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Mulyawan Karim (2021), "Di rumah panjang; Pergulatan hidup dan cinta orang Dayak Iban"

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The Iban are arguably the most extensively studied ethnic group among Bornean societies. Their current transnational distribution among three different nation-states (Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei Darussalam) has been the result not only of the arbitrary colonial boundary-making in Borneo since 1846, but also due to their earlier northeastern migratory expansion from the Kapuas basin (in today’s Indonesian province of West Kalimantan) to the Batang Lupar, Rajang, Kemena, and Baram basins (in today’s Malaysian state of Sarawak).

Contemporary migrations since the mid twentieth century on a smaller scale have expanded the dispersal of the Iban further into Brunei Darussalam and the Malaysian state of Sabah. A consequence of the majority of the Iban residing in Sarawak has been that most writings on the Iban so far have been focused on Sarawak. Mulyawan Karim’s book, though written in a relatively popular format for a general Indonesian readership, is a welcome addition to academic studies that take the Iban in Indonesia as their focus, which, except for the notable works by Michael Eilenberg (2012) and Eilenberg and Reed L. Wadley (2009), have been few.

Mulyawan Karim, an anthropologist and retired journalist, has extensively traveled the Iban areas of West Kalimantan in 1993-1994, and many of the valuable notes of these travels have been left unpublished, even untouched, for almost thirty years.

*Di rumah panjang; Pergulatan hidup dan cinta orang Dayak Iban* is an ethnographic account of Iban life. The book opens with a prologue in which the author revisits the area in 2018 and reacquaints himself with old friends, going to villages and noting the many changes that have occurred since his last visit. It is through this prologue that readers are guided and introduced to the area and its characters. As a result, this book is not a conventional monograph,
but sits somewhere between a personal memoir, a travelogue of return and an ethnographic account focused on Iban lifestories.

The first chapter contains an ethnographic overview of the Iban. Here the author also maps the most important literature on the Iban. Given the tendency of Indonesian ethnographical writings on Borneo to confine themselves within the boundaries of the nation-state, the author has rightly attempted to highlight the transnational dimensions of the Iban world in this first chapter (p. 26). He demonstrates for Indonesian readers the importance of trans-nationality, in the form of migrations and continuing circular mobility (*bejalai*), both of which are normal and daily aspects of Iban life and livelihoods. This is followed by ethnographic descriptions of the Iban social structure, agricultural system, their gendered division of labour, their intricate systems of knowledge, and their cosmology. While these latter aspects have been extensively studied and written about by other authors, both in Sarawak and Kalimantan (see Derek Freeman 1955; Benedict Sandin 1980; Wadley and Colfer 2004; Clifford Sather 2001, among others), this book offers additional insights, into their varying attitudes towards religion(s) and religious life.

One significant decision on the part of the author has been to organize the subsequent chapters around thirteen individual characters, whose names are used as chapter headings, five females and eight males, wherein each character takes over the narrative from the author to present her or his life story. The stories revolve around the experiences of childhood, growing up in the longhouse, education, *bejalai*, and finding love. These life stories also reveal the ups and downs of domestic life, parenthood and the importance of journeying (*bejalai*), both as an economic, educational experience and an identity-formation activity for young males. These life stories also offer glimpses into experiences regarding social change and encounters with modernity.

The stories on Iban courtship or *ngayap*, which frequently feature in both male and female life stories, will doubtless attract much attention and perhaps mixed responses from contemporary Indonesian readers, since they illustrate how customary law, or *adat*, needs to be borne in mind when understanding practices in relation to pre-marital sex and its consequences as felt by Iban females. It describes the alternate discourses through which sexuality is perceived, practiced, and negotiated by both females and males alike.

The shortcomings of this book may also be its strengths. The author does not end the book by offering a general conclusion. Instead, as a popular book, it gives emphasis to the humanizing effect of anthropological encounters instead of burdening itself with anthropological theorizing. However, the book would have benefited if more contemporary works on the Iban had been consulted to enrich the first chapter. Eilenberg and Wadley’s article (2009) on borderland livelihood strategies could have provided context for understanding the importance of *bejalai* for contemporary Iban households. In addition, Eilenberg’s monograph *At the edge of states* (2012) could have been referred to for understanding the Iban longstanding socio-economic marginality and often troublesome relations with the Indonesian nation-state.
These shortcomings, however, are partially mitigated by an epilogue written by Iwan Meulia Pirous, an anthropologist, who manages to give contemporary context and weight to the important findings of the book and what the Iban stories may teach us.

Mulyawan Karim’s achievement has been to explore and emphasise personal life struggles and individual romances, two important aspects of everyday life that are arguably absent from the general tenor of published monographs in Borneo studies that focus almost exclusively on development, social transformation, environmental change, and politics. The result is not a dry and dusty academic tome about the Iban, but a book in which Iban voices and narratives are allowed to speak on their own behalf. This book was clearly written with a mission to popularize anthropology to the general Indonesian public, and to highlight what the understanding of cultural diversity may offer in the current socio-political climate in Indonesia, beset by sectarian politics and contestation over moral politics in the public sphere.

REFERENCES
Eilenberg, Michael. 2012. *At the edge of states; Dynamics of state formation in the Indonesian borderlands*. Leiden: KITLV.