J. Freedman

Iban augury

In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 117 (1961), no: 1, Leiden, 141-167

This PDF-file was downloaded from <http://www.kitlv-journals.nl>

IBAN AUGURY*

AN INTRODUCTORY COMPARISON

In the second book of the *Odyssey* we are told of how Telemachus faced with the obduracy of the suitors who thronged his father's house called on Zeus to intervene, and how the all-seeing god, in answer to this prayer, sent forth two eagles from his mountain top:

"Swift as the storm-blast they flew, wing-tip to wing in lordly sweep of pinions, until they were over the midmost of the many-tongued assembly. There they wheeled in full flight, with quivering, outstretched, strong wings, and glazed down with fatal eyes upon the upturned faces. Next they ripped with tearing claws, each at the other's head and neck, swooping quickly to the right over the houses of the citizens. So long as eye could follow them everyone stood wondering at the birds and musing what future history this sign from heaven could mean."¹

Halitherses, "an elder of great standing who surpassed all his generation in the science of bird-reading," saw in this event a portending of the return of Odysseus "carrying with him the seeds of bloody doom for every suitor". But the idle suitors would not listen and stayed on to meet their fate.

This incident from the *Odyssey* illustrates the main doctrine of augury as it existed among the ancient Greeks. The gods, so it was believed, were accustomed to communicate with men by using birds as their messengers, making known in the behaviour of these birds whether they condoned or condemned a future course of human action. It was then for men to read aright these signs from heaven, and so benefit from the counselling of divine omniscience.

I have begun with this example because the system of augury of

* This article appeared as an appendix, on pp. 73—98, to *The Birds of Borneo* by B. E. Smythies, published by Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh 1960. As the book will mainly reach an ornithological public, Editors of the *Bijdragen* are glad to be able to bring the chapter on "Iban Augury" to the attention of anthropologists. They are grateful to the author and to the publishers for their permission to do so.

¹ Homer (transl. Shaw, 1955, pp. 27—29).

the ancient Greeks² closely resembles in its central doctrine that of the Iban of Borneo.³ The comparison enables me, from the outset, to make plain that in Iban augury we are dealing with a system of divination: the interpretation of divine revelation as it is believed to be manifested in the behaviour of certain sacred birds.⁴

MYTHICAL ORIGINS AND CHARTER

Amongst the Iban divination takes many forms,⁵ but of all these forms it is augury which holds for them the highest significance, divinely sanctioned, and (under their traditional culture) pervading

² A system of augury closely resembling that of the ancient Greeks also existed in ancient Rome. Hose, McDougall, James and others have noted similarities between the Roman system and those of various of the indigenous peoples of Borneo. Cf. James (1950): "Among the Dayaks of Borneo there is a system extraordinarily like that of Etruscanized Rome, down to minute details."

³ The Iban (or Sea Dayaks) are a proto-Malay people of southwest Borneo. They are brachycephalic, of short stature (average height of males, 5 ft. 2½ ins.), with dark eyes, broad noses, full lips, black lank hair and cinnamon-coloured skin. The Iban of Sarawak (1947 census, 190,326 Iban, c. 35 % of the mixed population) are mainly scattered through the undeveloped, interior zone of the country, major areas of settlement being the Second and Third Division. Other Iban tribes live in the region of the western headwaters of the Kapuas River in Kalimantan, or Indonesian Borneo. The Iban are essentially agricultural; their subsistence economy is based on shifting cultivation, dry rice being grown on hillside clearings in the tropical rain forest. They live in longhouses which are built on the banks of rivers navigable by dug-out canoes. Settlement is scattered, the average density of population being about ten per square mile. Iban society is cognatic or bilateral. A long-house consists of a number (about 15 on an average) of privately owned family apartments, and each family (containing, on an average, six persons) is an independent unit, owning land and property in its own right. The Iban are an egalitarian people without hereditary chieftainship. In former years they were much addicted to head-hunting. They have a highly developed and complex religion, which at the time of the 1947 census was still practised by over 96 % of the population. In the account that follows I shall be discussing augury as I observed and studied it in the course of field expeditions undertaken during the years 1949-51 and 1957-58, among the Iban of the Baleh River, in the Kapit District of the Third Division of Sarawak. All of my enquiries were carried on in the Iban language, and throughout this paper vernacular references are briefly given for the benefit of students of Iban culture and as a check on my analysis. Although variations do occur from region to region, the system of augury here described is, in its essentials, the system followed by all of the Iban tribes of Sarawak.

⁴ There has been a tendency on the part of ethnographers working in Borneo to confuse augury (a type of divination) with animism (the doctrine that the phenomena of animal life, etc. are produced by an immaterial soul). For example, Hose and McDougall (1912) discuss both augury and hepato-

almost every aspect of their lives. Nothing, an Iban will aver, matters more than an understanding of augury (*nadai lebis ari berandau burong*); and when speaking of the diverse cultures of Borneo, Iban will often describe themselves (in contrast to such groups as the Chinese and Malays) as a people who practise augury. Their system of augury, they assert, is something wholly theirs, something purely of Iban origin, which has been handed down to them from their remote ancestors (*sigi asal kami ari aki ini munya*).⁶

Augury, like many of the other institutions of Iban society, possesses a mythical charter that proclaims its divine origin. The Iban are a polytheistic people whose pantheon contains scores of named gods and goddesses. The most important of them is Singalang Burong, whose main concern is with conquest and the arts of war, but who also keeps general surveillance over human affairs.

Long ago, runs the myth, an Iban leader named Siu found his way to Singalang Burong's long-house in the skies, where the god spoke to him of augury. "I am the ruler of the spirit world," said Singalang Burong, "and have the power to make men successful in all they undertake. At all times if you wish for my help, you must call upon me and make offerings to me. Especially this must be done before you go to fight against the enemy, for I am the god of war, and help those who pay me due respect.... And to help you in your daily work, my sons-in-law will always tell you whether what you do is right or wrong. In all the work you undertake you must pay heed to the voices of the sacred birds: *ketupong*, *embuas*, *beragai*, *papau*, *bejampong*, *pangkas* and *nendak*. These birds, named after my sons-in-law, represent them, and are the means by which I make known my wishes to mankind. When you hear them, remember it is me speaking through my sons-

mancy under the heading of "Animistic Beliefs". This confusion can lead to serious misunderstanding.

⁵ For example, the Iban also take omens from the behaviour of various animals, reptiles and insects. The Iban term *burong* which has the primary and generic meaning of bird, and the secondary and more restricted meaning of an augury, is applied by extension to all these creatures. However, only certain specific birds are used in the formal practice of augury (*beburong*).

