

# **"To Wake a Lexicographer"**

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One of my first thoughts when, in 1948, I knew I was to carry out field research among the Iban was: "Where am I to get a copy of Howell and Bailey?" I knew it would not be easy: their "Sea Dyak Dictionary" had been published, in parts, in Singapore, almost half a century before, and was long out of print. The London booksellers I consulted were all pessimistic, and made plain to me how rare a volume I was seeking. Then, by good fortune, I was put in touch with St. Augustine's College, Canterbury, where William Howell was educated in the 1870's. The Librarian at St. Augustine's had a copy to spare and I purchased it with gratitude. During the years in Sarawak that followed Howell and Bailey's Dictionary was constantly at my side, and I came to treasure it both as a lexicon and rich source book on Iban custom.

Now another dictionary has appeared.\* It is by Mr. N. C. Scott, Reader in Phonetics in the University of London, and was published in 1956 by the School of Oriental and African Studies of that University.

With Howell and Bailey's volume virtually unprocurable, Mr. Scott's dictionary does fill a serious gap and I am sure that it will be greatly welcomed and widely used. The making of dictionaries is painstaking and laborious and we should be grateful to Mr. Scott for what he has given us. It is good to have an Iban dictionary once more in the bookshops.

In this article, however, I want critically to examine Mr. Scott's work and to consider the extent to which it can be accepted as a fully satisfactory dictionary of the Sea Dayak or Iban language.

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\* "A Dictionary of Sea Dayak" by N. C. Scott. School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1956.

Let me begin my mentioning some of the obvious merits of Mr. Scott's work. Mr. Scott for the first time has made a thorough analysis of the phonology of Sea Dayak, and in this his dictionary is a great advance on that of Howell and Bailey. Among other things he has devised a scheme for systematic spelling of Sea Dayak by which pronunciations are unambiguously indicated. Thus, throughout the dictionary, the systematic form of a word is given in brackets, following the conventional spelling derived from Howell and Bailey. This represents a sensible compromise. It is certainly regrettable that Sea Dayak was not given a systematic spelling when first recorded; however, to have abandoned the inconsistent but nonetheless usable orthography of Howell and Bailey after it had been established for more than fifty years would have been altogether too drastic and doctrinaire a step. Henceforward, anyone learning the language who is in doubt about the pronunciation of a word can quickly solve his difficulty, in most cases, by looking up the systematic spelling given by Scott. From this point of view alone Scott's dictionary is well worth having.

The recording of the verbal forms of a language is one of the main tasks of a lexicographer. Mr. Scott has done this with the highest professional competence. It is plain, indeed, that Mr. Scott is primarily interested in phonetics and structure, and in these fields his contributions to the study of Sea Dayak are outstanding.

But a lexicographer has another and equally important task: to establish with the same meticulous care the meanings of words; 'ascertaining the signification' as Dr. Johnson would put it. It is here, I regret to say, that Mr. Scott's compilation falls far short of being an adequate dictionary of the language spoken by the Sea Dayaks or Iban. However, before going on to cite specific examples of the deficiencies of Mr. Scott's dictionary I would first like to discuss some more general issues.

One of the things that perturbs an anthropologist on reading the Preface and Introduction to Mr. Scott's dictionary is the absence of any kind of account of the groups who speak Sea Dayak as Mr. Scott has recorded it. This is plainly unscholarly. The Iban or Sea Dayak population of Sarawak is divided into a number of distinctive groupings, each grouping, in general, having a tract of country (usually a river system) to which it belongs.

These groupings are now to some extent blurred, but they were once tribes between which warfare was endemic. Further, each of these groupings had and still has certain peculiarities of dialect. Mr. Scott cannot have been ignorant of this, for the question is discussed fairly fully by Howell and Bailey, yet nowhere does he take proper cognizance of it.

