



BRILL

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN
VOLKENKUNDE 173 (2017) 83–113



brill.com/bki

Claiming Authority

Derek Freeman, His Legacy and Interpretations of the Iban of Borneo

*Victor T. King**

Center for Ethnic Studies and Development, Chiang Mai University,
and University of Leeds

victor.king@cmu.ac.th; v.t.king@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

The anthropological enterprise of translating other cultures is explored in the case of the Iban of Borneo. Derek Freeman's demonstration of authority in his analyses of Iban religion and social organization, his establishment of a lineage of authority, and his development of an evolutionary biological-cultural interactionist paradigm is critically evaluated. Freeman's legacy of authority, as expressed in Michael Heppell's detailed interpretation of Iban woven cloths and their motifs and patterns in terms of sexual selection, is then addressed as a case study. It is proposed that in this arena of Iban culture Freeman's and Heppell's authority should be questioned; their work raises major issues about Western assumptions that the arts of 'oral cultures' contain a language of symbols. Such assumptions about art forms as 'texts' to be read are often misplaced and can be traced back to the ethnocentric tendencies of writers from literate cultures in their search for meaning.

Keywords

authority – Iban – Borneo – Freeman – culture – biology – textiles

* I am enormously grateful to Dr Traude Gavin for providing me with information on her more recent research into Iban textiles, and for alerting me to relevant material in Derek Freeman's field notes and her discussions with Monica Freeman in 1993. Gavin is in the process of writing a paper addressing the specifically textile dimensions of several of the issues which have been raised in this article. I would also like to thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me to clarify several points in my argument.

Introduction

Anthropological authority, or the command of a field of cultural studies, has come into question in recent years, and doubts have been raised about field data based on participation observation. For example, Grimshaw and Hart (1996:16) have argued that the 'scientific ethnography' and the 'modern intellectual practice based on fieldwork' of Bronislaw Malinowski and his followers (see, for example, Malinowski 1922) are instead personal excursions into other cultures and subjective renderings of a cross-cultural experience. Malinowski 'developed a cult of his own personality' and 'encouraged the trend for ethnographers to assume authorship of the tribes whose names adorned their books' (Grimshaw and Hart 1996:26; Firth 1957). Rather than entirely objective, factual reports based on direct, empirical observations of 'real life' and conveying 'intellectual authority' they are subject to contestation and alternative interpretations (Grimshaw and Hart 1996:8, 12, 16; Clifford 1983, 2001). In other words, ethnographic accounts are, in part at least, 'rhetorical performances' (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Reyna 1994).

The authority to interpret and present an understanding of another culture, especially by foreign researchers, has become increasingly problematical with the emphasis on self-reflexivity in anthropology and self-doubt about the anthropological enterprise (Pels and Nencel 1991:1–21). Anthropological authority may be derived from a range of elements deployed in research into another culture. They include linguistic skills and fluency in the local language; the length of time devoted to field research; the quality of the engagement with local communities and informants; access to a wide range of information across several communities; the researcher's command of the literature and other materials relevant to the field of study; the level of commitment, work, intensity, and endurance applied to the research; the amount of time subsequently given to the contemplation and analysis of the ethnographic materials; the quality of the supervision and advice that has gone into the interpretation, organization, and development of the data; the intellectual capacity of the researcher; and the conceptual, analytical, and methodological coherence, appropriateness, plausibility, and effectiveness of the research.

In early anthropological research there was a strong impulse to stake out and claim a population, culture, and territory as one's own; it was a form of imperialism which sought to exercise control and authority over an area of knowledge production. It also often led to the desire to develop a legacy or lineage: the training of the next generation of scholars to delineate and defend an anthropological domain against others perceived, in some sense, as intruders, who did not possess the necessary in-depth, first-hand knowledge. The persis-

tence of this neo-colonial preoccupation in anthropology will be investigated in relation to debates on the understanding of the culture and social organization of the Iban of Borneo, arising from J.D. (Derek) Freeman's pioneering studies (1955a, 1955b, 1970), and from the lineage of authority presented in the more recent work of Michael Heppell, a former doctoral student of Freeman, in his interpretation of Iban woven cloths, particularly their ritual blankets (*pua' kumbu'*) (Heppell 2006a, 2006b, 2014, 2016).

In addition to an examination of Heppell's detailed work on motifs and decorative assemblages in woven cloths (2016), specifically in his encounter with Traude Gavin (2015), there is a need to investigate who has the authority to interpret and present Iban culture, and why the authority to do so is claimed. In this regard a crucial issue embedded in Western thought about what used to be referred to as 'primitive art' in 'oral cultures' is the preoccupation to reveal the symbolic meanings assumed to be embodied and conveyed in artistic productions.

Staking out the Anthropological Terrain: Freeman, the Iban, and Their Enemies

In the sense in which Malinowski argued for the establishment of anthropological authority based on extended participant observation and objectivity in the conduct of scientific field research, Derek Freeman long exerted a command over the ways in which the Iban of Sarawak were interpreted and presented to academic audiences. Appell and Madan provide considerable evidence of Freeman's significant contribution to our understanding of the social organization and culture of the pagan Iban of the Baleh region of Sarawak, as he observed them over his 30 months of residence among them with his wife Monica in 1949–1951 and in subsequent revisits in 1957–1958 and 1976 (Appell and Madan 1988; and see Appell-Warren 2009).

Whenever there were what Freeman considered to be unwarranted interventions in Iban studies, he reasserted his authority. This defence of the terrain requires contextualization. Freeman, having trained at the London School of Economics (LSE) in the British anthropological tradition of Raymond Firth and his predecessor Bronislaw Malinowski, and then having undertaken doctoral research at Cambridge (1953) supervised by Meyer Fortes, previously at the LSE, departed from British structural-functionalism. Freeman was subsequently to embrace an evolutionary-based, interactionist paradigm, which argued that 'heredity and environment interact to modify behaviour at every stage of development' (Freeman 1992:16). This interactionist paradigm focused on the com-

plex interrelationships between biological, socio-cultural, and environmental factors, drawing on the fields of ethology, primatology, neuroscience, psychology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry, molecular biology, and evolutionary genetics (Freeman 1992:12–4; and see Brown 1991). This paradigmatic shift was demonstrated in Freeman's later interpretation of his Iban ethnography in two papers published in the 1960s (Freeman 1967, 1968). It was expressed early on in a more definitive theoretical form in contributions to the journal *Man* (Freeman 1965, 1966, 1974). A further development of this alternative paradigm with regard to his Iban data came much later, in a rare return to his earlier work on the Iban (Freeman 1979). More recently, Michael Heppell, a former student of Freeman, has sought to continue the deployment of elements of this paradigm in his study of Iban woven cloths (Heppell 2014; Heppell, Limbang and Enyan 2005).

This engagement with the interface between culture and biology resulted in Freeman's paradigmatic 'collision' with both the school of American cultural anthropology founded by Franz Boas and carried forward by his main disciples, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, which Freeman referred to as 'cultural determinist' (Freeman 1983, 1996, 1997, 1999), and the Oxford school of anthropology presided over by E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Rodney Needham. However, it was Freeman's sustained assault on Margaret Mead and her Samoan research and the reaction of the American anthropological establishment that especially served to demonstrate how an anthropological terrain was demarcated, invaded, and defended between warring parties. Nevertheless, there were several staunch defenders of Mead, as well as those who questioned elements of Freeman's approach to the subject, his authority, his handling of the whole affair, and his methods of critical scrutiny, to which we shall return in our examination of the Iban case (Orans 1996; Shankman 2009a, 2009b, 2013).

Blood, Thunder and the Mockery of Animals

An earlier statement of Freeman's adoption of the interactionist paradigm, his critical views on the British and American anthropological establishment, and—importantly—his mode of attack in which he addressed the relationships between biology and culture focused not on Iban or Samoan culture, but on that of the Penan of Borneo and the Semang of Peninsular Malaysia (Freeman 1968). Freeman responded to a paper by Rodney Needham (1964) on the themes of blood, thunder, and the mockery of animals. Freeman's analysis has relevance for the later consideration of the interpretation of Iban weaving. He intervened explicitly to demonstrate the authority of his interaction-

ist paradigm and to separate himself decisively from the British anthropology that he no longer supported (Freeman 1987:302–3). Although complimenting Needham on his analysis of ‘natural/primordial/universal symbols’ (stone, blood, fire, water, tree), and his ‘stimulating paper’ (Freeman 1968:353), Freeman was critical of Needham’s conclusion that these symbols ‘make a primordial impress upon the unconscious mind of man as a natural species’ (Needham 1964:147). Freeman charged Needham with ‘explanatory vacuousness’, which did ‘virtually nothing’ to explain symbolic meaning and ritual behaviours, and provided a ‘mere reiteration of what is descriptively known’. Furthermore, for Freeman, Needham failed ‘to recognise that symbol formation involves the psychological process of projection’, in this case onto ‘an independently occurring natural phenomenon’ (thunder and lightning) which draws on psychoanalytic ‘discovery and theory’ (Freeman 1968:354, 355, 357).

