

Chapter 5. “All Threads Are White”: Iban Egalitarianism Reconsidered

Clifford Sather

*Ragi ubong samoa dedudok ari burak magang, Tang chura iya digaga' dudi,
nya' alai bisi' mansau, Kuning, gadong enggau biru.*

All cotton threads start out as white, But after they are dyed, they become
red, yellow, green, and blue.

(an Iban saying)

Introduction

The characterization of societies as “egalitarian” — in Borneo as elsewhere in the non-Western world — has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years (Boehm 1993; Flanagan and Rayner 1988; Flanagan 1989; Woodburn 1982). Even so, despite this newfound interest, compared to “hierarchy”, notions of equality have been far less explored in the anthropological literature. Part of the reason is almost certainly as Flanagan (1989:261) suggests: that equality tends to be “naturalized” in the social sciences and so regarded as the proto-cultural condition out of which structures of inequality are presumed to have developed by evolutionary differentiation (cf. Fried 1967). Thus it is not equality, but the origin and maintenance of inequality that is viewed as problematic and therefore the primary subject of sociological speculation and theory. Relatedly, inequality is taken by many to be universal (cf. Fallers 1973) — an inherent property of all human social systems; or the term “egalitarian” is applied by default, as a residual category, to those societies that otherwise lack clearly defined hierarchical features.

In discussing “egalitarian” societies, it is useful at the outset to distinguish between “equality”, “equality” and “egalitarian”. The distinction, I propose, is not unlike the one that some have drawn between the “individual”, as an entity arguably constitutive of all societies, and “individualism”, an ideology present in some societies, absent in others, that gives accent to the individual, to individual autonomy, and so on. “Equality”, like “individualism”, is a cultural construct. Following Woodburn (1982:431-432), I would argue that the related term “egalitarian” is therefore best reserved for societies in which relations of equality, to the extent that they exist, are:

not neutral, the mere absence of inequality or hierarchy, but [are] *asserted* [emphasis in the original], ... repeatedly acted out, [and] publicly demonstrated ...

An “egalitarian” society is therefore a cultural configured social system, just as is a “hierarchical” one. These distinctions may be briefly summarized as follows:¹

equality

1. Following Woodburn, a cultural construct or set of ideas,
2. which therefore operates at the level of ideology;
3. has the potential for creating objective relations of equality; that is, as ideology, of configuring social relationships in its own image; and
4. has also the mystificatory potential to obscure or conceal relations of inequality.
5. “Egalitarian” is an appropriate term since in the standard concise Oxford definition, it refers to “the principle of equal rights, etc. for all persons”, that is to say, it has to do with the *principle* or *concept* of equality, i.e. with jural rather than *de facto* reality.

equality

1. refers to the process whereby individuals compare themselves with each other and find themselves the same;
2. operates at the level of objective conditions of existence.
3. “Equality”, in common standard usage, refers to the notion of equivalence; to “The condition of having equal dignity, rank, or privileges with others; the fact of being on an equal footing” (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition).

Contrasting these terms, in a parallel way:

hierarchy

1. like equality, is a cultural construct,
2. which similarly operates as ideology, and
3. following the numbered points above, has the ability to create and maintain relations of inequality; and
4. also has a mystificatory potential to conceal relations of equality. [This latter possibility is little discussed by students of hierarchy, although Michael Allen (1987), in pointing up the existence of relations of equality in a Nepalese society, shows how both caste ideology and Dumontian social theory similarly work to mask its presence.]

inequality

1. refers to the objective conditions of existence in which individuals have different opportunities and achieve different statuses.

The relation between these notions can be depicted by means of a simple four-cell diagram (Figure 1). Here "hierarchy" and "equality" have to do with culture and ideology; "inequality" and "equality" with material conditions and social relationships. Read vertically, "inequality" is opposed to "equality"; "hierarchical" to "egalitarian".

	social relations	ideology
differences between persons	unequal conditions	hierarchical ideology
equivalence between persons	equal conditions	egalitarian ideology

Figure 1. Hierarchy and equality

It follows from these distinctions that conditions of inequality may exist in an "egalitarian society" and those of "equality" in a "hierarchical" one, and, indeed, equality and inequality may coexist as modalities within a single social system (cf. Flanagan 1989:261). Similarly, a point made in this paper, "egalitarian" and "hierarchical" cultural values may be contextually articulated in different domains within the same society. In what follows I use these notions to reexamine a debate concerning the characterization of Iban society as "egalitarianism".

