I will argue that differential access to the key means of production — in earlier times land for swidden rice cultivation and today capital for investment in cash crops — accounts for the economic inequalities between Iban bileks. But to understand why economic advantage is not easily translated into political power, why, that is, the Iban have not come to resemble the more hierarchically structured groups of Borneo, we must recognize that ideology has some degree of autonomy. I suggest that it is the self-definition of the Iban as independent farmers, fully mobile, each able to grow rich and trade his surplus for his own profit, that makes the Iban unwilling to work for others and hence curtails the development of political and economic inequalities. This is the sense in which the Iban are “egalitarian”. My analysis is borne out by recent developments. The Iban have eagerly adopted cash crops, as independent smallholders, but have not occupied the large scale, bureaucratic, monocultural plantations proposed by the government, on which they were to work as labourers.

1. Status differentiation and the ideology of achievement

In contrast to the Malays, Dayaks and other neighbouring groups of Borneo, the Iban have no formal, named, ascriptive ranks. Prestige is based on individual achievement. According to Sullivan (1978), the “traditional” Iban attained high status for the following qualities: the ability to talk well in meetings, to plan and carry out head-hunting attacks, the pioneer and lead followers into new jungle, and, most important of all, to reap successful and abundant harvests (see also Freeman 1981:38). Skill and hard work were recognised as determinants of success in agriculture, though arbitrary factors such as the weather were also recognised. The success of the harvest was also thought to depend on the possession of powerful magic charms, the efficacy of which depended on the favour of the gods. This latter was partly a matter of luck, but it was also to a considerable extent achieved through correct adherence to adat and the performance of certain rituals. Though head-hunting and pioneering have ceased, it is still largely true today that the title of an individual Iban and his bilek group is thought to lie in his own hands, whether mediated by ritual or directly through work, and he expects to gain rewards commensurate with the efforts he makes. This analysis is also that of Freeman.

Many ethnographers of the Iban have noted that the situation which in fact prevails is rather less flexible than this meritocratic model suggests. Freeman (1970) notes the existence, in every longhouse, of a core group of 3-4 families, the original pioneers or their descendants,
who continue to exert a decisive influence over longhouse affairs (ibid:77), who always manage to get one of their members elected as headman (ibid:111), who are major landholders (ibid:127), and who "are might be expected" (ibid:126) have much more power than any other families. Each, in his early survey of Borneo (1950) noted the existence of an "influential house-owning group", which holds political authority.

The high status of this core group in the Baleh can be accounted for within the meritocratic schema, since migration there was recent at the time of Freeman's fieldwork. It was often still the original pioneers who were the leaders of the longhouses in Freeman's study. However, from the second division and other long-settled areas of Sarawak, there is evidence that the high status of the founding bilek tends to be preserved over the generations (notwithstanding the variation in skill of individuals). To account for the discrepancy between the actual distribution of wealth and power, and the meritocratic model espoused by the Iban and reported by Freeman, we must consider factors in the economic context, particularly the distribution of land. At the same time, however, we must consider why it is that the advantages of the core group do not become formally legitimated, nor do additional rights and powers accrue to them so that they come to resemble the more hierarchical groups of Sarawak. In this connection we will examine trade and labour relations. The time referred to is approximately Freeman's ethnographic present, the 1960s.

2. The Economic Context

a. land

As Pringle (1970), King (1975) and Rousseau (1973) have noted, the context in which Freeman's study was carried out, the Baleh in the 1950s, may have caused him to overestimate the egalitarian tendencies of the Iban. In areas where there is virgin jungle, it is easier to achieve as an "ideal Iban" should. However, as Pringle has pointed out (1970:36), the fact of open frontiers in the Baleh, alone, is not a sufficient explanation for the openness of Iban political and economic structure there. The Kayan, organised into rigid strata, have even more virgin land available. Here I would point out the crucial political differences between Iban and Kayan, the right of mobility being central.

