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The Life and Afterlife Crises of Saribas Iban Television Sets

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THE LIFE AND AFTERLIFE CRISES OF SARIBAS IBAN TELEVISION SETS

John Postill

Abstract

This paper discusses the exchange of television sets among the Iban of Sarawak, on the island of Borneo. It focuses on two critical stages in the 'careers' of Iban televisions: their acquisition and their disposal. This approach captures these media artefacts as they transit through the gift and exchange systems that bind rural and urban Iban, as well as the living and the dead. One form of transit are burial rites at which television sets are destroyed so that the deceased can still enjoy their favourite programmes in the Afterlife – an upside-down world where only broken things work. The analysis reveals, therefore, culture-specific ways in which the material nature of television is understood. In addition, the paper puts forth a cross-cultural argument: television sets in Sarawak and elsewhere lead 'double lives' as both non-reciprocal media (most viewers have little influence over TV contents) and reciprocal artefacts (TV sets enter kin-based relations of reciprocity). This contradiction, intrinsic to all mass media, remains under-theorised in the media literature.

Once you are dead, put your feet up, call it a day, and let the husband or the missus or the kids or a sibling decide whether you are to be buried or burned or blown out of a cannon or left to dry out in a ditch somewhere. It's not your day to watch it, because the dead don't care.

Thomas Lynch (1998: 14)

So we gave [our TV] to the deceased because she still wanted to watch it. Sometimes people dream [of the dead]; that means they're searching [for personal belongings they left behind]. The more you pity the dead, the more things you let them take with them.

Mother of Luta, 1997

Semak Longhouse, the Saribas, Sarawak, April 1997. At dawn, the all-male burial party marched down the longhouse gallery to an uproar of wailing women and the shrill squawking of cocks. The European-style coffin had been fastened onto a long bamboo pole. Half a dozen men carried it. As is customary with death-related practices, it was lowered from the downriver end of the longhouse. The men lifted it onto the back of a lorry and drove some five minutes until they reached a narrow opening in the thick forest undergrowth. The pallbearers lowered the coffin by the pole and followed a man who cleared the way with a bush knife. About a dozen men followed down the slippery trail. Some carried food and cooking implements for the graveyard meal, others the deceased's grave goods (baya'): his clothes, his comb and toothbrush, his favourite chair and table, his television.

After the men had dug up the grave, the deceased's son-in-law took one of the idle hoes and smashed up the television screen. 'So that he can still watch TV over there', he explained to me. He then proceeded to shatter the rest of the grave goods. Later in the day, once the Christian burial and the meal were over, the television set was placed at the foot of the grave.

Introduction

Few social anthropologists working in the 20th century paid systematic attention to the study of communication media (Spitulnik 1993) -- although matters somewhat improved in the late 1990s (Drackle 1999). In recent years, it has become increasingly apparent that besides undertaking cross-cultural research beyond the traditional heartland of media research (America and Western Europe), more anthropologists need to engage with social theories of the media originating in other disciplinary traditions. One key contribution comes from the sociologist John B. Thompson (1995). In his book *The Media and Modernity*, Thompson argues that modern societies were built on three main kinds of social interaction: face-to-face interaction, mediated interaction and quasi-mediated interaction. Face-to-face interaction takes place in contexts of co-presence in which persons share the same strip of space and time. Mediated interaction -- such as that of a telephone conversation, letter and e-mail -- implies a separation of spatial and/or temporal contexts as well as a narrowing of the range of symbolic cues used by participants (gestures, intonation, etc). Finally, mediated quasi-interaction --e.g. reading a book, watching television or listening to the radio -- also takes place across spatial and/or temporal contexts and exhibits a reduced symbolic repertoire. In contrast to the other two forms of interaction, however, this form is (a) orientated towards an undetermined audience and (b) largely monological rather than dialogical or reciprocal in nature, i.e. it is a one-way flow of communication over which most recipients have little or no control (Thompson 1995: 82-87).

This three-pronged model of interaction has important implications for the study of contemporary social identities. With the growth of modern societies, says Thompson (1995: 207-208),

the process of self-formation becomes more reflexive and open-ended, in the sense that individuals fall back increasingly on their own resources to construct a coherent identity for themselves. At the same time, the process of self-formation is increasingly nourished by mediated symbolic materials, greatly expanding the range of options available to individuals and loosening -- without destroying -- the connection between self-formation and shared locale...In contexts of face-to-face interaction, individuals are able to achieve forms of intimacy which are essentially reciprocal in character; that is, their intimate relations with others involve a two-way flow of actions and utterances, of gains and losses, of rights and obligations. In the case of mediated interaction...individuals can establish a

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

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

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

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

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

1. *Appropriation*: how families or households acquire their information and communication technologies (ICT); in effect how they pay for them.
2. *Objectification*: how household members transform an anonymous commodity into a familiar object within the 'geography of the home'.
3. *Incorporation*: how they accommodate new ICTs into their daily routines.
4. *Conversion*: how they convert items from the media (e.g. news, images, songs) into discursive materials they can use in their social lives.