⁶ A system of augury essentially the same as that described in this paper is found among the Mualang (and other Iban-speaking groups) of the Belitang region of the middle Kapuas in Indonesian Borneo. (Personal communication from Dr. F. H. van Naerssen, Reader in Indonesian and Malay Studies, University of Sydney, who did field research among the Mualang in 1949-50). This distribution (the Iban of Sarawak trace their migration from the Kapuas) is evidence that augury is an ancient Iban custom and not a recent borrowing as some have suggested.

in-law in encouragement or warning. Whatever work you may be engaged in — farm work, house building, fishing or hunting — wherever you may be, you must always do as these birds direct. Whenever you have a feast, you must make an offering to me, and you must call upon my sons-in-law to come and partake of the feast. If you do not do these things, some evil is sure to happen to you. I am willing to help you and to give you prosperity, but I expect due respect to be paid to me, and will not allow my commands to be disobeyed.”⁷

For the Iban then, their birds of augury are (as mythology lays it down) gods, or *petara* in their own right, and members of a divine society. The seven main augural gods are believed to live in the same celestial long-house as Singalang Burong, and five of them — Ketupong, Embuas, Beragai, Papau and Bejampong — are married to his daughters. It is thus usual for the Iban to refer to their augural birds as *menantu Lang*, or the sons-in-law of Singalang Burong.⁸ All the principal gods of the Iban are anthropomorphic, and live in a society which has a structure identical with that of the Iban themselves.⁹ The genealogies of these gods are known and remembered by *lemambang*, or religious experts, who make use of their knowledge in the invocations (*timang*) which are chanted at Iban rituals, or *gawai*.¹⁰ All seven of the augural gods have siblings, parents and grandparents, all named, who are important figures in the Iban pantheon. For example, Apai

⁷ These words of Singalang Burong are derived from a myth recorded in the Second Division of Sarawak by the Rev. Edwin H. Gomes, and first published in 1904. (The names of the augural birds have been modified to conform with the dialect of the Ulu Ai Iban of the Third Division.) Essentially similar accounts of the mythical origin of augury are to be found among the Iban of other parts of Sarawak. In all of them augury is represented as divinely revealed and sanctioned. In some versions Singalang Burong gives detailed instruction in augural signs.

⁸ Singalang Burong's full name (in invocations, etc.) is Lang Singalang Burong; it is commonly abbreviated to Lang, as in the phrase *menantu Lang*.

⁹ According to several prominent augurs (*tuai burong*) with whom I have discussed this matter, Ketupong, (who is looked upon as the most senior of the augural gods) is still living in Singalang Burong's *bilek* family (i.e. practising uxorilocal residence). But the other four who are married to Singalang Burong's daughters have all achieved partition and seceded from his *bilek* family to set up separate domestic apartments in the same long-house. The two remaining augural gods — Pangkas and Nendak — are unmarried members of *bilek* families of the same community. For an account of the Iban family system, see Freeman (1957).

¹⁰ It is significant that the gods themselves are said, by the Iban, to practise augury. In the invocation (*timang*) that accompanies head-hunting rituals, a description is given of Singalang Burong, his wife, daughters and sons-in-law leaving their celestial long-house to attend the *gawai* to which they have

Embuas (the father of Embuas), whose full name is Bujang Bungah Jajingah Tinggi Serukong, lives beneath the immense buttresses of a mythical *plai* tree (*Alstonia ochalanis*); his special task is the safeguarding of *bedilang* (the hearth stones over which enemy heads are smoked), the manufacture of the rotan casings (*ringka*) in which these heads are secured, and of the circular framework (*bengkong*) from which they are suspended. In head-hunting rituals Apai Embuas is invoked, and is believed to bring these objects (*bedilang*, *ringka* and *bengkong*) to the *gawai*.¹¹

Singalang Burong and his sons-in-law — as gods — figure prominently in the religious life of the Iban. For example, they are principal guests at the great head-hunting *gawai*, through the performance of which Iban men seek social and martial prestige. The gods are believed to attend these *gawai* in person, to reside in the resplendent shrines which have been built for them in the gallery of the long-house, and to confer on their human hosts numerous benefits. In the invocations that accompany such rituals the demeanour of the gods is graphically described so that they take on for the Iban personalities which are individual and distinctive like those of men and women. Again, the augural gods, in particular, are important figures in the *dramatis personae* of the great sagas (*ensera*) in which they appear as traditional adversaries of the culture heroes of the Iban, the mercurial Orang Panggau.

In all these ritual and mythical contexts the augural gods are anthropomorphous. Ordinarily, of course, they cannot be seen, but they do frequently appear to the Iban in their dreams in human form. Singalang Burong, for example, was described to me by an augur, who had encountered him in a dream, as an impressive old man, completely bald, massive of body and heavily tattooed in traditional Iban style.

THE AUGURAL BIRDS

While Iban gods normally assume human form, they also possess the mystical power of metamorphosis, and it is the special characteristic

been invited. At this point Singalang Burong says: "Here let us halt and listen for auguries". (*Ditu kitai ngetu mending ka burong*.) Only after the augury heard by Ketupong has been interpreted as favourable by Singalang Burong do the gods continue their journey.

¹¹ In the space available to me I cannot give details of the ritual significance of all the divine kin of the augural gods. Let me note, however, that their fathers and grandfathers (*Apai Burong* and *Aki Burong*) are of great importance in Iban religion.

of Singalang Burong and the augural gods that they change themselves into birds (*burong*), in which shape they commonly present themselves to men. Singalang Burong, when he does metamorphose himself, always appears as a Brahminy Kite, or *lang* (*Haliastur indus intermedius*).¹² But, as befits a high god, he does not deign to do this often, electing instead to make his will known to men through the agency of his *menantu*, or sons-in-law,¹³ who assume the following bird forms¹⁴:

Iban name	Systematic name	English name
<i>ketupong</i>	<i>Sasia abnormis</i> (Temminck)	Rufous Piculet
<i>embuas</i>	<i>Lacedo pulchella</i> (Horsfield)	Banded Kingfisher
<i>beragai</i>	<i>Harpactes duvauceli</i> (Temminck)	Scarlet-Rumped Trogon
<i>papau</i>	<i>Harpactes diardi</i> (Temminck)	Diard's Trogon
<i>bejampong</i>	<i>Platylophus galericulatus</i> (Cuvier)	Crested Jay
<i>pangkas</i>	<i>Blythipicus rubiginosus</i> (Swainson)	Maroon Woodpecker
<i>nendak</i>	<i>Copsychus malabaricus</i> (Scopoli)	White-Rumped Shama

¹² Eagles, hawks and kites are widely associated with sky gods. Cf. Aristophanes, *The Birds* (trans. Rogers, 1924, p. 179):

"..... Zeus
who at present is Lord of the Sky
Stands wearing, as Royalty's emblem and badge,
an Eagle erect on his head."

¹³ The Iban do not use the Brahminy Kite in deliberate divination (*beburong*). This is in contradistinction to the Kenyah of Borneo, who look on the Brahminy Kite (which is believed to represent their high god Bali Penyalong) as their principal bird of augury.

¹⁴ These incarnations, it may be noted are invariable. I.e., the augural god Ketupong, when he takes on bird form, always appears to men in the shape of a Rufous Piculet, which form none other of the augural gods ever assumes. Again, the name of each augural god is identical with the name of the bird whose shape he takes. In this paper (because of the lack of space) I have not discussed the *engkerasak*, or Little Spiderhunter (*Arachnothera longirostris*), and several other birds which have a very minor significance in Iban augury.

