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In December 2008, I had breakfast with an elderly Bidayuh man and his daughter in their upland village—one of four due to be resettled to make way for a new dam and reservoir. With an official land compensation ceremony<sup>i</sup> a few days away, the conversation meandered, as it often did, towards the project. My elderly interlocutor—a follower of the old rituals, *adat gawai*—had been reminiscing about life in the 1950s, 'before [Sarawak became part of] Malaysia'.<sup>ii</sup> Back then, he said, the bus fare to Kuching was under a dollar; food in the city came in generous portions for just ten cents, and trousers cost a few dollars. These days, however, everything was expensive because those Malays who ruled the country didn't know how to run the 'economy' (English). But being Malay was difficult, added his Anglican daughter, since they were Muslim and had to live according to strict observances. Ruminating further, they began to contrast the lives of Muslims with those of Christians, who today form the bulk of the Bidayuh population.

Running through the different churches in the area, they concurred that the 'strongest' of the lot was the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB), or Borneo Evangelical Church—a non-denominational organization with a small but vocal local presence. Those people were rich, they declared, and their prayers really worked; indeed, the SIB leaders were so powerful that they were often able to tell the future. To illustrate their point, they mentioned 'Pastor Henman' (pseudonym): a white preacher who visited the region regularly, and who had predicted 2004's Boxing Day tsunami. More recently, he had prophesied bad things for the dam being constructed downstream: perhaps it would collapse or just fail. But of course, this was hardly surprising, explained the old man, since the soil at the construction site was poor, prone to landslides and flooding. As I discovered later, it was also an area filled with capricious local place spirits which might respond badly to the upheavals around them. All things considered, my interlocutors concluded that the dam would almost certainly run into problems.

As ethnographic episodes went, this was an admittedly difficult one to follow. Rather than forming a coherent narrative, our discussion drew together several topics—the economy, development, ethnicity and religion—in a seemingly formless pastiche of associations. Here, Islam, Christianity and the old spirit beliefs segued in and out of view; one analytical blink and a breakfast companion would have missed them. Yet their import in my acquaintances' lives cannot be overstated. In this chapter, I argue that despite the nominal a-religiosity of official discourses and policies, religious considerations play a crucial role in shaping—and ambiguing—Bidayuhs' engagements with development and the state. But rather than taking the explosive form of church-bombings or demonstrations (such as those seen during 2010's 'Allah' controversy),<sup>iii</sup> these engagements possess a far more muted, quotidian quality. By teasing out their manifestations in the context of a dam-construction and resettlement scheme, this chapter reveals how religious toleration and conflict in areas of significant ethnic plurality are not necessarily diametric states, but can exist as strands of a single tangled web.

We begin, however, by situating the case study in its larger context: the developmentalist milieu of contemporary Sarawak.

### *The ‘anti-politics’ of Sarawakian developmentalism*

As elsewhere in Malaysia, Sarawak’s politics and economy over the last few decades have been driven by a particularly vigorous brand of ‘development’ (*pembangunan*). A variant of the top-down, technocratic model of development that emerged in the post-World War II international order (Escobar 2012), the *pembangunan* paradigm seeks to transform Malaysia into a prosperous economic power, and eventually, a fully-developed nation. Since independence, it has become Sarawak’s ‘ultimate civil postulate, closely tied to ideas of political legitimacy’ (Brosius 2000, p.1), suffusing relations between the state and its citizens.

To a greater extent than in West Malaysia, Sarawakian developmentalism is dominated by an ideological dualism between ‘native rural society’ and ‘modern society’ (Bissonnette 2011, p. 350). This dichotomy feeds a powerful temporalizing discourse that depicts rural communities as impoverished and backward, needing to be incorporated into the modern, progressive mainstream of Malaysian citizenry. Decrying shifting cultivation, hunter-gathering and other ‘traditional’ subsistence practices as incommensurate with the nation’s forward trajectory, the Sarawakian government has channelled its energy into reshaping ‘the practices and conceptions of rural native populations ... for the enhancement of economic production’ (ibid., p. 351). This transformation is formulated in overtly economic and technological terms, and visibly manifested through electricity generators, schools and clinics in remote areas, mega-dams and oil palm plantations. Like the ‘anti-politics machine’ famously described in Lesotho by James Ferguson (1990), Sarawak’s development apparatus appears to operate beyond ethnic, religious and party politics. The notion of *pembangunan* as a virtuous, top-down endeavour which it enshrines, moreover, permeates the thoughts and language of Sarawak’s urban elite, among them the Bidayuh politicians chiefly responsible for bringing development to their rural constituencies (e.g. Mamit et al. 2003; Minos 2000).

