To know or not to know?

Practices of knowledge and ignorance among Bidayuhs in an 'impurely' Christian world

Liana Chua, Cambridge University

This article seeks to render ignorance analytically and ethnographically productive by exploring practices and tropes of knowing and not-knowing among young Christian Bidayuhs in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. It argues that these Bidayuhs' professed ignorance of the old 'religion', *adat gawai*, cannot be dismissed as a simple lack of knowledge or reflection of sheer indifference. Instead, their invocations of ignorance could be understood as a productive, empowering device for dealing with the dangers of living in a world in which religious conversion remains an ongoing, incomplete process. Through this ethnographic analysis, the article also offers a reflexive critique of the knowledge-centred impulses that often shape anthropology's epistemological and methodological projects.

'Most ethnographers are at some level constantly on the look-out for at least partial reincarnations of Muchona, and in my experience, a great number claim to have found them' (Metcalf 2002: 20).

As people who know – and more importantly, reveal what they know – 'informants' have long been central to the anthropological enterprise. In ethnographic lore, the paradigm of such 'native exegetes' was probably Muchona the Hornet, Interpreter of Religion, whose methodical and lively expositions on

Ndembu ritual gained fame through the work of Victor Turner (1967). But more than being a valuable informant, Muchona's purported exegetical prowess has turned him into 'a model and an ideal for many ethnographers' (ibid.: 19), whose task has conventionally been to pursue 'local knowledge' (Geertz 1983) as well as to purvey it, transform it into 'anthropological knowledge'. We seek knowledge in local Muchonas, one might say, in order to *be* like him, the adroit knowledge-broker, in a discipline which is fundamentally and teleologically knowledge-oriented.

During fieldwork in a Bidayuh village in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, I too discovered my share of Muchona-like informants, who were keen to 'make me know' what would later crystallize in my ethnography as aspects of 'local culture'. But equally and perhaps more prominent were many *non*-Muchonas who could or would not expound on the things I asked about. To a degree, their recalcitrance stemmed from simple indifference, uncertainty, or the inability, as ethnographers so often find, to articulate what they grasped through practice and instinct. Some of these silences were shattered as I grew into my role as a 'student of culture' in my fieldsite. But many others lingered to the end; and I eventually realized that certain protestations of ignorance were quite heartfelt.

This was especially noticeable when young adults talked about *adat gawai*[1] – the 'indigenous' ritual complex almost uniformly practised in Bidayuh villages until the 1970s, and still observed today by small and ever-diminishing clutches of *nyamba gawai* (*gawai* elders). Born and raised as Christians, these Bidayuhs readily concede that *adat gawai* is their 'tradition' or 'culture', as it is often depicted in national multiculturalist discourses. Beyond that, however, their knowledge of it is usually patchy at best. Like most other villagers, they agree that when the *nyamba gawai* die, it will be lost because nobody else knows it. This is

not because *adat gawai* knowledge is particularly secretive or exclusive; indeed its practitioners frequently assert that anybody can learn it, although it takes many years to become truly adept. But the prospect of even fleeting acquaintance does not appeal to most young adults, who prefer to watch today's periodic *gawai* rituals from the sidelines in blissful ignorance. At such events, they often reiterate to visitors and ethnographers that they know nothing about it, stating with seeming nonchalance that 'this is what people in the old days followed. We are all Christian, so there is no need to learn about *adat gawai.*'

   Anthropologists of religious conversion would probably find such repudiations of 'old' knowledge frustratingly familiar. And in the Bidayuh case, the reasons for them are often prosaic or political. Plain lack of interest is a common culprit; sheer impracticality another. For many people, Christianity's allure lies in its consonance with 'modernity': a sentiment arguably fanned by community leaders' and politicians' exhortations to young Bidayuhs to discard those aspects of 'traditional (village-centred) culture' which impede their socio-economic progress in the 'modern' nation (Kiong 2003; Minos 2000; Sarok 2003). Indeed, those who have heeded that call and found education or employment in Malaysia's Muslim-majority urban centres have increasingly turned to Christianity as a buffer against peer pressure to convert to Islam (Chua 2007b: 274). In this milieu, it is hardly surprising that most young Bidayuh adults feel little compulsion to know about *adat gawai*, and even less compulsion to explain why. What is striking, however, is that despite their apparent apathy, few have relegated it to the status of superstition or misapprehension. Instead, as I shall argue, another reason for these young adults' desire *not* to know 'the old ways' may stem precisely from the fact that they take them quite seriously. Understanding why this is so mandates an analysis not only of the contents of such knowledge, but also of the mechanisms

of knowing and not-knowing bound up in *adat gawai* and other aspects of village life.

The aim of this article is thus not to deny the plethora of mundane and political reasons for young Bidayuhs' ignorance of *adat gawai*, but to add some depth to what might otherwise be construed as a straightforward tale of knowledge-loss. Rather than allowing ignorance to fall by the analytical wayside as the absence or inverse of knowledge, I take it as the starting point for an investigation into Bidayuh practices of knowing and not-knowing in a world which, as one of my village friends put it, is 'not yet pure Christian'. This investigation illuminates certain conceptions of agency and causality which have influenced people's decisions in the space between what they call the 'old (*gawai*) world' and the 'modern (Christian)' one. In the process, I shall reflect on common anthropological knowledge practices, which are often geared towards the pursuit of 'local knowledge' while treating ignorance on the part of both ethnographer and informant as a problem to be overcome. And yet, it is precisely in those gaps and silences – which we hope our Muchonas will fill – that ethnographic revelations can sometimes be found.