BASIC TENETS

When any of these augural birds is seen or heard (so runs the theory of Iban augury) it can be assumed that the gods have something to communicate to man, for these birds, say the augurs, never reveal themselves without cause, they always have something to tell us (*enda kala bemunyi diri, enda tau enda bisi utai di padah*).¹⁵ The augural gods, it is believed, are all-knowing (*nemu magang burong*) and able to foretell the future; furthermore, whenever they do intervene in human affairs it is always for man's advantage. This brings us to a cardinal feature of Iban augury. The augural birds, it is important to realize, are benign creatures, favourably disposed towards men (*nadai jai ati enggau Iban*); their *raison d'être* is to help and not to hinder; to confirm men in enterprises that are likely to succeed, to forewarn them of action and intentions likely to end hurtfully in failure or disaster. Iban augury is thus in essence a beneficent and beneficial commentary on human purposes, a system of divine guidance for the well-being of man.¹⁶

From this belief in augury as a form of divine communication stems the injunction that no augury should be wilfully ignored by the person (or persons) encountering it (*burong enda tau ngereja*). This injunction, naturally enough, applies with particular force to auguries that are inauspicious, and numerous instances are cited of individuals suffering injury or death from defiant or unthinking failure to heed divine prognostications of misfortune. The gods, in their omniscience, ensure

¹⁵ This belief is commonly supported evidentially *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. For example, at four o'clock on the afternoon of 19th April 1950 as I was talking to Kubu, an augur of Rumah Nyala, Sungai Sut, a *ketupong* (Rufous Piculet) began chirruping close to the *dampa* (farm house) in which we were sitting. All in the house heard the bird. I at once asked Kubu what this augury might mean. He replied: "I'm not sure, but something is being told us." (*Entah, tang bisi utai di padah.*) Later that evening, soon after their evening meal, Binya (a woman of the house) and her young son Kachang suddenly developed a gastric sickness. Kubu then announced to me that it was to this sickness the augury had referred; the sickness, he said, must have been caused by something Binya and Kachang had eaten, and it was against this action that the *ketupong* had issued its warning.

¹⁶ During my 1957-58 field expedition I was given striking evidence of Iban attitudes towards their augural birds. I had with me a collection of skins (lent to me by the Sarawak Museum) which aroused fascinated interest. One woman (of Rumah Tungku, Sungai Tiau) spoke of the birds as helpers for whom the Iban had strong affection (*kasih udu*); and several families held special offerings (*bedara*), welcoming the skins to their apartments and asking for continued guidance from their augural birds.

that an augury is seen or heard only by those for whom it is intended.¹⁷ It is this way that the Iban account for the fact that one man will sometimes hear an augury, whereas others working close at hand do not. The gods, it is said, are able to stop the ears of men, separating one person from another by an interval no thicker than a leaf (*petara nijal pending enggau antara daun se rambar*).

The augural birds, we have now seen, indicate for man's good the auspicious and the inauspicious. They do this in their movements or cries; it is for men to read these signs aright, relating any given augury to the proposed human action to which it refers. If men fail to take heed of an augury or, in their ignorance, misread its significance, it is then that undesirable results accrue. One augur (*tuai burung*) put this important point in this way: "These birds of augury they indicate to us things that are hurtful and things that are not; but if we do not understand their language, if we do not heed them, then we suffer." (*Sida burung bisi madah ka utai pemedis, utai enda; tang enti kitai enda nemu jako padah iya, enti enda beluli iya, nya kitai ka pedis.*)

In other words, it is not an augury in itself which produces results, either good or bad, but rather the behaviour of men in respect of it. This is something which the Iban stress when explaining the principles on which their system of augury is based. To take an example: the beginning of the agricultural year is traditionally marked by prolonged inaugural rites in which the Iban make offerings to their sacred birds and seek favourable auguries for the felling of the forest, its subsequent firing, and the sowing, maturation and reaping of their *padi bukit*, or hill rice. For the Iban the growing of *padi* is of the utmost concern and favourable auguries are much sought after in an attempt to make auspicious the strenuous and hazardous course of cultivation. Such an augury, when it is encountered, enheartens the cultivator, giving him confidence in the future, but — if anything — it will cause him to work the harder. There is no expectation that the favourable augury, of itself, like some magical act, will automatically produce a good crop. "Even though one hears a good augury ten times over," I once heard a *tuai burung* of the Sungai Sut remark, "the harvest will not be an outstanding one without sufficient work." (*Sepuloh kali ninga burung badas, enda turun ka iya, enda bulih padi.*) Similarly, if harmful results

¹⁷ In the case of a corporate work group an augury heard by any one of its members is accepted as referring to the purposeful activity of them all, and so affects the group as a whole.

follow the hearing of an inauspicious augury, the responsibility lies not with the gods but with man for having failed to heed their warning.¹⁸

THE READING OF AUGURAL SIGNS

The mythical charter and basic ideology of Iban augury are clearly and simply formulated. In contrast, the actual practice of augury is of great complexity. This complexity lies mainly in the related processes of interpretation and application: in determining the significance of casually encountered auguries and in deciding upon the auguries to be deliberately sought for particular human purposes. Both of these processes are concerned with the purport of augural signs, and it is to this somewhat abstruse subject that I would now like briefly to turn. By way of preamble let me say that in what follows I shall understand by the term augural sign: some aspect of the appearance or behaviour of an augural bird which, by general consent, is regarded as having a symbolic meaning.

As I have already noted the augural birds of the Iban are looked upon primarily as gods, and in this form they figure prominently in ritual invocations (*timang*) and sagas (*ensera*). Moreover, in these *timang* and *ensera* the various augural gods possess distinctive personalities and characteristics. Thus Ketupong has all the marks of a leader: when, for example, the gods (going to attend a *gawai*) find their path blocked by an impenetrable thicket it is Ketupong who springs

¹⁸ In ordinary conversation the Iban often speak of augural birds as though they were able in themselves to cause harm. Such a metaphorical mode of speech is apt to mislead. Further investigation (in my experience) always reveals the theory of ultimate human responsibility as I have described it. In August 1950 for example a woman named Pawa died at Rumah Tungku, Sungai Tiau, soon after her arrival from Sungai Julau in the Kanowit District. It then became known that a short distance down-river from Rumah Tungku a *pangkas* (Maroon Woodpecker) had given its alarm cry and flown to and fro across the path of a party of which she had been a member, and that instead of pausing in their journey for the required ritual observances they took no heed of the augury and paddled straight on to their destination. When he heard of this Kara, the augur of Rumah Tungku, publically upbraided the leader of the party saying: "Idiot! you know that augural birds are killing things!" (*Isu! sigi nemu utai munoh burung!*) In later discussion, however, Kara explained that it was really a failure to take cognizance of augury that had led to Pawa's death; i.e. if one's thinking (and behaviour) are at fault death may follow an augury (*enti salah pikir parai kitai laban burung*).

forward to attempt to cut a way through it.¹⁹ While Bejampong, to take another example, is always described as one possessing (in warfare and tests of prowess) great swiftness and agility.²⁰ Such attributes of the gods are often taken into account when interpreting an augury, but in addition so are the appearance and behaviour of the augural birds *per se*.

Of most importance are the cries which the birds utter. Two different types of 'voice' (*nyawa*) are distinguished: the ordinary call of a bird, and its alarm cry; and in three instances the alarm cries of augural birds are regarded as possessing a distinct significance and given special names. Thus, the *ketupong* when it utters its alarm cry is referred to as *kekiah*, while the *papau* becomes *senabong*, and the *pangkas* becomes *kutok*.²¹ All of these alarm cries are regarded as harsher than the ordinary cry and associated with danger and misfortune.