It is within this ideological and political framework that the dam-construction and resettlement scheme discussed in this chapter has unfolded.<sup>iv</sup> Located in the hills near the Indonesian border, several hours’ walk from the nearest road, the four villages involved in this scheme are prime targets for the state’s developmentalist aspirations. While by no means isolated from the ‘modern’ world, they have not been urbanized to the same extent as their roadside counterparts, some of which are now virtually suburbs of Kuching. Most villagers are subsistence rice farmers who earn a small income by cultivating cash crops such as rubber, cocoa and pepper, and providing irregular labour for nearby construction projects, including the dam. Many have spent some time studying or working in town, and all of them have friends and family in urban areas. Nevertheless, their relative isolation has made it easy for the state, the media and other Bidayuhs to portray them as ‘remote’ (*ulu/jo*), ‘poor’ (*miskin*) and ‘not yet’ (*belum/bayuh*) developed. When the resettlement scheme was first publicized, for example, the *Borneo Post* quoted a Bidayuh politician involved in it as saying, ‘If we leave them there, then they are denied access to many basic infrastructure and facilities. As a leader, I feel guilty if I am unable to help these people. You know, they are too deep in the interior and their population is small. To bring major development there is not economical’.

Such remarks treat the improvement of the villagers’ lives as an ethical necessity—a means of making them fully Malaysian. Accordingly, the scheme has been depicted from the outset

in terms of progress (*kemajuan*), modernization and material welfare. Drawing an isomorphism between the well-being of the state and the communities, its political architects exhort the affected villagers to contribute to the greater good (averting water shortages in the capital) rather than selfishly oppose it. Their reward, so to speak, is the gift of development: a better, easier life in a planned township along the main road with free cement houses, piped water, 24-hour electricity and access to modern amenities. In this new location, shifting agriculture will be consigned to a benighted pre-modern past; with each household being assigned just three acres of land, the villagers will be steered towards new priorities and economic opportunities such as oil palm, cash cropping and eco-tourism.

As this brief overview reveals, the insistent futurism of Sarawak's dominant development discourse simultaneously obviates any reference to ethnicity or religion—two of the most divisive factors in Malaysian society today. Yet, as the rest of this chapter argues, the reality of development on the ground is more complex than is initially apparent. In the following pages, I shall examine the close entwining of Islam, Christianity and the old rituals, *adat gawai*, in rural Bidayuhs' experiences of development. My exploration centres on two interlocking themes: the politics of religion, and its moral and conceptual purchase in Bidayuhs' lives. I suggest that for most Bidayuhs, development in Sarawak is inseparable from ethnic and religious politics—particularly the Malay-Muslim hegemony which they see as lying at the heart of Malaysian statehood. Rather than entering into open conflict with the government and Islam, however, many of them have found alternative means of dealing with the upheavals around them, particularly by recourse to the other two religious influences in their lives: *adat gawai* and Christianity. These responses reveal how *pembangunan* has become an arena in which religious tensions, but also strategies of accommodation, are played out in numerous small-scale, uneven ways. In this respect, the dam-construction and resettlement scheme may be seen as a microcosm of the situation in East Malaysia, where constant, daily negotiation rather than clear-cut conflict tends to characterise inter-religious relations.

### ***Framing the problem: pembangunan and Malay-Muslim hegemony***

The Bidayuh villagers affected by the dam are not unaware of the politically-charged discourses swirling around them; indeed, many are firm subscribers to the ideal of economic and material progress that underpins Sarawak's *pembangunan* paradigm. Yet their eagerness to participate in this grand enterprise is tempered by an abiding sense of marginalization by the very state that is meant to be 'giving' them development. To account for this, we need to examine the peculiar relationship between development, ethnicity and religion in Sarawak.