As in Thompson's model, there is one fundamental element missing here. In this case, it is stage five of the process. I shall term this fifth element 'disposal'. How do households in a given society dispose of their media artefacts, say, when they acquire a new video or their TV set is damaged beyond repair? Do they pass them on to poorer relations, resell them, recycle them, destroy them? In terms of Kopytoff's African example, we need to know what happens after the car collapses; we must document 'the final disposition of its remains'.

Below I use the biographical approach to artefacts to examine the social and economic significance of television among Iban in the Saribas area of Sarawak. But rather than produce full biographical profiles of television sets I will concentrate on two phases in their 'careers': (a) how they are acquired and (b) how they are disposed of. One reason for leaving out the three middle phases is to avoid redundancy, as the impact of media technologies on the organisation of time, space and sociality in Saribas longhouses is a problem I will address elsewhere. Another reason is the assumption that in rural societies we can learn a great deal from the critical points at which commodities are exchanged for money, labour, gifts, gratitude or supernatural protection, for it is at these junctures that the group members tell themselves (and at times others as well) what they think they are doing – and, more importantly for our present concerns, *who they think they are*. In other words, this strategy allows us to identify contemporary processes of self-formation within a given social world. In addition, we can learn about the conflicts that may emerge when two or more different value frameworks impinge upon an exchange. For instance, in an Iban setting, when selecting the burial goods (*baya'*) that a deceased family member will take with her to the afterlife. In turn these 'border clashes' tell us about the locally-designed limits and contours of the self. In

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

The Iban

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

The longhouse was the political centre of pre-state Iban society. It consists of a communal gallery (*ruai*) and a series of collateral family rooms or apartments known as *bilik*. Derek Freeman (1970: 129) defined the longhouse not as 'a communal pavilion', as some had suggested, but rather as 'a street of privately owned, semi-detached houses'. A later scholar, Sather (1993: 65) has offered an alternative model to what he sees as Freeman's 'fixed, physical matrix'. To him, the longhouse is a 'ritually constituted structure' in which ritual 'orders' persons and artefacts in time and space. I see the longhouse as a combination of these two models as *well as* being a modern organisation increasingly built around the demands of non-reciprocal, mediated 'clock and calendar time' (Anderson 1991:23) -- both during daily life and on special occasions such as weddings, funerals and festivals.

Sarawak achieved its independence from Britain within the Malaysian Federation in 1963. Today the Iban are the most numerous ethnic group in Sarawak, making up approximately 30% of the population, followed by the Chinese (29%) and Malays (21%). The other Dayaks -- that is, non-Muslim indigenes -- represent the remaining 20% of the population (Jawan 1994: 24). In terms of Bourdieu's (1998) theory of culture, the Malays and their Melanau Muslim allies control the state's cultural capital (i.e. the official culture) while the Chinese control the economic capital (the private sector). The past three decades have seen a sustained expansion of the Malaysian state with the spread of large-scale farming, education (Seymour 1974, 1977), urbanisation (Sutlive 1972, 1978), migration (Kedit 1993) and the media -- notably school textbooks, radio, television and the pop music industry (Postill 2000).

I undertook field research in Sarawak for a total of 17 months between 1996 and 1998¹. Out of these, I spent some 13 months in the Saribas area. The Saribas has long had a reputation as an area that experienced early social and economic progress (Pringle 1970: 208). Iban from the Paku branch of this river, in particular, took advantage of a high world demand for rubber in the 1910s and 1920s to amass considerable fortunes. Saribas Iban also demonstrated an 'early thirst for education', and many would travel considerable distances to acquire a mission education (Pringle 1970: 206). Interestingly, Saribas Iban are also widely regarded as taking great pride in the preservation of their cultural heritage. Indeed the rubber boom 'led to an elaboration of traditional ceremonial forms' and public speech-making became a central institution (Sather 1994: 69).

A working television set

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

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

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

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

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

An obvious answer to the mystery was not hard to find. It was both given to me at a later point by the participants themselves and available in Richards' *Iban-English Dictionary*. Before sending an object to the afterlife the Iban must destroy it², for their Afterworld (*Sebayan*) is a back-to-front realm where things fall upwards, water is carried in sieves and cracked jars, light is dark (Richards 1981: 30) ...and television can only be watched on smashed-up screens. In *Sebayan*, the belief goes, the deceased will be able to make use of the object's 'spirit' (*semengat*) (1981: 336). But the nagging question remained unanswered. Why destroy a valuable television set? Wasn't that an irrational act, a waste of precious technological resources?