In discussing the character of augural cries the Iban often liken them to human speech — as a way of indicating their symbolic nature. I list below the main ascriptions of two augurs of the Sungai Sut²²:

English name	Iban name	Nature of cry (<i>nyawa</i>)
1. Rufous Piculet	(i) <i>ketupong</i>	like a man of one word; i.e. deliberate and authoritative (<i>baka orang tunggal jako</i>)

¹⁹ Ketupong fails in this attempt as do the other augural gods and it is only when Singalang Burong comes to their aid that the obstruction (*pintu langit*) is breached. This incident is a good example of the subordination of the augural gods to their father-in-law (*entua*), the high god Lang Singalang Burong.

²⁰ For example, in ritual invocations Bejampong, the god, is spoken of in these words:

"Keen of eye, quick in seeing,
Sharp of ear, quick in hearing."
(*Mata silik, jampat ngelala,
Pending lamsik, jampat ninga.*)

In most cases, as in this, the attributes of the god resemble closely these of the bird (in this instance the Crested Jay) whose shape he assumes.

²¹ There is a myth accounting for the existence of these alarm cries. The seven augural birds (it is related) once had a dispute over the direction in which an *ensurai* tree was about to fall. *Ketupong*, *pangkas* and *papau* said that it would fall towards the river in the bank of which it was growing, while the other four insisted that it would fall in the opposite direction. When the tree did fall towards the river, *ketupong*, *pangkas* and *papau* gave throat to raucous shouts of triumph which became their alarm cries (*nyawa began*).

²² I.e., Kubu of Rumah Nyala, and Jang of Rumah Umpang.

English name	Iban name	Nature of cry (nyawa)
	(ii) <i>kekiah</i> (i.e. alarm cry)	like a fierce person, someone who scolds (<i>baka orang mangah, baka orang nganu</i>)
2. Banded Kingfisher	<i>embuas</i>	like someone speaking kindly (<i>baka orang mentas jako</i>)
3. Scarlet-Rumped Trogon	<i>beragai</i>	like a man laughing (<i>baka orang ketawa</i>)
4. Diard's Trogon	(i) <i>papau</i>	like someone conversing, having no desire to find fault with others (<i>baka orang berandau, nadai ati nganu orang</i>)
	(ii) <i>senabong</i> (i.e. alarm cry)	like a man who attacks with sharp words (<i>baka orang merak kitai, tajam jako</i>)
5. Crested Jay	<i>bejampong</i>	like someone speaking very rapidly (<i>baka orang dras jako</i>)
6. Maroon Woodpecker	(i) <i>pangkas</i>	like a man shouting in triumph (<i>baka orang manjong</i>)
	(ii) <i>kutok</i> (i.e. alarm cry)	like someone issuing an emphatic warning (<i>baka orang tunggal jako, sigi sigi</i>)
7. White-Rumped Shama	<i>nendak</i>	like someone speaking soothingly; lit. so as to give shade (<i>baka orang ke ngelindap jako</i>)

As this evidence indicates the cries of their augural birds have, for the Iban, a symbolic character.²³ Furthermore, the symbolic character

²³ The two augurs Kubu and Jang were giving a formal exposition of augural symbolism, and to simplify this exposition all of their ascriptions were phrased anthropomorphically. Ordinarily, however, directly anthropomorphic comparisons are not made. The *beragai*, for example, is spoken of merely as 'the laughing bird' (*burong ketawa*), or 'the glad bird' (*burong gaga*); the *pangkas* as 'shouting bird' (*burong panjong*), and so on. It should also be mentioned that in addition to the examples given there are a number of other symbolic interpretations of augural cries; these, however, I have not the space to discuss.

of a cry largely determines the interpretation placed upon it. For example, if the cry of the *pangkas* (Maroon Woodpecker) is heard by a war party, this is welcomed as foretelling the shouts of triumph that traditionally accompany the taking of an enemy head (*antu pala*). Similarly, if a *beragai* (Scarlet-Rumped Trogon) is heard when on a trading expedition this is also looked on as a good omen, predicting the happy laughter that will follow the acquisition of valuable property.

In the instances so far cited the symbolism has been anthropomorphic. These without doubt are the most numerous, but there are also other kinds of symbolic identification. Thus, the rapid cry of the *bejampong* (Crested Jay) is said to resemble the crackling of burning tinder and so is sought at the beginning of the cultivation cycle as presaging the successful firing of a family's swiddens.²⁴ By some, the alarm cry of Diard's Trogon (*senabong*) is said to have a sound comparable to the rattle of blood as it issues from the throat of a newly slain animal, and this has led to the *senabong* being described as a *burong darah* (lit. bird of blood) and being much sought after by hunters. Again, the alarm cry of the Rufous Piculet (*kekih*) is likened to the sound of something being scraped by a knife, and consequently the *kekih* augury is sometimes used to rid a swidden of the spirits of misfortune (*antu tisi*) believed to be inhabiting it (i.e. by scraping them away).

The appearance of an augural bird may also possess symbolic meaning. The *beragai*, the laughing call of which we have already noted, also has a brilliantly red breast. Because of this the *beragai* is known as *burong tampak* (lit. bird of brightness) and is associated with success and renown. This makes the *beragai* an augury sought after by men going to war, attending head-hunting rituals (*gawai*), or undertaking a distant journey (especially to the coast or the territory of an alien tribe) for material profit and social prestige. Again, the top-knot (*jugu*) of the *bejampong* (Crested Jay) is seen as a symbol of the long tuft of human hair (taken from a slain enemy) which traditionally adorns the hilt of a head-hunter's ceremonial sword (*pedang*). The *bejampong* is thus an auspicious augury for men on the warpath portending the slaying of enemies.

It is also possible for the habitual behaviour of an augural bird to be seen as significant. The behaviour of the *bejampong* (Crested Jay),

²⁴ Because my space is limited I have not in this paper been able to give any account of the very important association of augury with the cultivation of *padi*. I hope to be able to discuss the rituals of Iban agriculture in a later publication.

for example, has resulted in this bird becoming known as *burong gear* (agile bird) and *burong jampat* (swift bird). Accordingly the *bejampong* augury is sought before embarking on such activities as war and hunting in the hope that a comparable swiftness and agility will be imparted to those hearing or seeing it.²⁵

Finally, meaning may be drawn from the particular movement or movements of an augural bird from the point of view of the person to whom it appears. A main distinction made is between flight across the observer's line of vision from right to left (*mimpin*), in contrast to flight from left to right (*raup*). The *mimpin* movement is looked on as carrying more force (*kring agi*) than the *raup* movement, the analogy here being to the greater strength of the right arm.²⁶ Another important distinction is between flight in the same direction as the observer himself is travelling (auspicious), as against flight in the opposite direction (inauspicious). Other kinds of behaviour, such as diving, hovering, alighting, etc., are taken into account if it is thought that a bird is using them as a mode of communication. Thus, if an augural bird persistently alights upon or enters a long-house this may be interpreted as a warning that the house should be abandoned to avoid impending misfortune.

