I heard from NGO-representatives in AMAN - The National Alliance of Traditional People (Alliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantera), these demands were too costly to be accommodated by the companies.

Apparently, that was enough. From what I understand, it was simply too much effort for the companies to take the battle against villagers that showed as much unwillingness as they did in Sungai Utik. Still, there have been regular visits from companies that have appeared with concession papers and claimed their right to exploit the forest. So far, none of these plans have been realized.

There have also been a few attempts of illegal logging in Sungai Utik. There is a story that villagers in Sungai Utik often told me with much pride. Once, the tuai rumah (customary leader of the longhouse) came across some intruders in the deep in the forest that were cutting logs secretly. According to the story, he told them: "Leave this place or die!" These dramatic words were clearly effective as the workers ran away, leaving behind their chainsaws and working tools.

Environmental- and indigenous rights discourse

In 1993, nations worldwide participated in the UN year of Indigenous people. Indonesia on the other hand did not partake in this event, stating that the indigenous issue did not apply to the Indonesian context (Persoon 1998: 281). The government claimed that Indonesia did not have any indigenous people, or that all were equally indigenous. In the eyes of the state, tribal groups did not have any specific rights above other citizens, contrary to what is stated in the ILO (International Labor Organization) Convention 169 (Li 2000: 149). Instead, the state differed between groups belonging to the modern and mainstream society and those being seen as isolated and backwards (masyarakat terasing). The official politics of the state was to bring these groups back into the fold of mainstream society (Persoon 1998: 281).
Despite the lack of recognition of indigenous communities, there was a beginning movement for indigenous rights in the 90s. According to Leslie Potter (2011), West Kalimantan was the first province in Indonesian Borneo that experienced a great loss of Dayak land to plantation companies. Because of this, the province early developed a strong lobby against further allocation of land to the companies (Potter 2011: 167).

One of the most important NGOs that were established in West Kalimantan, and that today works as the leading spearhead for indigenous rights in Indonesia, is AMAN. AMAN was first established as AMA Kalbar - Alliance of Traditional People West Kalimantan (Alliansi Masyarakat Adat Kalimantan Barat), with the aim of supporting local farmers in a land dispute with a palm oil company (Potter 2011: 182). AMAN was born out of the local reality experienced by Dayak peasants, but is also a movement linked to the global indigenous uprising in the 1990s.

AMAN as a national movement was officially founded in 1999. Since ethnicity as the basic concept for claiming rights and recognition for indigenous groups was a disputed matter, AMAN rather defined indigenous groups as "communities which have ancestral lands in certain geographic locations and their own value systems, ideologies, economies, politics, cultures, and societies in their respective homelands" (Duncan 2007: 715). This definition has laid the fundament for indigenous rights discourse in Indonesia, and also for other NGOs working in traditional communities.

Environmental movements have also contributed to set the agenda for community development and indigenous rights in accordance with nature conservation practices. However, the relations between nature conservators and villagers have not only been harmonious. Nature conservation imposed by environmental NGOs have in certain cases been characterized by its utilitarian approach, that does not give much room for villagers' traditional use of their forest environment (Persoon 1998: 284).

This has for instance been evident in Kapuas Hulu, that was designated as conservation district in 2003 with its two National Parks, Taman Nasional Betung Kerihun (TNBK) and Taman Nasional Danau Santarum (TNDS). WWF were instrumental in establishing these national parks (TNBK in 1995 and TNDS in 1999). As a method for conserving biodiversity, establishing national parks can prove to be effective in the initial face, but
rather difficult in the long run. NGO representatives from KOMPAKH told me that many conflicts have evolved between park authorities and local communities that consider these areas to be their customary land. Several people have been jailed because they were caught hunting or collecting logs inside the national parks.

