

Understanding of Iban Women Political Participation through Analysing the Decision-Making Process in Iban Society

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ABSTRACT

An individual is said to have become involved in politics if he or she participated in activities such as voting, campaigning, soliciting for votes, giving political speeches to influence the actions or the decisions of the other persons, becoming a member of a political organisation, distributing party fliers, carrying banners, or supporting a political party. A person's involvement in politics may be classified as active involvement or passive involvement. The highest level of a political participation is when a person puts himself or herself up to be chosen as the people's representative in a competitive election. To date no Iban women have ever been elected to the country's House of Representatives. This is not to say that their involvement in 'low politics' is any better either. Niggling issues such as the customary practices, the longhouse systems, the political socialisation, the decision-making processes, and the notion of manliness may still be the decisive factors in how and why the Iban select or determine their leaders. This paper is an attempt to understand how and why the involvement of Iban women in politics is still at an infancy stage, as well as exploring the challenges that hinder its progress and development.

Keywords: *Decision making, community leader, longhouse tradition, participation, socialisation*

INTRODUCTION

There is no question that what the Iban do today, especially in relations to whom they pick and choose to assume the leadership at the grassroots level, is still influenced very much by what happened in the old days. The stories from the times of head hunting, territorial expansion, migration, and process of pioneering settlements (Sandin, 1994, p.10) continued to be shared over generations thereby giving higher social esteem, social status, prestige, and pedigree to the descendants of the persons that had led and directed those activities. "The taking of heads of enemies in battle undoubtedly raised the social status of an individual as a warrior and leader (Ooi, 2006, p. 191).

For our purpose, the grassroots leadership is defined here as the leadership at the local area level as longhouse headmen or local councillors at the District Council. The District Council or the Local Government deals with what is known as 'low politics' and performs such functions as cleaning services (such as cleaning the drain), rubbish and sewage collections, environmental sanitation, traffic lights, streetlights, parking space, maintenance of parks and recreational areas. The question is, how many Iban women have been appointed as local district or local government councillors over the years or decades. At any one time, there are roughly about 900 local councillors in Sarawak, though not all of them are Iban of course, but a substantial number of them are. Of all the Iban local councillors, how many of them are women. As there are about 5,000 longhouses in Sarawak, this also

means that there are about 5,000 longhouse headmen in the State. Of this figure, how many of them are women.

Of course, 'political participation' covers many types of activities, and this includes such things as voting, campaigning, soliciting for votes, giving political speeches to influence the actions or the decisions of the other persons, becoming a member of a political organisation, distributing party fliers, carrying banners, or supporting a political party. An individual is also said to have been involved in politics when he or she participated in demonstrations, violence, or protests.

The absence of political involvement of the Iban women in 'high politics' such as becoming the Members of the House of Representatives or the Members of the State Legislature or the members of the administration as cabinet-ministers is influenced by many factors. The highest level of political participation is when a person puts himself or herself up to be chosen as the people's representative during election. Few Iban women have tried their luck but none had succeeded. Most of them represented the opposition parties that had no chance of winning.

This question is important for Iban politics in general. It is easier to answer political participation at the 'low politics' level where entry is based on appointment. Getting involved at local politics level is a good start for anyone. Example of a woman that began at this level that finally made it up to the top is Theresa May, the former Prime Minister of Britain. However, tradition, culture and decision-making process still play a tremendous role in thwarting active political participation among Iban women even at the lowest level.

IBAN WOMEN IN FORMAL POLITICS

Before we discuss Iban women in formal politics, I think it is crucial to elaborate on the Iban concept of maleness and femaleness, which are very much influenced by the Iban culture. The Iban concept of "maleness" and "femaleness" revolves around the characters of Keling and Kumang. Keling is a handsome, strong, fearless, clever, powerful, rich, resourceful, and perfect human being, whilst Kumang is described as hardworking, beautiful, honourable, independent, loyal and an excellent weaver (Hew, 1995, p. 69). However, Kumang, who is representing the epitome of womanliness, "is portrayed in a less favourable light when compared to Keling, [and often described as] naïve and easily cheated...[and] shown to be impetuous and the cause of much trouble." (Sutlive, 1977; Hew, 1995).