From *adat gawai* to Christianity: historical and ethnographic notes on Bidayuh conversion

The Bidayuh are Sarawak's second largest indigenous group, encompassing several different dialect-speaking communities within their 210,000-strong population.[2] Since the mid-nineteenth century – when the Brooke Raj (1841-1946)[3] enforced generally peaceable relations between feuding groups – they have lived in villages in the mountainous hinterlands of Kuching, planting rice, crops,

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and raw commodities such as rubber and cocoa up to about the 1970s. This rice-based agricultural system formed the basis of the 'indigenous' complex of rituals and practices commonly known as *adat gawai*.[4] Briefly translated, *adat* means both 'customary law' and 'way of life', while *gawai* conflates 'festival', 'ceremony', and 'feast' (Nais 1988: 155) – the main events at which such *adat* is observed and reinforced (Adat Bidayuh 1994: 25). Consisting mainly of a series of rituals held at various stages of the 'rice year', *adat gawai*'s basic objective is to bless and invoke the blessings of the rice spirit, as well as ancestor spirits and other benevolent entities from the surrounding mountains, rivers, and jungles – while also keeping malevolent spirits at bay. Most rituals entail several hours or nights of prayers, processions, and chants designed to draw the 'good' spirits to the longhouse veranda where offerings of food, betel nut, and tobacco await them in return for their goodwill, blessings, and protection.

Until about thirty years ago, *adat gawai*'s major ceremonies were village-wide affairs. Entire longhouses would observe specific rituals at the same agricultural time, with each household contributing substantial amounts of labour and resources to the proceedings. Such inter-household coordination was particularly important owing to the need to uniformly observe the many *pantang* ('taboos' or prohibitions) accompanying the rituals. After certain ceremonies, for example, longhouses would be closed to all traffic for several days, and their inhabitants barred from eating specific foods or performing various tasks. The penalties for breaking *pantang* were severe; and most people preferred not to risk spiritual punishment or a hefty fine by the village and ritual heads (Adat Bidayuh 1994: iv-v). In theory, at least, *adat gawai* both sanctioned and depended upon the entanglement of livelihood (rice planting) and 'religious' practice.

In the late-nineteenth century, this tight bundle of 'work' and 'prayer' (Howes 1960: 493) severely impeded the success of the few early Anglican missions to be established in Bidayuh areas. Abetted by the paternalistic ethos of the Brooke Raj, and to a lesser degree by the British government (1946-1963), the Bidayuhs' rice-planting system remained shielded from commercial exploitation and development well into the twentieth century (Grijpstra 1976: 38-39; Kaur 1995; Ooi 1997). In 1963, however, Sarawak gained independence as a state of Malaysia. Its incorporation into the new nation was rapidly followed by an era of intensive rural development – notably through a series of 'Malaysia Plans' (Loh and Kahn 1992) – which introduced infrastructural improvements, large scale cash-cropping, wages, and 'modern' accoutrements such as radios, cars, concrete houses, and electricity to Bidayuh villages. At the same time, the extension of educational facilities and affirmative action policies designed to boost indigenous participation in the economy and civil service (King 1988; Siddique and Suryadinata 1981) generated a steady outflow of villagers to Kuching and other urban areas for schooling and employment.[5]

This population trickle severely drained the agricultural workforce, and by the 1980s, rice cultivation was no longer the prevalent economic activity among Bidayuh communities. These developments proved deleterious to *adat gawai*, the labour-intensive tasks of which became harder to fulfil as the villages' able-bodied populations shrank. More significantly, many young Bidayuhs, now regular school-goers and workers, grew unable or unwilling to comply with *gawai*-based restrictions on movement around the longhouse and village. Consequently, numerous households armed with urban wages 'became modern' by moving into detached houses or establishing new villages, unfettered by *gawai* constraints (Lindell 2000). Eventually, Bidayuh longhouses – the loci of *adat*

gawai rituals – began disintegrating, with entire sections being demolished or left dilapidated from the 1980s.

Post-independence changes thus unmoored *adat gawai* from its rice-planting base, opening a space for a new *adat* with which to meet the challenges of 'the modern world'. It was in this climate that Christianity tentatively began advancing in Bidayuh villages in various denominations.[6] Its most effective proponents were youthful returnees who had converted while working or studying in urban areas. Christianity was deemed compatible with their self-consciously 'modern' lifestyle, enabling them to move freely in and out of the village and to pray anywhere, independent of agricultural demands. Building on the rudimentary foundations laid by earlier missions (Saunders 1992: 6) as well as the support of a small pool of priests and nuns, these young Bidayuhs were instrumental in encouraging large-scale conversion to Christianity. *Adat Christian*, as many call it, was depicted as a viable and equally efficacious replacement for the prescriptions of *adat gawai* – how to stay healthy, keep away evil, and do well in the world – without similarly inhibiting prohibitions. Its initial appeal was thus less doctrinal than instrumental; indeed it was not uncommon in the 1960s and 1970s for individuals and households to 'hedge their bets', as an elderly missionary put it, by switching between *adat gawai* and Christian practice in order to get things done.

Subsequently, conversion took on a life of its own. In the 1980s and 1990s, many older people began 'following' their children into Christianity, often for reasons unconnected to being 'modern'. First, many deemed it easier to be Christian, which primarily involved 'sitting down' for a few hours in church on Sundays (Harris 2001: 10), than to constantly abide by *adat gawai*'s numerous labour-intensive and often restrictive regulations. Secondly, many *nyamba gawai*

were persuaded to convert by the fear that their (Christian) children would not know the *gawai* rites to send their souls to the appropriate 'village' after death, thereby leaving them stranded. Many thus 'entered' Christianity, secure in the knowledge that their children's prayers would at least get them to Jesus' village – heaven (cf. Lindell 2000: 192; Schiller 1997: 144). By the 1990s, over ninety-five percent of Bidayuhs had become Christian. The majority are Anglican or Catholic, although much smaller presences include Methodists, Seventh-Day Adventists, and the evangelical SIB (*Sidang Injil Borneo*). Most Bidayuhs, however, define themselves primarily as 'Christian', a term under which they consciously subsume denominational affiliations. As I explain elsewhere (Chua 2007a: 88-91, 147-149), this has engendered a discursive and ideological notion of Christian sameness which takes precedence over denominational differences in most contexts: a tendency which I shall reproduce in this paper by referring to Christianity as a single generic entity.