As elsewhere in Malaysia, Sarawak's economic and development policies have long been tempered by a form of 'economic indiginism [sic]' (Siddique and Suryadinata 1981) that explicitly privileges the interests of 'native' populations. Initially a post-independence measure to enable Malays to compete with other races—notably the economically dominant Chinese (Watson 1996)—the *bumiputera* (lit. 'sons of the soil') system has generated a highly-fraught dichotomy between Malays and non-Malays on the Peninsula (see also Yeoh, this volume). However, the situation in Sarawak and Sabah, where there are large non-Malay *bumiputera* populations, is more complex. As one of Sarawak's recognized 'native' groups, Bidayuhs are theoretically entitled to the same '*bumi*' quotas, benefits and economic incentives as Malays. But in practice, many of my acquaintances feel short-changed by the

particular ethno-religious configuration of power that has dominated Sarawakian politics over the last few decades: one they associate with the government of Taib Mahmud, Sarawak's Melanau Chief Minister since 1981.

The Melanau are unusual among Sarawak's native groups in having mostly converted to Islam over centuries of contact with the Bruneian sultanate and coastal traders. Historically, such converts were assimilated into the politically dominant Malay category. Although contemporary Melanau politicians have since disentangled their ethnic identity from their religion (Boulanger 2009, pp. 72-82; Postill 2008, p. 92), the Melanau-Malay association—with Islam at its core—continues to run deep in both party politics and the eyes of most Sarawakians.<sup>v</sup> In light of this, many Bidayuhs view Taib primarily as a *Muslim* whose influence stems from his collaboration with other Muslims—particularly the Malays in Kuala Lumpur who run the nation. Indeed, they routinely describe his government as '*Kirieng*'—the term for 'Malay' which automatically implies 'Muslim'. When my acquaintances talk about the *Raja Kirieng* (the Malay rajas) who rule Sarawak, then, they are referring to a particular Malay/Melanau amalgam held together by their religious affiliation. Accordingly, their responses to *pembangunan*, which they also associate with Taib's government, are frequently coloured by anxieties over Malay/Melanau-Muslim dominance.

As I argue elsewhere (Chua 2007), Bidayuhs have long had an awkward relationship with Islam, which they portray as trapping its adherents in a strict religious and praxiological regime incompatible with their own modes of sociality. Since independence, these concerns have been amplified and given new shape by Malay political dominance of West Malaysia. More than being a problematic 'other', *Kirieng* are now seen as having acquired a position of immense power as rulers of the nation, thereby turning Islam into a powerful means of obtaining political and economic resources. In Bidayuhs' eyes, this has generated a two-tiered *bumiputera* system, with Muslim *bumiputera* (Malays and Melanau) monopolising all the benefits, and non-Muslim *bumiputera* becoming 'second-class indigenes' (Bala, this volume; Boulanger 2009, pp. 115-17; Postill 2008, p. 195). It is widely said, for example, that if ten civil service jobs are advertised for *bumiputera*, nine will go to Malays—even if the other candidates are better qualified. Yet it is not only ethnic Malays or Melanau who enjoy access to these perks, for others can also buy into this world. Such was the consensus whenever my acquaintances and I drove past a nearby Bidayuh village that had converted en masse to Islam: Look at their tarred roads and brand new community hall, my interlocutors would point out; all you need to do is 'enter Islam' (*mürüt Islam*) to get development from this government.

Such low-level grumblings are endemic throughout Bidayuh communities, but have acquired new intensity in the context of the dam-construction project. Although the affected villagers have been split by the scheme, with some vehemently opposing resettlement, others enthusiastically supporting it and everyone else shuttling in between, all parties concur that the *Kirieng* government has a poor record of 'giving' development to non-Muslim *bumiputera* like themselves. I was frequently told during fieldwork, particularly while walking past the dam construction site or Land and Survey boundary markers, that the government only brought *kemudahan* (facilities) and *maju* (progress)<sup>vi</sup> to its own people—Malays, Melanau, Muslims. For my companions, this was a sore point: if the *Kirieng* could bring them to Borneo Highlands—a luxury resort and golf course built atop a nearby mountain—why could they not do so here? While the religious factor was often so self-evident as not to require exposition, it was nonetheless a resource on which people drew freely. Reflecting on different countries' economic situations, for example, an elderly man told me that Malaysia was full of poor people. When I asked if there were many poor Malay

villages, however, he sniggered. ‘Look at what happens during their *gawai* [religious festivals, i.e. Hari Raya],’ he said, ‘the government gives them food, drink, everything. And when it comes to our own *gawai* [i.e. Christmas and the traditional harvest festival]? Nothing.’