There is merit in Freeman’s criticisms in that Needham clearly did not examine the evidence to demonstrate the nature of the phylogenetic mechanisms which ‘make a primordial impress’ on the human mind. But whilst on theoretical grounds Freeman challenged Needham, who had had field experience among these communities, Freeman could not claim any first-hand knowledge of them. Freeman’s propositions then occasioned the intervention of Clayton Robarchek (1987a, 1987b), who had undertaken extended field research on Semai-Senoi in Peninsular Malaysia.

In explaining thunder-gods, taboos and punishment, offerings of human blood, and the mockery of animals, Freeman draws his concepts from psychoanalytic theory to establish symbolic associations and their meaning, which leads him into a world of threatening, aggressive, and punishing fathers; phallic symbolism; penis envy; oral, phallic, and urethral aggression; sadistic sucking; interdicted sex; and the sexual nature of mockery (Robarchek 1987a:278–88). Robarchek argued that Freeman’s analysis was biologically reductionist; that he was selective in his use of empirical evidence; distorted that evidence to prove his case; made symbolic associations, which were not supported in the ethnographic record; and separated the variety of cultural behaviour from its cultural context (Robarchek 1987a:278, 284–9).

Freeman responded to Robarchek in characteristically robust fashion, but, interestingly, he did not address the substantive critical issues raised. Instead, the mode of establishing authority, which also surfaces in the Iban case, was to indulge in an excessively dramatic counterattack. It was a response which was designed to demolish the opposition with an overpowering use of words designed to cast doubt in the mind of the reader about the authority of that opposition. Freeman proposes that Robarchek’s ‘egregious paper’ was composed of ‘misdirected pedantry’, ‘flagrant non-sequiturs’, ‘outright disinforma-

tion', 'rank misrepresentation', 'heavy-handed melodrama', 'paranoid, if not preposterous supposition', 'historically ludicrous' statements, and 'false accusations' (Freeman 1987:301, 302, 303, 305). Yet Freeman did not support these charges with hard empirical evidence and cases. Robarchek's major critical comment was that Freeman's commitment to the biologically programmed 'psychic unity of mankind' served to reduce 'cultural behaviour to the principles and processes of individual psychology or human biology' (Robarchek 1987a:278, 284–7, 290).

In Robarchek's response to Freeman's rejoinder he returned to his charge that, in this instance, Freeman was not deploying an interactionist paradigm at all, but one which reduced symbolic associations to biology and a 'psychoanalytic edifice' (Robarchek 1987b:307; Dentan 2002:214, 230). This observation has particular relevance to the later consideration of Heppell's interpretations of Iban weaving and the attempt to continue Freeman's legacy in the thesis that Iban weaving can be reduced to Darwinian processes of sexual selection.

Jensen's Iban Religion

We now turn to the anthropological terrain of the Iban, which was very much Freeman's domain until he departed from Iban studies to address Margaret Mead's Samoan research from the 1980s. One of Freeman's first major interventions to defend and explain his authoritative interpretation and presentation of the Iban was in the mid-1970s, in his review article of Erik Jensen's book on Iban religion (1974). Freeman emphasized that the book emerged from Jensen's Oxford DPhil thesis, supervised by Rodney Needham, and examined by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, and also by H.S. (Stephen) Morris of the LSE. He acknowledged that Jensen's research was based on 'intensive' and extended field research in the Lemanak area of Sarawak, but then drew explicit attention to the fact that it was 'written with the encouragement and advice of several distinguished British social anthropologists' (Freeman 1975:275). This provided Freeman with a platform to address the shortcomings, as he perceived them, of the anthropological school that he had abandoned in the 1960s.

Freeman's review was designed to establish anthropological authority. He questioned Jensen's command of the field of Iban studies and referred to his 'insufficient indication of the extent to which these practices are vestiges of a once very much richer religious complex' (Freeman 1975:276). With regard to Jensen's analysis of headhunting and its rituals, though accepting that it might well hold for Jensen's field site, Freeman states that '[i]t most decidedly does not hold for the Iban of some other parts of Sarawak' (Freeman 1975:277);

Freeman continued, 'Indeed, those unacquainted with Iban history (as many of the readers of this book will be) are likely to form a quite false impression of the dimensions of Iban religion' (Freeman 1975:278). Here Freeman casts doubt on Jensen's ethnographic knowledge, and his failure to demonstrate the broad compass of, and variations in, Iban religion.

Freeman then exerted further authoritative pressure: 'Readers of *The Iban and their religion* should realize then that the account presented refers primarily to the Lemanak, where, apparently, the great rituals central to the traditional religion of the Iban were, by 1961, no longer performed' (Freeman 1975:278). He added that Jensen's account of shamanism is 'very thin' (Freeman 1975:278), and that the 'great rituals at which Singalang Burong [the deity of warfare and head-hunting] was venerated are not discussed in Dr. Jensen's monograph' (Freeman 1975:279).

What is most damning, and prepares us for a later authoritative declaration in relation to Freeman's response to Jérôme Rousseau's paper on 'Iban inequality', was that 'Dr. Jensen frequently cites pronouncements on the Iban by the late Tom Harrisson. Whatever else he was (and he was many things) Mr. Harrisson was in no sense an expert on the Iban, and one is puzzled as to why Dr. Jensen should have given prominence to several of Harrisson's wilder outbursts' (Freeman 1975:282). Further references were then made to Harrisson's 'dishevelled comments', 'scatter-brained and insulting words', and his 'desultory incursions into Iban studies' (Freeman 1975:282–3). It should be noted that there was intense personal and intellectual animosity between Freeman and Harrisson. Indeed, Freeman linked his conversion to an interactionist paradigm with incidents in Kuching in 1961, which involved his conflict with, and campaign against Harrisson, as well as a severe mental crisis (Caton 2007; Heimann 1999:332–5, 443–5; Shankman 2009a).

The major thrust of Freeman's review, however, is to dismiss Jensen's British-generated, synchronic, and 'avowedly functionalist' paradigm (Freeman 1975:279). Freeman addressed Jensen's adoption of an interpretation of Iban religion which, he suggested, is primarily 'derived from the Institute of Social Anthropology at the University of Oxford, and, in particular, from the late Professor Sir E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Dr. Rodney Needham', which, Freeman proposed, has given rise to 'a highly distinctive view of Iban religion' (Freeman 1975:283). Freeman stated that 'the actualities of Iban religion to be obtained from Dr. Jensen's "ordered pattern" approach is very limited' (Freeman 1975:284). He then concluded his review with a comment that claims authority: 'because of its Procrustean theoretical approach, this book fails to comprehend the protean realities of the remarkable religion of the pagan Iban of Sarawak' (Freeman 1975:287). By direct implication, only Freeman has captured the 'essential'

character of traditional Iban culture. But given the diversities in the historical experiences of the Iban under colonialism and post-colonial modernization, which had impacted differently in different parts of Iban territory, this issue needs to be weighed more carefully (see below). Moreover, in Jensen's use of a structuralist perspective his study revealed some elements of Iban religion which had not been addressed before, and which demonstrated the importance of the relationships between certain social and symbolic categories (King 1978, 1980, 1985).

Correspondence on Cognation

In the 1970s there were other areas of debate in which Freeman engaged in order to reassert his findings and views on Iban society and culture, though these did not result in publications. He conducted a correspondence, with some acrimony, with John E. Smart; Freeman's initial intervention was copied to those senior anthropologists to whom Smart had given acknowledgements in his doctoral thesis on the Karagawan Isneg of northern Luzon, presented to the University of Western Australia, on cognatic kinship, the conjugal pair, and the concept of the kindred (Smart 1971). Smart's thesis was critical of Freeman's then structural-functionalist analysis of the Iban family and kinship undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s. The issues which Freeman raised were that Smart's criticisms were *ad hominem* and directed towards Freeman's motivation rather than more substantive issues; that Smart had not consulted all of Freeman's relevant publications, including his Cambridge doctoral thesis; and that, in the Iban case, the 'structural priority of the conjugal pair' could not be justified in jural terms and in terms of the principles of cognatic kinship.

Smart delivered a robust defence of his argument and the nub of the difference in approach was that, in Smart's view, Freeman's approach to his Iban material carried 'an unfortunate methodological weakness' in deploying a people's ideational model 'to describe observations based in their phenomenal world'; in this case, with reference to cognatic ideational categories (Smart 1973:4; King 2013:34–7). The exchanges between Freeman and Smart were conducted through personal correspondence, which has since been recorded and discussed (King 2013:34–9). However, the issue of the differences in the analytical use of indigenous categories surfaces again in Freeman's criticism of Jérôme Rousseau's analysis of Iban social organization (see below).

As a sequel to this, there then ensued an extended exchange between Freeman and myself on the same subject of cognation and the kindred in which King adopted Smart's distinctions between indigenous categories, anthropo-

logical models, and the phenomenal order of behaviour and interaction. This correspondence has also since been evaluated in order to place it in a historical and anthropological context (King 2013:14–29, 32–41). It was very clear that Freeman was continuing to assert authority in his interpretation of the Iban materials (King 2013:19). Nevertheless, this debate was never fully resolved in published form and was then overtaken by Freeman's engagement with Margaret Mead's work on Samoa. Although he promised to do so on several occasions, Freeman did not publish his subsequent thinking on the kindred and his response to his critics.