Sutlive (1977) also argues that these supposedly characteristics of Iban women has resulted in the exclusion of women in decision-making activities, although this argument is contested by Hew (1995) when she states that, "...women are crucial participants in decision-making concerning farming and festivities." This is evident in today's contemporary Iban community, where more and more women have received education locally and abroad. In addition, it increased their chance to meet women from different races or/and different social backgrounds and exposure to new skills, which their predecessors had no access to. To a larger extent, these exposures have increased their self-confidence to participate in the decision-making process more actively.

In Sarawak, women have contributed significantly to Sarawak politics. They had successfully galvanised support not only from their womenfolk but also men as well and participated in the anti-cession movement. Nonetheless, independence and statehood did not grant these women the same political status as their male counterparts. While the men assumed leadership roles, the women were systematically forced to remain in the grassroots or were raised to the glorified status of the Women's Wing of political parties. Even then their political fate is sealed because aspirations to rise to higher

levels are either slow or even if they do succeed, it is usually based on political connections which many are lacking.

Dayak women have been active in politics since Sarawak's independence, especially at the grassroots level, particularly those in the Women's wing. They are the one who goes to the ground, knocking on doors, going from longhouse to longhouse, organised meetings and campaigns related activities and many more. These women have been working endlessly to ensure their political parties win maximum votes to stay in power. Despite the obvious contributions, Dayak women are still very much underrepresented at the highest echelon of the party leadership compared to their non-Dayak female counterparts.

As of today, no Dayak women from the Dayak-based parties have ever been appointed to a ministerial position. The highest position accorded to the Dayak women is a Senatorship such as Tan Sri Datuk Seri Empiang Jabu, Rita Sarimah Insol, Susan Chermai Anding, and Dato' Sri Doris Sophia Brodie who became the first Iban woman to be appointed to the position of the Deputy President of the Senate (Sebli, 2019).

A number of Dayak women have also been appointed to the political secretaries' position to the Chief Minister such as Dato' Seri Doris Sophia Brodie, Beatrice Kedoh Tajang (both are from the Parti Rakyat Sarawak), Jenny Bangga and Susan Chemerai Anding (both are from Parti Bumiputera Bersatu). Dato' Alice Jawan is another Dayak woman who has been appointed as a Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Utilities Sarawak. These extraordinary, high achievers' women possess an impressive credential yet they are being relegated to a subordinate position, a secretary, a position that be-fitting their female gender (Sebli, 2019).

It makes one wonders, why are the Iban political leaders, the majority of whom are men are not making any effort to include more women into the highest echelon of party leadership? The first attempt to elect first Iban woman in competitive politics was made by Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS) – the Barisan Nasional component party - in the 2018 parliamentary election. Despite representing the incumbent governing party, Rita Insol still failed to get elected in Selangau constituency which never lost the seat since the formation of PRS in 2004. PRS had never fielded any women in any of the election since their first inception in 2004.

But Rita Insol's candidacy arguably was marred with controversies. The majority of the male members of her party, opposed her candidacy. Her defeat further confirmed some of the reservations that the party's members have on woman's suitability as party's candidate. At the end of the day, her eligibility as a candidate to represent the party in the last general election in 2018 was very much hinged on the fact that she is a woman. Politically, it is tough for Dayak women to break the traditional role of women within the Dayak society.

THE IBAN TRADITION AND CULTURE

The Longhouse

Wagner (1972) describes the Iban longhouse this way:

“The apartments are constructed in a like manner although there is some variation in size. The more centrally placed belong to the pioneering families who form the core of the community... These apartments consist of four major parts; the bilek, which is the family's combined living, eating and sleeping room, the ruai, which is the

roofed verandah running along the whole of the house structure, the tanju, a platform continuation of the ruai but unroofed, and finally above the bilik and the ruai there is a spacious loft, the sadau” (p. 89).

“The roofed gallery, the ruai, is probably the most interesting part of the longhouse, however, as most tasks and interactions take place here, from food-preparation, gossiping, news-exchange and story-telling to mourning rituals, invocations and other sacred rites. Here also the tuai rumah, or village head-man, mediates between disputing parties so that the ritual balance of the whole longhouse community will not be endangered, and discussions are carried on about and ideas that are of joint interest to all bilik-families” (Wagner, 1972, p. 89-90).