Every Iban household has the right to move at will, to "vote with its feet", and to go off to seek its fortune as it sees best. According to Rousseau, Kayan commoners do not have the same privilege, and chiefs of different longhouses collude to prevent mobility. An abscending bilek or individual will not be accepted by a chief elsewhere, and cannot survive in isolation. Iban who wish to leave a longhouse often have to pay a small fine for rituals to smooth out the disturbance caused by their departure. This may be seen as a shadow of the Kayan institution. It is nevertheless a key element in Iban ideology and political organization that they can move at will: we might call it a defining feature, though without better historical material we cannot ultimately account for the origin of this difference between Iban and Kayan.

However, in the long-settled areas in the 1950s and everywhere today, the importance of inherited rights to land is much greater and to a considerable extent accounts for the continued economic success of the descendants of the original pioneers. The preoccupation of the Saribas Iban with genealogies, especially among the powerful first families (Pringle 1970:36) is not, I would argue, due to the prestige associated with descent from the great pioneers per se, but with the land rights entailed therein. Genealogies here do not legitimize political domination: they establish the right to annually renewed advantage in the cultivation of rice. This is a point Freeman recognized, but did not stress since it was of less importance in the Baleh.

The well-being of many an Iban family springs from the privileged position it gains through such a bilek [for virgin land in the Baleh] (Freeman 1970:283). Rights of permanent usufruct of land, which lapse only some years after a bilek has left an area (i.e. when it is clear they will not be coming back), and which can be passed on to kin or friends remaining behind, are established by the bilek which first falls virgin jungle. This bilek has the right to lose out secondary jungle, though Freeman reports considerable nigpardsness over land even among close kin (a sign of recognition of its value) (Freeman 1970:148). Bilek members who marry out of their natal bilek lose their right of access to that bilek's land, though they may gain such rights in their spouse's bilek. The bilek is the corporate land-holding group, and derives its land rights directly from the ancestor who fell the land while a member of the same bilek. The longhouse itself has no corporate property.

First-comers, i.e. the pioneers, thus tend to have more land than those who arrived later.
It often happens therefore even within the same longhouse territory that some families are forced to observe a considerably shorter usage cycle than others. Similarly, some longhouses as a whole are a good deal better off than others (Freeman 1970:290).

The cumulative, degenerative effect of a too short land use cycle in swidden agriculture is well known. Its effect on economic differentiation over the generations where there is no new land can become acute and obvious. Seymour states categorically of Iban of Pernerani in the second Division, where there is today no primary jungle, that status depends on the quantity of land inherited, and that the biggest difference is between the headman and his followers.

Regarding inheritance, the Iban ideal is that in each generation marriages and migrations should be arranged so that only one child remains to inherit the land, the ritual charms used to aid a good harvest, and the bulk of the prestige property.

From one generation to the next, one elementary family group out of, and succeeds another, in an unbroken sequence (Freeman 1970:13).

The demographic structure of the Iban (shared by Bornean peoples generally) has allowed this ideal to be attained very often in the past. Iban family size has, until recently, remained small. Infertility is common, and it very high rates of adoption. The possibility of migration was also crucial — not only for the opportunities to the pioneers themselves — but for the retention of bilek land in viable proportions for those remaining behind. In the event that more than one married sibling wishes to remain in the natal bilek, a partition will take place.

There is then proportionately less land available to these sections, that to a family that does not so divide (Freeman 1970:290). 4

Thus I would emphasize that despite the apparent fluidity of the Iban bilateral kinship system with its unilineal residence, significant rights particularly those in land, are inherited in "straight lines" through the bilek unit. Nowhere among the Iban is land a free good, as it appears to be among the Kayan — not even in the "open" Baken. In the long-settled areas, where there is no longer virgin jungle, it is the closing of channels of social mobility and the loss of the conditions for meritocratic achievement, that account for the stability of the core group. The second question posed — that of the failure of this advantage to become institutionalised, will be discussed now.

d. labour

At the time of Freeman's study, and still largely today, the Iban conform to notions about peasant labour made familiar by the work of Cheyney, Shaw, and most recently Sahlin. Crucially, the size of the family farm is limited by the labour that can be provided by bilek members.