The Iban, Borneo, and the "Egalitarianism" Debate

Most ethnographic observers of the Iban, the most populous ethno-linguistic group of West-Central Borneo, have characterized Iban society as "egalitarian", "democratic" and "classless" (cf. Freeman 1970, 1981; Heppell 1975; Sather 1980; 1978). Thus Freeman (1970:129) asserts:

Under Iban *adat* all men are equals ... Iban society is classless and egalitarian — its members, individualists, aggressive and proud in demeanour, lacking any taste for obeisance.

Characterized in this way, the Iban are frequently contrasted with neighbouring upland peoples of central Borneo, the majority of whom live in societies formed of ascribed social strata characterized by *corvée* labour and the monopolization of political authority by an upper stratum of chiefly families (Ave, King and DeWit 1983:16-28; King 1976, 1978:27-32, 1985; Morris 1978, 1980; Rousseau 1978, 1990). Since Edmund Leach's (1950) pioneering account of indigenous structural variation in Borneo, most comparative observers have endorsed, in one form or another, the broad distinction that he drew in this account between "egalitarian" and "stratified societies" (1950:75-78), and, like Leach, have taken the Iban to be the prime paradigmatic example of the former — an "egalitarian society" in which "class stratification ... is absent in a formally instituted sense" (1950:71).²

This characterization of Iban society and, indeed, the more general distinction between “egalitarian” and “stratified” social systems has not gone unchallenged. Thus, for example, Alexander (1992:207) notes that Leach’s original characterization of Bornean societies “was based neither on wide empirical knowledge nor sophisticated theoretical analysis” and that it, and most subsequent “attempts to rank whole societies and cultures on a continuum from egalitarian to stratified have focused attention on relatively narrow questions of political authority and power”. Thus, while ascribed rank may be a salient feature in the political structures of many central Bornean communities (1992:207),

productive surpluses are small and the means of production are freely available to most households, while ideologies of hierarchy are underdeveloped with expressions of deference limited to specific contexts. In some of these societies ... local communities have considerable economic and political autonomy and the tenor of daily life is more appropriately described as egalitarian rather than hierarchical.

As Alexander (1992:208) goes on to observe, the fact that some political relationships “are grounded in inequality does not entail that equally important economic and gender relationships are similarly constituted”, nor should “notions of hierarchy ... be privileged over explicit values of personal and household autonomy”, which appear as at least as important in shaping social relationships (see also Nicolaisen 1986). Moreover, as she shows, ascriptive categories — where they exist — are not necessarily ranked lineally, but in many contexts are “constituted by reciprocal rather than subordinate relations”, with the result that “hierarchy and equality are not necessarily incompatible”, but may and, indeed, regularly co-occur (1992:207). From these observations, Alexander (1992:207-208) suggests that to reify ascribed status as a “system” may constitute “premature conceptualization”. The same may be said of “equality” and “egalitarian”. In both cases, it is not the presence of a “system”, but rather the combination of egalitarian and hierarchical values with structures of equality/inequality that raises the more pertinent questions concerning the processes by which “equality” and “hierarchy” are socially realized and reproduce themselves through time (see Alexander 1992:208).

In an inverse way, others have also questioned the appropriateness of the term “egalitarian” when applied to the Iban. Thus, Rousseau (1980:54) has argued that, in the case of the Iban, “an egalitarian ideology”, in actuality, “hid a structure of inequality” and that traditional Iban society was, in fact, composed of three “largely hereditary status levels” (1980:59-60). Freeman (1981), in response, has cogently laid out the distinctively “egalitarian” — and in particular non-ascriptive — features of Iban social and political life. He seriously weakens his argument, however, by downplaying the presence of objective inequalities.