Nowhere among the Sea Dayaks or Iban are differences in dialect sufficient seriously to impede communication, but the differences that do exist are certainly gross enough to deserve the close attention of both the lexicographer and the phonetician. Howell and Bailey in discussing the Ulu Ai Dayaks of the headwaters of the Batang Lupar say that these people "probably speak the purest dialect of the Sea Dayak language," though "their accent is harsh and their speech rough sounding and unpleasant." It was among some of the descendants of these people of the Ulu Ai—the Iban of the Baleh river—that my first two years in Sarawak were spent, and theirs was the language I learnt to speak.

To me it seemed a language of admirable precision, strength and vigour, but I well remember the petty misunderstandings that arose from differences in vocabulary and the merriment that my accent aroused when, after two years in the headwaters of the Third Division, I went to live in two of the more sophisticated communities of the Saribas. As I discovered then, the residents of the Saribas are unfamiliar with many of the verbal usages and conceptions of the tribes that live further inland, with whom—ordinarily—they never come into contact. But this, on historical and geographical grounds, is only to be expected.

Parts of the Saribas and Kalaka Districts have been under mission influence for generations and many of their communities are Christian; some hundreds of their peoples are literate in Malay and English as well as in their own language; scores of their men are highly educated and serve as Government officers, school-teachers and ordained ministers of religion. For decades their speech habits like all other aspects of their behaviour have been influenced and modified by the English and Malays.

In these respects the people of the Saribas and Kalaka Districts differ pronouncedly from the great mass of the Iban

population, for according to the census of 1947, 98% of the Iban were then pre-literate and about 96% pagan.

These are the kinds of facts which any lexicographer of the Sea Dayak language should take into account. It is certainly part of his job to give some indication of the main dialectal groupings into which the Iban or Sea Dayak population of Borneo is divided, and to state to which of these groupings his dictionary refers. Mr. Scott does neither of these things.

It is true that he does make a slight attempt to grapple with the problems I have been discussing by including at the end of his dictionary a supplement (of five pages) of "Additional words used in the Third Division, Sarawak, collected by the Rev. G. Bruggeman." This short list is worth having, but one is surprised at a linguist of Mr. Scott's standing classing what is essentially dialectal information in terms of political boundaries. One might as sensibly give an alphabetical list of words used in the Federation of Switzerland. The five Divisions of Sarawak are administrative and not racial, cultural or linguistic entities. Within the Second Division, for example, there was and still is, a complex series of tribal and dialectal groupings. During the last 150 years members of these groupings have gradually settled different parts of the Third Division. And so, to-day, within the Third Division there is to be found an appreciable degree of cultural and dialectal heterogeneity. Indeed, I would suppose that there is greater similarity between the dialect of the Saribas-Kalaka and that of parts of the Rejang below Sibü, than there is between Saribas-Kalaka and headwaters of the Batang Ai (both regions within the Second Division). Sound linguistic scholarship, I would suggest, should be concerned with the plotting of dialectal groupings in terms of the speech habits of their members, and not in terms of the imposed political provinces to which they happen to belong for quite extraneous reasons. Here, as in other matters, Mr. Scott displays a lamentable ignorance of the basic facts of Sea Davak ethnography and history.

Mr. Scott's preoccupation with the phonology of Iban has led to some curious results. One thing that struck me on beginning to read Mr. Scott's dictionary was the large number of personal names which have been listed. On the first three pages, for instance, one finds Abik, Achan, Adam, Adan, Ajah, Ajan,

Ajang Ajong, all male personal names, and making up in all about 10% of the entries for these pages. Presumably Mr. Scott became interested in these names in the course of his analysis of the phonetic structure of Iban. It is difficult to see the justification for including them in the main body of the dictionary. In contrast, Mr. Scott seems to have made no special attempt to record the names of the hundreds of gods and goddesses of Iban religion and of the 'culture heroes' and their consorts who throng Iban mythology. There is not even mention of such a cardinal figure as Sempandai—the god of creation. I would argue that the names of these divine beings are deserving of the lexicographer's attention, for no real understanding of Iban thought is possible without some knowledge of them. They are certainly immensely more important than mundane personal names, the equivalent of our Jim, Jack and John.