Amid all this, there remain small pockets of *nyamba gawai* in certain villages who, for various reasons, have chosen not to convert. Accordingly, the forms of *adat gawai* they observe have evolved to keep pace with changing circumstances. Although contemporary *gawai* practice is still oriented towards the well-being of the rice crop and the village at large, the niche it occupies within community life has steadily diminished. Owing to the lack of manpower and inter-household coordination, only a few key ceremonies are now observed annually, and prohibitions on work and movement tend to centre on individual practitioners and their households rather than being enforced across longhouses or the village. (In my fieldsite, moreover, 'modern' occupations such as office work and school, in which practitioners' children and grandchildren might be involved, are excluded from *adat gawai*'s prohibitionary remit.) Consequently, as we shall see below,

adat gawai rituals have also become community events at which spectators far outnumber practitioners.

With *adat gawai* practices and conversion to Christianity still fresh in collective memory, many Bidayuhs depict themselves as living in a transitional world which, to draw on the expression cited earlier, is 'impurely Christian'. This does not, however, imply that *adat gawai* and Christianity are radically different phenomena. Instead, many Bidayuhs arguably see conversion as a movement along a continuum[7] with 'pure' *adat gawai* and Christian poles. Both *gawai* and Christianity are treated as *adat*, and both have functioned as key social and temporal regulators of community life. This is the case even in the many villages with more than one denomination: as the only sites where people congregate weekly, each church serves as a communal node at which announcements are made and events arranged. Like *adat gawai*, Christianity is 'suffusive' (Schiller 1997: 78), spilling into houses, farms, and schools. Occasions such as birthdays, deaths, weddings, new jobs, the completion of a house, or even the purchase of a new car invariably warrant prayer sessions and large communal meals. Even rice-planting has not lain neglected: crosses have replaced *gawai* ritual barriers and offering bundles at the small remaining farms (cf. Howes 1960: 489), and rice stalks are blessed at special church services held around harvest time.

As these examples suggest, *adat gawai* and Christianity are fundamentally ways of getting things done – staying safe, encouraging a bountiful harvest, or ensuring a safe journey (also see Geddes 1954: 32; Harris 2001: 157). The knowledge associated with them is accordingly performative: for many people, to know *adat gawai* or Christianity is to know what to do, say, and use in order to achieve a desired effect. There is, however, an additional factor upon which the efficacy of these prescriptions is contingent: the cooperation of certain spiritual parties,

ranging from the rice spirit to Jesus and the saints. This is especially important in the observance of *adat gawai*, whereby relations between humans and spirits are mediated by the obligation to 'let each other know' what is happening. As we shall see, it is in these instances that the entanglement of knowledge and relationality becomes most explicit – and, for many Christian Bidayuhs, most dangerous.

Knowledge and relationality in the observance of *adat gawai*

When *gawai* rituals are held in my fieldsite, they almost always attract a substantial audience of local (Christian) inhabitants, lured to the longhouse by the sound of gongs resounding across the village and mountains. Despite being followers of a different *adat*, they see such periodic events as ordinary, if irregular, features of village life, worthy of support and spectatorship. Several have even become regular helpers at rituals, providing manual assistance to the increasingly frail *nyamba gawai* by collecting bamboo from the jungle to construct the 'altar' on which offerings are hung, playing gongs to accompany their dances, and cooking the sacrificial animals. Also present at these events are lively, chattering clusters of young adults and children. Like the *gawai* helpers, many of them work or go to school in urban areas, returning to visit friends and family in the village at weekends. For them, *gawai* ritual attendance is just one of several options for a night out; a plausible alternative to karaoke sessions, discos at the community hall, or barbecues by the river.

During these ceremonies, participants and audience members are generally free to talk, roam about, use the toilet, pass around beers and betel nut, or document the proceedings: as elsewhere in Borneo, 'the sociality of ritual is an aspect of its

sacredness, and not a byproduct or distraction' (Metcalf 1991: 9). There are, however, certain hazardous moments during each ritual – particularly when the spirits, attracted by the invitational chants of the women, congregate before the offerings at the altar – when everyone in the immediate vicinity, Christian, *nyamba gawai*, and visitor alike, has to be *capak'*ed, or anointed with a mixture of turmeric, coconut, oil, and sometimes chicken blood. *Capak*, my acquaintances explain, keeps a person's soul strong to stop it being frightened by the spirits that turn up, while also 'telling' (*da'an*) the spirits not to harm its bearers. At the rituals I attended, *capak* would be accepted without protest by those to whom it was offered; even if they did not know why or how these substances worked, they knew that they risked being harmed without it.

Such complicity was rooted in two common understandings. First, widespread conversion to Christianity has not caused the death or demystification of the 'old' spirits in the eyes of converts. Instead, such spirits are deemed to remain real and efficacious, *as long as* their existence is generated and sustained by the *adat*-based actions, offerings, and prayers of the *nyamba gawai*. This was explained to me by a well-educated civil servant in her mid-forties during a post-harvesting *gawai* ritual. While she would willingly attend *gawai* events as a gesture of support, she would not spend the night at the longhouse at ritual's end, as was the custom, because the veranda would by then be filled with spirits who might 'disturb' people nearby. Being Christian, she said in English, she did not 'believe' in these spirits – by which she meant pray to and do other things to engage with them – but this not alleviate the danger of simply being near the *nyamba gawai*. The only time she would truly feel safe, she reflected, was when all the *nyamba gawai* had died, and there was nobody left to 'believe' in the 'old' spirits, which would then disappear.[8] Later, I had a similar discussion with a senior female *gawai* practitioner, who speculated that when all the *nyamba gawai* had died, the

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spirits would probably learn to listen to Christian prayers – and maybe even become Christian too.

