

**“Claiming Anthropological Authority in Borneo:  
Derek Freeman, His Legacy and Interpretations of Iban  
Material Culture”**

Wednesday, 31st January 2018 at 2:30 p.m.

IAS Meeting Room 2.27, Level 2, FASS Building

**Abstract**

The anthropological enterprise of translating other cultures is explored in the case of the Iban of Borneo. Derek Freeman’s demonstration of authority in his analyses of Iban religion and social organization, his establishment of a lineage of authority based on his field research in the late 1940s and early 1950s, his training of doctoral students at the Australian National University, and his development of an evolutionary focused, biological-cultural interactionist paradigm is critically evaluated. Freeman’s legacy of authority, as expressed in the work of Michael Heppell, a former doctoral student of Freeman, and his detailed interpretation of Iban woven cloths and their motifs and patterns in terms of gender selection processes, is then addressed as a case study. It is proposed that in this arena of Iban culture Freeman’s and Heppell’s authority should be questioned and critically evaluated; their work raises major issues about Western anthropological assumptions that the arts of ‘oral cultures’ contain a language of symbols. Such assumptions about art forms as ‘texts’ to be read and ‘symbols’ to be interpreted are often misplaced and can be traced back to the ethnocentric tendencies of researchers from literate cultures in their search, in a Weberian sense, for cultural meaning and significance.

**Speaker’s Profile**



Victor T. King is Professor of Borneo Studies, UBD-Institute of Asian Studies; Emeritus Professor in the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, University of Leeds; Professorial Research Associate in the Centre of South East Asian Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He has a wide interest in the anthropology and sociology of Southeast Asia. His recent academic books include six co-edited volumes: *The Historical Construction of Southeast Asian Studies: Korea and Beyond* (with Park Seung Woo, 2013), *Rethinking Asian Tourism: Culture, Encounters and Local Response* (2014) and *Tourism and Monarchy in Southeast Asia* (2016), both with Ploysri Poranond; *Human Insecurities in Southeast Asia* (2016, with Paul Carnegie and Zawawi Ibrahim); *Borneo Studies in History, Society and Culture* (2017, with Zawawi Ibrahim and Noor Hasharina Hassan); *Tourism and Ethnodevelopment: Inclusion, Empowerment and Self-determination* (2017, with Ismar Borges de Lima). His recent single-authored edited volume is entitled *UNESCO in Southeast Asia: World Heritage Sites in Comparative Perspective* (2016).