Rousseau and Iban Inequality

A final example of authoritative discourse was Freeman's response to Jérôme Rousseau, whose major work was on the Kayan of Sarawak, over the issue of whether or not Iban social organization could be characterized as 'classless and egalitarian' (Freeman 1981:1). What adds an edge to this issue is that Rousseau's doctoral research was supervised by Edmund Leach at Cambridge, again a pillar of the British social anthropological establishment of which Freeman was critical. Rousseau (1980) had proposed, in a paper on Iban inequality published in *Bijdragen tot de Taal- Land- en Volkenkunde*, that the Iban were more unequal than Freeman had realized or had critically addressed. In Freeman's extended rejoinder, anthropological authority had become something of an obsession. He stated categorically that the Department of Anthropology at the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University of which he was then a distinguished senior member is 'a leading centre of Iban studies'. The claim was strengthened because of an authoritative legacy: Freeman referred to his own work on social organization, agriculture, and other aspects of Iban culture which had been 'notably supplemented by the writings of three Research Scholars of the Australian National University [two of whom Freeman had supervised]: Dr. Michael Heppell, whose dissertation *Iban Social Control: The Infant and the Adult* dates from 1975; Dr. Motomitsu Uchibori, whose *The Leaving of This Transient World: A Study of Iban Eschatology and Mortuary Practices* appeared in 1978; and Dr. James Jemut Masing, whose *The Coming of the Gods: A Study of an Invocatory Chant (Timang Gawai Amat) of the Iban of the Baleh River Region of Sarawak* was completed in 1981' (Freeman 1981:v). On the issue of Freeman's interpretation of Iban social organization, he says that his 'conclusion has since been confirmed by other systematically trained ethnographers who have studied Iban society at depth' (Freeman 1981:1). He invokes a lineage of authority.

In establishing his authority, Freeman was ruthless in his criticisms and demonstrated how authority is established and justified. In addressing the issue of Iban egalitarianism and Rousseau's proposition that Iban social organization can be characterized as 'unequal', Freeman questioned Rousseau's credentials, especially the fact that he had 'done, among the Iban, *no field research whatsoever*' (Freeman 1981:1; emphasis in original); indeed, Rousseau had not, but that should not have disqualified him from contemplating and writing about Iban society and culture. Freeman also assumed that Rousseau 'was bent on some kind of recondite anthropological joke' (Freeman 1981:1); that Rousseau 'now supposes himself to have descried "tripartite ranking" in a derivative paper in a marginal part of the literature, and undeterred by the superficiality of his knowledge of the Iban, has equipped them with "hereditary strata" of his own devising' (Freeman 1981:1); that Rousseau 'lacks an informed critical appreciation of the decidedly uneven state of the literature on the Iban' (Freeman 1981:12); and, finally, that Rousseau has presented 'an idiosyncratic depiction' of the Iban and engaged in 'a maladroit incursion into Iban studies' (Freeman 1981:50). We should note here the use of the term 'incursion', also used in the reference to Tom Harrisson's interventions in Iban studies.

For Freeman, Rousseau's incursion provided an ideal opportunity to address critically the intruders into Iban terrain. He stated that Rousseau's publication presents 'an apposite occasion for the clarification of Iban studies, which have, over the years, largely due to the erratic intrusions of the late Mr. T. Harrisson and various of his protégés, become fundamentally confused' (Freeman 1981:2). Having thus dismissed Harrisson's work, and with brief reference to Stephanie Morgan (1968), a former graduate student at Cornell who had written a paper on the Iban in Harrisson's Cornell seminar series on Malaysia, to which Rousseau had referred, Freeman then moved on to Benedict Sandin. Sandin's authority as Harrisson's successor as curator of the Sarawak Museum and a prominent local scholar of Iban culture, is scrutinized. Freeman (1981:12) says that 'Mr. Sandin, for all his prowess as a collector of folklore, is in no sense a trained social scientist'. He then pressed home this critical observation, proposing that Sandin uses some of the established terms in the social sciences 'in a highly idiosyncratic way'; Sandin is charged with 'capricious usage' of terms, generating 'paradoxical meaning', and his publications are 'fraught with the possibility of major misunderstanding'. Sandin's 'conceptual paradoxes' are also compounded with 'factual inexactitude' (Freeman 1981:12); his 'critical sense [...] is very much that of the ahistorical collector of folklore' (Freeman 1981:13), in the process of which he conjures 'a flabbergasting ambience' (Freeman 1981:13). And finally, in relation to Rousseau's claim, with reference

to Sandin's work, that Iban society is hierarchical and not egalitarian, Freeman remarks: 'We are thus dealing with nothing more than one of Mr. Sandin's eminently personal ahistorical speculations about the Sea Dayaks in days of yore' (Freeman 1981:14).

Freeman's criticisms clearly carry authority here and are apposite, particularly those directed to Harrison and Sandin, and specifically Sandin's obvious misuse of such terms as 'aristocratic' in characterizing Iban social organization. Yet there was much in Rousseau's questions about equality and inequality, and the need to take fully into account the historical differences between different Iban and Iban-related communities across Borneo, that Freeman did not address. Freeman's inclination to claim authority leads him to discard and discredit alternative views. The issues which Freeman chose to leave unanswered and the complexities of the relationships between hierarchy and equality appear to relate, in part at least, to his preoccupation with the essential, or 'pristine', nature of the 'traditional' pagan Iban prior to incorporation into Malay and European state systems (exemplified by the upriver Rejang and Batang Ai Iban as distinct from the 'long-settled areas' such as the Saribas, Skrang, and Sebuyau, where Iban had long been subject to Malay influence and then incorporated into a European-dominated political, economic, and cultural sphere).

In this regard, there were Sarawak Iban longhouses in closer relationship with the Brunei sultanate, as well as Iban-related communities further south in what is now Indonesian Kalimantan, some of which were subject to the Malay sultanates, such as Sintang and Selimbau, and whose leaders were 'ennobled' and given titles and positions by the sultans at the lower levels of the Malay socio-political hierarchy. These Malay-Dayak engagements, in all their complexity, are crucial for developing our understanding of socio-cultural and political forms in Borneo and the historical circumstances in which these were generated (King 1994, 2001, 2009).

Rousseau was also right to raise the issue of what social forms were evident historically among the other Iban-related groups in former Dutch Borneo, like the Mualang, rather than to focus exclusively on the pioneering outliers of the Dutch Batang Loeparlanden (the Emperan) and upriver Brooke Sarawak, which over time were to 'become' the Iban. Rousseau's observation is convincing in that in order '[t]o understand the specificity of the Baleh Iban, we have to consider the historical circumstances under which they came into being' (Rousseau 1980:60). This in turn requires a wider investigation of those communities which 'came to be Iban' in the context of the wider set of communities with which the Iban were and are culturally and historically related. Traude Gavin's re-examination of the problems occasioned

by a view of this complex of interrelated peoples that was too centred on the Iban and Sarawak, expressed in the term 'Ibanic', and a lack of attention to those related populations in Indonesian Kalimantan, raises the kinds of issues which, in the appreciation of Freeman's work on Iban social organization, and specifically 'egalitarianism', need to be addressed (Gavin 2012:98–113).

These issues of social organization and Iban 'egalitarianism' have been subsequently reconsidered by Clifford Sather (1996). He distinguished between the ideological domain which concerns the cultural constructs, concepts, or principles of 'equality/egalitarianism' on the one hand and 'inequality/hierarchy' on the other, and the domain of 'material conditions' and the 'objective conditions of existence' of social relationships (Sather 1996:73–5). This is the dual conceptualization that Smart used in his criticism of Freeman's analysis of cognatic kinship and the kindred. Interestingly, as Sather pointed out, Rousseau also made the same distinction between the ideological and the structural or objective domains of equality and inequality.

In this connection, Sather proposed that 'conditions of inequality may exist in an "egalitarian society" and those of "equality" in a "hierarchical" one, and, indeed, equality and inequality may coexist as modalities within a single social system. [...]. Similarly [...] "egalitarian" and "hierarchical" cultural values may be contextually articulated in different domains within the same society' (Sather 1996:75). On the basis of these categorical distinctions, Sather suggested that 'Iban society is most usefully seen—not as unequivocally "egalitarian"—but as structured around an articulation of principles of both "equality" and "hierarchy"' (Sather 1996:104). He demonstrated that an egalitarian ideology, in which all people are considered equal under customary law (*adat*) and which underpins everyday life and behaviour, is in a dialectical relationship with a competitive ethos which generates 'achieved inequality' (Sather 1989). Therefore, rather than remaining equal in practice or in objective terms, Iban individuals become 'socially differentiated, attaining in the process of competition, social position and assuming roles and community statuses on the basis of their achieved inequalities of reputation, experience, skills, wealth and power' (Sather 1996:77).