In the area where we come from, the so-called roof verandah consisted of three main sections; the *panggung* (an unraised stage), the *ruai* (the main hall), and *tempuan* (the passage or the walkway to get from one end of the longhouse to the other end). The three sections have their usage, purpose, and significance. All of these sections, including the *tanyu*, *bilik*, *sadau*, and the *dapur* (kitchen area), when put together, that is the Iban longhouse structure, system, process and function.

The *ruai* is the common hall, and it is here that all activities are undertaken, and where food are served during a function or ceremony. The *ngajat* (the war dance), for instance, is performed at the *ruai*. During a function or a ceremony, the women are to sit at the *ruai* only, facing upward to the *panggung*. The *panggung* constitutes a meeting place; a venue where discussions are held, where agendas are set, and where decisions are made. Traditionally, during a function, such a wedding and a *gawai* or festival of whatever type, be it *gawai antu* (festival of the dead) or *gawai batu* (wet stone festival), the *panggung* is exclusively reserved for men.

During a formal function such as a wedding ceremony, the men of honour, status, or prestige will sit with their back to the wall that separates the *panggung* and the *tanyu*, facing the crowd (including the women) who sit mainly at the *ruai* section of the longhouse. The speeches are made here. The discussions and the decisions on a dowry, for instance, are all made at the *panggung*. In normal day-to-day situation, while waiting for the evening meals to be served, for example, men tend to sit around at the *panggung*, conferring, chatting, gossiping, or sharing jokes and stories like relating their experiences in the farms during the day. However, and in many instances too, during that time, the men may also talk about serious issues such as the location of the padi planting and when to begin the planting season. The longhouse meeting then is merely used as a forum to announce the decisions that had already been made during that time and to get them endorsed officially by the head of the family *bilek*.

There are many similarities around the world where men sat together, either after or before the evening meal, to talk about many issues affecting their community. To illustrate our point and to use the example from Almond and Powell, Jr., (1966, p. 219), let us imagine, for example:

“... a Bergdama band sitting around an evening campfire somewhere in the mountains of southwest Africa after the completion of an evening meal. The group might be discussing plans for hunting-and-gathering activities during the following day, a discussion in which the headman may take the leading role but in which other adult males take active part. In this context the headman and the adult males may be making economic decisions. They may invoke spirits to insure success of the next day’s operations. In this connection they would be acting as the religious subsystem of the society” (Almond and Powell, Jr., 1966, p. 219).

Iban leaders

Traditionally, the Iban leaders were derived from among the brave especially among those that had been commissioned by goddess Kumang to lead and make war (*tau serang*).

“Bravery, particularly in battle but in any endeavour, is considered perhaps the highest good. The spirit of bravery, Lang Sengalang Burong, is made manifested in the decorated *kenyalang*, a fanciful carved rhinoceros hornbill, generally male bird, and provides the ideal in behaviour and action. Iban children learn from very young to be independent and fearless” (Rubeinstein, 1973, p. 44).

Richards (1949, p. 81) explains that:

“Leadership among the Ibans has gone to those of great physical prowess and to members of certain families. The bold or merely boastful have rarely gathered any following but great strength and a claim to magical powers or to be invulnerable always been useful supports to claim to leadership by descents.”

On the other hand, Usegi (1988, p. 8) describes how an ambitious Iban man who wished to be considered as a great leader converted his wealth into and fortune “into greater fame and prestige’ by hosting “an ascending sequence of *gawai* (feasts or festivals).

Augury

The Iban believe that God communicated to them through a system of augury which “manifest themselves through dreams and in cries and flights of birds and the behaviour of certain other animals, insects and reptile” (Wagner, 1972, p. 102). The Iban look for these signs before undertaking any important activities like in the construction of a house (a longhouse, for example), embarking on a farming activity (like in the clearing of land for hill padi planting). The consequences of ignoring these signs and what is heard could be fatal or devastating to the health, happiness and economic or social well-being of the persons. Due to this reason, a special augur (*tuai¹ burong*) is required to provide a divine guidance (Kedit, 2005, p. 6). He (as usually, the person is a male) is consulted first on what to do before undertaking those activities and on how to react accordingly when those signs appeared after those activities have already been undertaken. The decisions made by the augur with respect to what is to be done is regarded as correct, acceptable and legitimate. His opinions influence the structure, the system, the function, and the process of decision-making in the longhouse. Because of his “extensive knowledge of rituals and his ability to interpret or seek omens that can be of a very complex nature” (Wagner, 1972, p. 102), a Tuai Burong has a high standing within the longhouse community.

