

*Acting Authoritatively: How Authority Is Expressed through Social Action among the Bentian of Indonesian Borneo.* By Kenneth Sillander. SSKH Skrifter 17. Finland: Swedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki, 2004. x, 388 pp.

As the title suggests, the main focus of this book is on authority among the Bentian, a small Dayak group within the broader “Luangan” ethnic cluster in southeast Kalimantan. The revised version of Sillander’s Ph.D. thesis at the University of Helsinki, the book still has that “thesis” feel to it — detail upon detail accompanied by heavy theoretical aims structuring the narrative, with citations and qualifications left and right to cover every conceivable challenge from an examination committee. However, in this case, that is not necessarily a bad thing: the detail concerning this little-known group of people is rich, relevant and well-described, providing an important source for comparative studies in kinship, religion, and politics. In addition, Sillander reminds us of the contribution that studies on Borneo can make to theoretical concerns, as his use of (for example) Pierre Bourdieu and Max Weber reveals.

Consonant with his focus on social action, Sillander deals with authority as “*a capacity to influence or authorize people’s actions or views*” (p. 7, original emphasis) and how authority operates through communication between people, with mutual influence being created between the super- and subordinate. Authority does not end there, however, as it is also a process generated by people to enable their own actions, rather than just influence others. Indeed, this “self-authorization” forms an important theme in the book. Sillander’s focus thus puts us squarely into the motivations of socially embedded agents producing both “free-floating” and “objectified” authority; that is, authority that is not tied to institutions or personalities and authority that is “consciously perceived as authoritative or authorizing” (p. 13).

Following his theory-laden introductory chapter, including the obligatory “description of fieldwork” (which I have always found

useful) with all the standard caveats about representation and representativeness, the author leads us through a morass of comparative ethnographic and historical detail concerning the Bentian and the wider Luangan ethno-linguistic complex. Here we find the Bentian situated regionally and historically, and thereafter described in terms of subsistence and commercial pursuits (particularly regarding the roles of rice and rattan), land tenure, dwellings and settlement patterns. (Here Sillander briefly considers the Bentian as a Levi-Straussian “house” society, another now ubiquitous fixture of Southeast Asian ethnography.) Because of this detail, anyone considering undertaking field research in this area would do well to read this chapter, as Sillander pulls together a host of sometimes hard-to-find material, presenting it in a clear and logical fashion. But at 84 pages long, this chapter could easily have been cut in half, with the historical/regional material in one and the ethnographic in another.

In the next three chapters, Sillander gets down to business, dealing with authority from the perspectives of kinship, religion, and politics. It is here that his focus on social action and motivation comes to life, with richly detailed case studies that illustrate his theoretical points. In the chapter on kinship authority (that is, that authority derived from local social relations), the author first provides a basic background on Bentian social and kinship organization, including a list of kin terms in an appendix once standard in ethnographies. (I would, however, caution against such lists — with terms defined according to an explicit “genealogical grid” — as their now fixed structures may derive more from the method used to elicit them than how people actually employ them in social life.) The meat of the chapter revolves around the story of a young Bentian man, his social travails centring on competing obligations to kin and in-laws and the strategies each side used in its push-and-pull struggle to define the man’s post-marital residence and thus also lay claim to his labour. Sillander concludes that “notions of relatedness and obligations toward relatives constitute sources of authority which can effectively be used to restrict the autonomy of some, and increase the social resources of other[s]” (p. 164). He also usefully argues against overuse of and

over-reliance on notions of individual and household autonomy in Bornean ethnography.

Religious authority, “pertaining to or deriving from relations with so-called supernatural agencies” (p. 165) though particularly through processes of ritual, constitutes the topic of the second of these three chapters. Sillander focuses on a specific *buntang* ritual, a multi-day rite performed by traditional shaman (*belian*) for extended families or house groups aimed at thanksgiving, supplication, and curing. Although the stated aim of the ritual under scrutiny was to cure a man’s mild flu, it also addressed other, more important social issues, “some of which would have been inappropriate to address openly” (p. 199) such as the man living with a woman shortly after his wife’s death and without a marriage ceremony. The author draws out of this example the importance of ritual language, ancestors, and ritual objects in generating religious authority for the *belian*, but he also demonstrates the critical importance of social context for developing religious authority: a *belian* who is a social outsider in a community has not accumulated local obligation and thus may have a hard time trying to influence the behaviour of residents through his rituals.

The final chapter in this set concerns political authority, which is produced and employed in the interplay of families, communities and entities beyond the region, especially through the role of *manti*, the Bentian community leader and adjudicator. As with the *belian*, the authority of a *manti* rests, in part, on the extent of his network of followers, a classic pattern in Southeast Asian political life, as well as his moral qualities, connection to important supernatural entities and ability to speak well. Of central importance is the *manti*’s ability to connect his words and deeds to Bentian *adat* or “secular politico-ontological value-system” (p. 286), although I am hesitant to agree that *adat* is “secular” given its cosmological basis. As Sillander points out, “*adat* does not exist unless it is activated” (p. 290), and the *manti* plays an essential role in keeping it alive and relevant through their adjudication of disputes, such as in the case analysed of water buffaloes damaging a swidden plot. The form *adat* takes in these proceedings ensures that disputes are discussed and decided through

indirect, non-confrontational discussion (as open conflict threatens both social order and cosmological balance) and implemented through proper action, including a ceremonial exchange of ceramic plates that ratifies the settlement.

There is a good deal more that I have not even touched upon here, such as the historical variation in Bentian political order and the Bentian relation with the modern Indonesian state, as the book is packed, seemingly at every turn of the page, with ethnographic detail and insightful analysis. Given Sillander's aim at a "total" exploration of authority (p. 333), the complexity is not at all surprising. In sum, *Acting Authoritatively* is an excellent and articulate study, but one that may easily intimidate anyone who is not prepared for this level of detailed scholarship.

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