Howell and Bailev's dictionary, as I have already observed, contains much invaluable information about Iban custom, and particularly in its more esoteric aspects. It might be argued, indeed, that they sometimes go too far for a dictionary, presenting what are, in effect, short essays on such topics as *manang* (spirit mediums) and *gawai* (rituals). If this is a defect, it is a defect for which all students of the Iban must be grateful. Again the shorter definitions in Howell and Bailev of the leading ritual concepts and customary practices of the Iban are almost always, in my experience, admirably complete and exact. This excellence was, without question, the outcome of the intimate experience of the Iban which both these authors possessed. The Rev. William Howell (who was born in Labuan) spent the whole of his priesthood (he was ordained at St. Thomas's, Kuching, in May, 1883 and died at Sibu in September, 1938) among the Sea Davaks, being responsible at various times for the peoples of the Krian, Saribas, Lupar, Lingga and Undup rivers. D. J. S. Bailey, his collaborator, was Resident of the Second Division from 1888 to 1908. These were men who knew what they wrote.

One would have thought that Mr. Scott would have had the good sense to have accepted Howell and Bailey as his guides to the esoteric concepts of a people in whose country he has never set foot. Yet, in a surprising number of cases (many more than I can possibly hope to list here) he has either entirely omitted words given in Howell and Bailey, or drastically curtailed or modified their definitions.

In almost every instance where Mr. Scott has done this it has been for the worse. Let me cite a few examples, beginning with some of the major ritual concepts of the Iban.

A custom of especial importance for the understanding of the prestige rituals, or *gawai* which Iban men perform is that called *tampok*. One of the leading beliefs of the Iban is in familiar spirits, or *antu nulong*. All highly successful men, say the Iban, have an *antu nulong* of one kind or another. The late Temenggong Koh, for example, had two notable familiars—a serpent spirit (*nabau*) and a tiger spirit (*antu remaung*). Temenggong Koh, himself, and the people of the Baleh region, attributed his success and renown to the support he had long received from these powerful supernatural helpers. Sometimes a familiar spirit presents itself to a man in his dreams unhidden; more often however it is deliberately sought. This is sometimes done during the course of head-hunting rituals when the celebrant sleeps on a special platform which has been built above the roof of the long-house. Or instead, a man may go to some hill top or other place where spirits are known to congregate, there to sleep in the hope of encountering a spirit. Howell and Bailey describe the custom of *tampok* in these words: "to go and keep vigil in a solitary place (in hopes of meeting with gods or spirits and obtaining some favour from them)." In contrast, Scott's account is inadequate.

Another highly significant Iban belief is in *antu buyo*. *Antu buyo* are male spirits (which sometimes take animal and sometimes human form) that are believed to cohabit with the souls of sleeping women—usually married women. Should a woman become pregnant, the *antu buyo* then abducts the soul of her child claiming it as his own. This abduction of the soul, so it is believed, results either in a miscarriage or in the death of the child soon after its birth. Iban women dread *antu buyo*, and there are certain spirit mediums who receive high fees for the slaying of these molesting spirits. This then is the Iban theory accounting for miscarriages and infant mortality. For anyone concerned with the welfare of Iban women and children an understanding of beliefs about *antu buyo* is essential. Once again, Howell and Bailey give a fairly good account of what an *antu buyo* is: "an Evil Spirit that can take any shape it pleases

(generally that of a *maias* or snake). It is supposed to take possession of women and be the cause of miscarriages. *Manang* profess to be able to destroy this spirit, hence the phrase *bebunoh buyo*, to kill the Evil Spirit." Scott has contracted this to merely: "an evil spirit", and given a misleading example.