Dreams

The Iban believe in dreams particularly if the dreams involve goddess Kumang, for instance. According to Kedit (2005, p. p. 5) “It is from such dream experiences, that we see many Iban creative work of art, such as intricate and striking ikat weaving; their symbolic and rich oral tradition, for example the lengthy *timbang* (sacred text), pantun (song), and *ensera* (legends)”. Those who are able

¹ *Tuai* as it used in this sense literally means ‘a leader’. The other meaning of *tuai* is old.

to do them have a special place in the Iban society, and their thoughts are most sought after in many Iban livelihood activities.

Pioneer

The Iban migration had been driven by the need to look for new land for farming. The pioneers who cleared the primary forests for this activity established in perpetuity the ownership rights for him (and his descendants) over the lands that they had cleared for farming. Iban pioneers are always associated with the persons who led the process of acquiring empty lands farming or migrating into new areas. To lead such an endeavour, a person must be a man of valour, bravery, courage and have military prowess. But these characters may not be enough to make the person to become the leader of the group. Such a person must have the talent to lead, organise, steward, coordinate, direct, influence, guide, protect and care for his followers as well. No one would like to follow a leader to venture into new and unknown territories if he could not guarantee their welfare, safety, and security. For these reasons pioneers have a special significance in Iban folklore, culture, and traditional system of leadership. On this note, Vincent Sutlive, Jr. writes:

“Pioneers were ascribed a degree of name recognition which simply did not exist for other people ... Ascent to the position of raja berani had to commence with pioneering, be validated through successful farming, and capped by deeds derring-do” (2005, p. 37).

Pungka Lelaki

Pungka lelaki may be said to be as a man that has attractive physique, the handsome and the virile one, and having the attributes of the concept of ‘manliness’. Omar (2005) has succinctly described what ‘manliness’ in Iban means:

- “A man’s prowess is manifested in his voice, body, movement, as well as in his manner of eating, drinking, smoking and sleeping, and in carrying out a task entrusted to him;
- “When the hero walks, he glides like the snake moving through seven branches of a path, and the whole movement is likened to the coconut husk driven by the strong tide. When he straightens up he is like a rope;
- “When he walks, his speed is comparable to that of a lightning, the blowpipe and the bullet;
- “The speed of walking is also likened to that of the deer and the snake;
- “When he drinks he sounds like a thunder; and
- “When he belches, it is like the banter of the pig, and when he washes his mouth, it sounds like the heavy rain falling” (p. 70-71).

The *pungka lelaki* therefore has the personality traits of Keling, the Iban mythical hero:

“... handsome (sigat), knowledgeable about many things (bisi benda penemu), strong (kering) and brave (berani) and good hearted (bisi pemanah ati)” (p. 70).

He is regarded as the natural leader of men, and similar to Keling, he is also the lady’s man.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Iban leadership and the processes of decision-making at the grassroots level continue to be dominated by men. The structure, the system, and the function of the longhouse favour men over women. The stories from the days of old continue to influence the attitude, the behaviour, the perception, and the relations among and between individuals/families in the longhouse. One may argue that this type of dominance might have become less significance in many respects today, but it still has not disappeared altogether.

But there are still many observable activities in the longhouse that create its system, function, structure, and process, that in turn, still continues to influence relations and how decisions are made within the community. One may wish to argue on the contrary, but our culture, custom, tradition, value, and the operation and the function of the longhouse system and structure do affect the processes of political socialisation within the community and the kind of political roles that community can and wish to play.

Do the Iban women (and Iban men for that matter) have the right attitudes, beliefs, values, knowledge, discipline, and skills to participate in politics. Do we have the relevant political culture or the “psychological dimensions of the political system”, as Almond and Powell, Jr., (1966, p. 23) put it? How is the Iban women’s (and men’s) attitudes towards government? Do we need to have a concept to deal with the development aspect of our political behaviour? How rational, analytical, and empirical are we regarding our political action?