The labour of the domestic group is further constrained by the sexual division of labour. Freeman (1970:249) found that it is the women's work of weeding — an arduous task that must be continued throughout the growing months — that determines the size of the fields, and that actually determines the yield, though falling by now is often more ambitious. All bilek members help to guard the ripening crop and to bring home the harvest.

There are few deviations from the norm that bilek labour works the bilek's own farm. The labour exchange system, bulok, is not a means of gaining access to extra labour, as a day is returned with a day. This practice is clearly distinguished from the occasional help given to a sick relative or friend in need — an instance of Sahlin's "generalized reciprocity" though this is not common nor automatic. More significant is the practice of hiring the labour of kin or friends who have had a poor crop to help bring in an abundant harvest. Freeman considered such wage employment to be of small significance in the Baken. However I would argue that, if mechanisms exist to overcome the labour bottlenecks of production experienced by well-placed farmers with good land and potentially abundant harvests, these are significant, even if they account for very few days' labour per year for those employed. They extend the degree of economic differentiation and accumulation of riches that is possible for a bilek on the basis of bilek labour alone.

The most important feature of Iban labour relations, however, is that the practice of labouring for others at harvest time tends not to be extended to a more permanent relationship throughout the year, though many families have exhausted their stocks of rice only two or three months after the harvest. In part this is explained by the sexual division of labour. It is weeding that limits the production of the better placed bileks, but men rarely do this work, and would never weed another man's farm. But I should like to suggest that the extreme reluctance to work for others in return for rice rather than reciprocal labour has ideological roots of a deeper nature, that must be seen in the context of Sarawak as a whole. An Iban who worked for another on a long-term basis would be in a position too
close to that of a Kayan or Malay slave, who has no control over his
own labour power, nor independent farms, nor, consequently, the possibility
of becoming rich, and whose abject position is well known to the Iban. 2
Even Kayan compounders have to do unreciprocated coffee labour for their
chiefs which frees the latter to become rich and even more powerful through
monopolizing trade in jungle produce. Iban leaders, who, as we have seen,
are always the best placed farmers, seem never to have enjoyed any such
rights; the Iban rule is strictly a day for a day.

What are the alternatives open to a bilek without sufficient rice?
They can attempt to subsist on jungle foods or manioc (despised as pig
food), though if foraging necessitates long periods away from the longhouse,
the next year’s crop will suffer. If the family has valuable property,
typically gongs or jars, these can be exchanged for the surplus of other
Iban families. Freeman describes the post-harvest scene of jars and rice
changing hands up and down the Bilek, and seems to imply that, in the next
season, positions would juggle again, and no large discrepancies would
develop. While this may have been true of the Bileh, with open access to
land, and skill and luck being the most significant factors differentiating
one bilek’s harvest from the next, it is not likely to have been true of
the long-settled areas. There is of course the same families who repeatedly
fail to produce their own rice for subsistence, and the same who consistently
produce a surplus. Access to land, as I have argued, has much to do with
this.

Another strategy adopted by families without sufficient rice is for
one or several male members to go off and seek work with Iban in distant
parts or with Chinese cash-crop farmers or, today, on logging camps or
Brunei oil-fields. Work for non-Iban, or at least work for money, is
considered less demeaning. The important feature is that an Iban accepting
such wage work does so for a specified, fixed period of time, for a fixed
reward and with his right of mobility retained. There is little chance of
such a relationship developing into one of more permanent dependence. 3
This strictly economic contract does not carry status connotations over into
other aspects of social life, as would labouring in the long-term for
fellow longhouse-members. By this practice some of the strain is relieved
on the rice bowl at home, where the women remain to manage as best they
can with weeding and protecting the crop.

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The motto which suggested the title of this paper, and which I
often heard repeated, is:

"It is better to work for yourself, than there is no
one on top of you."