Such remarks reveal a pervasive suspiciousness over the intentions and priorities of the Sarawakian government, even when it claims to be giving development to the people. For Bidayuhs, what sets *Kirieng* apart from other *bumiputera* is less their ethnicity than their religion, which they see as woven into the fabric of political dominance in Malaysia. While wholly endorsing official ideals of progress and prosperity, my acquaintances have less faith in a model of *pembangunan* magically emptied of ethnicity and religion. In their eyes, development—and indeed their lives in contemporary Sarawak—cannot be disassociated from Malay/Melanau-Muslim hegemony. This awareness serves as a powerful filter through which to account for recent changes while also providing a language through which to articulate their grievances. Accordingly, what enthusiasm there is for resettlement is moderated by the nagging fear that the *Kirieng* government will renege on its promises, while objectors to the scheme cite delays and compensation-related problems as proof of the state’s disinterest in non-Muslim *bumiputera*. In these moments, religious politics becomes implicated in the success or failure of government-led development, acting as one of many strands in the nexus of relations between Bidayuhs and the state.

For all their unhappiness over their perceived religious and political marginality however, Bidayuhs are aware that religion, particularly Islam, is a delicate topic in Malaysia that—as a teenage acquaintance explained with much hang-wringing—can get people into trouble with the ‘ISA’ (Internal Security Act). This impression is reinforced through periodic reports of religious conflict in the local media, such as the Lina Joy affair, in which a Malay convert to Christianity tried unsuccessfully to obtain official recognition of her new status, and more recent protests and church-bombings over the use of the word ‘Allah’ by Malaysian Christians (2010). Moreover, it is not uncommon for Bidayuhs—like other Sarawakians (see, for example, Bala, this volume)—to have friends and relations who have converted to Islam and ‘become Malay’ through marriage, migration or other reasons. In a region long characterized by such ethnic and religious fluidity, open religious conflict is thus not only politically risky, but also socially and pragmatically undesirable. In the face of all this, many Bidayuhs prefer not to rock the boat, but to find other less overt means of tapping Malaysia’s ‘*moden*’ (modern) resources. Among these, as the next section reveals, are the political affordances of their old rituals, *adat gawai*, and the religion to which nearly all of them now adhere, Christianity.

### ***How to do things with religion***

#### The culturalization of *adat gawai*

Until relatively recently, *adat gawai* was, like subsistence farming and remoteness, a badge of rural Bidayuhs’ backwardness in the eyes of the state. Officially classified alongside other indigenous ritual complexes as a ‘tribal/folk religion’ (*agama suku kaum/folk*), *adat gawai* occupies an implicitly inferior position to scripture-based world religions (*agama*) such as Christianity and Islam, which are associated with ‘modern’ citizenship. As one Bidayuh politician put it in 2000, ‘my estimate is that less than 25 percent of the Bidayuhs still cling to the old “adat” or religion. [...] My prediction is that, as the Bidayuhs get more educated and

as the non-Christian ones meet and mix more with those already Christians [sic] in the villages or towns, one day almost 100 percent will be Christians' (Minos 2000, p. 118).

Over the last two decades, the old rituals have indeed continued to die out, leaving behind dwindling groups of elderly practitioners in a few villages, including one affected by the dam. Interestingly, however, their decline has been inversely mirrored by *adat gawai*'s redefinition and valorisation in official multiculturalist discourses as 'Bidayuh culture'. Since the 1990s, the preservation, promotion and commercialization of ethnic 'cultures' has become increasingly central to Sarawak's self-definition; an intrinsic part of its identity as a 'modern' state. These developments have turned 'culture'—reified in the Bidayuh context as *gawai*-based dances, costumes and paraphernalia—into an important and often lucrative mediator between indigenous groups and the state (see Chua 2012a). For the villagers affected by the dam, this culturalized form of *gawai* has also become an increasingly useful means of negotiating with the government.