The several augural birds of the Iban, it may be remarked at this point, differ considerably in the extent to which they approach human habitations. Both the *ketupong* (Rufous Piculet) and *nendak* (White-Rumped Shama) are commonly seen and heard in the immediate vicinity of long-houses, for which reason they are looked upon as taking an intimate interest in human affairs: the diminutive and restless *ketupong* as a kind of watchful guardian, and the *nendak* (the song of which rivals that of the nightingale) as a wholly benign ally against the threatening forces of the world.²⁷ The *bejampong* (Crested Jay), *beragai* (Scarlet-Rumped Trogon) and *pangkas* (Maroon Woodpecker) are usually encountered somewhat further afield, as for example along the tracks linking a long-house with its swiddens. All of these birds,

²⁵ An augury may be both seen and heard. This rule applies to all of the seven augural birds, there being no division of *signa ex avibus* depending (as in ancient Rome) on whether they refer to flight (the *alites*) or utterance (the *oscines*). Thus, among the Iban, although an augury may have been only heard, it is nonetheless permissible to refer to non-aural signs (e.g. derived from the appearance of the bird concerned) in assessing its significance.

²⁶ Similarly, the cries of the augural birds may be heard either to the right (*kanan*) or left (*kiba*) of the observer.

²⁷ A *nendak* augury is invariably auspicious.

frequently seen in the open, commonly *raup* and *mimpin*, and so intervene in human undertakings. The *papau* (Diard's Trogon) haunts more remote and thicker vegetation and is seen still less often; while the habitat of the *embuas* (a primitive tree kingfisher) is the upper levels of primeval forest, from which it very seldom issues to be seen by man.²⁸ For the Iban, then, their augural birds vary markedly in their characters and habits, a variation which is reflected in the diversity of signs found in their system of augury.

RELATING AUGURY TO HUMAN PURPOSES

We have now seen something of the way in which conventional signs are taken into account in interpreting an augury. The reading of these signs is of central importance; however, a complete interpretation almost always involves the consideration of other factors. As noted earlier augury is for the Iban one of the principal methods by which certain gods reveal their will to men. Further, it is believed that each revelation has as its purpose specific comment on human intentions. In interpreting an augury it becomes important, therefore, to identify these intentions. To achieve this the whole context in which an augury is encountered has to be taken into account: the time, the place, and the human activity being carried out (or about to be initiated).

All this can best be illustrated in the concept of the *jeritan*, on which the Iban themselves place great emphasis. A *jeritan* is an augury which has been observed either just before or during the early stages of an important phase of activity. In these circumstances an augury is thought of as being especially urgent and constraining, for there can be no mistaking the immediate human intentions to which it refers. A *jeritan* may be either auspicious or inauspicious depending on the augural signs involved. For example, if the *beragai* (Scarlet-Rumped Trogon) be heard just as a party of hunters beach their canoes with the intention of scouring a nearby hillside for game, this is taken as a favourable omen foretelling a good catch that will bring happiness to the hunters. Again, a *nendak* (White-Rumped Shama) heard as a travelling party is setting out is likewise an auspicious *jeritan* — an indication that no harm will befall the travellers. On the other hand,

²⁸ Thus, for example, although all of the men of Rumah Nyala were familiar with the cry of the *embuas*, a number of them had never clearly seen this bird. For this reason the skin of the *embuas* which I had with me in 1957-58 attracted very great interest.

should the alarm cry of the *ketupong* (Rufous Piculet) be heard as the felling of the forest (i.e. to make a swidden) is about to begin this is highly inauspicious, a *jeritan mantap*, warning those concerned that if they continue with the felling one of their number will seriously wound himself with an axe. The only course in such circumstances is to abandon felling for the day and return to the long-house.²⁹

On other occasions the relevance of an augury may be much more difficult to divine as, for example, when a cry is heard by a group of people who are gossiping idly in the gallery (*ruai*) of a long-house. Considerable conjecture will often follow the hearing of such an augury without any clear consensus of opinion being reached as to its significance. An augury of this kind (in contrast to a *jeritan*) lacks power of constraint for the simple reason that its precise bearing on human action is uncertain. In these circumstances all that can be done is to 'wait and see'; however, it is usual for any untoward event that does ensue to be at once linked (*post hoc ergo propter hoc*) with the previously undetermined augury.³⁰

Quite often an augury will be taken by an individual to refer to his personal intentions — intentions, moreover, which he may not have divulged to others. Such an interpretation is, of course, consistent with the theory of augury, one of the dogmas of which is that the gods know the thoughts of all men. An interesting case illustrating the way in which individuals relate augury to their private purpose occurred during our stay at Rumah Nyala, in the Sungai Sut. On the night of 23rd March 1950, Sunggau, the son of Nyala (who was the *tuai rumah* or headman of the community) committed adultery with Unsai, the wife of Nyanggau. On discovering this, Nyanggau slashed and destroyed a loin-cloth and other property belonging to Sunggau. This, in the eyes of all concerned, was justifiable retaliation. Two nights later, during a sudden flood, Nyala's canoe disappeared from its moorings at the river bank. Nyala at once alleged that Nyanggau was responsible, and despite Nyanggau's vehement denials insisted on placing the case before a *pengulu's* court at Kapit. Nyala left for Kapit

²⁹ Although an unfavourable augury compels the abandonment of the intended activity to which it refers, it does not affect other undertakings. For example, an Iban who has encountered an inauspicious *jeritan* at his swidden is entirely free to return to his long-house and engage in some other kind of work. Thus, while augury results in frequent interruptions to work, it does not lead to such great loss of time as some European observers have imagined.

³⁰ Cf. note 15 *supra*. Negative instances (as in most mystical systems) are ignored.

at dawn on 4th April, hearing on his way a *pangkas kanan* (a Maroon Woodpecker to his right hand side). On encountering this augury Nyala at once uttered a prayer (*sampi*):³¹

"I will win: auspicious augury! weak the jaw, weak the bones of my opponents, incapable of argument as I confront them."

(*Aku manang lagi, badas burong! lemi rang, lemi tulang, enda depat bejako orang lagi laban aku.*)

In these words Nyala was ascribing to the augury he had casually encountered a meaningful relevance to his immediate personal situation. This was done, it will be noted, by linking the augury with an imprecation directed against Nyanggau and his supporters.³² This kind of manipulation of augury to make it serve personal ends is very common among the Iban. Augury can thus be said to provide the Iban with the opportunity for sanctioned wishful-thinking, and this, I would suggest, is a principal reason for its popularity.³³

Expert augurs, indeed, view as one of the highest developments of their art the ritual manipulation of an augury to make it serve wished for human ends. The term applied to this process is *ngintu*, meaning literally 'to take care of something'. Ritual manipulation is resorted to when the import of an augury may be given differing interpretations. An example will make this clear. The *beragai*, as already noted, has a brilliantly red breast and a laughing cry. When a *beragai* enters a long-house, as it sometimes will, this is an augury the urgency of which cannot be ignored. It is possible, however, to interpret the event in two very different ways: it may be seen as foretelling good fortune (that is, its laughing cry and the brightness of the bird's breast may be taken as symbolical of future happiness and fame); or alternatively it may be looked on as an omen of disaster, foreboding the burning

³¹ It so happened that unbeknown to Nyala another member of the long-house, while in the forest nearby, overheard the utterance of this prayer and later recounted it to me. It becomes, therefore, a most interesting instance of the private use of augury.

³² As can be seen in the words of his *sampi*, it was Nyala's intention in conducting his case to make the fullest use of his status as an elder and headman. His tort was dismissed, however, on grounds of insufficient evidence. This outcome was later attributed to the fact that Nyanggau, on his way to the court, had himself heard two auguries (a *pangkas kanan* and a *beragai kanan*) which had been more potent than those encountered by Nyala.