The Iban express a dislike of authority both in political relations and
daily life (a fact of which Freeman gives ample evidence in his 1981:14
22-24), as well as in more strictly economic contexts. In contrast to
Rousseau (1960), I do not consider this to be mere rhetoric. It is an
ideology, understood in the sense of Bourdieu’s “habitus” (1977). It forms
part of the self-understanding of the Iban, and it is the generative
principle behind their various practices, while itself subject to constant
revision in the light of the consequences of these practices. It is the
self-understanding of the Iban, their self-definition as autonomous, mobile,
independent producers not subject to hierarchical political or economic
relations that accounts for why, despite unequal access to land, Iban
society has not become more stratified and closer to other groups of
Borneo. Well-placed Iban with a surplus of rice cannot usually use it as
veto or loans to gain access to the labour of others and increase future
surpluses. The Iban bilek’s attempt to retain full control over the labour
power of its members is a crucial defining feature of Iban social
organization, which has continued to shape the Iban’s response to change up
to the present, as we shall see in the last section of this paper. The fact that
the Iban “lack any taste for obedience” (Freeman, quoted at the beginning
of this article) must be recognized as significantly informing Iban
practice.

c. trade

The fact that surpluses of Iban rice, rather than being redistributed
internally through feasts, loans or gifts, are exported to the coast has
very important consequences for the organization of social and economic
life.

Sutcliffe (1978) has claimed that the Iban have a redistributive
system similar to that of other big-man societies, where prestige is gained
from accumulating and then generously disbursing surpluses, a system which,
though it increases political differentiation, acts also as a levelling
mechanism, preventing too great an economic differentiation between
households.

On the question of feasts, it is true that there are some large and
important Iban festivals sponsored by individuals. Such feasts, however,
have only a temporary impact on the individual’s prestige. Prestige among
the Iban has to be constantly re-won, annually, with each abundant harvest. It is indeed to this end that many of the gawai are directed. A.J.N. Richards has pointed out (private communication) that the word gawai (feast, festival) is related to the word gawa: "work, business, seeking help from the gods." A large proportion of gawai are intended to bring the favour of the gods on productive activities such as farming and housebuilding, and the send-off of a pioneer. The prestige-related gawai ratify with regard to the next life brave deeds accomplished in this life. It is the deeds, rather than the gawai, per se, which bring prestige to the individual.

The most important point, however, is that contrary to Suttive's claim the gawai are not effective as economic levelling mechanisms, many rich and famous Iban have overflowing rice stores, and this possession is prestigious in itself, as evidence of skilful farming. There is no compulsion on the bilek concerned to expend this surplus on gawai and many choose not to do so. There are important alternative uses. Geddes claims wealth does not help a man to become chief because it gives him power to distribute largesse. Riches rarely incline a Dayak to charity, although they may to usury (Geddes 1965:50 quoted in Sahlins 1974:224).

Surplus rice can be used for wages if someone can be found willing to work for the bilek—though it need not be lent, given or even sold to others, even to close relatives in need. The most common, and the preferred, course is to trade it with other Iban or for a better price with Chinese. This is done for much prized prestige goods, traditionally gongs and jars, but now house-building materials and furniture that are proudly displayed. Their display may arouse envy, but not disapproval, as the accumulation and retention of wealth is considered legitimate.5

A consequence of this trade in rice is that there is no "logic of underproduction," no "anti-surplus principle". All Iban aspire to riches, and the consistent, ambitious over-felling of jungle by the men of the bilek (felling beyond the capacity of the women to weed) reported by Freeman attests to this desire for riches as against, for example, leisure.6

This export of the subsistence crop implies that any "dual economy" theories, or theories which divide the economy into spheres, subsistence and prestige, and claim that each is characterised by a different ethos (cooperation and sharing to the first, competition, unequal possession and prestige to the second) could not apply to the Iban case.7 For the Iban, the two "spheres" are inseparable: the aim of production never stops at subsistence. The attempt to produce a surplus is integral to production, even in uncertain swidden conditions where many fail to obtain their basic needs. Production for the market thus reinforces the autonomy and separation of the household producing units.

Sahlins specifically recognises the distinctiveness of the Iban and other S.E. Asian hinterland societies in view of their articulation to external markets, and is led to classify them as peasant.