In many ways, their efforts have been stimulated by the state's own policies. 'Cultural preservation' has been factored into the resettlement scheme since its commencement. Over the last few years, research teams from Sarawak's Council for Customs and Traditions have visited the area to collect 'traditional' artefacts, information on *gawai* rituals, agricultural and environmental knowledge, myths and oral histories, among other things. Government funds have also been allocated for the construction of a new *baruk* (*gawai* ritual house) at the resettlement site, and for the performance of all the *gawai* rituals associated with the transition. Cumulatively, these measures have boosted the communities' awareness of the political cachet of *adat gawai* as a potential bargaining chip with the government. The elderly man mentioned at the start of this chapter, for example, told me that he and other villagers consistently reminded the government officials they met that it was the state's responsibility to provide a new *baruk* and other ritual facilities at the new site. If not, he told them forcefully, '*Gawai* will be lost. Our *culture* (*budaya*) will be lost.' By transforming a developmental necessity into a moral burden, these practitioners effectively turned the state's own conceptual frameworks to their advantage.

In recent years, their case has been boosted by growing tourist interest in the four villages, particularly in the community furthest from the road, where *gawai* is still followed. Every month, small groups of backpackers, urbanites, and occasionally journalists and filmmakers, hike up to the area in search of nature and culture. Over the years, a cluster of villagers have become adept at catering to these visitors, running a number of private 'homestay' programmes and offering packages that include jungle hikes, 'traditional' cooking and—for a heftier sum—'cultural' dances performed by the elderly *gawai* practitioners. Such activities have brought an extra source of (non-governmental) income to the communities, but also opened the resettlement scheme to increased public scrutiny. Today, the looming prospect of moving is intrinsic to these villages' 'story', winning them sympathisers and allies, widespread media coverage, and thus a modicum of leverage in their relations with the government. Over the years, newspaper clippings, photographs and VCDs of *gawai* dances and rituals have become part of residents' engagements with the scheme: held up as proof not only of their 'cultural' distinctiveness, but also of their connections with influential outsiders, to whom they can (and do) report governmental missteps.

In this way, the fate of the old rituals has become a point of negotiation between some of the affected villagers and government representatives: a publicly visible platform through which the former can take the state and its developmental agenda to task. Yet they do so not by

openly decrying Malay/Melanau-Muslim dominance, but by using one quintessentially Malaysian political vocabulary—that of ‘culture’—to critique another (‘development’). In the process, they have also been able to contest earlier pejorative portrayals of their old rituals while staking their claim to *moden* benefits in a way that circumvents Sarawak’s *pembangunan* apparatus.

### Modernity, munificence and Bidayuh Christianity

Although Christianity—in the form of rudimentary mission schools and health facilities—first entered Bidayuh areas in the late-nineteenth century, it was only from the late-1960s that large-scale conversion began to take place (see Chua 2012a, Chapter 3). Precipitated in part by post-independence demographic and socio-economic changes, this process was largely spearheaded by educated young Bidayuhs who saw it as a religion more suited to the demands of the new, urbanising world in which they now moved. During this period, Bidayuhs converted to Anglicanism and Catholicism in equal numbers with minimal regard for denominational specificities; as I explain elsewhere (Chua 2012a, p. 90), decisions on which church to ‘follow’ (*tundak*) were often based on kin relations, friendships, rivalries and other social considerations. Today, the vast majority of Bidayuhs belong to these two denominations, although a number of newer denominational and non-denominational churches, such as the Methodists, Seventh-Day Adventists and SIB, have garnered smaller congregations in the area. For the most part, however, Bidayuhs tend to refer to themselves as Christians first: a cue which I shall take in the discussion that follows.

For many of my acquaintances, Christianity is a useful buffer against Muslim hegemony because of its officially recognized status as a ‘modern’ world religion (Chua 2007, 2012a). This enables them to assert their modernity and parity with Malays—a difficult task for followers of *adat gawai*—without having to convert to Islam. As we have seen, however, this claim to ‘modernity’ is no guarantee of development. Indeed, rural villagers occasionally speculate that the *Kirieng* government deliberately withholds amenities from them precisely because they are Christian. In the face of such perceived discrimination, Christianity has also come to acquire a different role: that of a benevolent provider which ‘gives’ Bidayuhs what the state doesn’t.