Returning to Freeman's response to Rousseau, this was clearly a vehicle to champion the importance of his paradigmatic conversion. One of Freeman's major propositions was that our 'primate nature' and our 'phylogenetically-given capacity to make choices' is of the utmost importance for our understanding of human history (Freeman 1992:20). In this regard, he wished to demonstrate forcefully contra Rousseau that where we find a society like the Iban 'with a social organization based on the kindred, that encouraged the

emergence of individual talent and creativity, and in which participation in group activities was *by choice* rather than prescription', then we should assign this as 'of the greatest anthropological interest and human value' (Freeman 1981:50–1; emphasis in original). The refutation of Rousseau's argument provided an ideal means to promote Freeman's then developing theoretical position based on the central premise that 'our basic human nature is physiologically programmed' and that making choices between sets of alternatives is 'one of the crucially significant biologically-given capacities of members of the human species' (Freeman 1992:16, 17; Appell and Madan 1988).

In establishing this anthropological domain and demarcating territory, the imagery that Freeman uses in this struggle over who interprets and presents the Iban to the academic world is most instructive. In response to Rousseau he deployed metaphors of conflict and defence. He stated, 'with the appearance of Rousseau's far-fetched paper in so reputable a journal as *Bijdragen*, the time has come for the impaling of certain heavy-footed misconceptions about the Iban on the ineluctable calthrops (*sic*) of ethnographic fact' (Freeman 1981:2). The use of the term 'calt[h]rops' is intriguing; it is used 'to refer to the sharpened spikes of dried bamboo (*tukak*), which in former times were placed in the environs of a long-house, protruding slightly from the ground, to impede the advance of Kayan and other invaders of Iban territory' (Freeman 1981:53). From this metaphorical defence and staking out of Iban territory against Rousseau and the Kayan we turn to recent, post-Freeman debates, bearing in mind that these have been conducted in the public domain primarily by Western-trained outsiders and not within Iban intellectual circles.

In Search of the Biological and the Symbolic

The Lineage of Authority

Freeman's lineage of authority and his interactionist paradigm have since been continued in the work of one of his former doctoral students, Michael Heppell, as exemplified in several publications by him during the last decade on Iban material culture, specifically on woven textiles, and his critical engagement with Traude Gavin's work (see Heppell 2006a, 2006b, 2010, 2014, 2016; Heppell, Limbang and Enyan 2005 [Heppell wrote the text]; Gavin 1996, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b). These publications can be read, plausibly, as Heppell's attempt to maintain the anthropological terrain of his mentor, as well as to confirm the analytical value of the interactionist paradigm. Heppell's evolutionary framework comprises two strands: one is technological, focusing on the development of weaving, and the other is biological-genetic, arguing

for the importance of sexual selection, reproductive success, and the survival of the fittest. His position is clearly intended to confirm a lineage of authority and, following Freeman, to exclude unwelcome intruders from the Iban anthropological domain. For example, in Heppell's *Iban art: Sexual selection and severed heads*, which deploys elements of Freeman's paradigm and which resonates with Freeman's oft-cited paper 'Severed heads that germinate' (1979), the author specifically acknowledges Derek Freeman as having 'paid particular attention to the chapter on textiles', pointing out that 'the present version satisfied his [Freeman's] own view of meaning in Iban cloths'. In addition, 'Derek gave me access to his fieldwork notes and other material and was a wonderful guide to the complexities of Iban society' (Heppell, Limbang and Enyan 2005:5, 33–6). Furthermore, in his latest book, *The seductive warp thread*, Heppell again acknowledges Derek and Monica Freeman and his personal access to their field materials (Heppell 2014:ii). But what is of particular interest is that he draws parallels between Freeman's criticisms of Margaret Mead's Samoan research and his own critical assault on Gavin's work (Heppell 2014:149, 153; 2016:24).

Most recently Heppell has pressed home the evolutionary interactionist paradigm and, in Freemanesque style, arranges his defensive caltrops against incursions into the anthropological territory of the Iban, so that an extended appendix is devoted exclusively to a criticism of Gavin, who is seen as the insufficiently trained and culturally unaware intruder (Heppell 2014: Appendix 1, 149–69). Gavin's 'contrary view' is dismissed as of 'little merit' (Heppell 2014:5), in that it does not follow the authoritative pathway set down by Freeman, and continued by Heppell; it is a 'non-core track' (Heppell 2014:150). These unrelenting claims to authority need to be contextualized.

Gavin's work is located in a British anthropological tradition, informed by an art-historical discourse and inspired, among others, by Ernst Gombrich (1979), though rather removed from the structural-functionalist and structuralist perspectives from which Freeman departed in the 1960s. However, Rodney Needham, as a senior British anthropologist and a proponent of Anglo-Dutch-French structuralism, and criticized by Freeman, played an important part in advising Gavin. I, too, supervised Gavin's work, had embraced Needham's structuralist paradigm, and had found some merit in Jensen's analysis of Iban religion (King 1980, 1985) and Rousseau's thesis on Iban inequality.

There are two strands in this encounter: first, the deployment of the interactionist paradigm to understand the relationship between weaving, head-hunting, sexual selection, and success; and second, the interpretation of patterns and motifs in textiles, or, in Heppell's terms, 'pictograms', 'texts', 'stories', and 'symbolic representations' which express 'myths and cosmology' (Heppell

2006a:182, 2014:91, 150). According to Heppell, Iban and culturally related peoples, which Heppell covers by the term 'Ibanic', assign 'a meaning to every motif' (Heppell 2014:117).

Biology, Culture, and Sexual Selection

I have some sympathy with elements of the interactionist paradigm whilst recognizing that demonstrating the complex interaction between biology and culture in an evolutionary context places heavy intellectual demands on a social scientist, who has to have a command of such fields as genetics and heredity, molecular biology, primatology, ethology, and neuroscience. It is analytically insufficient to claim, as Heppell does, that the complex whole of traditional Iban culture, particularly headhunting and weaving, comes down to 'the biological imperative of survival', and two evolutionary principles: first, that 'heads enhanced survival' and second, that of 'sexual selection', in that a woman seeing a man holding a trophy head 'sees someone to protect her offspring and pass on these characteristics to them' (Heppell, Limbang and Enyan 2005:36; Heppell 2014:100). This biological, reductionist perspective is clearly revealed in Freeman's earlier interpretation of thunder-gods, lightning, blood expiation, and the mockery of animals (Freeman 1968).

Heppell distilled the focus of traditional Iban culture and gender relations into 'a simple equation: beautiful cloths = heads = primacy for sexual selection' (Heppell, Limbang and Enyan 2005:167). He expands these arguments, which resonate with Freeman's work (1968), in his most recent book: 'textiles were driven by sexual selection', and weaving was used 'to attract mates', 'to titillate the male eye', and to 'seduce their menfolk', (Heppell 2014:i, ii, 1, 5), because 'men had recognised that weaving provided insights into the reproductive fitness of women' (Heppell 2014:100; Gavin 2015a:26–7). Nevertheless, the relationships between weaving skills, 'reproductive fitness', and 'better genetic endowment' are assumed intuitively and circumstantially on the basis of oral histories and not demonstrated with detailed genetic and statistical evidence. For example, Heppell ponders why warriors would risk their lives in head-taking. He says, without firm evidence: 'The most plausible benefit, given the present state of knowledge, was sexual access to superior females in the group and consequently enhanced prospects of long term reproductive success' (Heppell 2014:99).

Heppell's earlier work on *Iban art*, from which these recent pronouncements have been developed, provides a relatively unelaborated conceptual framework, unlike that of Freeman's paradigm on which Heppell relies. Heppell refers to Darwin's theory of selection and the survival of the fittest. However, although Darwin's *The descent of man* is included in the bibliography, there

is no reference to Darwin and evolution in the index or any extended conceptualization of Darwin's theory in the text; in Heppell's development of this paradigm we find only two relevant terms in the index: 'sexual' selection (three references), and 'fitness' (eight references). What is problematical is the lack of engagement with Darwin. The reference in the bibliography is to a more recent, New York edition (Darwin 1998), which does not include the full, first-edition title: *The descent of man and selection in relation to sex* (1871). Nor is there any reference to Darwin's *On the origin of species* (1859). In support of the evolutionary paradigm there is reference, though brief and unexplored, to Amotz Zahavi's and Avishag Zahavi's concept of the 'handicap principle' (Zahavi and Zahavi 1997; see also Heppell, Limbang and Enyan 2005:166); and an equally brief reference to Geoffrey Miller's concept of 'the mating mind' (Miller 2000), again without the full title of the book referenced, and the thesis that 'the basic mechanism for the evolution of art was sexual selection' (Heppell, Limbang and Enyan: 166; and see 36, 61, 177).

And yet, in *Iban art* Heppell gives clear expression to Freeman's interactionist paradigm: the importance of addressing the connection between biology and culture in explaining the sexual selection process of bringing together headhunters of prowess and skilled weavers. He combines this with his understanding of the Iban expansionist impulse and their territorial and political success against their, presumably, less fit, less intelligent, less accomplished, and genetically less favourably endowed Dayak neighbours. This is an important issue. To argue his case convincingly, Heppell would also have to investigate the mating habits of the neighbours of the Iban who presumably are assumed to be less reproductively and genetically successful.