This exegetical framework strongly emphasizes the capacity of humans to generate and (re)shape the existence and presence of the spirits with whom they engage through *adat gawai* and Christianity. It was this principle, I suggest, which underlay many elderly people's decisions to convert in order to safeguard their post-mortem fate: this was not an admission of Christianity's superior efficacy, but acknowledgement that their souls' well-being would be directly sustained by their *children's* prayers and actions. This is also the reason that 'old' dangers are seen to exist mainly in villages where *adat gawai* is practised, and less so in towns or 'pure' Christian villages. But human agency is not tantamount to human control: once relations are established, spirits themselves are quite capable of taking action. This was the basis of the second understanding shared by the *capak* recipients, who all acknowledged that the *nyamba gawai* were entangled in an *adat*-regulated relationship with the spirits they had summoned. Although no Bidayuh equivalent for the encompassing anthropological term 'relations' exists, there are various modes by which connections between different entities are revealed and articulated. These include notions of movement between groups and places, gifting practices, and most pertinently here, the trope of 'knowing'. In the practice of *adat gawai*, humans and spirits are, crucially, obliged to let each other know what is happening: it is at these points that relations between them crystallize. At many rituals, it is a basic courtesy for the *nyamba gawai* to inform the spirits through *capak* not to harm its human bearers; having been 'made to know', it becomes incumbent on the spirits to comply.

When *adat gawai* was widely followed, such reciprocity was observed – admittedly not always perfectly – in many realms of village life. For example, it

was good practice for people entering the jungle to inform the spirits within of their intrusion by smearing their forehead with earth or stashing a rolled-up leaf behind their ear. Minor rituals were also held prior to the start of certain events – planting, hunting in the jungle, a long journey, or construction – to let nearby spirits know what was about to happen. Having been informed thus, the spirits were obliged to let things transpire, and even aid their endeavours. Conversely, humans would look out for 'omens' sent by spirits before commencing. These could take various guises, including animal sightings, clouds, or sneezing; but birds were by far the most common and significant (Roth 1980: 221-231).[9] Whether messengers or incarnations of spirits – one old man described them as telephones – they foretold the future through their cries and flight paths. Some signs were auspicious, but many warned of imminent dangers, including accidents, deaths, or bad harvests. Having been 'made to know' these risks, people were obliged to stop, postpone their tasks, or further appease the spirits and seek more signs.[10] Failure to do so could result in injury, sickness, or even death. Interestingly, spirits were deemed more forgiving of plain ignorance of the rules than of absent-minded transgressions (cf. Schiller 1997: 83). Even unintentional slights by those who really should have known – misreading an omen or forgetting to perform a ritual task – could beget serious consequences.

'Letting each other know' thus situates humans and spirits on the same relational plane: to know is to be socially obligated. But as the above paragraph suggests, there is an important caveat: humans and spirits can only be successfully 'made to know' *if* they possess the knowledge that enables them to recognize what is being communicated in the first place. Where and how the spirits obtain their knowledge is, for most of my acquaintances, not a matter for explication or concern. Bidayuhs are quite willing to concede their incomplete knowledge of the worlds and ways of spirits; what is important is what humans know, and what

they do about it (cf. Metcalf 1991: 47; Schiller 1997: 78). Humans attain their knowledge through various relationships and modalities. A *gawai* practitioner, for example, might teach her granddaughters to chant, pressing a few grains of cooked rice and salted fish to their lips to ensure they remember what they have learned; more fleetingly, spirits might 'give' humans the skill of healing, often in the form of a small stone, in their dreams. Once acquired, such knowledge has the capacity to then generate relations with – and sustain the very existence of – the relevant spirits.

The practice of *adat gawai* thus entails at least two sets of relations: those through which knowledge is conveyed, and those which are brought into being by the acquisition and use of that knowledge.[11] In describing these different packages of knowledge and relationality, however, my informants tend to use a single verb: *pu'an*, to know. The scope of *pu'an* is sufficiently vague to encompass great variation in types and degrees of knowledge. For example, people may be said to know about (*pu'an*) omens through conversations with their parents; but their possession of this *adat*-governed knowledge *simultaneously* entangles them in relations with omen animals, such that when birds 'let them know' (*da yǔh pu'an*) about dangers ahead, they are obliged to respond. The second set of relations thus pivots on the point of knowing, at which one's existing knowledge and its associated relations are 'activated' through *recognition* of specific forms: the *capak* sign on people's foreheads or a bird call, for instance. In this respect, knowing *adat gawai* is an inherently performative process of positioning oneself within a 'field of relations' in which 'beings of all kinds…continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence' (Ingold 2006: 12).[12]

This tight entanglement of knowledge, knowing, and relationality is not confined to *adat gawai*. Non-Bidayuhs who have married into Bidayuh villages,

for instance, are said to have 'become' (*jadi*) Bidayuh[13] when 'they now know' village *adat*: how to speak its dialect, work on its farms, eat its food, or weave its baskets, all of which must be acquired and practised through village relationships. Perhaps the strongest gesture of acceptance for incomers is their acquisition of a village teknonym: an intrinsically relational appellation which identifies its bearer through his or her progeny and the familial networks in which they are enmeshed. It is only through months and years of interaction with other villagers, however, that knowledge of such networks – the ability to know who's who – can be built up. Possessing and using teknonyms thus not only reflects how much one knows about village networks, but also establishes and sustains one's social position – and those of others – within them.