**NGOs in Sungai Utik**

Villagers in Sungai Utik maneuver themselves among a wide range of NGO-initiatives with “the will to improve” (cf. Li 2007). Through the years, a large number of NGOs have appealed to villagers with various projects. Some have been accepted, while others have not. Villagers in Sungai Utik are generally positive if they believe their community can benefit from the relation with a specific NGO. But in cases where the ideas of the NGO raise too many questions about uncertainty for the future, the proposal is politely rejected.

It would be misleading to describe the Ibans in Sungai Utik as opportunists, nor as pure traditional forest conservators. As I have demonstrated so far, the forest is essential for Iban life in its many aspects. But the Iban community is also highly competitive, and villagers are not hesitant for improving their economic and material conditions. Generally speaking, their attitude should rather be described as pragmatic. Their actions, choices and allies are based upon what they believe will gain them the most advantages in the long run. In this section, I will give an overview on some of the actors and projects that have been working in Sungai Utik up through the years.

**Claiming land rights**

The initial focus for the NGOs that started to organize in Sungai Utik in the beginning of the 1990s, was largely directed towards the political and juridical situation for the villagers. Without any formal rights to their land, much effort was canalized to strengthen local customary laws-and practices, and recognizing Iban territoriality. Especially two NGOs had a strong presence in Sungai Utik during this time: AMAN and LBBT (Lembaga Bela Banua Talino) - Institute for Community Legal Resource Empowerment.
These two NGOs operated as mediators between villagers in Sungai Utik, and the government and the companies that wanted access to the forests in Sungai Utik. LBBT also made a study to identify the customary rights (hak ulayat) in the village. This work was supposed to provide material to make a perda (local government regulation), that recognized Sungai Utik as customary land for the Ibans. As far as I understand, this perda has never been recognized, but was nonetheless an early step for claiming land rights in Sungai Utik. It is important to note that these two NGOs were accepted and had broad support from the beginning, and were partly established by Dayaks and villagers from Sungai Utik. Many elders, such as Bandi the tuai rumah, were early supporters and well-known figures in the organization. Also, the head of LEI in Pontianak is originally from Sungai Utik.

AMAN also initiated a community logging-program together with another NGO called PPSHK Kalbar, Empowerment Program for Community-based System in West Kalimantan (Program Pemberdayaan Sistem Hutan Kerkyatan-Kalbar). The objective of this project was to widen the scope of economic benefits from the forest in accordance with principles of sustainability. Although this project did not turn into something concrete and lasting, the community logging-program contributed largely to an eco-label that was given in 2007 by LEI (Lembaga Ekolabel Indonesia), The Indonesian Eco-Labeling Institute. LEI is a government-led Institution subject to the Ministry of Forestry. This eco-label acknowledges the people of Sungai Utik as traditional forest conservators that manage their forest areas in a sustainable way, and is given out for a period of thirty years.

Sungai Utik was the first indigenous community to ever receive this eco-label. It was even handed over personally by the former Minister of Forestry who came to the village in a helicopter that landed on the football field outside the longhouse. The eco-label is not the same as being given property rights to the land, but it gave the villagers something more concrete. Receiving acknowledgment from the state itself was a major turning point, but it did not secure their rights to land. Surprisingly, just two months after they received the eco-label, a man turned up saying he represented a logging company that had been given a concession of 88 000 hectares in Sungai Utik. The company had received this permission from the Ministry of Forestry.
**Eco-tourism**

Today, several NGOs are involved in a pioneer eco-tourism project in Sungai Utik with AMAN as the major economic supporter. This project has been running for about ten years, and much of the foundation has been laid, but still this initiative has not taken off yet.

Green Indonesia, that offers packages with trips to indigenous communities throughout Indonesia, has also been involved for a long time. Pak Kades, the head of the village has even been to Norway together with representatives from Green Indonesia to participate at *Reiselivsmessen* (The Norwegian Travel Exhibition) in Oslo 2015. On their website, Green Indonesia presents the Iban community in Sungai Utik as a green paradise, and portrays the Ibans as traditional forest conservators that live in harmony with their forest environment. There are several articles, photos and videos about Sungai Utik on their website. Among these are for instance an article that explains an *adat* ritual, photos of food from the forest, and a video that shows the villagers harvesting rice in their swiddens. In all this, the Ibans are strongly being naturalized as an indigenous group.