In this regard, Murray (1981), in a less sweeping critique, points up the seemingly contradictory association of an egalitarian ideology with overt social and material inequalities. Unlike Rousseau, she argues, however, for the critical importance of ideology, seeing it as a major factor that prevents these inequalities from assuming a permanently institutionalized form. Later, I will return to these and other arguments, but here, in addressing the larger issues involved, it is important to locate the problematic of the debate where it rightly belongs, within Iban society itself, and so to approach the question of "egalitarianism" by seeing it — not only as a question of analytical concepts — but as an actor's problem as well.

At the level of everyday cultural values, the Iban are an assertively egalitarian people. Thus they guide their daily life by an *adat* order that inscribes equality of condition as a fundamental social premise. According to Iban *adat*, every individual is equal by potential, sharing identical rights and obligations, without inherited distinction or privilege. Like the white cotton threads referred to in the saying by which I preface this paper — and from which Iban women begin the complex process of dyeing and weaving *ikat*-textiles — all persons are thought to begin life equal, equivalent and undifferentiated. But Iban society is also intensely competitive. Through competition individuals gain distinction and earn a place for themselves in the social order. Thus the Iban compete not only to assert their equality — to prove themselves equal to others — but they also seek, if possible, to excel and so exceed others in material wealth, power and reputation.

What is significant to note, however, is that equality of potential is, for the Iban, a precondition for the attainment of achieved inequality. The two, in other words, are not in opposition, but are dialectically related (Sather 1989). Through competition persons are both individuated — gaining for themselves "name" (*nama*) and "reputation" (*berita*) — in short, "making themselves seen" (*mandang ka diri*) — and, at the same time, they are also socially differentiated, attaining in the process of competition social position and assuming roles and community statuses on the basis of their achieved inequalities of reputation, experience, skills, wealth and power. The resulting outcome is, by intention, unequal. Thus it can be argued that the nature of Iban cultural premises is such that they make cognitive sense of **both** equality **and** inequality — of sameness as well as of difference.

Like the coloured cotton threads which, following dyeing, Iban women weave on their looms to create textile designs, each individual is, at once, differentiated as a result of competition, becoming figurative as the saying says, "red, yellow, green, and blue", and, at the same time, he or she is incorporated into the social fabric by his or her achievements, thereby assuming a unique place within its overall design. The textile metaphor thus maps a cognitive image of society that

is by nature both equal and unequal, its members, as social actors, alike in potential, yet differentiated and unequal by outcome.

Beginning with this metaphor, and returning to it once again at the end, I will try in this paper to show how, for the Iban, cultural understandings serve as one of the means by which Iban actors attempt to make sense of the social, political and material inequalities that are present in a society that is otherwise dominated by egalitarian values. Drawing on my fieldwork with the Saribas Iban, I will attempt to show how, in part, inequality of outcome is conceptualized as a kind of “proportional equality” (Lakoff 1964), that is to say, inequality is seen as largely proportional to merit. Thus those who achieve more are expected to win greater honour in relative proportion to their greater achievement. Inequality is also “historicized” and linked to the past achievements of ancestral founders whose accomplishments to some degree “freeze” merit, making its rewards available to successive generations of future descendants.

Finally, while principles of equality structure major areas of Iban social life, they are balanced, particularly in the ritual domain, by principles of precedence and hierarchy. This conjunction of “equality” and “hierarchy”, I argue, forms another way in which the Iban come to terms with inequality. The resulting articulation is made possible by the fact that personal success is won largely outside the *adat* community, through actions undertaken in an external world beyond the immediate boundaries of each individual’s longhouse. Success, moreover, is valorized by public rituals in which the participants, drawn from a wider regional society, enact a social order modelled, not on the everyday world of immediate experience, but on an unseen, idealized world of the gods, spiritheroes and ancestral dead. Hierarchy is thus constituted within a ritual context, distinct from the largely egalitarian relations of everyday longhouse life, and its constitution projects an image of inequality that is, while non-egalitarian, yet distinctively individuated and non-ascriptive, and so congruent with the essentially egalitarian ethos asserted in other social domains. Each individual, rather than being aggregated into a socially-defined stratum, is expected to gain for himself and to ritually validate a fluid personal ranking, which is fixed and rendered inalterable only by death. At death, a summation is made of each individual’s accomplishments. On this basis are determined the details of death and mourning ritual. In Iban belief this final aggregate ranking, together with any other intangible marks of achievement that were won in life, are carried by the soul of the dead on its journey to the Otherworld. Status inequality is thus returned, as we shall see, to the unseen world from which it derives. Paradoxically, while the Otherworld is conceptually hierarchized, achieved inequalities are thereby removed from the living world and so made uninheritable. As a consequence, the members of each new generation must start afresh — like undyed cotton threads — attaining distinction and a place for themselves in the social fabric by their own initiative and effort.