Yet another spirit of the Iban, more bizare even than the *antu buyo* is the spirit known as *antu koklir*. An *antu koklir* is the spirit of a woman who has died in childbirth, or while pregnant. Such a woman attributes her fate to the malefactions of lustful men, and, as a vengeful spirit (in the words of Howell and Bailey), she "wanders about at night and attacks all male persons whose testicles she tears out and devours." So the belief runs, and because of it special precautions are taken at the burial of a woman who has died in childbirth, thorns being thrust into the feet of her corpse and a magical rite uttered to immobilize her spirit. Howell and Bailey, as will have become apparent, give a graphic account of what an *antu koklir* is like; Scott makes no mention of her at all. On what grounds I know not, for the belief in *antu koklir* is certainly still prevalent among the Dayaks of the Saribas. Indeed, the fullest account of *antu koklir* that I collected was at a predominantly Christian long-house in Sungai Paku.

In Iban *gawai*, or rituals, a feature of high importance is the *ranyai*, or shrine, which is erected in the gallery of the long-house, by the family and others concerned, and becomes the centre of a series of elaborate rites. The gods who attend the *gawai* are believed to make the *ranyai* their abode, and so it becomes charged with great sacredness and is surrounded with many taboos, or *pemali*. The contents of the shrine vary according to the nature of the *gawai*, for instance, in the case of a *gawai benih*, *padi* seed and all of the paraphernalia of cultivation are represented. Howell and Bailey give as an example the *ranyai* of a head-hunting ritual, which contains spears and other weapons, and they cite the mythological origin of the *ranyai*. Scott has contracted all this to the meaningless phrase "a set of spears set round a post."

On the same page (p. 148) there is another example of the same thing in the word *rapoh*. The Iban have a fervent belief in the immortality of the soul. They believe that on death all

souls go to an After World, called Sabayan, which is, in general, a replica of this world. Further, it is a matter of the greatest consequence to the Iban that when a man dies he should be equipped with all of the things he will need in the After World. All of these things (called *baiya* collectively): clothes, ornaments, weapons, implements . . . . . even down, nowadays, to a cake of soap and a box of matches, are either placed in the grave or left lying on its surface. It is believed that all of these objects also possess *samengat*, or soul-counterparts, and that in this form they are transported to the After World. Some months after the death when an elaborate mortuary ritual (*gawai lumbong*) is held further property (including the seeds of all important food crops) is taken and left at the burial grounds. With this the obligations of the living towards the dead are at an end. When a man dies, and is buried, away from his tribal territory, as when at war or on a distant journey, a serious difficulty is created. How can his family and kin be sure that his soul has been furnished with all that it will need for its existence in the After World? This difficulty is met by gathering together all the property that the soul of the deceased is thought likely to need and, with due ceremony, depositing it in the burial ground of his long-house. This property is called *rapoh*. Howell and Bailey deal with this rather complicated situation fairly accurately, defining *rapoh* as follows: "any article that belonged to a person who has died abroad is buried in his so-called grave at home (when the news of his decease is received) and is supposed to be of use to him in the next world." Scott will not have this clear statement, preferring a version of his own ("a curtained space in which are placed some of the goods of a man who dies and is buried away from home") which is quite inadequate as an account of the *rapoh* custom.

These are examples of major ritual concepts which have, for no apparent reason, either been omitted or inadequately dealt with in Scott's dictionary. There are numerous other examples which I might quote (*penyadai*, *nabau*, *enselan*, *taku*, *sabak*, *burong*, *pagar api*, and *Gerasi* are some of them) where the definitions of Howell and Bailey have been changed or omitted, in each case for the worse, but detailed examination of all the cases I have collected is not possible in a short review article of this kind.