Nevertheless, for the Ibans, these practices that build on folklore and environmentalist notions are more likely to resonate locally than projects that alienates Iban relations to their forest environment. This representation of Ibans in Sungai Utik is not necessarily a false one, but it is strongly a selective one. As I described in chapter 2, Ibans in Sungai Utik have participated in logging and palm oil activities for a long time in other locations, which opposes the idea of Ibans as traditional forest conservators. This is not part of the story represented by NGOs. But as with so many other communities, villagers in Sungai Utik are in need for money to improve their living conditions.

It is also fair to say that many communities that accepted logging and palm oil perhaps felt that they had no choice. However, lessons from Sungai Utik demonstrate that economic development does not necessarily mean that communities have to compromise themselves.

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48 I have even come across pictures of him on the Internet, dancing an Iban war dance in front of an audience at Telenor Arena.
These environmentalist representations are also adapted and used actively by villagers. Whenever they have appeared in the media, in videos on the Internet or in web-articles, it is common to read headlines like “The indigenous community whose forest is their supermarket” or statements like “the water is our blood. Clean water gives us health so we can sustain ourselves” (news.mongabay.com).

**Artists and media**

Lately, many other external actors have started visiting Sungai Utik. These are for examples artists, journalists-and media, students and researchers. Although they are not NGOs, they share some similarities. As with the NGOs, there is a strong element of cultural folklorization in their representations of the Iban community in Sungai Utik. By using a wide range of multimedia-channels, these actors have been instrumental in bringing out the story of Sungai Utik throughout Indonesia, as with the rest of the world.

For instance, a few years ago, there was a group of Yogyakarta-based artists that came to Sungai Utik to document indigenous art and the different aspects of Iban life. Among them were a musician, a tattoo artist, graphic workers and photographers. The project that went under the name Tanah to Indai Kitai (In Iban: “The land is our mother”), led to a major art exhibition in Yogyakarta. Also, a CD with recordings of local Iban music and a small book with stories, photos and interviews from the village were launched.

Villagers have figured in several news articles and made TV-appearances, both locally and nationally. One of the TV-programs they have been featured in is a famous children’s show on channel TRANS 7 called Si Bolang. This is a show about how children in Indigenous communities all over Indonesia are living. In the episode from Sungai Utik, we follow four boys living in the longhouse, among them Yosep, the oldest child in the *bilik* that I lived in, during a “typical” day. For instance, we get to see them fish in the river using fish traps, and seeing them cook the fish in bamboo tubes, before going for a swim in the river, using the nature’s own “shampoo”, a river plant which gives a soapy green paste when rubbing it.

Projects and actors representing the “outside”

NGOs and activists that operate in Sungai Utik can be ascribed as actors on the “inside”. These are all kinds of actors that are seen as legitimate partners, who understand custom and Iban cultural values. However, NGOs, projects and actors that invoke too much skepticism and uncertainty for the future, are politely dismissed. Their ideas and approaches are alienated from Iban life, and are therefore seen as a part of the “outside” together with the state and capitalist enterprises.

Ideas regarding tenure is essential, whether an actor is regarded as “inside” or “outside”. Some NGOs such as FFI (Flora and Fauna International), have appealed to villagers in Sungai Utik with the aim of designating the village as *hutan desa* (“village forest”). *Hutan desa* areas are understood to be part of the national forest estate, but managed by a village community. A *hutan desa* village manages and allocates benefits from the area over a period of 35 years. It is renewable subject to the annual work carried out by the villagers (de Royer 2011: 33). If a forest area is designated as *hutan desa*, it temporarily protects the forest, and making it out of reach for the companies. On the other hand, it puts land use under government restriction. The forest might be protected, but traditional communities like the Iban would not be able to utilize the forest according to their customary ways.