The anthropological problem of value

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

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

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

It is easy to laugh at such crass conspicuous expenditure, which by its apparent lack of utilitarian purpose makes at least some of our own consumption seem comparatively rational. Because the objects these fishermen acquire seem functionless in their environment, we cannot see why they should want them. On the other hand, if they collected pieces of antique Chinese porcelain and buried them in the earth as the Iban do (Freeman 1970), they would be considered sane but enchanted, like normal anthropological subjects (Gell 1986: 114).

Similarly, it is easy to laugh at the replacement of those pieces of antique porcelain that Freeman came across in the late 1940s with the 'modern' television sets I witnessed at late 1990s Iban burials. Are the Iban no longer 'sane but enchanted'? Are they no longer 'normal anthropological subjects'?

The trouble with Gell's post-utilitarianist approach is that it can lead us to the opposite extreme of discarding all potentially utilitarian aspects of consumption in non-Western societies. It also hampers the ethnographic inquiry by reducing the problem of value to a dichotomy: that of utility vs. the absence of it. A more promising approach to artefacts is Miller's (1998: 6-7) view of material culture as 'an endless creative and hybrid world' to which no rigid etic classification can do justice. What is needed, he argues, is an ethnographic 'generality of difference' in the study of artefacts. Those artefacts that matter to participants in the ceaseless construction of self and others ought to matter to researchers as well. In this chapter I focus on artefacts that matter to Saribas Iban, especially television sets. I will not however limit the inquiry to those aspects of the value of Saribas Iban media artefacts that would appear to contrast with a supposed Western utilitarianism, for I am doubtful that Gell's contradistinction is a valid one. Instead I will start by opening up the semantic field of the term 'value' (*rega, guna*) in a Saribas Iban context to situate more precisely the subsequent inquiry.

Nine Saribas Iban value frameworks

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

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

Table 1: Most valued *bilik*-family possessions among Saribas Iban. Sample: 119 *bilik*-families in 6 longhouses.

The follow-up question in the survey was: Why are these particular objects so important to you? Those who had chosen their TV sets gave very similar, concise explanations: they want to know what is happening in the world, keep abreast of development(s), especially overseas. In their written responses three adults made this clear.

Melissa, 25, handicraft factory worker:

TV shows countries other than Malaysia. It also shows both foreign and Malaysian news.

Apai Dunggat, 45, male farmer:

We can watch the news on TV, watch stories and see countries that are far away from Malaysia when we turn it on.

Indai Edut, 28, housewife:

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

These survey responses demonstrate that Saribas Iban, unlike Gell's Sri Lankan fishermen, do indeed value television as an information technology⁵. Such a form of valuation derives from recent historical memory, from a sense of having been left behind by those among their urbanised brethren who are now 'clever and rich' (*udah pandai, udah kaya*). However, this is but one way in which they talk about television, one appropriate to the context of a formal survey conducted by a foreign researcher. That is, they stressed the 'serious' value of television over its entertainment (*hiburan*) value. But I wish to argue that there are at least nine kinds of overlapping value frameworks whereby Saribas Iban estimate the worth of television as an artefact-cum-medium outside the rigid confines of a questionnaire.

1. *Market value (rega)*. Television sets are expensive to purchase yet, unlike family heirlooms (*utai pesaka*), they rapidly lose market value. The market is controlled by the Chinese diaspora.
2. *Exchange value*. Television sets are important exchange items in the regular flow of gifts (*meri*) and counter-gifts with the living and with the dead; they keep people together.
3. *Status value*. Television sets are conspicuous markers of inter-familial disparities in wealth, prestige and social status (*pangkat*); they separate people.
4. *Utilitarian value (guna)*. Television sets are seen as the chief providers of information (*berita*) about more advanced urbanized societies.
5. *Moral value*. Owning a television and watching it regularly provides Saribas Iban with materials to contrast their local custom (*adat*) with the televised lifestyles and morals of other, more powerful ethnic groups.
6. *Aesthetic value*. Television sets can be appreciated for their design and style. The Saribas Iban domestic aesthetics is eclectic: Iban and alien elements are often juxtaposed in the local sitting-rooms (*bilik*).

7. *Historical value (asal)*. Television sets, unlike family heirlooms (*pesaka*), are not generally attributed the potentiality to transcend the human lifespan (historical temporality). However, some urbanised Saribas Iban may regard them as 'collectibles' (*koleks*).
8. *Biographical value*. Television (both as an artefact and as a medium) is routinely used in the construction of a sense of self in relation to others (lifelong temporality, cf Hoskins 1998). In certain situations, it can be therefore reclassified as a grave good (*baya*).
9. *Social value*. Television sets routinely provide the time-space coordinates for a new form of *bilik*- based evening socialising (day-to-day temporality).