The implication of an external trade (rice is not merely an internal bar on sharing it, nor a corresponding requirement of gold pro quo in intra-community dealings, but a departure from the ordinary characteristics of primitive distribution in virtually all respects (Sahlins 1974:224). Thus it must be recognised that, while subject to two of the conditions of Sahlins' DMP—labour generally limited to that available within the domestic group and limited technology—the Iban do not conform to the third: limited production goals. The accumulation of riches, however, is not an accumulation of capital: in Iban swidden rice cultivation, accumulated rice, prestige goods or cash cannot be used to increase future production, except in the limited set of circumstances I have described above—that is, on the few occasions when the direct producer can be "bought". As we shall see in the following section, these occasions are becoming more frequent, particularly as swidden land fails to produce an adequate living by today's Iban standards, and access to the capital necessary to improve productivity is limited and differentially distributed. Wage labour is still, however, considered to be "wage-slavery" and is not accepted as a norm.

3. Iban economy and ideology today

I argued earlier that unequal access to land was the source of economic differentiation in the past. I also suggested that the ideology of independence curtailed the widespread use of wage labour, debt bondage, or any form of corvée, and hence limited the economic and political disparities that could develop between bileks. I shall now argue that unequal access to capital for investment in cash crops is the source of economic inequalities today, in which the same core group has an advantage. The ideology of independence is still frequently voiced, though it corresponds less and less to the economic realities facing those who have not succeeded in entering the cash-crop sphere, except on the most unfavourable terms as casual wage labourers. Nevertheless, this ideology continues to inform
lions mainly in the form of advances of fertilizer against a future pepper crop. Since Iban land by law cannot be mortgaged to them, they loan only to the more creditworthy.

Thus, as with yiddan land in the past, the distribution of capital is such that those who started with an advantage will improve their economic position further; the labour limitation still applies, though at a much higher ceiling owing to the new possibilities for cash substitution; Iban still avoid a position of dependence on their fellows where they can. Economic disparities are striking both within and between longhouses. Wealth is displayed in house-building materials and bilek contents, and reflected also in the use made of educational facilities etc. The richer bileks approach the standards of the middle class in Kuching, with carpentered plank bileks, glass windows, linoleum floors, red plastic chairs, cabinets of glasses, new clothes and school books. Running a generator, a rice mill, and a television is usually the private enterprise of one Iban entrepreneur—others in his longhouse use these facilities for a fee.9

b. ideology and planned development—the Iban response

The pattern of changes I have described—namely the reluctant involvement in the wage economy of those without cash crops; the attempt to maintain independent farms; and, for those who have cash crop smallholdings, the continued use of family labour and minimal dependence on government agencies or Chinese who provide initial capital—is in accordance with the ideology and organisation of production of the Iban outlined above. The large monocultural schemes which are the central part of Sarawak's current development plan are based on quite different principles, and have not been at all successful nor well received by the Iban. Moreover their effect, though not their intention (at least as far as is stated), is to promote a much greater economic differentiation—both within longhouses and between them (based on advantageous or disadvantageous location), and between regions within Sarawak and even across borders as poor Iban from Indonesia come in to fill the derelict and poorly paid labouring jobs.

The details of the "Development Schemes" are these: when a scheme is proposed for a certain area, Iban whose land will be required are invited, and persuaded, to join by handing over 10—50 acres to be planted with rubber or oil palm. The bilek then remains bound by a long-term debt to the scheme, for the costs of the development of the land, the provision

a. capital and labour

The most profitable, well established cash crop in Sarawak today is pepper. This requires a heavy initial investment in time and cash (hardwood posts and fertilizers). Rubber requires less initial investment, but yields a low income (though new high yield varieties do require expensive fertilizer). Other cash inputs—such as chainsaws to fell and cut firewood, weedkillers to clear swamp fields and reduce the arduous task of weeding growing hill padi, fertilizer and insecticides for swamp rice—greatly increase labour productivity. The Iban are well aware of the benefits of their use, and carefully calculate the cash equivalents of, for example, a gallon of weedkiller versus five days of bedrok labour, worth so much per day at the wages paid by local Chinese. To borrow a chain saw one must pay a substantial amount, even to a close relative.