The converse occurs when people move out of the village or spend most of their lives in cities. When the relations that bind them to specific places are severed or weakened, so too is the knowledge they sustain. While sitting with an elderly woman who was preparing *sago* paste – a process requiring dexterity and immaculate timing – I commented that one of my friends who lived in the city and returned to the village at weekends had recently made the same with markedly less success. 'Of course she's not clever at making *sago*,' my companion replied, stirring vigorously; 'she no longer lives in the village'. This comment did not simply concern my friend's undoubted lack of practice, but the fact that certain types of knowledge are indelibly acquired, maintained, and indeed instantiated *through* relations in the village. Indeed I was frequently reminded of this by the old ladies with whom I spent many afternoons learning to winnow rice and weave baskets. Although they mused that I too had 'become' Bidayuh after several months of fieldwork, their awareness of my impending departure left them no illusions about my potential for Bidayuh housewifery. 'Your work is different,' they noted, when explaining my early abject failures at winnowing. Instead, my

work – what I knew best – was reading and writing so that I could tell others about life in their village. This was an acknowledgement of the different relational framework from which I had come, and to which I would soon return.

Knowledge, agency, and intention

The link between knowing and relationality demonstrated by these examples is not, of course, unique to Bidayuh society. Indeed, we can gain conceptual illumination by turning briefly to another body of literature, ethnographically situated halfway across the world from Sarawak: recent work on kinship knowledge in the West. In an influential article in this field, Marilyn Strathern argues that if 'self-knowledge' is 'foundational to [Euro-American] personal identity' (1999: 68), then the mere act of acquiring information on one's parentage has an 'immediate (simultaneous) "social" effect' (ibid.: 75): 'knowing something about one's kin is also knowing something about oneself' (ibid.: 77). In these situations – such as when adopted children discover their biological parents – the knower has little *choice* over the relations engendered by such knowledge, because 'relationships come into being when the knowledge does' (ibid.: 78). Its effects, in Strathern's words, are 'built-in' (ibid.: 75). Pivotal to the situation is not the content of knowledge but the fact of knowing, through which personal identity and relations are inexorably brought into existence. The subject only exercises a choice prior to knowledge acquisition: to know or not to know. Once knowledge is obtained, however, agency resides *in knowing itself*, which, quite independently of the subject's *intention*, sets him or her on 'trajectories which, once embarked upon, have their own momentum' (Carsten 2007: 414).

I cite these works not for the sake of pure comparison, but to exploit their analytical possibilities for understanding Bidayuh exegeses on knowing and not-knowing. Notably, they foreground an important but understated distinction which we might use to think through the case at hand: that between agency and intention. As revealed earlier, the mere act of knowing *adat gawai* has the agentive effect of generating 'built-in' relations with *gawai* spirits, whether or not the knower *wants* them. In the process, the knower gets bound up in a web of attendant obligations and regulations – such as those associated with omens – over which he or she has limited control. Knowing, in these cases, may thus be constitutive and potentially empowering, but it is simultaneously *dis*empowering owing to the operation of these 'built-in' relations.

This divergence between agency and intention sits uneasily with many recent anthropological studies of the performative aspects of knowledge (e.g. Barth 1990, 2002; Burke 2000; Lambek 1993; Lindstrom 1990). Reflecting a broader disciplinary interest in 'practice'-oriented approaches (Ortner 1984), these works shift our focus from the semantic content of knowledge to how it is 'managed' (Harrison 1995) or 'socially distributed' (Simpson 1997) by human actors. This move, Barth argued in his 2000 Sidney Mintz lecture, 'An Anthropology of Knowledge', 'secure[s] the space for agency in our analysis' by 'focusing on the knowers and the acts of the knowers – the people who hold, learn, produce, and apply knowledge in their various activities and lives' (2002: 3). The advantage of this framework is thus that it avoids the danger of treating knowledge as 'a context-free, knower-less entity' (ibid.: 2). However, in concentrating its analytical energies on the knowers themselves, it leaves little room for an exploration of those knowers' understandings of *the way knowing works*.

This is especially problematic when dealing with indigenous tropes of 'knowing' – such as *pu'an* – which may overlap but also differ in subtle ways from those used by anthropologists. A critical point of divergence, I suggest, is that most knower-centred anthropological models collapse *both* agency and intention in the knowing subject, treating knowledge as an abstract resource which he or she deploys selectively. Here, knowledge is a base for human action and social interaction (ibid.: 1), but is itself *ontologically* passive, for it can only affect the world if it is 'produced, represented, transmitted, and applied' *by* people (ibid.: 10). In these models, knowledge and knowers are the key – indeed the only – analytical coordinates. As managers of knowledge, knowing subjects can thus *afford* to acquire as much of it as possible, because they have the presumed choice over what to do with it later. 'Unactivated' knowledge, by contrast, lies dormant, incapable of affecting the world without people's active mediation.

Variations on the same theme can be found in the limited corpus of literature to deal concertedly with the question of ignorance, a recent example being a 2000 ignorance-themed issue of *Social Analysis*.[14] As Barth does with knowledge, the contributors to this volume largely portray ignorance as a 'strategic' resource invoked and employed by human actors in order to 'gain beneficial relations within positions of power' (Gershon and Raj 2000: 3). In these articles – which explore cases from Punjabi Hindus' 'intergenerational ignorance' (Raj 2000) to the reconfiguration of gendered identities by Filipino women activists (Parnell 2000) – ignorance and knowledge are fundamentally analytical mirror-images which are good to think with (Gershon and Raj 2000: 11). 'Strategic ignorance' is thus depicted as powerful by virtue of the way it is *managed* by its avowed non-knowers. From a purely analytical perspective, this would be an ample description of how young Bidayuhs have dealt with the dangers of an 'impurely' Christian world, which I discuss further below. But to treat their invocations of ignorance as

simply 'strategic' would be misleading, because it ascribes to them the same combination of agency and intentionality as the literature above does to (non-)knowers. In the process, one easily loses sight of an important feature of Bidayuh exegesis on the *disempowering* aspect of knowing arising from that crucial split between agency and intention.