The purpose of charting out this vast analytical space is to capture some of the complexity inherent in any ethnographic study of value and exchange. Covering all these dimensions of value adequately is not possible in this chapter. Here I will concentrate on the *exchange value* (no. 2) of media artefacts, and in particular television, although it will soon become apparent that the boundaries between these analytical constructs are fuzzy. For instance, the market value (no. 1, *rega*) of a television set can be an important measure of its significance as a gift (no. 2) when a well-off *bilik*-family decide to give one to poorer relations. In addition, this act of giving might also be interpreted in terms of status (no. 3), utility (no. 4) and morality (no. 5) at different times by different people within the social network concerned. The empirical combinations are endless, and in the ten case studies presented below I can only hope to map some of the socially-regulated paths through which media artefacts circulate and are valued, some of the regularities that make such exchanges viable.

Three methods of acquisition

I have identified three chief paths through which television sets are acquired and four through which they are disposed of, as shown in Table 2.

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

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

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

Household A: Thomas, 31, supports a family of 8. He used to earn only RM 420 a month as a conductor with STC, the local bus company. Now he can make as much as RM 75 (ca. US\$ 13⁶) on a good day as a construction worker and occasional carpenter. In 1990 or 1993 a cousin of Thomas' who lives in Kuching presented them with their first, and to date only, television set -- a colour Goldstar. Thomas estimates it cost him approximately RM 1000 upfront (US\$ 250).

Household B: This hard-up family of 6 depend on the erratic earnings of two brothers who currently work in the local building sector. They bought their first TV set, a black-and-white model, in the early 1980s. They had it repaired in Kuching once but it broke down again. In 1995 the head of the household's brother, a carpenter in Kuching, gave them a black-and-white Panasonic imitation. It still works. They estimate it cost him RM 700 to RM 800.

Media theorists, who base their notions largely on studies undertaken in Western countries, have paid little heed to the severe economic constraints in the consumption of media that characterise Third World societies (see Skuse 1999). Among the Saribas Iban, there is a strong link between income and television or car ownership. In the richer longhouses, often close to a market town or further away but blessed with abundant pepper harvests, most if not all *bilik*-families own a TV set while very few or none own a car. In poorer communities television sets are rarer; and rarer still it is to have them repaired when they break down. When households face hardship owing to, say, a depressed local job market, a poor harvest or the death of the family ricewinner, televisions become luxury items.

In the six longhouses I surveyed in the Saribas area, the percentage of *bilik*-families owning one or more TV sets (usually one) went from 100% at a community next to the market town (*pasar*) to 55% at a poorer longhouse some 4 miles further away from town. Yet these figures can be misleading: at a third, even poorer longhouse with 65% ownership, I found that of the 13 television sets owned by families there, only four were working -- having the other nine repaired was beyond their present means. *Television is a much valued, yet dispensable, commodity.* There are indeed poor families in the Saribas who have no support from relatively wealthy relations and cannot even afford a radio set, let alone a television. Most of them, however, can count on closer-to-hand relations to watch it, as in the following example:

Household C: A 6-strong family of two parents with four children aged 4 to 15. The father, 45, works intermittently as a labourer (*kuli*) for some RM 30 a day and helps with the wet paddy farm at peak periods. They have no family heirlooms and have never owned a TV set. To watch it they often go next-door to the mother's first cousin's who is married to Thomas (Household A). They used to have a small radio bought when the father was a labourer in Brunei but it broke down 'a long time ago' (*lama udah jai*), so they also have to listen to the radio next-door.

A second well-established point of entry for a television set is as a flexible hire-purchase from a prominent local Chinese merchant. We shall call him Mr Chan. A long-time resident and fluent speaker of Iban, Chan set up his own shop in 1982. His father was a fishmonger, whereas he has diversified into furniture, electronic goods, bicycles, and antiques⁷ and claims to have customers virtually in every longhouse across the Saribas and Skrang region. He used to travel frequently up the Skrang in search of Iban heirlooms (*utai lama*) but nowadays few of any value are to be found in longhouses. Most of them, he says, are now owned by wealthy urban Sarawakians (as Beavitt 1995 confirms⁸). Moreover, as longhouse residents have become aware of their increasing market value only destitute families are today prepared to part with their heirlooms. When asked about the potential risks of selling haunted jars Chan is firm: 'No, no, my jars have never harmed anyone' (*nadai kala ngachau urang*).

Chan buys his television sets and other mass-produced merchandise wholesale in Kuching. For almost 20 years now his customers have been able to hire-purchase (Ib. *lun*, from E. loan) television sets and other costly goods. Thus a television worth RM

1000 can be purchased in monthly instalments of RM 100, sometimes RM 80 or less if the family are facing financial difficulties (*suntok*). Black and white sets cost just over RM 300. According to Chan, his customers are happy to buy in instalments. Newly arrived traders are reluctant to offer this service for lack of trust in the local population. Indeed even Chan has suffered from an increase in the default rate. He estimates that one or two out of every 10 customers never meet their financial obligations. 'People are not like before. I'm paying so-and-so's wife a visit to embarrass him [into paying up] (*'Ka nemuai bini Sanu, ngasoh iya malu*)'.