Richer farmers who have achieved a certain "take-off" have cash available to engage in all these strategies, and thus overcome the limitations of bilek labour. Others, though knowledgeable and willing, lack the initial capital to begin cash crop farming. They continue to farm rice (as, indeed, do all Iban), and if their land is insufficient, they must seek casual wage work with neighbouring Chinese or in more distant parts. Long term wage work for local Iban is still avoided wherever possible, though some are obliged to engage in this. The Iban express an awareness that when they work for wages, it is another who will become rich, not themselves.

Only as an independent farmer can a man make money or, at least, be in a position to plan his own life, work when and how he likes, and hold his head up.

Where wages are insufficient to accumulate capital for productive investment, and loans from relatives are rare8 (since each bilek invests in its own gardens), external sources of capital become very important. The government agricultural offices give some subsidies, though their policy seems to be one of "letting on the strong", and helping especially those proven successful farmers who it is thought will serve as examples to the others. The headman of a longhouse is most likely to receive such officials. Agricultural officers will receive hospitality in his bilek when they visit. Chinese traders, found in the vicinity of most longhouses, offer

the response of the Iban to new developments—in particular to the government proposed large scale, bureaucratic, monocultural plantations.
of the processing plant etc. Profits from the sale of the product go to pay off this debt, which will take at least ten years, depending on the state of the market. After this debt has been paid, all the profits from the plot belong to the bielek that originally owned the land. Meanwhile, employment is available on the scheme at a rate of M$4 per day. In the early rubber schemes, the participants were obliged to cease farming rice and other cash crops, and concentrate solely on labouring and tapping rubber. There were many enticements, such as roads, electricity, schools and health facilities which, it was felt by the authorities, could be provided centrally.

I shall now give two examples, from the second division of Sarawak, of the reaction of the Iban to such schemes. This will support my argument that it is an egalitarian ideology - the Iban's self-conception as autonomous agents who should be free to make their own fortunes and who owe obedience to no one - that lies at the heart of Iban identity and that, despite more superficial changes in life-style and economic practice (bemoaned by government agents as "loss of culture and tradition"), continues as a live force reflected in the decisions made by the Iban in response to new circumstances.

The Iban of Marup, a longhouse near Emkiliili, had collectively decided against participation in any government schemes. They based their decision on the lessons learnt from the experience of relatives and friends who had joined the nearby scheme at Skrang, many of whom had since left Skrang to rejoin other "free" longhouses. People at Marup described the problems at Skrang thus: M$4 per day is not enough to feed a family and pay the rent of a scheme house. Many default on rent and have their prestigious electric wiring removed. Those who were originally from the area were able to continue their other economic activities, such as rice and pepper farming, because their lands were nearby, and rubber tapping and processing is usually finished by 2 p.m. Those who had moved to the scheme from far away, however, had no access to land to farm independently, and were totally dependent on the scheme. They could not improve their position by their own efforts, and rapidly declined into serious poverty. As they became further indebted to the scheme, overseers forced them to work harder tapping rubber, and had various sanctions to impose. The Iban became, as they put it strongly, "wage slaves". Though at first they "brushed their teeth in coffee" they later felt deceived. They resented the hierarchical relations in the labour process and their loss of all control over their labour power and production decisions. Moreover they could see local pepper smallholders prosper, and dreaded a fall in the price of rubber, on which they were now totally dependent.

Thus when the local Agricultural office proposed a cattle scheme, in which people in Marup would be "given" cattle to raise and sell, the plan was rejected. Marup has about twenty head of cattle, and the people are well aware of the profits to be made from selling them, but no one from Marup has accepted any "free" cattle on the terms offered. The problem is that if a scheme cow died, the "owner" would have to pay M$100 to the Agricultural Office, and this he may not be able to pay. When one of their own animals dies, it is a loss only to that bielek, and entails no debts - above all no debts to officials who have the power to prosecute or cause other difficulties for the Iban. Marup has very extensive lands, and the people feel that these lands are the source of their independence. They are forever engaged in litigations with other neighbouring Iban accused of trying to encroach. They are very willing to use the land for cash crops, but repeated requests to the Agricultural Office to open up roads always meet with refusal, since Marup has not been co-operative in official plans. People at Marup say they would rather stay poor than lose their autonomy.