Put differently, *adat gawai* may be knower-*based*, but it is not necessarily knower-*centred*. It is here that knowing – already prominent in my acquaintances' *exegetical* space – emerges as a third coordinate in this paper's analytical space. Unlike anthropologists who use their analytical focus on 'knowing' and 'not-knowing' to restore 'agency' to their subjects (e.g. Hobart 1993: 21), the Bidayuhs I have mentioned are rather more ambivalent about the implications and effects of *pu'an*, which can generate relational consequences well beyond knowers' intentional reach. In that sense, seeking ignorance is not merely a tactically empowering manoeuvre, but an admission and evasion of the potentially *dis*empowering drawbacks of knowing. Central to this is the implicit understanding that agency and intentionality may not always converge in the same actor, or indeed in an actor at all. And this, as the next section argues, is the rub for many young Christian Bidayuhs.

How not to read an omen

Since becoming Christian, elderly villagers sometimes muse, life has become 'freer'. Unburdened by *adat gawai*'s numerous prohibitions, manual tasks, obligations, and omens, they simply attend church every Sunday, and make the sign of the cross before farming or entering the jungle. As explained earlier, such ruminations signal key continuities in the aims, scope, and nature of both *adat*

gawai and Christianity. But they also highlight one vital difference between them: relations between humans and Christian entities such as Jesus, saints, and spirits who now listen to Christian prayers are far less regulated by the principle of reciprocal communication than was the case with *adat gawai*. People may pray at an altar at the base of a hill farm before starting work, but they do so to invoke God's help and blessings, not to tell him what they are doing. Neither do they wait for omens or signs; they simply say a prayer before commencing.

And yet, when many elderly people happen to hear certain bird cries or see something reminiscent of an 'old' omen, they often feel obliged to respond. Harris (2001: 89-92), for example, recalls that one of her Christian Bidayuh acquaintances postponed her journey instead of abandoning it when she heard a certain bird, while another put off her midday meal because she interpreted a bird call as a warning that a bone would stick in her throat. In a similarly precautionary episode, several elderly Christians in my fieldsite suggested, upon hearing of government plans to demolish a bridge at the village entrance, that the *nyamba gawai* should really hold a ritual to inform the guardian spirit (a white crocodile) living beneath it of what would happen. These varied and often impromptu responses to lingering remnants of the 'old' ways are, I suggest, reflective of the abiding conviction that *adat gawai* knowledge, even in scattered and dimly-recalled fragments, still has the capacity to keep alive not only unwanted relations with 'old' spirits, but the spirits themselves – and therefore, the dangers associated with them. The tight bundle of knowledge and relations through which *adat gawai* operated in the past has unravelled, but only partially, in this 'impurely' Christian world.

Having examined the constitutive potential of knowing and the problematic divergence of agency and intention in the practice of *adat gawai*, we are now in

the position to take a closer look at invocations of ignorance by young Bidayuhs. As we have seen, the problem for Christians living in an 'impurely' Christian village is not merely that they can endanger themselves through proximity to those who keep *gawai* realities alive. Another concern is simply that the potential still exists even for *Christians* who possess certain kinds of *gawai* knowledge to activate relations with 'old' spirits. Unlike many staunchly Christian Kelabits, who fearlessly discuss 'the old ways' (Amster 1998:294; Poline Bala, personal communication), or certain Kayan communities (Rousseau 1998) and Ngaju Dayaks (Schiller 1997) who have sought to reshape and revitalize theirs as rationalized 'religions', the elderly Bidayuhs mentioned above would rather *dis*engage with *adat gawai* – unless, as happens with omens, they are directly confronted with it. This often translates into a general reticence about it, which is, I suggest, one means by which they shield their children, younger villagers, and indeed ethnographers[15] from the relational risks of knowing it.

Viewed in this light, young Bidayuh adults' lack of interest in or refusal to learn about *adat gawai* is less a rejection of the *contents* of knowledge, than of the agentive effect of *knowing* and its 'built-in' relations. For knowing *adat gawai* does not merely entail the acquisition of a passive, abstract body of propositions, but the obligation to perform and sustain those propositions. In this regard, ignorance – not-knowing – may be described as an equally productive mechanism for *denying* inappropriate relations and enabling non-(*adat gawai*)-knowers to engage fully in the relations associated with Christianity. This in turn provides a means of not simply avoiding, but actually *obviating*, the dangers of living in an 'impurely' Christian village. To illustrate how this works, let us return to the example of omen birds.

Although *gawai* followers were obliged to heed omen birds once they had noticed them, they also had ways around them. One tactic employed by Bidayuhs in the past was to leave the house as early as possible, before birds started making noise (Geddes 1954: 24); another was to beat drums and gongs along the way to drown out competing sounds, including those of omen animals (Roth 1980: 193; Rousseau 1990: 133). The rationale was that if they *did not hear* any bird calls warning of danger, they would not then *encounter* any danger (Geddes 1954: 24).[16] This strategy invokes a peculiarly circular causal mechanism. Omens were not 'communicative event's (Rousseau 1998: 74) by which birds warned of distinct, pre-existing dangers. Instead, like the 'old' spirits, these dangers were *constituted through* people's actions: that is, hearing, recognizing, and then not heeding omen birds. It was in knowing itself – in having their knowledge 'activated' – that humans placed themselves in potential danger. The agentive potential of hazards thus arose not as a consequence of the intentions of either humans or birds, but *in the space between them*.[17] Conversely, not hearing omen bird cries – not *letting* oneself be 'made to know' – was a viable way of evading danger.

Young Christian adults today, however, appear to have a more feasible means of placing themselves in a similarly safe position of non-recognition: by avoiding the first stage of knowledge acquisition altogether. In recent years, elderly people have noticed the gradual disappearance of omen birds, or at least their cries, from the village-scape: a process which they attribute mainly to the clearing of jungle for farming and urban development, but also specifically to Christianization. Villagers of all ages explain that when young people enter the jungle today, they do not know how to identify such birds, let alone their cries. Although they do of course know in a very basic sense that omen birds exist, they can safely claim ignorance of what they look like and how to recognize them. By not knowing how

to be 'made to know', they are thus able to forestall the dangers generated through disregarding omens. In a world where human beings no longer engage with them, these birds will gradually disappear or become spirits of a different (Christian) order. The security engendered by such ignorance, however, is tenuous, for it is always possible to acquire knowledge specific to and constitutive of that relationship.