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Let me next mention some of the more mundane cases (but not the less important for that) of divergence from the definitions of Howell and Bailey. Here, again, I shall be able to cite only a few of the instances I have noted. We may begin with *tanah*. This word has the basic connotation of earth or land but it also has another very important meaning. The Iban kinship system is bilaterally symmetrical and there are no unilineal descent groups. In the organization of Iban affairs it is frequently important for an individual to distinguish, for example, his mother's kin from his father's kin. This is done by using the word *tanah*, as in the phrases *tanah indai*, on the side of the mother, or *tanah apai*, on the side of the father. This usage is of fundamental importance for anyone wanting to study Iban kinship Howell and Bailey give the extended meaning of *tanah* which I have just discussed; Scott has elected to omit it.

Perhaps the commonest of all Iban exclamations is that most expressive word: *akai*. *Akai* is used in a great variety of contexts—in sorrow, in mishap, in pain, but also—and just as freely—when listening to fabulous tales, to bawdy stories or gossip. Howell and Bailey refer to *akai* as “an exclamation of wonder or pain.” Scott, mistakenly, has contracted this to “interjection (in pain).”

And now an example from the other end of the alphabet: *wai*. *Wai*, or friend, is the most generally used of all Iban terms of address. Among the Ulu Ai Iban, for example, it is used by both sexes and without distinction as to age or status. While in the Baleh region I often heard nameless young men, still in their 'teens, addressing as *wai*, the famed Temenggong Koh, described in the official Handbook of Sarawak as “the Chief of the Sea Dayaks,” Howell and Bailey have a brief note discussing *wai*, pointing out that among some Iban tribes the term is used by both sexes, while in others its use is restricted to women only. This is the kind of pertinent information that one expects to find in a dictionary. Scott, in ignorance of the facts, has defined *wai* merely as a “term of address between women.”

Howell and Bailey describe *rendai* as "roasted Indian corn, paddy, etc." Scott omits all mention of *padi*, despite the fact that among the great majority of the Iban, *rendai* in the form of puffed rice (made by casting *padi* into a cooking pan and letting the grains explode in the intense dry heat) is of pre-eminent importance, particularly as an ingredient of *piring*, or ritual offerings.

For the word *tungku*, Howell and Bailey give the general definition of "the supports of a cooking pot." Scott has changed this to "stones to support cooking pot," oblivious of the fact that almost all Iban families have for many years been using wrought iron stands for their cooking pots—stands which they call *tungku*.

There are many other examples of this same general kind which I might give. They are all indications of defects in Scott's definitions which are not to be found in the old-fashioned but much more accurate listings of Howell and Bailey.

Next, we come to words which have been omitted altogether from Scott's dictionary, as from Howell and Bailey's. The list I have drawn up is an extensive one (much too long to quote in full). One striking omission is the verb, *mudik*, meaning to travel up river, a word which is on the lips of most Iban every day of their lives. Other examples are: *dedipan*, *ngebak*, *ngebat*, *ngerampas*, *ngerandang*, *sengkenyang*, *temius*, *teresang* and *turai*, all words of importance with which a trained lexicographer would become quickly familiar if he worked among the Iban at first hand.

Here I might usefully draw attention to a report that appeared in the *Sarawak Gazette* of October 1st., 1938 (vol. LXVIII, no. 1021, p. 144). The Rev. William Howell, it was reported, had about a year before his death (on September 17th., 1938) contributed a further 2,000 words for publication in the next edition of his dictionary. It would be interesting to know if this list still exists. Mr. Scott was apparently unaware of its existence, for he makes no acknowledgement of it in the Introduction to his dictionary.

Borneo is a land of great fascination to naturalists, and many people using a Dayak dictionary will look for the scientific names of birds and animal and plants. Here Scott seems to have made no advance on Howell and Bailey, although there was much better systematic scientific information to which he might have referred. Indeed, in the comparison I have made (for apes and monkeys) Scott fails in several respects to come up to the standard set by Howell and Bailey over half a century before. One primate for which Borneo is very widely known, the celebrated orang utan (*Pongo pygmaeus*), called *maias* by the Iban, while it is listed in Howell and Bailey, is inexplicably missing from Scott.