Household D. Four generations share this 6-strong *bilik*, from a primary schoolboy to his great-grandfather, born in 1901. Aki Nyaru, 58, was the first person in the longhouse to own a wireless, a Philips he bought in the 1950s for RM 115. In those days he was a 'leading coolie' [E. term used] in the divisional capital, Simanggang. The new artefact was an instant success in the longhouse. He still remembers how a dumbfound woman went round the talking box in search of the mysterious speaker, and how their *bilik* was always full of people eager to listen to the Iban-language broadcasts. In 1977 he found local employment as a *kuli* with the Public Works Department. Two years later he started paying Mr Chan for a black-and-white television in irregular instalments. Two or three years after the longhouse had celebrated its 1988 *Gawai Antu*, or mourning feast, he replaced it with a Sharp colour TV which he also paid Chan for in variable instalments of about RM 100 a month totalling some RM 2100. He believes local life has generally improved over the years. For instance, 'in the old days you couldn't buy on hire purchase'. No longer a labourer, these days he taps his own rubber trees and farms wet paddy. The family live on his son's considerable wages as a lorry driver, up to RM 1800 a month with overtime.

Household E. Stella, 28, and her husband Edut, 36, live with their daughter in a small house on stilts they built beside the longhouse. He is a mechanic with the local bus company. She does some farming and describes herself in English as a 'housewife'. They bought their first television and video in 1990 on hire purchase from Chan, RM 700 upfront and the remaining RM 400 in four monthly instalments. When it broke down Chan himself repaired it. In 1994 they decided to buy a Panasonic television and video set. This time the method of payment was 'more comfortable' (*nyamai agi*): Edut's employer paid directly to Chan by deducting RM 100 from his salary every month.

Chan's business activities illuminate two aspects of local media acquisition. First, they shed light on the middle-income section of the longhouse population, that is families with one regular wage earner employed locally, almost always a man working for a construction firm, the bus company, the police or the Public Works Department (now JKR). There is a marked sexual division of labour in longhouses

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

Second, trade in television sets and other media devices is in the hands of the Chinese diaspora -- and so is the private sector that employs thousands of Iban labourers-cum-consumers across Sarawak. Chinese entrepreneurs have to understand their customers' beliefs and needs if they are to prosper. In the account presented earlier Mr Chan reveals his knowledge of both pagan thought and of the uses to which the notion of *malu* (shame) can be put in an Iban setting. Kopytoff (1986:88-89), following Curtin (1984), has stressed the importance of trade diasporas for the history of world trade. These groups have 'provided the channels for the movement of goods between disparate societies' acting as a cushion against the impact of the world economy upon small-scale societies. In terms of the aforesaid 'double articulation' of television in culture and economy, it is important to note that Malaysia's Chinese contribute little to television's contents -- a role largely in the hands of Malay producers of official culture in the capital, Kuala Lumpur. The crucial role of the Chinese merchants is to buy and sell the hardware through which the mediated quasi-interaction of rural Iban with Malay(sian) culture producers takes place. Malaysia's ethnic division of capital (cultural vs. economic) into Malay and Chinese fields of power relations, is therefore reinforced by a parallel division of labour in the production and distribution of media contents and artefacts.

With the continued monetization and urbanization of rural Sarawak, however, it is likely that informal verbal arrangements of the kind Chan has established with his longhouse customers will be increasingly replaced by more impersonal, inflexible written contracts (i.e. mediated interactions). In fact, a rival company already uses quite a different strategy with defaulters: they recover their goods by force. In other words, the nature of commodity exchanges in the Saribas is changing as its economy becomes more firmly locked into the wider national and world economy. What is unlikely to change in the near future is the national media's ethnic-based double articulation.

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

Household F. The longhouse headman, 46, is married with three children. They all share a spacious *bilik* with his mother, his sister and her two daughters -- a 9-strong domestic unit. The headman is a driver with the local bus company. His wife, 30, works as a farmer and housewife. His late father was a business associate of Chan's, trading mostly in Skrang heirlooms and Kalimantan cattle. This connection allowed his father to hire-purchase from Chan one of the longhouse's first television sets. He began payment of a 14' black-and-white National set in 1982 at the reduced rate of RM 450. In those days Semak longhouse did not yet have a regular electricity supply, so their television ran on a car battery costing RM 90. The headman's sister used to work as a teacher in Kapit, far in the interior of Sarawak, where she bought an 18' colour National television for RM 800 in the 1980s. Living conditions in Kapit were hard, and after a few years she decided to return to her Saribas *bilik* bringing back, among other objects, her colour TV set. It replaced her father's obsolescent set which they gave to relations in a poorer longhouse 8 miles from town. She now works locally as a clerk and earns some RM 1000 a month. In 1996 she bought a Sony television on a trip to Kuching for RM 1200 upfront. A year later, she bought a video. She also owns the only car in the longhouse.