Heppell continues with his theme in his most recent book by arguing that accomplished weavers and warriors of prowess demonstrated biological 'fitness', which was used as a predictor of the quality of genetic endowment, intelligence, and reproductive success. With weavers, in particular, fitness is also associated with physical beauty and symmetry, and 'a capacity for strenuous work', as demonstrated by the presence of 'strong thighs' (Heppell 2014:101–4), though Heppell (2014:103) notes 'that there has been little research about fitness indicators for women'. He also elaborates the interactionist paradigm and provides some 15 references on evolutionary, biological, and psychological issues, including the evolution of human mating, reproductive strategies, competition, handicaps and costly signalling, and visual perceptions (Heppell 2014:99–109). Here is the problem, in that whilst overt characteristics of success and physical attractiveness are important in choosing a partner, the less overt 'genetic' and 'reproductive' characteristics are much more difficult to discern in an Iban woman's choice. Heppell, Limbang and Enyan (2005:166) say: 'Deep

down [a woman] also wanted to know her man was blessed with intelligence to pass on to their children'. But how does the researcher penetrate and provide evidence for this 'deep down' motivation?

Therefore, where the thesis becomes problematical is in translating sexual and physical attraction, bravery, and the qualities of a warrior, as well as artistic and other cultural skills into such characteristics as intelligence and genetic advantages to be passed on to children in order to enhance their survival rates, genetic endowment, and success (Heppell, Limbang and Enyan 2005:166–8; Heppell 2014:106); and, more importantly, in demonstrating this in evolutionary terms on the basis primarily of oral histories. More recently Heppell (2014:102) also focuses on the Iban institution of monogamy as a further important impetus to secure a suitably genetically endowed mate.

As Wadley (2006:262–3) indicated in his review of Heppell's first book, 'the thesis is logically intuitive, but intuition is not proof'. Heppell then responded to Wadley arguing that there is 'evidence', although he did not address Wadley's major criticisms of the 'Darwinian sexual selection' thesis and the genetic and statistical evidence which is needed to demonstrate this. In trawling through 300 years of Iban history in earlier publications Heppell has suggested recently that their weaving is 'certainly more than 700 years old' (Heppell 2014:141) and that some textile styles suggest that the development of weaving occurred much earlier, between the 8th and 11th centuries (Heppell 2013:19). On what is this reasoning based? He refers to the 'evidence' primarily in Iban genealogies (and marriages), oral history, and what he refers to as 'texts' (Heppell 2006b:264–5, 2014:110–3). But these are highly problematical when attempting to date events and processes in what is a speculative historical reconstruction. They are even more problematical in attempting to demonstrate specific links between the selection of marriage partners, genetic success, and reproductive capacity, and the relation between the perceptions of 'fitness' and 'the quality of genes a potential partner will bring to a match' (Heppell, Limbang and Enyan 2005:36; Gavin 2015a:27). Moreover, Heppell does not address possible negative, adverse genetic and physiological consequences of sexual relationships within relatively closed familial and small-scale social systems in which, so he argues, warriors and skilled weavers regularly intermarry in successive generations.

There is an additional difficulty in that Heppell reveals that there is 'anecdotal' evidence of relatively high rates of divorce and casual affairs and adultery among the Iban, which clearly have implications for the sexual selection of mates (Heppell 2014:107–8). In this connection, he then raises the problem which is general to his thesis when he states: 'For our argument about the sexual desirability of leaders and gifted weavers, statistics on the frequency of casual affairs would be helpful. There are, of course, none. Unfortunately nor are

there statistics about the frequency of divorce of leaders and great weavers' (Heppell 2014:108).

Here resides the problem of using oral materials for the purposes Heppell has in mind. Oral histories serve a range of purposes, but they do not present a historical narrative as such. Oral histories are imaginative constructions. Undoubtedly, they contain valuable information which relates to real-life events and personages and they can clearly be used for purposes of historical reconstruction. However, they are also used as religio-mythical charters. Oral histories establish a moral order and cultural priorities, and explain how the social and cultural world came to be and the position and role of humans within it. They are used to define identities and their origins; depending on the individual(s) carrying and retelling these histories, and the contexts in which they do so, they vary, change, and are subject to manipulation. In oral cultures genealogies, too, are invented and re-invented, particularly at earlier generational levels. They are used to legitimize current socio-political circumstances in the service of which they can be altered so that old connections can be forgotten and new ones established. Genealogies provide arenas for debate and dispute; generations can be lost, others repeated.

What would Heppell have to do to move beyond supposition, speculation, intuition, and anecdote on the basis of this evidence? He would need detailed historical and statistical data on partnerships between warriors of prowess and skilled weavers and demonstrate that these partnerships were reproductively and genetically successful over a reasonably long historical period. He would have to factor in casual liaisons and extra-marital relationships, which would not all have taken place between warriors and weavers, and therefore they would have implications for his sexual-selection thesis, genetic quality, and reproductive success. In my view this requires statistical data and analysis; more detailed corroborative historical material is needed, not merely information gleaned from oral histories and genealogies, however interesting and valuable, that attractive and skilful women tended to marry attractive, brave, protective men. Moreover, Heppell's engagement with the biological domain would require him to demonstrate with the use of genetic data that superior genes and intelligence, which are, of course, different from reproductive capacity, and which Heppell tends to conflate, produce superior children in the next generation.

Incidentally and ironically, Heppell, in defending Freeman's commitment to the principle of Iban egalitarianism, and in developing his evolutionary paradigm, suggests that the Iban are far from equal, and that this inequality was expressed in spatial terms. Households in the downriver section of the longhouse (*ili bilek*) were among the disadvantaged, whilst those upriver (*ulu*

bilek) 'were generally the most successful households' (Heppell 2006b:265). Later he indicates that 'warrior households' were located in the centre of the longhouse. 'Lower status households lived beyond them and the lowest status of all lived on the ends where the two entrances were' (Heppell 2014:101). His theme of 'leading' households withholding 'secret' knowledge about weaving from other 'ambitious' households in order to retain their position, privilege, advantage, and 'power' (see, for example, Heppell 2014:144–5; Gavin 2015a:30), then leads to the issue of where equality, competition, and opportunities for advancement enter this picture of relatively closed circles of marriage and reproduction between leading households of warriors and weavers, marked out by their members' genetic quality and reproductive success.

Interestingly, in his diplomatic and carefully thought-through intervention in these debates Clifford Sather makes a very pertinent point. He says: 'While Heppell has chosen to couch his arguments in terms of "sexual selection", history, to my mind, might well have offered a more appropriate framework. The flowering of Iban art was, after all, extremely short-lived in biological terms and depended upon a number of historically-circumscribed processes' (Sather 2006:269). Dentan (2002), with reference to contextualized histories, makes the same criticism of Freeman's position in the debate on the relationships between blood, thunder, and the mockery of animals.

Finally, Heppell takes another evolutionary pathway, which connects to his thesis of biological evolution based on sexual selection and the survival of the fittest, and that is technological development in Iban weaving in his Chapter 3, 'The Establishing of Difficulty' (Heppell 2014:37–89). This, in turn, is linked to the preceding Chapter 2, which contextualizes the development of weaving by attempting to trace the migrations and encounters of the Iban (and the populations related to them) across Borneo and changes in society and culture (Heppell 2014:15–35). In Chapter 3 he discerns eight stages of progressive technological achievement, from a first stage of plaiting and use of cordage through stages of increasing complexity and elaboration to the penultimate and final stages of the development of warp ikat and the use of the highly esteemed, rich, reddish-brown dye (*Morinda citrifolia*), requiring a pre-treatment process of the cotton thread (see Gavin 2003:49–77). Some of his evolutionary narrative and his reconstruction of Iban history are plausible, but again with recourse to primarily oral materials and genealogies there are problems in translating them into historical data in order to construct fixed evolutionary sequences or stages and attach reasonably reliable dates to them.

Although he claims authority in Freeman's name, Heppell recognizes some of these problems in his thesis and in these two chapters his speculative narrative is peppered with such qualifications as 'possibly', 'probably', 'more likely',

'it seems likely', 'might have', 'appears', 'seems', 'can be less sure', 'suggestive evidence', 'a reasonable assumption', and so on. In his 'evolutionary' chapter he says: 'Like the previous chapter, this chapter also flirts with the speculative' (Heppell 2014:37). He adds: 'Hopefully additional data will be forthcoming in the future to falsify or validate the proposed principles and the order of development which is proposed' (Heppell 2014:38). What is more, in Chapter 2 '[t]his attempt at dating some fleeting Iban histories of these early migrations would neither satisfy a judge in a court of law nor a good historian demanding evidence to substantiate vainglorious claims' (Heppell 2014:32). The technical development in his stage 6 is 'a bit of a mystery', and another 'mystery' which remains unresolved is how the warp ikat method was introduced to the Iban and related populations (Heppell 2014:71). Clearly there are problems in this speculative evolutionary scheme.

