

Engaging Bidayuh Indigenous Beliefs with Christian Theology

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Introduction

The Bidayuh are a people group in East Malaysia (Borneo) that is estimated to be 60% Christian.¹ Though many Bidayuh claim to be Christian, Bidayuh believers face a significant theological gap when integrating their spiritual worldview with Christianity. The goal of this article is to examine several cultural practices that are challenging for Christians to think about biblically and then demonstrate how indigenous thinkers can bridge this gap, offering biblically faithful and culturally relevant answers to questions that Western resources often overlook, and using all this to show the importance of training indigenous Christian theologians.

¹ “Bukar Sadong, Bidayuh,” Joshua Project, accessed 3 June 2025, https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/10993/MY.

Animistic Practices Among the Bidayuh Indigenous

To better understand the challenge of discipling believers from animistic backgrounds, this section will examine the Bidayuh spiritual worldview by examining their view of omens, mystical transformations, and black cloth.

Cosmology and the Role of Omens

The Bidayuh believe that spiritual communication is an essential aspect of daily life. Farming decisions, particularly in padi (rice) cultivation, are based on interpreting omens from the natural world. A *dukun*, or shaman, facilitates communication with the spirits, helping to determine the suitability of the land through signs such as the appearance of animals or the calls of birds. Similarly, omens guide hunters and even soldiers, particularly in times of war or battle, where birds' calls can signal either good fortune or imminent danger.²

Western theological resources, influenced by scientific rationalism, often dismiss these practices as primitive superstitions. However, to the Bidayuh, omens represent a way of navigating the intersection of the spiritual and material world. Western Christian teaching that focuses solely on modern agricultural techniques or scientific explanations for natural phenomena fails to address the deeply spiritual worldview of the Bidayuh people.³

In terms of theological reflection, indigenous theologians should teach that while God may use natural signs, ultimate trust and guidance must come from a relationship with the Creator. A biblical approach to addressing the reading of omens must recognize that God has communicated through unique means, as seen in stories like Gideon's fleece (Judges 6:36-40) or the pillar of cloud and fire (Exodus 13:21-22). However, unlike animistic beliefs,

² William Nais, *The Study of Dayak Bidayuh Occult Arts of Divination* (Kuching: Sarawak Literary Society, 1993), 22.

³ "Statement on Spiritual Warfare (1993)," Lausanne Movement, July 14, 1993, <https://lausanne.org/content/statement-on-spiritual-warfare-1993>.

where omens are often manipulated to gain favor or power, the Bible portrays God as sovereign, not subject to manipulation by humans.

Mystical Transformations: The Barui Tradition

Generally known among the Bidayuh elders, the practice of *barui*—transforming temporarily into animals or objects—is another deeply spiritual aspect of Bidayuh cosmology. Individuals with this ability are believed to possess unique powers that can aid in farming, hunting, and warfare. For example, Bidayuh soldiers who can transform into animals are thought to gain strategic advantages in battle, making them invincible or granting them the ability to evade detection.

Western Christianity, influenced by materialism and rationalism, may view these stories as fanciful or irrelevant to theological discourse. However, to the Bidayuh, these transformations signify a real interaction between the human and spiritual realms. They see *barui* as a way to harness spiritual power for practical purposes, such as survival in hostile environments.

Biblical theology also speaks of *transformation*, though with distinct differences. For example, Jesus stated that no one can be saved without being born again (John 3:1-8). Paul spoke of those in Christ being transformed into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18) and also being a “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). These texts emphasize that these biblical transformations are divine, permanent, gradual, and purposeful, whereas *barui* often serves human desires for control over nature and others.⁴

Indigenous theologians can teach that transformation in Christian teaching points to God’s redemptive work in Christ, but *barui* represents a distorted desire for power. They should emphasize that true spiritual power lies in submitting to God’s will, not in manipulating spiritual forces for personal gain. This teaching must be contextualized in a way that acknowledges

⁴ Dean C. Halverson, “Animism: The Religion of the Tribal World,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 15, no. 2, (Apr.-June 1998).

the spiritual heritage of the Bidayuh while pointing them toward a deeper understanding of biblical truth.

Symbolism of Black Cloth and Spiritual Protection

Commonly a part of Bidayuh cosmology, black cloth is not merely a cultural symbol; it is perceived to be a powerful spiritual tool. It is worn as protection against evil spirits, particularly by infants, who are considered vulnerable to being lured away by malevolent forces. During funerals, black cloth is worn to shield mourners from the spirit of the deceased, who may pose a danger if not properly appeased through rituals.

To Western Christians, the wearing of black cloth may appear to be a harmless cultural tradition, but for the Bidayuh, it holds deep spiritual significance. Western theology, when focused more on doctrinal correctness without considering spiritual protection, may fail to engage with the fears and concerns that drive this practice.