At Paku, on the Undup, a decision has recently been taken to join an oil palm scheme. This is, conveniently, to be located on their doorstep, so that all the fringes benefits, medical dispensaries etc. will be nearby. The headman of Paku was one of the chief applicants for the scheme and may have had some influence over its location. It is in these facilities, and most importantly for the road that will now be built, that the decision to join the scheme was made. With the road, all the cash crop activities at Paku will become much more profitable. It is not a requirement of this particular scheme that other economic activities should be abandoned: those at Paku had no intention of giving them up and will probably expand them when they can get better prices. Other longhouses who have also joined the scheme will be at a relative disadvantage. Because of the distances between the bulk of their land and the centre of the scheme, they will find it much more difficult to maintain a diversified family economy. If they have no cash crops, or face transport problems, they may find themselves heavily dependent on the wage-labour opportunities offered by the scheme. Those at Paku had no intention of working full for M$4 per day - they were confident that poor Iban from up-river, or from elsewhere in Sarawak or Indonesia would be found
to do that - and finding labour is the responsibility of the government.

The richer farmers of Paka would become, in effect, absentee landlords,
merely reaping the profits from the sale of the fruits and incurring no risks nor loss of family labour. On M$4 per day it is quite clear that those who do labour on the schemes will not be able to accumulate sufficient funds to begin their own pepper gardens, and will become, in effect, a labouring underclass.

Thus, though these trends are as yet in their early stages, there are signs that a much greater differentiation will develop between regions and, linked to this, between emergent classes that stand in different relations to the means of production. The crucial element now seems to be not so much the quantity of land possessed as the location of that land in relation to the new centres of political and economic power, and the distribution of the resources necessary to make that land more productive. The residual independence of the poor farmers, barely able to subsist on inadequate land and already involved in casual wage labour, will eventually be eroded. Before that point is reached, however, Sarawak may be faced with a problem similar to that now facing West Malaysia - an acute shortage of labour, that is, labour willing to work on plantations. The Iban will not part with their independence without strong resistance.

Conclusion

I set out to examine the question of Iban egalitarianism, and to provide a detailed account of the socio-economic context in which the political and ideological expressions of egalitarianism are located. We have seen how the Iban's ideology of independence contains the development of economic and political differentiation, despite unequal access to land, and today, unequal access to the sources of cash for investment in new crops. In trying to elucidate the complex relationship between political, economic and ideological forms in the Iban case, I argued that the organization of labour is a crucial factor in the self-definition of the Iban. Its origins lies partly in the Iban's longstanding involvement in the rice trade, but it should also be seen as a factor constantly and consciously reproduced in the Iban's relation to, and differentiation from, other groups in Sarawak which continues to be reflected in the responses of the Iban to economic changes today.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Bill Watson, Sue Benson, Victor Li and Anthony Richards for their critical readings of earlier drafts of this paper. Julian Hurry was jointly responsible for the fieldwork, carried out in 1975.

Notes

1. Freeman reports that in the Baleh land disputes were rare and partitions frequent. Little has been written about this, but in the more densely settled areas I would hazard a guess that, apart from the more careful attention to genealogies noted by Pringle (1970: 36), one would also find more careful marriage strategies and more land disputes. Freeman notes the high degree of inter-relationship among the core group in a longhouse, which has the effect of political consolidation and avoids sharing land with "outside". If such a "close" marriage could not be arranged, one would expect to find pressure on subsides to marry out into a different longhouse, rather than bringing in a spouse and dividing the bilek land, which would result in a much reduced cycle and possible poverty for both resulting sections.

2. See Freeman (1981: 77, 107, 30, 38) for examples of Iban who are aware of, and explicitly comment on, the difference between their own egalitarian and the Kayan hierarchical systems.