Patterns, Motifs, and Pictograms

Aside from the issue of whether or not an interpretation of traditional Iban art and headhunting can be reduced to survival, sexual selection, mating, and genetic quality, the other arena of contention is whether or not the patterns and motifs in woven cloths constitute a 'language of symbols', or 'symbolic representations', or more specifically 'pictorial narratives' (Heppell 2006a:184; 2014:91–4, 117, 138). In his exchanges with Gavin, Heppell presents arguments designed to establish an authority which resonate with Freeman's criticisms of Jensen, Rousseau, and Needham. Previously, in detailed endnotes to *Iban art*, Heppell devoted a considerable amount of critical attention to Gavin's 2003 book (Heppell, Limbang and Enyan 2005:170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175). In addition, in his subsequent review of three books on Iban textiles, those of Gavin (2003), Margaret Linggi (2001) and Edric Ong (n.d. [2002]), he makes little of Linggi's and Ong's books; much of his criticism is directed to Gavin (Heppell 2006a:182–92). He returns to the attack in subsequent rejoinders (Heppell 2010, 2016), and then in his most recent book (Heppell 2014).

In *The seductive warp thread* Heppell, in claiming authority, casts doubt on the quality of the Iban weavers who served as Gavin's informants, as 'merely competent', 'lesser strand', and 'low road' (Heppell 2014:144, 145, 150, 158). The competence of advisors and those associated with the examination and publication of Gavin's thesis is also questioned, notwithstanding the fact that the revised thesis was published by two reputable presses: KITLV Press, Leiden, and subsequently by NUS Press, Singapore (Heppell 2014:169; Gavin 2003, 2004). In identifying 'the language' embodied in textiles Heppell maintains that this symbolic language was 'secret', and resided 'in a secret domain', much of it now forgotten or lost and that Gavin therefore did not have access to it (Hep-

pell 2014:151–5, 158, 169). Previously he had proposed that ‘Gavin’s argument is too heavily reliant on other writers and theorists who have no familiarity with the Iban material’ (Heppell 2006a:190). This echoes Freeman’s criticism of Rousseau’s and Jensen’s work (Heppell, Limbang and Enyan 2005:172; Heppell 2014:91–2, 161). Lastly, and most revealingly, Heppell compares his criticism of Gavin to Freeman’s demolition of Margaret Mead’s research. In this connection, Gavin is accused of lacking in the ‘requisite skills’ to undertake field research (Heppell 2014:149, 153). It echoes certain elements of Freeman’s charge against Mead in his examination of her alleged ‘fateful hoaxing’ and her lack of engagement with Samoan village life (Freeman 1999).

And yet, Gavin spent close to three years in Sarawak, between 1986 and 1999; in the course of her field research she visited over 40 longhouses in Saribas, Baleh, and Ulu Ai, with extended periods at two locations; and she photographed and documented some 700 cloths and their patterns at source (Gavin 2003:vii, 21). These included recent figurative patterns in a narrative style, often picturing well-known deities and culture heroes and referring to mythologies, stories, and events (Gavin 2003:19, 80, 83, 97, 104, 150–153, 165–6). However, Gavin’s emphasis was on old, long-established patterns, which are largely non-representational. The names of these non-representational patterns are of great importance in that they function as titles, indicating the pattern’s rank, and the rank of the weaver who is authorized to make it and the ritual function for which it is appropriate (Gavin 2003:79, 166). There are also countless motifs and designs, particularly on skirt cloths, where the name is, according to Iban weavers, ‘just’ the name; these names function as mnemonics, but they do not indicate what the design depicts, represents, or symbolizes (Gavin 2003:83, 169–171, 191, 198, 206–7, 273). Often, such designs function as space-fillers (*pengalit*; Gavin 2003:68, 192–3, 236). Gavin’s findings contradict Alfred Haddon’s study, which saw Iban textile designs as comprising a form of language of ‘pictographs’.

Haddon and Pictographs

Haddon visited Sarawak in 1898, and while there studied and purchased a substantial number of Iban cloths, of which many patterns and motifs were named (Haddon and Start 1936 [new edition 1982]). Haddon never spoke with Iban sources about these names; the information was derived primarily from Charles Hose, a Brooke Raj administrator (Gavin 2003:197). As Gavin demonstrated, Haddon assumed that the names of designs tell us what they ‘represent’, even if the design shows no representation of the object so named (Gavin 2003:198). However, this representational difficulty was explained by evolutionary theory: it was assumed that a realistic depiction was copied until it ‘degen-

erated' to the point of being unrecognizable. Haddon and his colleagues in his earlier *Evolution in art* (1895) used the same argument to explain why local people were ignorant of the 'true' significance of their 'pictographs'. For Haddon, they comprised a language, which those who had created it had forgotten (Gavin 2003:198–204). Haddon applied these Western assumptions, derived from a literate, non-oral culture, to claim a superior interpretative knowledge of the artistic creations under investigation.

Freeman and Heppell, like Haddon, subscribe to the notion that Iban textile patterns contain a language of symbols. When Gavin visited Derek and Monica Freeman in Canberra in 1993, as she records in her book (Gavin 2003:viii, x) they generously made available to her their field notes and Monica's drawings of Iban cloth patterns. Monica indicated to Gavin that when they collected data on weaving during their early fieldwork, they focused on modern, innovative *pua' kumbu'* patterns (Gavin 2015b:73; 2016a, 2016b). Gavin demonstrates the shift over a relatively long period of time from primarily non-representational patterns to increasingly figurative, narrative ones (Gavin 2003:18–19, 80, 83, 97, 104, 150–3, 165). She also points out that Monica, in her diaries, only included figurative examples (see Appell-Warren 2009:182, 192, 415, 419, 481; with the exception of Figure 5). From Gavin's consideration of Derek Freeman's field notes on these recent cloths, she confirms that Freeman rightly concluded that they were indeed representational and 'told a story'. Again, contrary to Heppell's claims (2010, 2014:158), Gavin did not say that the Freemans were wrong with regard to recent representational patterns (Gavin 2015b:73). However, it also appears that Freeman's focus on these cloths led him to the conclusion that this principle applied to all Iban patterns (Gavin 2016b).

We do not know whether Freeman was told that some names are 'just names' in these precise words, as recorded consistently by Gavin (2003:83, 169–171, 191, 198, 206–7, 273). Yet he has many examples of motifs, which he was told were 'only space-fillers' (*pengalit*) (Gavin 2003:199). This might have suggested to him that this device of 'filler motifs' was not about 'representation' alone (Freeman 1949–1951, quoted in Gavin 2016b; and see Gavin 2003:68, 192–3, 236). Nonetheless, as is clear from his field notes, he assumed that all Iban patterns were representational. For example, Freeman recorded that even when Iban women knew the name of a pattern, they were 'quite unable to point to the elements in the design to which the name refers' (Freeman 1949–1951; Heppell 2014:92). Echoing Haddon's evolutionary approach, Freeman concluded that the original patterns were 'lost', eventually becoming 'conventional' patterns through successive copying (Gavin 2016b).

In focusing on representation and lost knowledge, it seems that Freeman did not give due recognition to the 'social meaning' of Iban textiles, that is, concepts

of rank, status, spiritual efficacy, power, and identity. Gavin demonstrates that experienced weavers cared more about a pattern's rank and title than they did about the names of individual motifs, in that these determined the weaver's rank and her standing in the community (Gavin 2003:79, 85, 139, 155, 166, 243, 249, 278–9).

Heppell, Symbolic Language, and Taking It Further

Freeman's perspective of lost knowledge has since been bestowed on his former doctoral student Michael Heppell, who refers to Freeman's field notes and the Baleh Iban 'process of amnesia' and the 'dissipation of memory' and devotes his Chapter 4 to 'memory and its loss' (Heppell 2014: 91–4). Heppell, like his mentor Freeman, has adopted Haddon's evolutionary assumptions that Iban woven cloths embody a 'language of symbols' (Heppell 2014:94, 144, 146, 150; 2015: 151, 152; and see Gavin 2015a).

Notions of 'forgotten meaning' and a 'language of symbols', as promoted by some anthropologists, coincide with those of an array of individuals, particularly cultural brokers, patrons, textile collectors, tourist agencies, cooperative organizers, and handicraft enthusiasts in Sarawak, and those who wish to market Iban textiles as fashion and tourist items, both within and beyond Borneo (Gavin 2016b). In this arena textiles must carry symbolic meaning, and the successful marketing of textiles requires the selling of 'exotic' symbols (Ong 1986, n.d. [2002]). With powerful internal and external players pressing for symbolic meaning it is no surprise that some Iban weavers, for reasons of financial gain, generate, invent, and sell these meanings—though there seems to be disapproval among some Iban weavers of the ways in which Iban culture is being marketed and globalized in the arena of cultural politics (Low 2008:214–6).

There is also a substantial, worldwide comparative ethnographic literature which demonstrates that patterns and motifs often are seen locally in decorative and aesthetic terms, and, in some cases, are deployed for vitally important social purposes, but do not contain a 'language of symbols'.¹ Rather, this assumption of a language of symbols tends to be rooted in 'outsiders' stereotypes of "primitive art" (Price 2007:610; and see Gavin 2016b).