This example shows that we should be wary of fetishizing that most visible of visual media artefacts: television. It is no secret to rural Iban that increased employment opportunities and financial security are open to the better educated among them. The latter's acquisition of expensive commodities over the years provides other families with what to them is tangible proof that education is the best avenue to wealth and security. When talking about relatively wealthy relations, Saribas Iban often refer to their early educational successes. For instance, a local teenager who is now studying at an American university on a Malaysian government scholarship, is well-remembered as a studious boy who was 'always reading books in his *bilik*' (in Thompson's terms, he favoured a private form of mediated quasi-interaction over face-to-face interaction in the longhouse). In the minds of Saribas Iban, the school's print media are the means to the future acquisition of electronic media and other advanced technologies. The true significance of the headman's sister's purchases lies in the 130-year long Saribas association of literacy with tangible material wealth. Pringle (1970: 201) says of 1860s

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

A party of Saribas Dayaks going on a gutta expedition asked for a copy of the first Dayak reading book, because one of them could read, and thought he would teach the others in the evenings when they were not at work. And this is indeed what did happen, and when the party returned most of them were able to read. The Saribas women were just as keen as the men, and many of them have been taught to read by some Dayak friend. I have myself noticed, when holding services for some Christians in villages in the Saribas, how many of those present were able to use the Dayak Prayer-Book and follow the service and read the responses (Gomes 1911: 107, quoted in Pringle 1970: 201).

Four methods of disposal

At the time of field research (1997-98), wealthy families in the Saribas and other rural areas of Sarawak had owned and replaced television sets for almost twenty years. Over the years, four standard ways of disposing of old sets have emerged. One possibility is to present it to relations who cannot afford to purchase or repair their own set, as in the above example from the headman's *bilik*-family (Household F). What kind of an exchange is this? According to Appadurai (1986: 12) anthropologists have tended to romanticise the difference between a gift and a commodity exchange as being representative of small-scale and industrial societies respectively. He prefers to understand commodities not as special kinds of goods but as 'any thing intended for exchange' and reminds us, with Bourdieu (1977), that gifts are also 'economic calculations' yet with in-built lapses of time that may conceal their true nature. To him, as we said earlier, commodities are 'things in a certain situation', that is things whose most salient feature at certain times in their social lives is their exchangeability. The main difference between gift and commodity exchanges is that the former are generally person-centred, social exchanges whereas the latter are object-centred, relatively impersonal and asocial (1986:12-13). According to this perspective, giving a television set to relations in another longhouse is therefore a self-interested, yet personal, form of economic calculation. This corresponds to the evidence I have gathered. P. Kedit (1993: 136), an Iban anthropologist, describes how urban-based Iban still

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

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

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

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

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

They first acquired a television in the late 1970s, a black-and-white model Emmerson bought while he was based in the divisional HQ which they brought back to the longhouse in 1996 as a 'collectible'. It is now gathering dust at the far end of the *bilik*, next to their family heirlooms. 'It's part of our collection (M. *koleksi*)' says Indai Rita, laughing, 'Who knows, one day it may fetch a high price as an antique!'. The television they currently use, a 16' colour Singer, was hire-purchased by Indai Rita's sister for over RM 1000 in the late 1980s. 'It's an old Malaysian model. Nowadays there are lots of models to choose from: Panasonic, Fischer, Toshiba, you name it...I reckon the one at Beng's coffee-shop is at least 36 inches. Now the screen at the laser-disc shop⁹, that's even bigger'. The family have built a small house by the pepper garden where Emmerson spends most of his time. There he has a 20' colour Toshiba he hire-purchased in the mid-1980s here in the Saribas.

This case study brings us to the relationship between contemporary Iban identity and temporality. It captures the long-term repercussions of one of the few career avenues open to young Iban men after independence in 1963: the security forces. Many Iban families were built 'on the move' as the head of the household was posted to different Sarawak localities in accordance to the security needs of the new nation. For both parents and offspring, the construction of a sense of self and family took place alongside the army's construction of a united Malaysia. Commodities played, and still play, an important part in this parallel process of family- and nation-building. Indai Rita enjoys demonstrating her technical sophistication through a code consisting of the television's size, price, and brand. In doing so she is indirectly proving her competence in matters modern as well as her family's urban credentials. Indai Rita is well aware of her cultural ambiguity as a young, formerly urban woman now living in a longhouse. Often during our frequent conversations in the longhouse gallery, she would pepper her remarks with English and Malay terms and laugh at the odd juxtapositions created. She was particularly fond of ironies and wordplays involving both rural/Iban and urban/Western notions.