³³ Sanctioned wishful-thinking: the socially approved acceptance of the thought that conditions are as an individual would wish them to be, and the rejection of the thought that they are otherwise. (Cf. Drever, 1952).

down of the long-house (the bird's red feathers being symbolical of flames). One reaction to this situation is to fear the worst and abandon the long-house for a period in the hope that the fire of which warning has been given will not occur. By ritual manipulation, some augurs assert, there can be a much more desirable outcome. This is achieved by making offerings and sacrifices to the augural bird concerned, and in the prayers that accompany these rites accepting with gratitude the blessings foretold. In this manner, it is said, a dubious augury can be turned into an entirely auspicious one.

Deliberate avoidance of possibly bad auguries is also common practice. Thus, whenever a group of Iban are engaged in an undertaking of consequence (for example, moving to a new long-house, fetching a bride, or performing a *padi* ritual) they take care to see that certain of their number — usually two or three girls — are equipped with bronze gongs which are beaten without cease until the business in hand is concluded. Whether from a party travelling through the forest, or a canoe gliding down a river, the rhythmical throb of gongs is a familiar sound in Iban country. Its purpose is to forestall the hearing of inauspicious omens.³⁴ Such behaviour may seem flagrantly inconsistent with the basic tenets of augury, but in such cases it is usual for auguries to have been taken in advance and for a series of propitiatory offerings to have been presented to the gods. The attitude is rather that of a man who, having taken good counsel and every safeguard, decides for better or for worse to shut his ears to all further admonition. Augury, then, is far from being an inflexible system unamenable to human regulation.³⁵

THE DELIBERATE SEEKING OF AUGURIES

So far the examples I have given have concerned in the main auguries which have been encountered casually. Auguries of this kind, we have seen, are usually related to the purposeful activity being (or about to be) engaged in at the time of observation. I want now to turn to a more

³⁴ Another method sometimes adopted (when gongs are not available) is to block the ears with plugs made from leaves.

³⁵ Augury is also associated with many other ritual practices. For example, it is usual for a visitor to an Iban long-house to be met at the top of the entry ladder by one of the residents who waves a cock over the visitor's head, and, if the occasion be an important one, recites a prayer and presents him with a bowl of rice wine from which a libation is poured. The purpose of these rites is to cleanse the visitor of the threatening influence of the unfavourable auguries he may have heard on his journey, so safeguarding the ritual well-being of the long-house.

important aspect of the practice of augury: the premeditated seeking of augural signs before major undertakings are embarked upon, called by the Iban *beburong*.

It is in this process that the knowledge and experience of an augur are brought most fully into play, for the art of *beburong* lies in the selection of auguries pertinent to the *particular* venture about to be undertaken. The venture before which auguries are commonly sought are numerous and varied: from going to war to the cultivation of *padi*, from the making of distant journeys to the building of a new long-house. Indeed, any undertaking at all may, at the discretion of those involved, be held to warrant the formal seeking of auguries. Although standard procedures are recognized it is usual for each case to be fully discussed and any special features it possesses to be taken into account. The problem facing the experts who join in such a discussion is the selection of those auguries best calculated to make auspicious a particular undertaking. In making this selection the symbolic significance of the various augural birds is again of prime concern, but weight is also given to permutations of auguries which, in the experience of the experts, have proved efficacious on comparable past occasions.³⁶ Despite a general acceptance of the meaning of augural signs it is not unusual, therefore, for the recommendations of one augur to differ from those of another. This, it may be noted, adds greatly to the fascination of augury for those who practice it: for the Iban debating at length the relative merits of differing augural interpretations is an honoured and favourite pastime.

To illustrate the kind of recommendations made by an augur let me cite two examples. The first is for a *bejalai kampung*, an expedition to the forests of the interior of Borneo.

Auguries to be sought (in order shown)	Signification ³⁷	Explanatory Notes
1. <i>nendak kanan</i> (White-Rumped Shama — to the right)	to ensure that kin left in the long-house re- main in good health and suffer no hurt (<i>mri kaban di rumah</i> <i>chelap nadai ngawa</i>)	the <i>nendak</i> is known as <i>burong chelap</i> , lit. cool bird; coolness being symbolical of good health

³⁶ In making their interpretations Iban augurs also give the fullest consideration to precedent. The fact that many different permutations are possible adds greatly to the complexity of Iban augury.

³⁷ I.e., signification according to Iban testimony; the explanatory notes are mine.

**Auguries to be sought
(in order shown)****Signification ³⁷****Explanatory Notes**

2. *ketupong kanan*
(Rufous Piculet
— to the right)

to ensure that during the course of the expedition its members be free from trouble (*mri kitai lama nadai ngawa*)

the *ketupong* as the most senior (*tuai*) of the augural birds is looked upon as a guardian of the welfare of men (*burong ngimpun kitai*)

3. *bejampong kanan*
Crested Jay —
to the right

to ensure that the members of the expedition retain their strength during their prolonged stay in the forests (*mri kitai ngu-an kampong se lama lama*)

the *bejampong* in its movements symbolizes swiftness and strength

4. *beragai kanan*
(Scarlet-Rumped Trogon — to the right)

to ensure gladness of heart; i.e. at the successful outcome of the expedition (*mri ati kitai gaga ila, bulih utai*)

the *beragai* with its laughing call is associated with gladness and success

5. *embuas kanan*
(Banded Kingfisher
— to the right)

to ensure that the expedition return with much property (e.g. jungle produce, bezoar stones, hornbill feathers, etc.) (*mri kitai bulih utai*)

the *embuas* is called a *burong brat* (heavy bird) and is associated with prolific success

My second example is of auguries used in warfare (*burong enggau ngayau*).

**Auguries to be sought
(in order shown)****Signification ³⁷****Explanatory Notes**

1. *papau kiba*
(Diard's Trogon
— on the left)

to blind the eyes of the enemy; to ensure that enemy bullets miss their mark (*mri munsoh rabun, leka sinapang enda kena kitai*)

the *papau* is known as *burong rabun* (lit. bird difficult to see)

Auguries to be sought (in order shown)	Signification 37	Explanatory Notes
2. <i>beragai kanan</i> (Scarlet-Rumped Trogon — on the right)	to ensure gladness, i.e. at the taking of ene- my heads and the car- rying away of loot (<i>mri gaga, bulih mun- soh bulih tajau</i>)	the laughing cry of the <i>beragai</i> foretells gladness
3. <i>bejampong kanan</i> (Crested Jay — on the right)	to ensure swiftness and agility in battle (<i>mri kitai gear</i>)	the movements of the <i>bejampong</i> are swift and agile

This combination of auguries — *papau*, *beragai* and *bejampong* — was employed by an augur well known to me (who shall be nameless) when he participated in the storming of a Japanese stronghold at Song, on the Rejang River, in 1945. He crossed the Rejang in the face of Japanese machine-gun fire, and survived the attack that followed without the slightest wound, returning to the Baleh with a trophy head (*antu pala*) and four large jars (*tajau*) looted from the Song bazaar. This good fortune he attributes to the auguries that made auspicious so hazardous an occasion.

If the venture be an important one (e.g. a major expedition) it is usual for the seeking of auguries to be conducted from a specially selected site. *Adat* ordains that it should be on the true right bank of a river, above the reach of floods, and at a distance from human habitation; ideally, it should also be reasonably near to primeval forest. At this site a thatched shelter (*langkau burong*, or augury hut) is erected in which the members of the expedition live, spending their spare time in hunting and fishing, and in preparing equipment and supplies for the journey that lies ahead; again, a *langkau burong* is a favourite place for Iban males to have themselves tattooed.