Iban Egalitarianism

The richly detailed ethnographic writings of Derek Freeman (1970, 1981) present the most sustained argument in favour of Iban "egalitarianism". Thus Freeman maintains that Iban social organization, with its pervasive emphasis on "choice rather than prescription", approximates in practice what John Locke (1690) portrayed in the ideal, "a state of perfect freedom and equality" in which all are free:

to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, ...; without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man ... (quoted in Freeman 1981:51).

Freeman's arguments are complex. However, three points stand out as central:

First, under the terms of Iban *adat*, all persons are viewed as "equal" or "alike" (*sama* or *sebaka*) (1981:50). Secondly, while marked differences of wealth, power, and prestige exist, there are no ascribed strata. Thus, in principle, any individual of ability may, by his or her own effort, gain prestige and become a respected leader. In place of ascribed ranking there exists an "elaborate prestige system" in which all are free to compete on a more or less equal footing (1981:38). Unencumbered by hereditary privilege, Iban social organization encourages, Freeman (1981:50) argues, "the emergence of individual talent and creativity", including the rise of "natural leaders" to positions of power.

Thirdly, Iban society was historically acephalous. Until the establishment of the Brooke Raj, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, there were no permanently constituted positions of formal authority above the longhouse level (cf. Pringle 1970:157). This is not to say that regional leadership was lacking, but that it took a distinctively "egalitarian" character (see Sather 1994:9-17). Thus both regional and longhouse leaders had, and, in the latter case, continue to have, only limited power, exerting authority mainly by persuasion and consensus. In all social undertakings allegiance to leaders is voluntary and the absence of coercive authority — the right of a leader to use force against recalcitrant followers — is pervasive, its absence permeating Iban social life, down even to the level of the *bilik*-family (Freeman 1981:47).

Equality and *Adat*

Although Freeman stresses the significance of *adat*, it figures very little in the Iban "egalitarianism" debate. This is unfortunate as *adat* is seen by the Iban themselves as a normative order that is very largely constitutive of society (Heppel 1975; Sather 1980). Thus every longhouse is thought to comprise an *adat* community, the continued existence of which depends upon its members behaving as the rules of *adat* require. According to *adat*, equality of condition is a fundamental premise. No overt recognition is given to ranking or to

hierarchical status in defining interpersonal rights and obligations, with the single, partial exception discussed later in this paper of *adat mati* or death rules. This exception aside, every adult, according to the terms of *adat*, is subject to the same rights and duties, without inherited distinction or regard to his or her achieved status, and, in principle, is equally empowered to act within the longhouse as an autonomous agent in jural matters (Freeman 1981:50). The basic unit of Iban society is the *bilik*-family, and all adult family members, whether they were born into the group, married-in, adopted, or incorporated — male or female — share identical rights of membership (Freeman 1957).³

Not only is equality expressed through the normative rules of *adat*, and in adherence to these rules in longhouse relationships, but it is also affirmed in the workings of the *aum* (v.f. *baum*), a deliberative face-to-face meeting of longhouse members convened by the community headman (*tuai rumah*) whenever matters of common interest arise, for deliberations concerned with the administration of *adat*, or with repairing disturbances to the ritual order (cf. Cramb 1989:281; Sather 1980:xxiv-xxvi). Although some families take a more active role in these discussions than others, the tenor of the *aum* is markedly democratic. Every adult has a voice, dissenting views are normally respected, and whenever a decision is reached, discussions are characteristically lengthy and generally strive for unanimity.