The Bible speaks extensively about spiritual protection, particularly in Ephesians 6, where Paul describes the “armor of God” as a defense against spiritual forces of darkness (Ephesians 6:10-18). Rather than relying on black cloth as a form of camouflage from evil spirits, Bidayuh Christians can be taught to trust in the redemptive power of Christ’s death and resurrection, which provides ultimate protection and deliverance from evil. The blood of Jesus is what shields believers from spiritual harm, not ritual objects or superstitions.

Another distinction relates to the fact that animists often merge the ideas of spiritual and physical protection in that they seek to guard against spiritual powers that can cause physical pain and suffering in the material world. In Matthew 10:28, though, Jesus states that we should “not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” From a different perspective, Peter states that suffering in this life is a necessary part of following Christ, but ultimately, as Paul states in Romans 8:31-39, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Thus, Bidayuh believers need to reorient their thinking away from

practices that focus on physical protection from spiritual powers. Instead, they need to realize that suffering is part of God's plan for us, but even still, our future is certain because of Christ's finished work on the cross.

Indigenous theologians should focus on teaching that while cultural symbols can have value, spiritual protection comes from a relationship with Christ, who has defeated the powers of darkness (Colossians 1:13-14, 2:15). The symbolic language of the Bible, such as being "clothed in white robes" (Revelation 7:9), can serve as a powerful counter-narrative to the Bidayuh belief in the protective power of black cloth.

The Need for Indigenous Theologians

Examining the previous three cultural issues among the animistic Bidayuh helps us see the need for indigenous theologians. Each cultural practice revealed a complex issue where beliefs about the spirit world are intertwined with the daily life of the Bidayuh. Helping believers to evaluate these practices from a biblical perspective is a complicated task. They must examine the various aspects of the practices and then interpret the biblical texts that relate to them so that they can determine which aspects are unbiblical and should be rejected and which aspects are permissible for believers. This task requires both cultural knowledge and theological acumen.

Reflecting on the issues in the Bidayuh context points to the importance of missionary anthropologist Paul Hiebert's "flaw of the excluded middle."⁵ Hiebert explains that for those from animist backgrounds, the spirit world is the most significant part of their worldview; however, since the spirit world is typically not a significant part of the Western worldview, Westerners often fail to address issues of the spirit world when they share the gospel with or disciple those with this worldview. The result is that unbiblical beliefs and

⁵ Phil Barnes, "Missiology Meets Anthropology: The Life and Legacy of Paul G. Hiebert" (PhD dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 92-96.

practices related to the spirit world often continue after animists come to faith.

This result is true in the case of the Bidayuh, where some reverted to traditional beliefs after converting to Christianity, which might be attributed to the inadequate presentation of the gospel. Christianity might have been introduced in a way that aligns with or conforms to the Bidayuh worldview, leading to misunderstanding. Evangelistic efforts might have been vague and not adequately explained the transformative nature of the gospel. In many cases, Bidayuh see Christianity as a more powerful way to meet the traditional expectations of their current belief system, rather than a complete transformation of those beliefs. Thus, Christianity may be embraced as an enhanced means of fulfilling existing spiritual needs rather than as a wholly distinct faith.

Indigenous theologians must be more thoughtful and culturally aware of presentations of the gospel that emphasize true commitment and the shift from traditional practices. This has important implications for indigenous theologians, requiring sensitive and open discussions, as the issue is often not theologically straightforward. Thus, a great need exists for indigenous theologians who can navigate these challenges and help local believers think biblically about their context.

After equipping indigenous theologians to engage with their cultural heritage through a biblical lens, they can foster a deeper and more transformative faith among indigenous believers. This includes evaluating omens, rituals, and symbols from within a Christian framework that acknowledges the spiritual world but rejects unbiblical practices and places Christ as sovereign over all creation. This approach also empowers indigenous theologians to become cultural translators, that is, people who help their communities navigate the complexities of faith in a way that honors their traditions while leading them toward the truth of the gospel.

For this training to be effective, indigenous theologians should engage in theological reflection that is both biblically faithful and culturally rele-

vant. They should learn to ask critical questions about their own cultural practices, discerning which elements can be redeemed and reinterpreted within a Christian framework, and which must be rejected. Of course, as this article has shown, Scripture should be the primary lens through which these practices are evaluated. This process of theological discernment is crucial for ensuring that the gospel is not simply layered on top of existing beliefs but transforms the entire worldview of the community.

Conclusion

The spiritual practices of the Bidayuh people, such as reading omens and using black cloth for protection, reveal a deep connection to the spiritual realm. Western theological resources, shaped by naturalism and rationalism, often fail to address these concerns, leading to difficulties for indigenous converts in reconciling their faith with their cultural heritage. By training indigenous thinkers, the church can provide biblically faithful and culturally relevant responses, strengthening Bidayuh Christians' faith while allowing them to engage with their cultural traditions in a way that honors Christ and transforms their worldview.