Indai Rita's remark about their old TV set being part of their *koleksi* (a Malay term few rural Iban would use) of family heirlooms made us laugh because it was an insightful way of bridging two distinct classes of things (traditional heirlooms vs. modern goods)

by means of a single, non-Iban word. After all, humour and insight alike are based on the meaningful reunion of two disparate items of common knowledge. Miller (1994: 396) argues that through artefacts 'we give form to, and come to an understanding of, ourselves, others, or abstractions such as the notion of the modern'. In an indirect way, Indai Rita tries to understand the modern by joking about the historical process whereby some items from the class 'new things' (*utai baru*) may come to be considered 'old things' (*utai lama*). There are a number of historical precedents. For instance, shotguns and rifles, known as *senapang* (orig. Dutch *snaphaan*) have been treasured as family heirlooms (*pesaka*) for over a century now.

A third television disposal method is what we might call 'non-disposal', or a 'stand-by position'. In poor Saribas longhouses which have suffered the ravages of a depressed rubber market and consequent outmigration of the younger population, it is common to find television sets that ceased to work many years previously still taking pride of place in a quiet *bilik*. Usually they are covered with a cheap embroidered cloth awaiting the return of a young migrant who will, it is hoped, see to it that it is repaired. This event may take years to materialize, if it does occur at all. It is one thing to acquire a television set or refrigerator in an urban area. Quite another problem is to have them repaired when they break down and the only person left in the *bilik* is, say, an elderly widow. In poor communities devoted to farming and some occasional low-yielding rubber tapping, the attitude of the largely elderly population is one of having to 'make-do' with whatever resources are available at the time.

This chapter opened with the fourth socially-regulated path, namely the disposal of the television set at the grave:

Household 1. Indai Luta is a wet-rice farmer and housewife in her mid-forties. She is married with three adolescent children. Her husband is a driver with the local bus company. In the mid-1980s he hire-purchased their first television set, a RM 400 (new) black-and-white Japanese model, at Chan's. Every month RM 30 to 50 would be deducted from his salary. A decade later, Indai Luta's mother '...took it [to the Afterlife] with her. She used to enjoy watching TV...We Iban have many kinds of heirlooms: jars, shallow gongs, deep gongs, old china plates...But nowadays there aren't any old things left so we give them TVs. You see, things wear out all the time, so we give them away [i.e. to the dead person]. It's a shame to throw things away when people die. So we gave [our TV] to the deceased because she still wanted to watch it. Sometimes people dream [of the dead]; that means they're searching [for personal belongings they left behind]. The more you pity the dead, the more things you let them take with them'. Some time after Indai Luta's

mother died, they hire-purchased a new television set, once again at Chan's. This one was a new 14' colour Panasonic paid in monthly instalments of RM 50 for a total of RM 1200.

Household J. With 16 souls, this is by far the largest *bilik*-family in the longhouse. Apai Laka, 47, is a construction worker. He lives with his wife, 26, their three children, his mother-in-law, his wife's seven siblings and their three offspring in a rather small *bilik*. Apai Laka's father-in-law bought the family's first television in 1983, a colour model with a dangerous propensity to heat up ('*ka angus*'). In 1987 he decided to replace it with another colour television. He remained a keen viewer for many years. Unfortunately in 1997 he was taken seriously ill. Some blamed it on an evil spirit, others on poisoning, still others mentioned the word cancer (*kenser*). He died in a Kuching hospital and was brought back to the longhouse for a syncretistic funeral. His family have at present no functioning television, for 'the deceased took it with him' (*udah dibai urang mati*) to the afterlife. With 16 mouths to feed, Apai Laka can ill afford the RM 100 needed to repair the old set.

We can now retake the questions that opened this chapter. Why destroy a valuable television set? Isn't that an irrational act, a waste of precious technological resources? After all, the survey results I presented earlier show an undisputed preference for television, whose purchase requires a considerable financial sacrifice for most Saribas families. Part of the answer is contained in Indai Luta's explanation: the dead will come back to search for their goods unless their relations 'pity them' (*sinu ka sida*) at the burial. Despite a long period of missionary activities and the proven advantages of a Christian name and education, Saribas Iban are notably sceptical about the efficacy of purely Christian practices. Anglican priests from other Iban areas of Sarawak have decried for generations the obstinate unwillingness of Saribas Iban to overcome their 'pagan fears', in particular the fear of spirits (*antu*). As one priest put it to me, punning on the Malay word for democracy: 'Saribas Iban live in an *antukrasi*, not a *demokrasi*'.