This sentiment was articulated most clearly during a long conversation I had one Christmas with James, an IT professional in his early thirties who worked in Kuala Lumpur and had returned to the village for the holidays. Unlike most of his peers, James was unusually well-informed about *adat gawai* protocol because his father – now a respected Anglican prayer leader – had been an intensely knowledgeable *gawai* healer. In contrast to many people of his generation, the latter had chosen to protect his children by educating them about the dangers of the 'old' world and how to spot or circumvent them.[18] But while acknowledging that *adat gawai* was his 'culture', James did not revel in such knowledge. Sometimes, he reflected, it was better to know nothing about *adat gawai* than to be a knowledgeable non-*gawai* follower. Like many other villagers, he reiterated that *adat gawai* would die with its practitioners. 'Nobody wants to know about it,' he said of the younger generation; 'and if we do, we just want to forget.'

James' partial knowledge of 'the old ways' had left him more circumspect than his peers about participating in certain village activities, such as a barbecue on a riverbank only accessible through the jungle where he might encounter an omen. His solution was to observe what he could – or, like some older Christians, try to 'forget', to sever that relation – while others simply opted not to find out in the first place. Ignorance, I suggest, has thus become a shield for many young Bidayuhs; a defence against the potentially uncontrollable relation-building

capacity of knowing in a world where those relations are no longer wanted. Unlike James, however, few people engage in lengthy introspective discussions over the whys and wherefores of their relationship with 'the old ways'; they simply say that they do not know – *dŭh pu'an*. Like *pu'an*, *dŭh pu'an*'s strength is its ambiguity; its exculpating capacity to encompass many different forms of ignorance, including passive ignorance (never having learned anything), partial but innocuous knowledge (the fact that omen birds exist, but not how to identify them), wilful ignorance (the active rejection of knowledge), and strategic attempts to 'forget' what is already known – all of which we have encountered in this paper.

My point in this exposition has not been to suggest that Christian Bidayuhs have developed a coherent system for dealing with the dangers of the 'old' days, but to highlight a common *understanding* shared by different parties of the agentive possibilities of knowing and not-knowing. Daily life in a village with an *adat gawai* presence, however, does not offer clear-cut choices between complete knowledge and complete ignorance; and many people constantly find themselves navigating an array of possibilities. While a pregnant friend experiencing pre-partum complications chose to register for a Caesarean operation rather than entrust her fate to a well-known *gawai* healer, for example, she refused to attend the funeral of a distant relative because a *nyamba gawai* had told her that the deceased soul could 'smell' and harm unborn children. Whereas a university student I knew often brought visiting friends into the jungle, heedless of nearby bird calls, he knew enough about the skulls in the village *panggah* – the meeting and ritual house where the spoils of headhunting were customarily stored (Winzeler 1996) – to mutter placations to them when his friends pulled out their mobile phone-cameras at the sight.

Perhaps the most common example of such navigation is the contemporary practice of *pai ping*: a gesture from the 'old' days which involves politely refusing food by touching it and then one's mouth or heart, or consuming a few grains of rice in lieu of a full meal. This procedure arose from the belief that spiritual punishment would befall those who refused food – and therefore hospitality and social relations – which they had been offered (Geddes 1954: 55; Harris 2001: 140; Noeb 1994: 14).[19] Today, Bidayuhs of all ages observe this convention, although many are rather ambivalent about why they do. As a group of adults in their thirties explained while performing *pai ping* over biscuits, adhering to an 'old' prescription like this was akin to taking out motor insurance – the key difference, I suggest, being that they were in the position to create the very dangers against which they were insured. But when I asked them whether this might change after the *nyamba gawai* had died and the 'old' spirits had disappeared or 'become Christian', I received a by now familiar response: '*Kah! Dǔh ku pu'an!*' ('I don't know!')

Conclusion

If the impulse to embrace rather than overcome ignorance seems counterintuitive to the anthropological onlooker, this is understandable given the discipline's constructivist epistemological impulses. Anthropological knowledge practices have long been framed by what Hobart describes as an 'implicit entelechy' (1993: 10) which depicts knowledge as having to be 'grown' – the more the better. Central to this is the continuing significance of the experience of fieldwork, which involves shifting from 'a child's relation to adult culture' to 'speaking with the wisdom of experience' (Clifford 1986: 108). By the same token, it is often easy to assume that the people we study are similar sorts of intentional agents in amassing

and deploying knowledge as they see fit. Ignorance, by contrast, is pejorative: a failure of knowledge, a hindrance to be overcome (cf. Hobart 1993: 1; Vitebsky 1993: 100-101). Hardly surprising, then, that ignorance usually 'lies outside of the cultural epistemologies scholars analyse' (Gershon and Raj 2000: 6).

My point here is not that anthropologists see themselves in their informants (though cf. Metcalf 2002 and Wagner 1981), but to caution against the presumption that notions – and methods – as central to anthropology as 'knowledge' and 'knowing' work for 'others' as they do for ethnographers. Through an exploration of certain Bidayuhs' conceptualizations of knowing and not-knowing, this paper has attempted not only to shed light on their discourses of ignorance, but to reflexively critique the assumptions often bound up in anthropologists' own epistemological projects. My purpose has not been to add another meta-analytical layer of arguments about 'knowledge' and 'ignorance' to the situation, but to use 'native exegesis' – in this case, the equally vague and dichotomous Bidayuh tropes of *pu'an* and *dǔh pu'an* – as the basis of my analytical framework.