A common notion shared by the villagers about *hutan desa*, is that villagers are not given property rights, but rather a concession to use their customary land in the same way as logging and palm oil companies are given for a limited period. Some people that I spoke with in Sungai Utik expressed a fear of what would happen after the period with *hutan desa* expired. Would they be granted another period? Or would the land be confiscated by the government for other purposes? Paradoxically, the forest in Sungai Utik is more protected as *hutan adat*, outside any formalized ownership.

**REDD+ in Sungai Utik**

Some attempts have been made to enroll Sungai Utik as part of various REDD+ projects, but all of these initiatives have been dismissed by the villagers. In overall Kapuas Hulu, there are not that many REDD+ projects at all. Among the few NGOs that operate within
this scheme, was a newly initiated project by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). During my time in Sungai Utik, there were some representatives from ADB who came to the village to consult about a project they wanted Sungai Utik to participate in. 1 million USD was assigned to the project that involved 11 villages in Sintang and Kapuas Hulu Regency. The ADB-representatives did not want to reveal much of their plans for Sungai Utik. I was given the impression that the ADB wanted to look into the possibility to facilitate a micro-hydroelectric system, driven by the river-stream to serve as an alternative energy source. Villagers in Sungai Utik had not made their final decision, whether this project was going to be rejected or not, but generally people seemed quite skeptical.

From what I experienced, people do not approve of REDD+ because it raises too many unanswered questions and uncertainty. My neighbor, Rengga in bilik no. 2, told me about NGOs coming to Sungai Utik to explain villagers that their forest was full of carbon stored in the trees and the ground. They were also told that rich countries wanted to compensate people in Sungai Utik economically if they let the trees alone. “People simply do not understand what REDD+ is about. It is too technical. People do not even know what carbon is”, Rengga said. People in Sungai Utik had often heard about compensations whenever there was a REDD+ project involved. But from whom and for what? According to Rengga, another common fear among villagers concerning REDD+, was that it would rather be the palm oil companies with licenses to utilize the forests in Sungai Utik that would receive compensations.

In the eyes of the Ibans in Sungai Utik, REDD+ appears as an absurd idea imposed by rich western countries which interferes with local forms for utilizing the forest, without any regards to Iban customs and practices.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at how the village Sungai Utik has become more integrated into the wider Indonesian society, as well as the global community, by three external forces: the state, capitalism and NGOs. These are representations of modernity and mainstream society that often operates with a “will to improve” (cf. Li 2007), transform
or re-structure livelihood and landscape in rural West Kalimantan. In this chapter, I have demonstrated how these hegemonic powers are connected, rather than seeing them as isolated forces.

The distinction between “inside” and “outside”, as equivalent to “us” and “them”, are expressions of social separation in the Iban community that are highly relevant for understanding how villagers in Sungai Utik position themselves in relation to external actors. The Indonesian government and capitalist enterprises are without doubt, actors that represent the “outside”. The same applies for certain NGOs, with ideas that fail to resonate with local customs and practices. Projects backed by the various NGOs are read in conjunction to past experiences with external actors. Those NGOs that to some extend can be related to the state and the companies, like the hutan desa initiative from FFI, fails in their attempt to protect forest and livelihood in the Iban community.

Another point that I have emphasized in this chapter is that Ibans often are guided by a general pragmatism. The Ibans themselves put a lot of weight on their profound relationship to the forest environment, which is not untrue. But instead of understanding this self-representation in naturalized terms, there is also a strategic element to their actions and choice of allies.
Concluding Remarks

I will now summarize and comment on some of the main topics and arguments I have presented in this thesis. My primary objective has been to account for how the Ibans in Sungai Utik protect their customary forests in the absence of formalized land rights and recognition as an indigenous group. I have focused on their customs and perceptions of living in a forest environment, as well as their agency and relation to external actors.