Do Iban women, especially those at the grassroots level do more than vote. Do they (and the Iban community in general for that matter) do more like campaigning or participating through individual contacts with government officials, politicians (including their aids and assistance) or the media.

Why is the Iban women political participation at the grassroots level limited in quantity when entry is based on appointment? Stillman II (2010) defines political appointees as “individuals who serve without tenure and whose appointments are based often, though not always upon political toes or party loyalties” (p. 172)

How do we incorporate more of them into politics? Is mass mobilization (and manipulative action) before and during elections enough in this respect? Does there exist any form of resistance to better Iban women political participation from traditional Iban elites/leaders or even from the community itself?

On the question of decision-making, do Iban women (and Iban men as well) know all the facts required to make the right political decisions and actions, and do they know the consequences of their decisions and actions. When making a political decision, what approach do they use? Do the Iban women (Iban men included) employ any of the following techniques when making political decisions:

- Decide for oneself
 - Decide for others
 - Delegate (usually subdecisions)
 - Defers to others
 - Enable others’ decisions (Burch, 1996, p. 183)
- (see Burch, 1996, p. 183)

And is there any reference group such as opinion leaders, traditional elites, peers, a political party that they consulted first before making their decisions.

We do not intend to provide the answers to all those questions that we have raised on how to improve Iban women political participation. Instead, we intend to pose more questions for us to ponder upon.

1. How is recruitment into politics by political organisation among Iban women determined?
2. How is decision-making about Iban women political participation made?
3. Why is decision regarding political participation among Iban women made in such a manner?
4. Does limited involvement or non-involvement in politics has anything to do with a sense of being powerless, with lack of political awareness, with lack of political knowledge or intelligence, with lack of interest or with limited resources?
5. Does limited involvement or non-involvement in politics has anything to do with poor attitude?
6. Does limited involvement or non-involvement in politics has anything to do with indecision?
7. Does limited involvement or non-involvement in politics has anything to do with not trusting the political system?
8. Does limited involvement or non-involvement in politics has anything to do with not knowing one's right, with not knowing how demands on the political system are created?
9. Does limited involvement or non-involvement in politics has anything to do with power-relations in the longhouse/community?

As we have mentioned earlier, we do not intend to go to issues concerning women's empowerment, but we cannot ignore the fact that women political participation would move up to another level with better education and economic capability. According to Weaver, Rock and Kusterer (1997):

... women are much more likely to participate in the organizational life of civil society and democratic politics if they have enough education to achieve literacy and enough income security to escape the day-to-day desperation of the lowest levels of poverty. Second, suggestive case studies in Latin America, South Asia, and the Middle East show that women are more likely than men to engage in political activity with modest and pragmatic goals and less likely to accept totalistic goals of revolutionary or fundamentalist social transformation. To the extent that this is true in a particular society and culture, the greater the participation of women in political life, the more democratic pluralism is furthered in its political culture (p. 205).

This is based on the experiences in other countries, of course. Will better education and having more money increase Iban women political participation.

We want to conclude this paper by sharing the works of three undergraduate students in our faculty. Robinson (2013) did a study in Iban villages in Kota Samarahan, and she discovered that economic decisions (like on how to use the family finances) among the Iban family are made by the women, while the political decisions (like on which party or candidate to support) are determined by men. Sungong (2005) did a study in a Sri Aman Division on Iban women passive political participation. Her findings reveal that during a political function, the Iban women are more concerned with the ceremonial aspects of it (like welcoming the guests to their longhouses in their traditional costumes). They did not concern much about the political aspects of a political function. In other words, they were less active politically, and those who belong in this category tend to ignore politics. Guat (2003) explains that election time in the Iban areas is a 'partying time', a festival time, a time of merriment and enjoyment. If political participation is about the activity by citizens to influence those who govern

and how they should do it, the Iban certainly have done their parts. The involvement of Iban women in politics certainly had increased quite a bit in the last Sarawak State Election in December 2021 through their participation in the poco poco dance, a popular line dance from Indonesia, which was widely used by the incumbent party as a method to control, manipulate, and influence the voters.

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