By contrast, *adat* in neighbouring “stratified” societies very largely concerns status obligations and entitlements of rank. Thus, coastal Melanau society, to take one example, was historically divided into three rank categories corresponding roughly, Morris (1978:48, 1983) tells us, to “aristocrat” (*menteri*), “freeman” (*bumi*) and “slave” (*dipen*). Not only did elders of the aristocratic stratum monopolize *adat*, its enforcement and oral transmission, but the rules of *adat* themselves functioned mainly in the past to stipulate the ways in which individual Melanau expressed membership in one or the other of these categories in their overt public behaviour. Thus, for example, on the occasions of births, namings and death, *adat* stipulated the details of ritual behaviour and the symbols, insignia and forms of speech appropriate between members of different ascribed strata. It also defined the corvée services and material gifts that commoners and slaves owed chiefly families and the occasions on which these were due (Morris 1983:3).

The Iban situation is profoundly different. While *de facto* inequality is certainly present, the framework of cultural understandings differs with the result that such inequality is perceived as having a different source and is understood and socially expressed in very different ways. Thus, for the Iban, inequality is thought to be a matter of achievement rather than birth-right. Consequently, it is equality, not inequality, that is inscribed in *adat*. While every individual, in principle at least, is thought to begin life more or less equal,

it is not "equality" that is the goal in the sense of sameness, but "proportional equality", the ideal that inequality should be relative to merit; that if one person accomplishes more than another, he or she should enjoy greater reputation and esteem in proportion to his or her greater accomplishments. Iban institutions also work, as we shall see, to mitigate the consequences of inequality and so to assure that most persons enjoy some minimum of achieved respect.

Egalitarian Leadership

Of Freeman's three points, the most contentious has proved to be the last: his characterization of Iban leadership as voluntaristic and consensual. Thus Marshall Sahlins (1958:313), in an early review of Freeman's *Iban Agriculture* (1955), noted that while Iban political institutions appear to be "elementary" — "hardly surpassing a family level of integration" — the Iban were historically able to organize large-scale war parties, comprising hundreds, at times thousands, of warriors. Sahlins questioned how this was possible in the absence of chieftainship, ascribed ranking, or corporate descent groups.

In his essay on the kindred, Freeman (1961) gave a partial answer. Thus, he noted that the highly ramifying and preferentially endogamous kindred networks of the Iban extend from longhouse to longhouse, over entire river watersheds, thereby providing the basis for large-scale mobilization, including in the past mobilization of warriors for raiding and predatory expansion. Moreover, as Freeman (1961:214) goes on to observe, in assembling war parties, "institutionalized authority" was not required, that is to say, authority which "allows its holder to discipline unwilling followers". This was because Iban men joined war parties by choice. They come together of their own free will, under the leadership of men of demonstrated ability, who were able to attract and hold their allegiance by virtue of their personal qualities as leaders. Thus Iban war parties took the form of "loosely organized" companies of "free and equal men" (1961:214). Leaders and followers alike shared a common interest in gaining personal renown, were usually kin, and in coming together both, in Freeman's terms, "were doing what they were doing because they wanted to" (1961:214). Each, it may be said, acted in accordance with the Iban notion of *muntis ka diri'*, "choosing for oneself".

Donald Brown (1979) has more recently re-examined the question of Iban leadership. He begins by applauding Freeman's emphasis upon its consensual basis (1979:20) and like Ulla Wagner (1972), he argues that the power of Iban leaders was consistently underestimated in the past because it does not fit well with Western notions of authority. Thus, while the Iban lacked the "hereditary chiefs" and ascribed ranking of some of their neighbours, they nevertheless "did in fact enjoy governmental institutions", including, in the pre-Brooke and early historical period, a permanent pattern of supra-local leadership (Brown 1979:16; see Sather 1994:9-12).

In the Saribas river area of Sarawak, regional leaders were known traditionally as *tuai menoa*. The most powerful of these were drawn from the *raja berani*, literally “the rich and brave”, and were typically self-made men with a reputation for military prowess, resourcefulness and wealth. Reputation was gained primarily through farming success, trade in surplus rice, fairness in dealing with others; migrational leadership; and from bravery and personal leadership in warfare and raiding. Greatest renown attached to those who were recognized as major war leaders. Such men were called *tau’ serang* or *tau’ kayau* [*tau’*, “have the capacity”, “be able to”; *serang*, “attack”; *kayau*, “war” or “raid”], and in the past no title carried greater prestige or was more sought after.