1 Price 2001, 2005, 2007; Lamb 1975; Thomas 2013; Gavin 2003:273–80.

Concluding Remarks

Interpretations of Iban society and culture present an especially arresting example of claims to anthropological authority, arising in no small part from the dominance of Derek Freeman in Iban studies and his critical interventions against those whom he saw as much less than authoritative. It has to be said, however, that Freeman represents a rather extreme example of an individual who needs to claim authority, a claim which sits uneasily with recent self-reflexivity in anthropology. Moreover, although the quality of Freeman's primary research and his reputation as a consummate field researcher are fully recognized and many of his findings have stood the test of time, it has to be said that some of his observations and analyses in relation to Iban egalitarianism and cognatic kinship, for example, are subject to revision, qualification, and elaboration. Similarly, with regard to Freeman's field notes on patterns and motifs in Iban woven cloths, there is a need to explore further the dimensions of, and alternatives to, his interpretation and that of Heppell, who seeks to continue the scholarly lineage which Freeman claimed in the 1980s. In the case of Heppell's analysis specific attention has been drawn to the problems occasioned by an evolutionary-based interactionist approach, which draws on Freeman's paradigm. Heppell's evidential base has to be questioned in that he relies primarily on oral histories and genealogies in explaining the historical relationships between headhunting and weaving, and between these and processes of sexual selection, genetic quality and renewal, reproductive success and capacity, and the survival of the fittest. Heppell's interpretation of cloth patterns and motifs, following Freeman's unpublished data, with drawings by his wife Monica, on imagery, symbols, representation, and memory loss, also requires critical commentary.

Regarding patterns, clearly the symbolic-language approach of Heppell dominates in the popular literature (see, for example, Ong 1986, n.d. [2002]). However, in claiming authority, using the kinds of argument which his mentor Freeman deployed, Heppell goes further in attempting to discredit, disqualify, and misrepresent Gavin's 'contrary view'. He supports his various criticisms by deploying a narrow and misleading definition of 'meaning', which refers explicitly to the 'symbolic meaning' that can be read into, and narrated from, a woven cloth. However, a close and accurate reading of Gavin's work proves that at no point did she say that Iban cloths were 'meaningless'. On the contrary, using a much more expansive and socially and culturally grounded concept of 'meaning', she argued that they served as agencies of ritual efficacy, power, status, and rank; they demonstrated the weavers' great skill, artistry, and accomplishment and were expressions of a richly expressive religious world (see for example,

Gavin 2003:245–72). A pattern does not need to be figurative and ‘tell a story’ to be powerful, ritually efficacious, and replete with socio-cultural meaning.

Therefore, issues arising from this discussion are the need to dissect and analyse these long-established Western assumptions of a symbolic language in Iban textile patterns, which are claimed to have anthropological authority, how they continue to be supported, and what consequences they have for local populations and their material culture. What also requires reflection are the ways in which authority has been established, sustained, and challenged in particular arenas of anthropological debate and the merits of competing explanations—biological, anthropological/sociological, historical. Claiming authority can easily lead to the dismissal of contrary approaches and perspectives and to an explicit unwillingness to consider whether they might lead to a need to revise and qualify the authoritative account that is so claimed.

This examination of claims to authority raises several general issues in anthropology. Freeman’s dominance in Iban studies was a product of an earlier stage in the development of anthropology when Western researchers, in a colonial context, could exercise an inordinate degree of control over field sites. Freeman became identified with the Iban and he defended his close bond with them by attempting to exclude others from his domain and develop a legacy or lineage of authority, a recent expression of which is Heppell’s study of Iban material culture. The devices to demonstrate authority are plain to see; this is not so much an issue of the validity of empirical evidence, which is of course crucially important, but of how senior figures in anthropology defend their terrain. Aside from the consideration of ethnographic detail, Freeman and Heppell adopt an aggressive mode of attack; a questioning of their opponents’ credentials, expertise, and fieldwork competence; their access to ‘reliable’ informants; and their command of the field of studies. Finally, those who intervene are depicted as idiosyncratic and not part of the mainstream of accepted interpretation, which has been established through a lineage of authority.

A final comment is necessary. In the case of the remarkable socio-political achievements and the artistic and other cultural expressions of the Iban of Borneo, I would argue that claiming authority, which stems from Derek Freeman’s legacy, runs the danger of establishing an anthropological hegemony and of ignoring or dismissing alternative voices. But in the current era of globalization, with increasing self-reflexivity in anthropology and the emergence of local voices and local anthropologies, it is highly improbable that this external dominance and claim to authority will be repeated or sustained.

References

- Appell, G.N. and T.N. Madan (1988). 'Derek Freeman: Toward an intellectual biography', in: G.N. Appell and T.N. Madan (eds), *Choice and morality in anthropological perspective: Essays in honor of Derek Freeman*, pp. 3–25. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Appell-Warren, Laura P. (ed.) (2009). *The Iban diaries of Monica Freeman 1949–1951, including ethnographic drawings, sketches, paintings, photographs and letters*. Phillips, Maine: Borneo Research Council. [Borneo Research Council Monograph Series 11.]
- Brown, Donald E. (1991). *Human universals*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Caton, Hiram (2005). 'The exalted self: Derek Freeman's quest for the perfect identity', *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research* 5:359–83.
- Clifford, James (1983). 'On ethnographic authority', *Representations* 2:118–46.
- Clifford, James (2001). 'Indigenous articulations', *The Contemporary Pacific* 13:468–90.
- Clifford, James and George E. Marcus (eds) (1986). *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Darwin, Charles (1859). *On the origin of species by means of natural selection; or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life*. London: John Murray.
- Darwin, Charles (1871). *The descent of man and selection in relation to sex*. London: John Murray. [Two vols.]
- Darwin, Charles (1998). *The descent of man*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books. [Great Minds Series.]
- Dentan, Robert K. (2002). 'Against the kingdom of the beast: Semai theology, pre-Aryan religion and the dynamics of abjection', in: Geoffrey Benjamin and Cynthia Chou (eds), *Tribal communities in the Malay world: Historical, cultural and social perspectives*, pp. 206–36. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Leiden: Institute for Asian Studies.
- Firth, Raymond (ed.) (1957). *Man and culture: An evaluation of the work of Bronislaw Malinowski*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Freeman, J.D. (Derek) (1949–1951). 'Field notes'. [Reported in a manuscript by Traude Gavin, 2016b.]
- Freeman, J.D. (Derek) (1953). *Family and kinship among the Iban of Sarawak*. [PhD thesis, University of Cambridge.]
- Freeman, J.D. (Derek) (1955a). *Iban agriculture: A report on the shifting cultivation of hill rice by the Ibans of Sarawak*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office. [Colonial Office Research Study 19.]
- Freeman, J.D. (Derek) (1955b). *Report on the Iban of Sarawak*. Kuching: Government Printing Office.
- Freeman, Derek (1965). 'Anthropology, psychiatry and the doctrine of cultural relativism', *Man* 65:65–7.

- Freeman, Derek (1966). 'Social anthropology and the scientific study of human behaviour', *Man*, New Series 1:330–42.
- Freeman, Derek (1967). 'Shaman and incubus', *The Psychoanalytic Study of Society* 4:315–44.
- Freeman, Derek (1968). 'Thunder, blood, and the nicknaming of God's creatures', *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 37:353–99.
- Freeman, Derek (1970). *Report on the Iban*. London: The Athlone Press. [London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology 41.]
- Freeman, Derek (1974). 'Kinship, attachment behaviour and the primary bond', in: Jack Goody (ed.), *The character of kinship*, pp. 109–20. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Freeman, Derek (1975). 'The Iban of Sarawak and their religion—a review article', *The Sarawak Museum Journal* 23:275–88.
- Freeman, Derek (1979). 'Severed heads that germinate', in: R.H. Hook (ed.), *Fantasy and symbol: Studies in anthropological interpretation*, pp. 233–46. London: Academic Press.
- Freeman, Derek (1981). *Some reflections on the nature of Iban society*. Canberra, Australian National University: Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies. [Occasional Paper.]
- Freeman, Derek (1983). *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The making and unmaking of an anthropological myth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Freeman, Derek (1987). 'Blood, thunder and the mockery of anthropology: A succinct rejoinder to Clayton A. Robarchek', *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 43:301–6.
- Freeman, Derek (1992). *Paradigms in collision: The far-reaching controversy over the Samoan researches of Margaret Mead and its significance for the human sciences*. Canberra, Australian National University: Research School of Pacific Studies. [Public Lecture 23 October 1991.]
- Freeman, Derek (1996). *Margaret Mead and the heretic: The making and unmaking of an anthropological myth*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Freeman, Derek (1997). 'Paradigms in collision: Margaret Mead's mistake and what it has done to anthropology', *Skeptic* 5:66–73.
- Freeman, Derek (1999). *The fateful hoaxing of Margaret Mead: A historical analysis of her Samoan research*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Gavin, Traude (1996). *The women's warpath: Iban ritual fabrics from Borneo*. Los Angeles, UCLA: Fowler Museum of Cultural History.
- Gavin, Traude (2003). *Iban ritual textiles*. Leiden: KITLV Press. [Verhandelingen KITLV 205.]
- Gavin, Traude (2004). *Iban ritual textiles*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Gavin, Traude (2005). 'Language games: Iban textile designs in their cultural context', *Hali* 140:78–85.

