

Essentialism in Studies of Iban Leadership

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In today's presentation, I am going to speak about my current research theme.

I am researching the leadership of the Iban people in Sarawak, Malaysia from a historical perspective. On the basis of previous studies on Iban society, I would like to historicize Iban leadership and reconsider essentialism in Iban studies.

The Iban people are one of the sub-groups of the Dayak people. They live in Sarawak, Malaysia and West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Derek Freeman, a prominent researcher of the subject, considers Iban society a “competitive egalitarian society,” where every man could become a leader if he distinguished himself in prestige-seeking activities, such as wars or trade. Freeman says, “The individual had to be the source (*pun*) of his achievement” [Freeman 1981: 38]. In the Iban language, *pun* means stem, source, or beginning. Thus, Freeman sees *pun* as the start or source of an individual's achievements, and that, in an Iban context, people endowed with *pun* could become leaders. Following Freeman's work, leadership in Iban society has long been considered meritocratic. Indeed, Freeman himself regarded a “competitive egalitarian” orientation as the “nature” of Iban leadership.

The Iban people have been expanding from long-settled to “pioneering areas.” The area where Freeman conducted his fieldwork was actually one such area—the Balleh region. Sather, who studied the “long-settled” Iban society, defines *pun* as “locus of continuity” [Sather 1996: 85]. Thus, he seems to emphasize the continuous side of Iban leadership. Sather suggests that this double meanings of *pun* results from the historical outward expansion of Iban people [Sather 1996: 85]. However, Sather too simplify the historical dynamics of Iban leadership.

To understand this difference, it is necessary to consider the history of the Iban people and the impact of the Sarawak government. In the beginning of the 19th

century, the Iban people of the coastal area started attacking trading ships and raiding neighboring villages. They engaged in headhunting and slave capture, and plundered Chinese jars, silver ornaments, and brassware. The Iban leaders sold their captives to Malay aristocrats, who engaged in coastal trading activities. In return, the Malay aristocrats ennobled the Iban leaders who brought captives by giving them Malay titles. These Malay aristocrats also provided firearms to the Iban people. Robert Pringle suggests some influential “first families” emerged during this process, and monopolized political and military power [Pringle 1970: 36]. Some leaders claimed larger shares of the spoils. These “first families” exercised their political power by distributing land and deploying warlords in their territories. The “first families” also preserved long genealogies, called *pun tusut* (trunk of genealogy), which legitimated their continued leadership [Sather 1993].

Why did Iban people in long-settled areas start engaging in raids and piracy? Nicolas Tarling points out at least two historical reasons. First, the kingdom of Brunei had started declining in the 18th century [Tarling 1978]. Deprived of income from trading activities, Malay aristocrats started to engage in piracy with the Iban people in long-settled areas. Second, the foundation of Singapore in 1819 undoubtedly accelerated the trading activities of Malay aristocrats in Brunei, and also undermined the centralized control of trade in the kingdom of Brunei. However, piracy expanded rather than declined, as more trading ships sailed to Singapore. At the same time, the Iban people started expanding northward.

Just after the Iban people reached the Balleh area, so too did the dominance of the Sarawak government, which built forts at strategic points along the rivers. As the government penetrated inland, trading activities also expanded. The growth of trade in the Rejang River area was “phenomenal”, and the Iban people in the Balleh region began engaging in gathering activities. They mainly gathered gutta percha, rattan, or illipe nuts. Other people, such as the Kayan and Punan, also gathered in that area. Sometimes, sporadic battles among these people occurred. However, I think these battles were quite different from those in long-settled areas. In the Balleh region, there were neither Malay aristocrats to ally with, nor trading ships to plunder. I think these small, sporadic battles failed to bring stable leadership to

the Iban people in the Balleh area. This is because it was difficult for strong governance to emerge in the region for two reasons. Firstly, people kept looking for virgin forests as sources for forest products to trade. Thus, the Iban people in the Balleh region were more mobile than those in long-settled areas. Second, these battles would bring little wealth by which to stabilize leadership. I therefore propose that the expansion of trade and abundant forest products in the Balleh region led to the evolution of egalitarian leadership among the Iban people.

To summarize, two types of leadership are observable in Iban society. One is hierarchical, which has developed in long-settled areas. The other is more egalitarian, and developed in pioneering areas. Both leadership types developed in specific historical contexts; thus, neither is the “natural” form of Iban leadership.

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