In nineteenth-century Sarawak, Iban war leaders, when they were first encountered by European observers, were indisputably powerful figures, capable of entering into military alliances with one another and of mobilizing hundreds of followers under their direction, for territorial expansion, raiding and the defence of their home rivers. In newly-opened regions, *tuai menoa* allocated settlement areas among their followers, arbitrated boundary disputes and set aside forest reserves (*pulau ban*) for communal use as a source of boat- and house-building timber (cf. Sather 1994:11-12). In the past, military status, like many other types of status in Iban society, was finally ranked or *be-rintai*. Thus, a young man who displayed bravery on the battlefield was called a *bujang berani* or “brave bachelor”. If he succeeded in killing or taking the head of an enemy (*bedengah*), he was entitled to receive an *ensumbar* or “praise-name”. The most successful and experienced warriors serving under a senior war leader’s command were called his *manok sabong*, literally his “fighting cocks”. In the past *tuai menoa*, including *tau’ serang*, generally settled their most trusted *manok sabong* at the *pintu kayau* (“doors of war”), the areas along the frontiers of their domain most vulnerable to attack or invasion. Once a man gained a reputation for bravery and judgment, others might join him, under his leadership, on small raids (*anak kayau*) of his own devising. Only gradually, after having achieved success as an independent leader, was a man likely to begin his ascent to the status of a veteran war leader (*tau’ kayau*). Only a man of exceptional abilities, who had managed to gather around him a following of seasoned warriors, and who was able to forge alliances with others and had demonstrated his ability to mobilize and lead large-scale raids and defensive campaigns, was likely to be accorded the highest rank and acknowledged as a *tau’ serang* (cf. Sandin 1980:80-81; Sather 1994:12). Such men were extremely rare. They were also believed, in addition, to be supernaturally-inspired.

Brown describes the *tau’ serang* as the holder of a political “commission” (cf. Brown 1973a), in this case, what he calls a “charismatic commission”. The *tau’ serang* obtains his “commission”, not by appointment or succession, but by means of a dream experience, or by a series of dreams in which his future success as a war leader is foretold. Such dreams were considered to be a sign of direct

spiritual inspiration and were typically accompanied by gifts from the guiding spirit-heroes or gods of magically-potent war charms (*pengaroh*) (Sandin 1966). Success in war served to validate such dreams, giving authenticity to an aspiring leader's commission. It also, as a rule, permitted successful war leaders to attract still larger followings and to enter into warring alliances with other successful leaders.⁴ With the establishment of Brooke rule in the second half of the nineteenth century, this pattern of competitive regional leadership was superseded by the creation of formal administrative districts under officially-appointed Penghulu or "native chiefs". Thus the Iban were brought within a centralized governmental structure. Although *tau' kayau* and *tau' serang* were sometimes appointed as Penghulu, this centralized structure was externally imposed and succession was routinized in a way diametrically opposed to traditional Iban political values (Freeman 1981:15-24; Sather 1980:xiv-xxviii).

In referring to Iban war leaders of the past, Brown (1979:18) contrasts a "commission", characterized by what he calls "ad hoc or discontinuous leadership", with an "office", characterized by "a system of perpetual succession". The *tau' serang's* commission, unlike an "office", attached to his person alone and was not derived from any overarching governmental authority. Instead, it came from what was taken to be a "sign" of direct supernatural authorization. I shall return to the issue of leadership again presently, but the point that Brown makes here is an important one: namely, that the *tau' serang* and other veteran Iban war leaders, though not office-holders or part of a formally constituted hierarchy of authority, represented nevertheless highly effective leaders, who, operating above the level of the longhouse, were a regular feature of traditional Iban society, exercising very real power, even though the positions they occupied were not "regularly constituted" in the sense that each individual leader had to obtain and validate his own personal dream-commission, there being, until the beginnings of colonial rule, "no way to pass one person's commission on to a successor" (Brown 1979:17).