To fully answer the question, we have to examine critically the expression 'valuable television set'. Valuable for whom? In what context? At which stage in the life of the person and the object? A narrowly utilitarian answer would miss the point of why such goods should matter to the dead -- and, more importantly, to the living. They matter to both the living and the dead only if they have become 'biographical objects' (Hoskins 1998), that is objects with which the dead had made sense of their lives. Television sets, unlike family heirlooms, were not purchased to transcend the mortality of their users. They were not purchased either to accompany them to the afterlife, yet some sets do become so closely associated with the life of a person that they enter an

irreversible state of 'decommoditization' (Kopytoff 1986:65) as part of a set of grave goods (*baya'*) that will eventually achieve immortality. Commodities, we said earlier, following Appadurai (1986: 13) are 'things in a certain situation'. Thus in most societies women reach the peak of their commoditization at marriage, while paintings do so during an auction (1986: 15). Television sets smashed up at an Iban burial have reached the lowest point of their monetary value as worldly commodities, and yet they are at their highest level of value in terms of the exchange system binding the dead and the living. The conflict between two bordering exchange systems is, of course, accentuated when the television set is still in good working order. In such cases, the 'degree of value coherence' (1986: 15) is high: it is valuable for both the living and the dead.

The nature of television does not make it an ideal grave good, especially in crowded *bilik*-families with stretched financial resources. As I explore at length elsewhere (Postill 2000, ch. 4), watching television is a deeply social event in a Saribas Iban longhouse. It is the main technological support (with electricity) of a new, *bilik*-based form of evening sociality. By contrast, radio, although often also a communal medium in the longhouse gallery or farm hut, is less problematic an afterlife-bound artefact, for its small size and low weight allow for its lifelong association with a certain individual carrier. Furthermore, its low cost relative to television minimizes the economic loss to the survivors. In a word, radio sets make less problematic grave goods. Indeed their sad broken entrails are a common sight at Saribas Iban graveyards¹⁰.

Television: a non-reciprocal mass medium, a reciprocal local artefact

At the outset I asked the question of how Saribas Iban social identities may be (re)produced through the exchange of television sets for money, credit, gratitude, supernatural protection or some other form of social or economic currency. The biographical approach to artefacts has illuminated two main kinds of reproduction:

First, television sets are central to the ceaseless exercise of comparing and contrasting how a certain ricewinner or household are doing in relation to their rivals 'along the path to prosperity', to use a well-worn governmental slogan on Malaysian television. Yet these artefacts are not sufficient in themselves. What really matters is the kind of economic activity which made the purchase possible: a civil servant 's TV set speaks of

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

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

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

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

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Notes

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

³ It is quite possible that many respondents did not consider land as a 'thing' they owned (*utai dikemis*), hence its relatively low valuation when I asked respondents to enumerate valuable things rather than provide them with a pre-set list of them. Richards (1981: 158) defines the term *keresa* as '1. Belongings, chattels, possessions, *kerekesa*, esp. those passing by inheritance and of ritual family (*bilik*) worth, incl. *jukut* (precious objects), *utai pesaka*. Property in land and things fixed to land is separately named and described (e.g. *kebun getah*, *kayu' buah*), and is excluded from *k*. because traditionally it was free and plentiful and had economic rather than ritual value'. On the other hand, stories abound of Iban in the Saribas basin selling their land to Chinese speculators at very low prices in order to fund costly rituals such as Gawai Antu and/or buy TV sets and other goods.

⁴ Very few rural Iban can afford to buy and maintain either a car or a telephone, which may explain their low valuation given that respondents were asked to value their actual, not their *desired*, possessions.

⁵ Lull (1991:170ff) reports strikingly similar reasons for watching the news among viewers in China.

⁶ The Malaysian *ringgit* (RM) was pegged at RM3: US\$1 before the 1970s. Since the adoption of flexible exchange rates in the early 1970s, it fluctuated within the range of RM 2.4-2.7 to the US dollar (Gomez and Jomo 1997: xiv) until the sharp devaluation in September 1997. At the time of writing --17 January 2000 -- the rate was 3.79 (www.xe.net).

⁷ Including brass (*temaga*), glazed earthenware jars (*tajau*), gongs (*tawak*) and round metal stands (*tabak*).

⁸ Beavitt (1995: 15) links the 1990s boom in the antique (*pesaka*) business in Sarawak to the steady growth of the tourist industry. He reports an unending quest for 'authentic' ethnic objects among foreign tourists and urban Sarawakians alike.

⁹ These micro-cinemas became popular with young people across Sarawak in the 1990s. The state-controlled press has repeatedly denounced the screening of illegal pornographic films and their misuse for indecent behaviour.

¹⁰ Another factor favouring their presence at graveyards is that radio sets have been bought and sold in rural Sarawak since the mid-1950s, while television sets only began to spread in the 1980s.

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