I have emphasized that in order to grasp how the Ibans perceive their life-world and forest environment, we must pay attention to what it means to be an Iban and living in a longhouse community. As I have demonstrated in chapter 2, ideas of both individuality/family autonomy and collectivism/solidarity are embedded in the longhouse. The longhouse expresses tradition and continuity from the past to the present with its traditional and wooden structure, but also through certain virtues of change and modernity in terms of consumption, wealth and materiality in the bilik-family.

In chapter 3, I illustrated how Iban perceptions, classifications schemes, and entanglement with the forest environment stand in opposition to government forest policy. While the Indonesian state divides forestland in terms of their functions, the forest is a holistic concept for the Iban community. For instance, Iban subjectivity is connected to the forest as a representation of memories, identity and personhood that is physically evident in the forest, and also maintained by the community through their practices, movements and collective memory.

As shown in chapter 4, Iban cosmology and religious practice is another aspect of the Ibans society that demonstrates how the forest is perceived as a spiritual domain. The Ibans are dependent on their ancestors’ blessings to prosper, but the world (and the forest) is also a capricious domain of uncertainty, where malevolent spirits can attack the living and cause harm. To a great extent, many of the choices the Ibans make, is about (re)gaining control and autonomy in an uncontrollable world. Ideas, beliefs, and practices of external character, in this case the Catholic Church, must also resonate with the local ontological reality to be considered as legitimate. Within the field of religion,
the state is present in Iban life as a counterpart to Iban *adat*, through the concept of *agama*.

Although most of the Ibans in Sungai Utik are devoted Catholics, it is the encompassing concept of *adat* that stands out as the most meaningful category in their daily life.

Sungai Utik is a rare case of a community that has managed to protect their customary forest areas, as well as their distinctive way of living. Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to give some explanatory factors for how they have managed to stand up against the Indonesian state and capitalist enterprises. As shown in chapter 5, Sungai Utik is far from an isolated community, but an integrated part of the wider Indonesian society, especially in relation to three external forces: the state, capitalism and NGOs. For villagers in Sungai Utik, the Indonesian state and capitalism are unquestionable forces that represent the “outside”. The “outside” accounts for all kinds of elements that pose a threat to the Iban way of life. Certain NGOs and ideas of forest conservation such as REDD+ also fails to bridge their own notions of land ownership and forest use with local Iban customs.

I have also been careful not to rely on naturalist explanations, by portraying the Ibans in environmentalist terms. I have rather argued that their actions and choice of allies must be seen as expressions of a general pragmatism. The outcome could have been the same in Sungai Utik as in other locations, where villagers gave in to the logging and palm oil companies in return for money. Instead, the Ibans in Sungai Utik value their forest areas for the benefit of future generations.

Zooming out, the larger picture is rather negative. Last year, the situation was devastating with the massive forest fires all over Kalimantan and Sumatra. In addition to deforestation, these fires led to massive amounts of toxic smog polluting the air above several Southeast Asian countries (wri.org).\(^50\) To prevent another crisis, the Indonesian president Joko “Jokowi” Widodo, ordered stricter enforcement to prevent illegal burning. Even though, the palm oil companies are the ones to blame, this policy also affects smallholders like the villagers in Sungai Utik. After I conducted my fieldwork,

villagers have reported that soldiers have showed up in the longhouse, threatening to put them in jail if they did not cease practicing slash-and-burn farming. However, studies have pointed out that swidden agriculture is sustainable if given time and space (e.g. Dove 1983; Lawrence et al. 1998; Labrière et al. 2015). The future for the Ibans in Sungai Utik is uncertain with the increased friction with the state and capitalist enterprises. But as long as they manage to maintain their awareness of the importance of the forest, I am cautiously optimistic.

51 This incident has also been portrayed in Mongabay: https://news.mongabay.com/2016/09/no-fire-no-food-tribe-clings-to-slash-and-burn-amid-haze-crackdown/ (acc. 10.11.2016).
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