Visits from charitable outsiders are nothing new to the affected communities. Over the years, they have received clothes, toys and medicines from the Sai Baba Council and other NGOs, funds for the upkeep of their bamboo bridges from ‘Chinese who go jogging in the jungle’ (probably Hash House Harriers from Kuching) and occasional donations by individual politicians, particularly in the pre-Taib era. However, the longest-serving and most prominent of these beneficent parties is the Anglican church, which began providing basic healthcare and education in the region in the late-nineteenth century, well before large-scale conversion took place. Many of my acquaintances credit Anglican missionaries with teaching Bidayuhs to stop fighting and taking heads, and to live in harmony and support each other during bereavement<sup>vii</sup> and other difficult moments (see Chua 2012a:82-87). In the 1990s, the Anglican church was joined in the area by the SIB, which has also garnered a positive reputation for giving financial and other aid to its adherents.

My acquaintances roundly describe these churches and their representatives as ‘kind’ and ‘generous’—characteristics which they pointedly contrast with the *Kirieng* government, whom they charge with allowing only Muslims to ‘*maju*’. ‘All the *kemudahan* in this area

comes from outside,' a young SIB mother once told me, 'But those YBs [Members of Parliament] have given us nothing.' She added that whereas government officials would tell villagers to fill out endless forms in order to obtain *kemudahan*, the Christian churches and many NGOs would simply hand over the cash. Their ability to do so is sometimes linked to the transnational communities of which they are part, and whose charity and compassion have brought donations, provisions, water tanks and even new buildings to rural areas. A blacksmith's forge built in a neighbouring village by a Singaporean church group, for instance, was sometimes held up by my informants as an exemplar of how *kemudahan* could be acquired without recourse to the government's bureaucratic, ethno-religiously biased channels.

In sum, Christianity has acquired subtle political overtones over the years as both a legible means of being modern (but not Muslim) in Malaysia and a practical route of obtaining development while circumventing the state. Like *adat gawai*, however, its capacity to do so is ultimately circumscribed by state policies and responses. I was told, for example, that although the village mentioned earlier had persuaded its 'Singapore friends' to pay for a new road to replace the rocky path leading to it, the government would not permit them to undertake the project. Consequently, my acquaintances' efforts to obtain development through their own religious resources are tempered by a sense of entrapment and frustration: of being tied to and reliant on a state which they are unwilling to trust. This is exacerbated by the widespread opinion that even when development comes, it does so at a price—in this case, the loss of their land and villages. In recent years, these sentiments have been aggravated by the widely-shared expectation that the cleared area will then be gazetted as a national park, a resort built near the reservoir, and the profits shared among the politicians. It is in these moments that Christianity's limitations as a material and political resource become painfully evident. Yet, these are also the points at which it comes into its own as a theological and moral influence in Bidayuhs' lives.

### ***Development through a Christian lens***

For most Bidayuhs, Christianity is not merely a political tool but also 'a meaningful system in its own right, one capable of guiding many areas of their lives' (Robbins 2004, p. 3). In this capacity, it has become interlaced with the affected villagers' efforts to make sense of and respond to the changes caused by the dam-construction and resettlement project. Significantly, I found that Christian notions and ideals were most often invoked in the context of opposition to—or at least unease over—the scheme. Of these, three recurred with particular frequency: individual morality, communal responsibility and the renunciation of (excessive) wealth.

As I explain elsewhere (Chua 2012b), a distinctive Christian addition to Bidayuh communities has been the notion of the individual self as the locus of moral agency—one involved in a direct relationship of love (*rindu*) with God. This individualist model, however, is tempered by a strong and equally Christian ethos of love for one's neighbour: of taking care of the community at large and maintaining peace and good relations. As the scheme has progressed, these motifs have grown increasingly entwined with ideas of worldly renunciation, or at least non-covetousness, in the ruminations of those who are opposed to or uncertain about resettlement. Unlike supporters of the scheme, who tend to couch it in development-oriented terms of 'progress' and 'modernization', these people use Christianity to muddy the situation and the power relations imbued in it. And as the following example



reveals, prayer gatherings—which are the only occasions on which villagers regularly come together from their dispersed farming activities—have become sites at which the tensions between these different parties are played out.