Such a move is undeniably problematic: standing at the juncture of knowledge, knower and the world, and yet only discernible through them, knowing and not-knowing are elusive objects of study. But they are of vital ethnographic and exegetical importance to Bidayuhs I have written about, for it is precisely those moments that (re)embed them in networks of relations and the world. Poised on the threshold of a soon-to-be 'pure' Christian environment, these Bidayuhs have eschewed the agentive relational capacity of *adat gawai* knowledge in favour of the relative ease and safety offered by not-knowing. If acquaintance with *adat gawai* is 'a process encompassing not only knowledge, but relationships' (Bodenhorn 1997: 117), understanding their inseparability and mutual constitution

in Bidayuh exegesis helps illuminate what at first blush seems a straightforward case of indifference and loss.

Such an understanding also mandates a reassessment of the way anthropologists have generally treated ignorance as a problem to be overcome or elided, both in theory and in practice. Far from being an incapacitating epistemological gulf, ignorance is as powerful and productive as knowledge in enabling young Christian Bidayuhs to avoid the lingering hazards of the 'old' world while situating themselves in and constituting the new one. Viewed in this light, their protestations that they know nothing about *adat gawai* cannot be dismissed as merely reflections of laziness, indifference, or aspirations to 'modernity', but treated as potentially efficacious efforts to locate – and protect – themselves within an 'impurely' Christian milieu. Such Bidayuhs are by no means the Muchonas of anthropological whimsy – and all the more reason for us to pay attention to them.

NOTES

[1] I use *adat gawai* here as a generic phrase which encompasses the practices, assumptions, and constituents of the Bidayuh pre-Christian 'lifeworld' (Harris 2001: 9).

[2] All the Bidayuh terms used here are Biatah, the dialect spoken in my fieldsite.

[3] The Brooke Raj was a private dynasty founded by English trader and explorer James Brooke, who wangled control of Sarawak from the Sultan of Brunei in the 1840s. The Brookes expanded Sarawak to its current size, obtaining recognition for it as a British Protectorate in 1888. White Rajah rule formally ended in 1946, when Sarawak became a British Crown Colony until it joined Malaysia in 1963.

[4] For detailed descriptions of *adat gawai* in other Bidayuh areas, see Geddes (1954), Harris (2001), Lindell (2000), and Nuek (2002).

[5] In the last decade, however, this pattern of outmigration has reversed: better road infrastructure and greater access to transport have made it easier for many Bidayuhs to travel regularly between their villages and urban areas, thereby creating a burgeoning group of village-based 'commuters'.

[6] For in-depth studies of conversion in Bidayuh villages, see Harris (2001) and Lindell (2000). Detailed surveys of Christianity in Sarawak are found in Archdiocese of Kuching (1981), Lees (1979), Ooi (1991), Saunders (1992), and Taylor (1975).

[7] This has not been the rule across Sarawak. Members of evangelical churches, such as the Kelabit and Lun Bawang, often portray conversion to Christianity as severance from a dark and ignorant past – although as various observers (e.g. Amster 1998: Chapter 7; Bala 2008: Chapter 4) have noted, important continuities also underlie these discourses of change.

[8] A similar sentiment was expressed by Lindell's informant, who suggested that the spirits would 'return to the heavens and…no longer visit us here on Earth' (2000: 105).

[9] Indeed Geddes noted in Mentu Tapah, the village where he worked, *all* omen animals were referred to as *manuk* (bird) (1961: 114).

[10] Similar examples abound in Bornean literature, for example, Amster (1998: 289-90), Geddes (1954: 23-24,74), Harris (2001: 89-92), Hose and McDougall (1993: 51-60), Lindell (2000: 110-17), Nuek (2002: 142-45, 192), Roth (1980: 221-231), Rousseau (1998: 67-72), and Sidaway (1969: 45-48).

[11] Although the noun *pimandai* captures the generic concept of 'knowledge', I seldom heard it used in my fieldsite, as people preferred to specify what they were discussing. The chants learned by girls, for example, were said to be part of the *adat* of *gawai*; while the skill of healing has sometimes been described as a sort of *uri* (medicine).

[12] While the processes Ingold describes are fundamentally ontological (2006: 19), I use them here as particularly apt articulations of the way *adat gawai* operates.

[13] As I explain elsewhere (Chua 2007b), the key exceptions to this process are Malays, who are seen as unwilling and unable to 'become' anything else.

[14] Another prominent example is the edited volume by Hobart (1993), which explores 'the attribution of ignorance' as a 'central theme' in development policy and discourse (1993: 4).

[15] *Nyamba gawai* mostly responded to my queries with vague platitudes, revealing basic points about *adat gawai*'s aims, scopes, and rituals, but never the specifics of chants, omens, or protocol. Upon conversing with a Canadian man whose Bidayuh wife of many years had refused to teach him about her 'culture' in order to keep him safe, however, I

realized that my informants might also have been protecting me – and themselves – from the knowledge I sought.

[16] Rousseau recounts similar episodes among the Kayan: during rituals for erecting house posts, for example, gongs were struck and people avoided looking upwards so they could neither hear nor see omens (1998: 51); if travellers in a boat noticed an omen coming from an inauspicious direction they could turn around so as to encounter it from the reverse direction (ibid.: 73).

[17] In that sense, these Bornean case studies diverge from conventional depictions of 'animism' as the attribution of intentional agency to nonhuman entities (also see Rousseau 1998: 73-74). I am grateful to one of JRAI's reviewers for drawing out this point.

[18] Indeed, he was one of the few villagers to voluntarily teach me about specific aspects of *adat gawai* – including protocol for entering the jungle and how to recognize potentially malicious spirits – constantly reminding me that I now had to observe the little I knew. While nothing untoward happened, I, like James, often found these scraps of knowledge unnerving and burdensome rather than empowering.

[19] It is widely agreed that if a tourist or outsider in a similar situation fails to *pai ping*, they will probably remain unharmed, 'because they don't know'. Once they are told about the convention, however, they are obliged to follow it.

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