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I have now given a number of examples of the kind of deficiencies with which Mr. Scott's dictionary abounds. I would like to suggest that these deficiencies, to a large extent, are the product of the methods of enquiry which Mr. Scott has followed. And here, may I interpolate the comment that my criticism of Mr. Scott's methods has a constructive object, for it really has to do with the conditions under which a good dictionary can and cannot be written.

What then of Mr. Scott's methods? His dictionary, he says, was made possible in the first place by the co-operation of a Sea Dayak speaker who, having been selected in Sarawak, was brought to London, where, over many months he acted as an informant. Mr. Scott thanks his informant for his patient and careful help. I am fully convinced that expert help of this kind was given, and nothing said in this review should be construed as suggesting anything to the contrary. The question, however, remains: "Can a satisfactory dictionary of an alien language be compiled with the help (however proficient) of a single informant, or even of a small panel of informants?" Such an approach may perhaps be adequate if one is concerned only with the phonology of a language, though the hazards would be many. I would contend that it is certainly not a justifiable approach for a lexicographer.

A lexicographer is concerned not only with the form words take, but also with their meanings. And if meanings are to be fully and accurately established this necessitates, I would argue, a deep and thorough conversance with the culture and social usages of the people concerned. Such conversance is not lightly gained. The least that can be asked is that the lexicographer should spend some months living with the people concerned, listening to their language being spoken in real social situations, and by careful enquiry establishing meanings and usages.

It has been said by some that for Mr. Scott to have published a dictionary of Sea Dayak without ever having set foot in Borneo is something of a *tour de force*. To me it is an act of temerity. No anthropologist would dare to base his account of a complex culture like that of the Iban solely on interviews with one or two informants who had been withdrawn far from their society. Rather modern opinion insists on field research with extensive observation and intensive enquiry lasting for one or two years. I would argue that fieldwork of a comparable kind is equally necessary for the proper study of a language. It is in the galleries of the long-houses of Borneo that the lexicographer should conduct his enquiries into the meanings of Dayak words not in a phonetics laboratory in Bloomsbury.

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On general anthropological and linguistic grounds it is highly desirable that there should be a definite dictionary of the traditional language of the Iban. Mr. Scott's falls far short of this ideal, and it would be most regrettable, in my opinion, if Mr. Scott's dictionary did come to be accepted as presenting an adequate version of Iban.

My main motive in writing this review, indeed, has been to attempt to persuade those interested in the Iban that there is an immense amount of important work still to be done on their language.

The Iban possess one of the richest 'oral literatures' to be found anywhere in the world. Their mythology challenges that of the ancient Greeks, and it is, moreover, still a living force. The great *ensera* or sagas of the Iban, telling of heroes and their fabulous deeds, are still chanted, night after night on the galleries of scores of long-houses. At Iban *gawai* the gods are still invoked in traditional *timang*. Chanted in polyphonic style by a *lemambang* and chorus, these *timang* describe in intricately patterned and highly poetic language the numerous gods of the Iban pantheon, and, when the gods have been summoned, go on to record the elaborate allegory on which the rites of the *gawai* are based. The whole performance takes many days. These *timang*, to use a loose analogy, are the scriptures of the Iban. They offer an exceedingly rich field for linguistic study. The same can be said of the *sabak*, or laments that accompany death rituals, the *naku* associated with head-hunting, the *pelian* of spirit mediums and the *pelandai* and *pantun* of general social occasions. All of these (and various other forms which I have not the space to mention) make up what I have called the 'oral literature' of the Iban.

This 'oral literature' has yet to be properly studied. I would plead that it does eminently deserve study and further that it is a responsibility of the Government of Sarawak to see that this unique cultural heritage is not lost to the Iban people.

When such study has been undertaken it should then be possible to compile a dictionary that will—at last—do full justice to the language of the Iban of Borneo.