- Gavin, Traude (2008). 'Rejoinder. Brief comments on: *Iban art: Sexual selection and severed heads—weaving, sculpture, tattooing and other arts of the Iban of Borneo*, by Michael Heppell, Limbang anak Melaka, and Enyan anak Usen (2005)' and 'Women's war: An update of the literature on Iban textiles, by Michael Heppell, *Borneo Research Bulletin*, 2006, vol. 37, pp. 182–92', *Borneo Research Bulletin* 39:274–8.
- Gavin, Traude (2012). 'Iban, Ibanic, and Ketungau', *Borneo Research Bulletin* 43:98–113.
- Gavin, Traude (2015a). 'Communication (with a foreword by V.T. King)', *ASEASUK News. Newsletter of the Association of Southeast Asian Studies in the United Kingdom* 58 (Autumn):25–35.
- Gavin, Traude (2015b). 'Rejoinder—Dr. Traude Gavin', *Borneo Research Bulletin* 46: 73–4.
- Gavin, Traude (2016a). 'Reply to Heppell's "Some comment on Traude Gavin's review of *The seductive warp thread*" by Traude Gavin', *ASEASUK News. Newsletter of the Association of Southeast Asian Studies in the United Kingdom* 59 (Spring): 32.
- Gavin, Traude (2016b). 'Claiming authority: Iban textiles'. [Unpublished paper.]
- Gombrich, Ernst H. (1979). *The sense of order: A study in the psychology of decorative art*. London: Phaidon.
- Grimshaw, Anna and Keith Hart (1996). *Anthropology and the crisis of the intellectuals*. Cambridge: Prickly Pear Press. [Pamphlet 1, second edition.]
- Haddon, Alfred C. (1895). *Evolution in art: As illustrated by the life-histories of designs*. London: Walter Scott.
- Haddon, Alfred C. and Laura Start (1936). *Iban or Sea Dayak fabrics and their patterns*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [New edition 1982, Bedford, Carlton: Ruth Bean.]
- Heimann, Judith M. (1999). *The most offending soul alive: Tom Harrison and his remarkable life*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Heppell, Michael (1975). *Iban social control: The infant and the adult*. [PhD thesis, Australian National University, Canberra.]
- Heppell, Michael (2006a). 'Women's war: An update of the literature on Iban textiles', *Borneo Research Bulletin* 37:182–92.
- Heppell, Michael (2006b). 'Response to Reed Wadley's review of *Iban art*', *Borneo Research Bulletin* 37:264–6.
- Heppell, Michael (2010). 'Rejoinder: On my late Iban co-author', *Borneo Research Bulletin* 41:286–93.
- Heppell, Michael (2013). 'The Saribas Johnny-come-latelys?', *Ngingit* 3:18–41.
- Heppell, Michael (2014). *The seductive warp thread: An evolutionary history of Ibanic weaving*. Phillips, Maine: Borneo Research Council. [Borneo Research Council Material Culture Series 1.]
- Heppell, Michael (2016). 'Response to Traude Gavin's review in ASEASUK Newsletter

- No 58', *ASEASUK News. Newsletter of the Association of Southeast Asian Studies in the United Kingdom* 59 (Spring):24–32.
- Heppell, Michael, Limbang anak Melaka and Enyan anak Usen (2005). *Iban art: Sexual selection and severed heads—weaving, sculpture, tattooing and other arts of the Iban of Borneo*. Leiden: C. Zwartenkot-Art Books; Amsterdam: KIT Publishers.
- Jensen, Erik (1974). *The Iban and their religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. [Oxford Monographs on Social Anthropology.]
- King, Victor T. (1978). 'Unity, formalism and structure: Comments on Iban augury and related problems', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 133:63–87.
- King, Victor T. (1980). 'Structural analysis and cognatic societies: Some Borneo examples', *Sociologus* 30:1–28.
- King, Victor T. (1985). 'Symbols of social differentiation: A comparative investigation of signs, the signified and symbolic meanings in Borneo', *Anthropos* 80:125–52.
- King, Victor T. (1994). 'What is Brunei society? Reflections on a conceptual and ethnographic issue', *Southeast Asia Research* 2:176–98.
- King, Victor T. (2001). 'A question of identity: Names, societies and ethnic groups in interior Kalimantan and Brunei Darussalam', *Sojourn, Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 16:1–37.
- King, Victor T. (2009). 'Borneo studies: Perspectives from a jobbing social scientist', *Akademika* 77:15–40.
- King, Victor T. (2013). 'Derek Freeman and the Iban kindred: A pertinent correspondence', *Ngingit* 4:11–49.
- Lamb, Venice (1975). *West African weaving*. London: Duckworth.
- Linggi, Datin Amar Margaret (2001). *Ties that bind: Iban ikat weaving*. Kuching: The Tun Jugah Foundation and the Borneo Research Council.
- Low, Audrey (2008). *Social fabric: Circulating pua kumbu textiles of the indigenous Dayak Iban people in Sarawak, Malaysia*. [PhD thesis, University of Technology, Sydney.]
- Malinowski, Bronislaw (1922). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Masing, James Jemut (1981). *The coming of the gods: A study of an invocatory chant (Timang Gawai Amat) of the Iban of the Baleh River region of Sarawak*. [PhD thesis, Australian National University, Canberra.]
- Miller, Geoffrey (2000). *The mating mind: How sexual choice shaped the evolution of human nature*. New York: Doubleday; London: Heinemann.
- Morgan, Stephanie (1968). 'Iban aggressive expansion: Some background factors', *The Sarawak Museum Journal* 16:141–85.
- Needham, Rodney (1964). 'Blood, thunder, and mockery of animals', *Sociologus* 14:136–49.
- Ong, Edric (1986). *Pua: Iban weavings of Sarawak*. Kuching: Society Atelier Sarawak.

- Ong, Edric (n.d.) [2002]. *Woven dreams: Ikat textiles of Sarawak*. Kuching: Society Atelier Sarawak.
- Orans, Martin (1996). *Not even wrong: Margaret Mead, Derek Freeman, and the Samoans*. Novato, CA: Chandler and Sharp. [Publications in Anthropology.]
- Pels, Peter and Lorraine Nencel (1991). 'Introduction: Critique and the deconstruction of anthropological authority', in: Lorraine Nencel and Peter Pels (eds), *Constructing knowledge: Authority and critique in social science*, pp. 1–21. London: Sage Publications.
- Price, Sally (2001). *Primitive art in civilized places*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [First published in 1989.]
- Price, Sally (2005). 'Art and the civilizing mission,' *Anthropology and Humanism* 30:133–40.
- Price, Sally (2007). 'Into the mainstream: Shifting authenticities in art,' *American Ethnologist* 34:603–20.
- Reyna, S.P. (1994). 'Literary anthropology and the case against science,' *Man* 29:555–81.
- Robarchek, Clayton A. (1987a). 'Blood, thunder and the mockery of anthropology,' *Journal of Anthropological Research* 43:273–300.
- Robarchek, Clayton A. (1987b). 'Blood, thunder, and the mockery of animals: Response to Freeman,' *Journal of Anthropological Research* 43:307–8.
- Rousseau, Jérôme (1980). 'Iban inequality,' *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 139:52–63.
- Sather, Clifford (1989). 'Traditional Iban society: Reflections on some dialectical themes,' *The Sarawak Museum Journal* 40:51–7.
- Sather, Clifford (1996). "'All threads are white": Iban egalitarianism reconsidered', in: James J. Fox and Clifford Sather (eds), *Origins, ancestry and alliance: Explorations in Austronesian ethnography*, pp. 73–112. Canberra, The Australian National University: Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. [Comparative Austronesian Series.]
- Sather, Clifford (2006). 'Some further comments by your Editor,' *Borneo Research Bulletin* 37:266–9.
- Shankman, Paul (2009a). *The trashing of Margaret Mead: Anatomy of an anthropological controversy*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Shankman, Paul (2009b). 'Derek Freeman and Margaret Mead: What did he know, and when did he know it?,' *Pacific Studies* 32:202–21.
- Shankman, Paul (2013). 'The "fateful hoaxing" of Margaret Mead: A cautionary tale,' *Current Anthropology* 54:51–70.
- Smart, John E. (1971). *The conjugal pair: A pivotal focus for the description of Karagawan Isneg social organization*. [PhD thesis, University of Western Australia.]
- Smart, John E. (1973). *Applications of the Conjugal Pair Focus*. [University of Western Australia, ANZAAS Congress, August 13–17, unpublished paper.]

- Thomas, Nicholas (2013). 'Introduction', in: Peter Mesenhöller and Oliver Lueb (eds), *Made in Oceania: Tapa—kunst and lebenswelten/Tapa—art and social landscapes*, pp. 14–23. Köln: Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum. [Ethnologica Neue Folge Bd. 29.]
- Uchibori, Motomitsu (1978). *The leaving of this transient world: A study of Iban eschatology and mortuary practices*. [PhD thesis, Australian National University, Canberra.]
- Wadley, Reed (2006). 'Review of *Iban art: Sexual selection and severed heads—weaving, sculpture, tattooing and other arts of the Iban of Borneo* by Michael Heppell, Limbang anak Melaka and Enyan anak Usen (2005)', *Borneo Research Bulletin* 37:260–4.
- Zahavi, Amotz and Avishag Zahavi (1997). *The handicap principle: A missing piece of Darwin's puzzle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.