The actual seeking of auguries is ideally done by a *tuai burong*, or qualified augur. In the absence of such an expert, however, the task may be undertaken by any experienced individual; in most cases he will be one of the leaders of the expedition, for among the Iban skill in augury is one of the recognized attributes of a leader. Normally an augur will rise some time before dawn to walk in a chosen tract of forest. When a desired augury is heard (at this hour it is almost always the cry of a bird) he utters a few dedicatory words, and with his bush knife cuts a branch from a nearby sapling. This branch, termed a *kayu*

burong (augural stick)³⁸ is taken as a material symbol of the augury he has heard. And so, morning by morning, in the cool green of the forest an augur listens for the cries that will make auspicious the venture he and his companions have planned.³⁹

THE ROLE OF AUGUR

The seeking of auguries for travelling parties and the like is a common practice: similarly, any Iban, should he wish, may take auguries for his own family. It often happens, however, that auguries have to be sought for a whole community, and this important task falls to the community's *tuai burong*, or augur, whose role is one of great ritual and social importance.

The basic units of Iban society are its *bilek* families, there being no large-scale corporate kin groups such as lineages or clans.⁴⁰ A long-house community consists of a federation of these independent families, whose privately owned apartments have been built side by side to produce a single attenuated structure. Within the long-house all *bilek*

³⁸ The *kayu burong* an augur collects are important ritual objects. They are looked upon as talismans in which the potency of an augury is stored, and many Iban assert that *kayu burong* are even more important than charms given by spirits (*lebis ari pengaruh antu*). The kind of use to which they are put is well illustrated in the following episode. While returning from his swidden on the late afternoon of 10th February 1950, Oaga, a man of Rumah Nyala, heard the cry of a *papau* (Diard's Trogon). A Diard's Trogon if heard towards dusk is given the name of *papau malam* (lit. trogon of the night), and is believed to have the special power of 'blinding' evil spirits. On hearing his *papau malam* Daga at once cut a *kayu burong*, ritually shutting his eyes as he did so, and uttered a prayer:

"This augural stick of the trogon of the night will
cause us not to be seen by evil spirits."

(*Tu kayu burong papau malam, ngambi antu enda meda kami.*)

On Daga's arrival at his farmhouse (*dampa*), pieces of the augural stick (which had now become an *engkarabun*, or 'blinder') were tied to each end of the house and at the foot of its entry ladder, so making all of its inhabitants invisible to the malevolent spirits of the surrounding forest. Another term for an augural stick is *paong burong*.

³⁹ One of the hazards of seeking a pre-decided sequence of auguries is that the augur, in the course of his task, may casually encounter a markedly inauspicious omen — say the alarm cry of a *ketupong*. Such an unwanted augury is called *burong selit* (lit. inserted augury), and is commonly taken as a warning that the entire sequence should be sought anew. Because of interruptions of this kind and delays in encountering particular auguries the process of *beburong* will sometimes last for several weeks.

⁴⁰ Cf. note 3 *supra*.

families are socially at parity with one another, there being an absence of any kind of hierarchical organization. Further, a long-house holds virtually no property in communal ownership, nor does the community, as such, engage in corporate economic activity. Nonetheless, membership of a long-house does impose upon a *bilek* family many duties and obligations for it is universally accepted that the well-being of a community is dependent on the proper maintenance of its ritual state, and for this all its *bilek* families are in part responsible. Primary responsibility rests, however, with the *tuai burong* of the long-house.

Another name for a *tuai burong* is *pun rumah*, meaning house founder, a name which points to a most important aspect of the augur's traditional role. The subsistence economy of the Ulu Iban is based on swidden agriculture and in former times communities were accustomed to change their place of abode every ten years or so as fresh tracts of virgin land were brought under cultivation. The founding of a new house, when this is decided upon, is accompanied by protracted rites, the performance of which is always under the supervision of a recognized *tuai burong*. In addition to a knowledge of augury, such a *tuai burong* also possesses an assortment of charms, known as *penchelap rumah*, which are believed to ensure that a long-house is kept in a ritually 'cool' and benign state. Throughout the course of the house founding rites the *tuai burong* listens for the required auguries and collects augural sticks which are fastened to various parts of the site and structure; moreover, the first post to be erected is that of the *tuai burong* (as house founder) whose apartment becomes the ritual centre of the long-house.

Sometimes the members of a new community will decide to hold a *gawai engkune* — a ritual in which the augural gods play a prominent part. A temporary shrine (*ranyai*) containing offerings, augural sticks, charms, and pieces of wood (termed *engkune*), is erected on the gallery of the long-house by the *tuai burong*. For one whole night a party of four men skilled in the task parade around the shrine, chanting an

⁴¹ Further elaborate rites mark first entry into a new long-house, culminating in the gathering of the whole community on the gallery (*ruai*) of the *tuai burong*. After offerings (*bedara*) have been made, the *tuai burong* waves a cock over the heads of the assembled throng and utters a consecratory prayer. The cock is then sacrificed and some of its blood smeared on the foreheads of all the men, women and children present. During the next three days, no person may leave the immediate precincts of the long-house, lest by encountering a bad augury he jeopardizes the laboriously contrived state of ritual concord of the new community.

invocation (*timang*) to the gods. In poetical words they describe the arrival of the augural gods who, at the behest of the Iban, build for them a splendid new house. Especially prominent is *Apai Nendak* (the father of the augural god Nendak) who brings most of the materials for the house and furnishes it with charms potent against all manner of evils. The gods, it is believed, enter the shrine charging the objects stored there with supernatural qualities. To conclude the ritual the shrine is dismantled and its contents shared out by the *tuai burong*; to a representative of each *bilek* he hands an augural stick from the shrine, uttering a prayer (*sampi*) as he does so:⁴²

"May these hallowed augural sticks, which I now hand out, protect and guard our long-house, so that free from all harm, from all sickness and disorder, we may dwell in coolness and shade, in happiness and health, for ever."

(*O aku tu bedua kayu paong burong ngibun kami se rumah, ngambi kami enda tabin, enda bebirin, chelap lindap, grai nyami, se lama lama.*)

On the completion of these inaugural rites a *tuai burong* becomes specifically responsible for the maintenance of the ritual state of the community. Thus, he is entitled, under Iban *adat*, to fine (*ukum*) individuals and families who have committed any act ritually offensive to the community; again, any family leaving the long-house must present to its *tuai burong* a quittance payment (*pemali rumah*) as a safeguard against possibly undesirable consequences.⁴³ It is usual for these fines and payments to include a fowl (or pig), which is sacrificed by the *tuai burong* (should he consider this warranted) on behalf of the community. On especially important occasions (as for example at the commencement of the agricultural year, or before a series of *garwai*) a *tuai burong* will act for all his *anembiak* (house members), distributing augural sticks to all those who require them. He is also available for consultation (in matters relating to ritual and augury) by any family, and from time to time organizes protective rites (*garwai sukol*) for the community as a whole.

⁴² The pieces of wood from the shrine are also shared out for preservation, as symbols of the materials used in the house built by the gods, which is thought of as being mystically fused with the very timbers of the Ibans' own long-house.