3. On earlier opportunities for earning elsewhere we have little information. Malay chiefs often employed Iban as mercenaries. They may also have been able to join the famous pirate bands. There is, however, only one fine line drawn between the berjaili adventures that young men love to engage in, and those forced by circumstances on rather older men - heads of farms - but which nevertheless could become sources of prestige, and exciting tales to tell. A full analysis of the importance of berjaili travel has still to be made.

4. The Iban did have a form of slavery, but it appears not to have been very common, and had almost disappeared by the time the Brooke established rule. Sandin (1967) suggests that acute debt was a cause of bondage. However, the examples he gives are of bonds caused by failure to pay fines for serious ritual offences, rather than cumulative indebtedness from failure to produce sufficient rice. Other slaves were war captives, who often became adopted into the bilek of their captors, thereby swelling the domestic labour force without being subjected to super-exploitation. Freeman (1981: 49) mentions that acute debt could be paid off in labour services, though he states that this was not equivalent to slavery, since the bond ended when the debt was paid. This again suggests that those debts tended not to be cumulative - there was no permanently indebted and subservient underclass.

5. Freeman (1970: 272) reports the dilemma of a household trying to balance its obligations to sell rice at the cheaper rate to kin and neighbours, against the desire to purchase prestige goods. Since in that year, 1950, there was an exceptionally bad harvest and 60% of the bileks in the longhouse studied by Freeman failed to attain their subsistence needs, the fact that any rice was sold to the Chinese should leave us in no doubt as to the essentially autonomous nature of the Iban domestic group.
6. A key aspect of the rice trade among the Iban is that everyone has the right to engage in it. Each sells his own surplus product. Kayans and Malays, by contrast, have monopolistic trading patterns. Only the chief has the right and the time to trade, and hence he appropriates to himself a focal point in the economy (see Boumeau 1971; Dodge 1981; also Sahlin's arguments (1974) about redistribution and the development of hierarchy, and those of Godelier (1977).

7. For contrasting examples of economies divided into "spheres", which lie within cultural areas in other respects similar to the Iban, see Madhu (1970) for the Karen of Thailand, and Vitebsky (unpublished) for the Sora of India.

8. The Karo Batak of Sumatra, whose production system is similar to that of the Iban in many respects, provides a contrasting case: they have a clan-based kinship system, with wife-giving and wife-taking categories, and can mobilise the capital of a large group to support a prospective entrepreneur. The Iban has only his bilok family (see Penny and Singaribum in Epstein 1972). Geertz and Dewey, in their studies of Javanese petty trading, also noted the lack of stability in the S.E. Asian bazaar, where bilateral kindred, though occasionally important as providers of lodgings and hospitality, are not particularly favoured as business partners, and transactions remain ad hoc and insubstantial. Trade above a certain value passes into the hands of the Chinese, who again raise capital and loans along clan lines (see Geertz 1963; Dewey 1962; and for an illuminating study of the Chinese in Sarawak, Tien 1950).

9. Becoming rich and successful is admired today as it was in the past, education in considered by some Iban to have replaced head-hunting as a prime goal for young men, though even head-hunting may not be quite over. One educated young man assured me that he had been trying very hard to become a Rajah Berani (warrior, head-breaker) in the traditional way, and joined the army with the express purpose of taking a head, or at least killing a man so that he could celebrate a Gawai Kenyalang. It was difficult, however, these days, because in the army they usually "hunt in groups", not individually so that, if a man was killed, it would not be known by whose bullet. Also if a soldier went forward and killed, it would not be proof of bravery, because his comrades behind would shoot him for cowardice or desertion if he failed to attack. Another difficulty was that, though a man might be brave, he must be noticed and reported by his corporal to his sergeant and so on up the hierarchy before this was officially recognised and he was awarded a medal. Such are the difficulties faced by Iban individualists in a modern bureaucratic society!

Bibliography


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some people permit one step, prohibit marriage between parent and grandchild. The prohibition, when it exists, is simply not simply a distant prohibition, but a feeling that they are morally wrong. It is not simply a matter of a relationship in which the disapproving parent is a brother or daughter, but may in very little groups than myself. Nor is it a question...