Shortly after construction commenced, a group of affected households began working with a human rights lawyer and opposition politician to contest the legality of the scheme and obtain official recognition of their right to build their own villages on their ancestral land rather than move to the resettlement site. The leader of this group is also the sole Anglican prayer leader of his village: a talented orator who has single-handedly run its prayer gatherings for years. As matters progressed, Sunday services and fellowship meetings in his village became microcosms and barometers of its internal fissures. Just after the case went to court, several families stopped attending Sunday services in apparent protest at the prayer leader's behaviour, which they thought might jeopardise their access to government compensation. When I arrived a few months later, the strains had eased, partly because many pro-settlement villagers had moved out with their newfound wealth. This demographic shift altered the dynamics of church services again, turning them into less fractious arenas in which the prayer leader and his allies could discuss the situation.

During my visit, I attended a fellowship gathering at which most attendees were involved in the anti-resettlement case. Following an hour of praise and worship, the prayer leader took advantage of the largely friendly crowd and began expounding on the legal proceedings. As he spoke, he deployed an intriguing melange of language and ideas deriving from official *pembangunan* discourses, Christianity, and legal and human rights terminology (picked up from the lawyers and sympathetic NGOs). Echoing the words of earlier missionaries (Chua 2012a, p. 138), he exhorted his listeners not to be afraid: it was not wrong, he said, to fight for their land rights (*hak tanah*). What they needed now, he added, was for the government to acknowledge (*ngaku*) their 'title' (English) to the land on which they planned to build an alternative village. Other people could take the compensation money, he pointed out, but everyone in this room was going to do the right thing. In this way, he situated his audience within a moral framework that depicted them as forgoing immediate financial gain for the sake of a righteous outcome.

The prayer leader's portrayal of the situation would have been familiar to many in attendance, for the notion of following the way of the Lord (*aran Tuhan/Tápa*) rather than 'this world' (*dunia ong*) is a common theme in sermons throughout Bidayuh communities. In recent years, it seems to have gained especial currency among opponents of resettlement as a way of accounting for their fellow villagers' co-optation into the scheme. During fieldwork, I occasionally heard morose remarks about how kin and neighbours had become greedy and waylaid by money rather than taking care of their land and community. Such actions were depicted as an abrogation of their responsibility to their fellow Christians and villagers and, by extension, their personal responsibility to God. Accordingly, such ruminations were sometimes accompanied by comments on the inner character of the people in question. When a village elder and staunch supporter of resettlement showed up at a Sunday service looking exceptionally surly, for example, the woman next to me whispered conspiratorially that perhaps his *atin* (heart, inner spirit) was troubled (*susah*) because of his recent behaviour, implying that coming to church and entering the presence of God had somehow pricked his conscience.

These examples reveal how Christian ideas, practices and spaces have been implicated—alongside notions of indigenous rights, *pembangunan* ideals and other factors—in the

affected villagers' experiences of and responses to the resettlement scheme. Crucially, I suggest, they help to mitigate a poignant problem that no amount of grumbling about Malay/Melanau-Muslim hegemony will resolve: the fact that some of the thorniest conflicts over this scheme are not between Bidayuhs and political 'others', but *within* Bidayuh communities and families. On a larger scale, there is also the irrefutable but equally troubling fact that the chief engineers of state-led development projects in the area are not Malays or Melanaus, but Bidayuh politicians. Such figures are often criticised by affected villagers of all stripes for their '*nakar*' (mischief-making) behaviour: for personally profiting from state politics and development spinoffs while their fellow Bidayuhs suffer the consequences. Without recourse to an anti-Malay/Muslim critique, some rural residents have depicted their behaviour in terms of a failure to live up to Christian ideals—for not caring about their own people while chasing money and political power. Over the last few years, I have occasionally heard pronouncements to the effect of, 'He [Bidayuh politician] calls himself Christian, but look at what he's doing to his own people.' Similarly, a comment in English on a highly critical Sarawakian blog runs thus:

Wonder what kind of Christians are these Bidayuh BN [Barisan Nasional, the ruling coalition] goons? Far from what Jesus teaching!

Never inside the Bible that show Jesus hang around with corrupt leaders oppressing the poor (except being crucified [sic] for helping the poor and against evil Roman rule).

[...]

Bidayuh folks must get their head right this time: stop voting the BN evil looters and be a responsible Christians. Help, defend the poor Bidayuhs like what Jesus always did, not kill them for BN greed.