⁴³ It is likewise usual for a *tuai burong* to be presented with a small share of the fine that marks the settlement of a tort. This is a safeguard against the ritual concord of the long-house being adversely affected by the bitter quarreling that frequently accompanies the hearing of such cases.

To become a *tuai burong* a man needs more than a formal knowledge of augury. A true augur, in Iban eyes, will also have undergone a dream experience, divinely sanctioning his vocation. The form which the dream takes is culturally standardized, and closely parallels the myth of Siu, to which reference was made earlier in this paper. In his dream (*mimpi*) the dreamer after a long journey approaches a strange long-house which he is invited to enter. He discovers it to be the abode of Singalang Burong, who is discoursing on augury to a large assembly of Iban *tuai burong*. Later Singalang Burong turns to the dreamer, who has joined the assembly, telling him that having had this divine instruction he may henceforward practice the art of augury. On awakening, the dreamer prepares offerings to Singalang Burong and the augural gods, and after presenting these on the gallery of the long-house relates his dream of the night before, so achieving public recognition of his new-found status. This recognition does not mean that a man at once becomes a long-house augur, but it is an important pre-requisite. For the position of *tuai burong* there is no rigid dogma of succession, any suitably qualified male cognate, given popular support, may succeed.

In the absence of hereditary chieftainship the position of *tuai burong* (which was to be found in every long-house) was of the greatest importance in ancient Iban society. Although primarily of ritual figure, a *tuai burong* was also the main custodian of *adat* or customary law in the community, and so exercised a crucial regulatory function in a society which otherwise lacked institutionalized political authority.⁴⁴ Iban augury thus provides us with an interesting example of a ritual institution assuming jural and political significance in a cognatic and acephalous society.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In the absence of documentary and archaeological evidence no conclusions can be reached concerning the origins of Iban augury. What

⁴⁴ It is true that there were also war leaders (*pun ngayau*) who often exercised widespread influence within the tribe; but this influence was essentially personal. The positions of augur and war leader, of former days, have now been superseded by the positions of *tuai rumah* (house headman) and *pengulu* (district leader). These new offices were introduced during the reign of Rajah Sir Charles Brooke, and are recognized by the present Government of Sarawak. The position of augur has persisted, however, in almost all traditional Iban communities. In some long-houses the positions of *tuai rumah* and *tuai burong* are held by the same man; in others there are two separate officials.

can be said, however, is that augury with its pervasive importance in Iban culture, has the appearance of being an institution of considerable antiquity.⁴⁵ Again, all of the augural birds recognized by the Iban have a Malaysian distribution, and so the Iban may conceivably have possessed a system of augury prior to their coming to Borneo.⁴⁶ One possibility is that augury may have been introduced to Malaysia by Indian traders and settlers, who in turn may have derived it from ancient Greeks. Alternatively, augury could well be of more local origin, for in Southeast Asia there is evidence of ritual pre-occupation with birds dating from at least the Dongson culture of the Bronze age.⁴⁷

Concern with the significance of the behaviour of birds is not difficult to account for in a culture in which there are sky gods, for the skies become the natural region to look to for signs divinely revealed. And granted this situation, the association of the Brahminy Kite with the high god Singalang Burong (as of the eagle with Zeus, Horus and Vishnu) is understandable. In contrast, the bird forms taken by the seven augural gods of the Iban are, at first sight, puzzling in their apparent insignificance. Closer examination, however, shows that the seven birds concerned do possess a range of characters, which — symbolically interpreted — apply to most facets of human behaviour. In this sense, the augural birds of the Iban have proved adequate to the task that men have imposed upon them.

This leads me to an hypothesis — basically sociological — concerning augury, which I would like to note briefly in concluding this paper.⁴⁸ Human behaviour is essentially purposive. In augury, as in other comparable systems of divination we have, I would suggest, an extension of this notion of purpose to animal species, so that their behaviour in the presence of man and in respect of man is treated as though it were

⁴⁵ Cf. note 6 *supra*. It is interesting to note that augury is one of the ritual institutions of the Iban which survives despite marked general cultural change. In the Second Division of Sarawak I discovered communities whose members had abandoned traditional Iban religion, but who still paid attention to bird omens; however, the divine character of augury had been forgotten and superstitious belief taken its place.

⁴⁶ There are linguistic and cultural reasons to suggest that the Iban are relatively recent arrivals in Borneo. Further research (particularly archaeological) is required before a chronology can be established.

⁴⁷ For a recent discussion of the possible religious significance of the bird figures depicted on the bronze drums of the Dongson culture, see Wales (1957).

⁴⁸ A fuller presentation of this hypothesis is not possible because of restrictions of space. This paper, indeed, presents no more than a summary account of Iban augury. I hope to deal with the subject in more detail in other publications.

purposive in human terms. This attitude, I would contend, is one which would arise naturally from primitive man's experience as a member of society: the kind of thinking found in augury is fundamentally an extension of the way in which man thinks about his fellows. It is an attitude, interestingly enough, traces of which survived in Western Europe until a century and a half ago in the anthropomorphic interpretations of the great naturalist de Buffon and his annotators. That birds (and other animals) have purposes and ways of their own greatly dissimilar to those of man is a more recent realization, and one still in process of exploration in the researches of students of animal behaviour like Lorenz, Lack and Tinbergen.

J. D. FREEMAN

REFERENCES

- Aristophanes
 1924 *The Birds* (translated by B. B. Rogers), London.
- Buffon, de
 1812 *Natural History, General and Particular* (translated by William Smellie; carefully corrected and considerably enlarged by many additional notes and plates by William Wood, F.L.S.), London.
- Delacour, J.
 1947 *Birds of Malaysia*, New York.
- Drever, J.
 1952 *A Dictionary of Psychology*, London.
- Freeman, J. D.
 1955 *Iban Agriculture*, London.
 1957 The Family System of the Iban of Borneo, *Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology*, 1, pp. 15—52, Cambridge.
- Fowler, W. W.
 1933 *The Religious Experience of the Roman People*, London.
- Gomes, E. H.
 1904 Two Sea Dyak Legends, *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, No. 41, pp. 1—29, Singapore.
 1911 *Seventeen Years Among the Sea Dyaks of Borneo*, London.
- Homer
 1955 *The Odyssey* (translated by T. E. Shaw, World's Classics Edition), London.
- Hose, S. and McDougall, W.
 1912 *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo*, London.
- James, E. O.
 1950 Augury, *Chamber's Encyclopaedia*, London.
- Lack, D.
 1943 *The Life of the Robin*, London.

Lorenz, K. Z.

1955 *King Solomon's Ring*, London.

Naerssen, F. H. van

1953 Indonesia, in *Approaches to Community Development*, edited by Phillips Ruopp, The Hague.

Perham, J.

1882 Sea Dyak Religion, *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, No. 10, pp. 213—243, Singapore.

Rose, H. J.

1911 Divination (Greek), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings, Edinburgh.

Smythies, B. E.

1957 An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Borneo, *Sarawak Museum Journal*, VII, 9 (New Series), Kuching.

Tinbergen, N.

1951 *The Study of Instinct*, Oxford.

1953 *The Social Behaviour of Animals*, London.

Wales, H. G. Quaritch

1957 *Prehistory and Religion in South-East Asia*, London.

Waterbury, F.

1952 *Bird-Deities in China*, Ascona.

Wissowa, G.

1911 Divination (Roman), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings, Edinburgh.