Whether or not the poster was from the affected area, his or her comments are an apt, if unusually eloquent, encapsulation of the sorts of sentiments I have heard in this area. Unlike the Lun Bawang and Kelabit whose responses to Malay-Muslim hegemony are framed by the 'Law of Love' (Bala, this volume), my Bidayuh acquaintances' ruminations tend to focus on fairness, justice and individual responsibility. In the process, they reconfigure their relationship to the government by holding their political representatives accountable to a different—and arguably greater—moral order than that of the state. Perhaps it was just this logic that lay behind some of my informants' grim verdict, which I heard on a few occasions, that the cancer which later struck one of the politicians behind the scheme was a just punishment from God.

### **Conclusion**

In recent decades, most scholarship on development and economic policy in Malaysia has focused on the politics of race and indigeneity on the Peninsula. If religion—usually in the form of Islam—is present in these accounts, it too is highly politicized and invariably tied to the 'Malay-Muslim exceptionalism' (Yeoh, this volume) that characterizes the postcolonial state. What this chapter has attempted to do, however, is shed light on not only the politics but also the religious dimensions of *pembangunan* elsewhere in Malaysia, from the perspective of one of its ethnic minority communities.

Contrary to the resolutely ‘anti-political’, a-religious tenor of official developmentalist discourses, *pembangunan* for my Bidayuh acquaintances is shot through with religious tensions, politics, concepts and moral templates. By this, I do not mean to portray *adat gawai* or Christianity as all-encompassing ‘cultures’ that invariably determine their responses to development interventions. Bidayuhs are every bit as likely to attribute the failures, problems and indeed promises of *pembangunan* to factors such as the global economy, environmental considerations and party politics. These elements, however, are woven into their lives alongside concerns about Muslim hegemony, Christian moral responsibility, and the agency of both God and the old *gawai* spirits. Rather like the strands of a Bidayuh rattan basket, such religious influences alternate between visibility and concealment, lending shape and structure to the situation without dominating it.

In the same way that state-led development projects have become sites at which wider inter-religious tensions and concerns are played out, then, both *adat gawai* and Christianity have become means through which my acquaintances grapple with the contingencies of development. What I have tried to underscore, however, is the distinctly quotidian quality of these ongoing negotiations. Such negotiations are responses, in part, to the demographic fluidity of the region and the acknowledged riskiness of outright religious discord (see also Yeoh, this volume). However, they also reflect the suffusive nature of the different religious influences in Bidayuhs’ lives. Just as my acquaintances find it impossible to disentangle Islam from contemporary Malaysian statehood and *pembangunan*, they see *adat gawai* and Christianity as intrinsic to, and not distinct from, their socio-economic and political existence (Chua 2012a). Consequently, I argue, they enable Bidayuhs to ambiguate rather than outwardly contest their economic, political and religious marginality through various small-scale means: by turning ‘cultural’ preservation into a moral duty for the state, by tapping into charitable transnational religious networks, and by morally reframing the actions of peers and political representatives through Christian tenets. Viewed in this light, religious ‘toleration’ and ‘conflict’ look less like dichotomous states than like intertwined strands in a tangled and ever-shifting relational bundle. And it is only by studying them from the ground up, through the prism of the everyday, that scholarly observers can do justice to their multiplicity and complexity.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> This was one of a series of such events at which the affected villagers were awarded compensation cheques for the land they were about to lose.

<sup>ii</sup> Sarawak and Sabah gained independence from Britain in 1963 when they joined Malaya and Singapore to form the Federation of Malaysia.

<sup>iii</sup> In 2010, protests and violence erupted in parts of Malaysia, including Sarawak, when the High Court ruled in favour of allowing non-Muslims to use the term ‘Allah’ to refer to God.

<sup>iv</sup> Owing to the controversial nature of the scheme, I refrain from describing or referencing it in detail here.

<sup>v</sup> Indeed, they are often grouped together as a single constituency (see, e.g., Jayum and King 1994).

<sup>vi</sup> I cite these Malay words as they have been incorporated into everyday speech, rather than modifying them for grammatical consistency.

<sup>vii</sup> One of the most commonly cited reasons for converting to Christianity was the fact that the old death rituals were extremely elaborate and expensive, with the bereaved family having to pay large fees (rice, jars, cash, etc.) to a ritual specialist and undertaker to dispose of the

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corpse. Conversion to Christianity was seen to ‘free’ people from such expenses and encourage mutual cooperation during the mourning period.

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