The Concept of *Pun*

In a critical rejoinder to Rousseau (1980), Freeman (1981) presents a more detailed account of Iban leadership than is contained in his earlier work. Here he points up in particular the connection that exists between what he sees as the distinctively egalitarian nature of Iban leadership — its consensual, non-instituted basis — and what he rightly calls "a most fundamental concept of traditional Iban society, that of *pun*" (1981:31).

Literally, *pun* means source, basis, origin, or cause (Richards 1981:290; Sather 1993:75-76). Its root meaning "is that of stem, as of a tree, from which the development of any kind of activity springs" (Freeman 1981:31). In reference to group undertakings, *pun* typically describes the person who initiates or originates an action, who announces its purpose, and enlists others to join him

or her in bringing this purpose about. As an example, Freeman (1981:35) describes the *bejalai*, a journey undertaken, primarily by young men to gain wealth and social recognition:

A *bejalai* group was formed by an experienced individual announcing his intention to undertake such a journey; and as others *chose* [emphasis in the original] to join him, and a group of individuals with common interests formed, so he became its *pun bejalai*, and its leader (*tuai*).

Similarly, with other undertakings — migration, for example, the construction of a new longhouse, or the launching of a raid — each is initiated by a *pun*, who, once the action is under way, became, for the members of the group formed to carry it out, their *tuai* or leader (lit. “elder”). The point that Freeman makes is that anyone who chooses to may assume the role of initiator and provided he proves himself competent, may attract and hold a following as its leader. Those who follow an initiator’s lead, and so recognize him as their *tuai*, do so voluntarily, of their own free will. Thus the *tuai*’s position is in no sense ascriptive, or socially prescribed, and, as Freeman (1981:38) aptly puts it, each “individual had [traditionally] to be the source (*pun*) of his own achievements”.

But in addition to this, the notion of *pun* has also a range of further meaning that reflects a different and somewhat more complex image of Iban leadership. Not all groups in Iban society are short-lived like those formed for *bejalai* or to carry out a raid. In this respect, the term *pun* may also convey a notion of group continuity. For example, a *pun tusut* refers to a “main-line” genealogy from which branching or collateral lines are said to “break off” (*mechah ari*, v.f.).⁵ Each branching line has a new “source” and the potential of becoming a main-line itself in time. This same imagery of “stem” and “breaking off” also applies to the *bilik*-family and is used to describe the processes of family succession and partition. Partition, like genealogical branching, is described as “breaking from the *bilik*” (*mechah ari bilik*). The seceding family is distinguished as the “new family” (*bilik baru*) and, similarly, its founder, with regard to its other members, becomes its new “source” or *pun* (Sather 1990:32-34, 1993:68-70). At the same time, continuity is marked by a succession of *pun*. Thus every *bilik*-family has a *pun bilik*. From its founding onward, it is through the person of its successive *pun bilik* that a family is said “to be continued” (*tampong*) from generation to generation. Thus the *pun bilik* is the acknowledged heir through whom, in each generation, *bilik* rights and possessions are said to devolve (cf. Sather 1993:70). As such, the “family source” represents the living embodiment of *bilik* continuity, the chief link between its present and past generations, and the reference point in terms of whom all other members reckon their *bilik* affiliation. The continuing succession of *pun bilik* thus symbolizes the continuing life of the *bilik*-family, including that of its jointly held assets and sacra, for which the *pun* is the primary custodian. Similarly, every longhouse, too, has a *pun*. At the time of

house-construction, the *pun rumah* acts as the original founder by erecting the first house-post, but also, with the passage of time, like the *pun bilik*, the original *pun rumah* is succeeded by a continuing series of successors, each of whom embodies the community's continuing existence and serves as the principal custodian of its sacra, particularly its cooling charms or *ubat penyelap* (Sather 1993:68-74).

Pun in this second sense thus represents a locus of continuity, the "stem" through which the continuing life of any permanently constituted social group is thought to flow. The same principle applies to families, longhouses, and to entire riverine societies, all groups that, for the Iban, endure through time.

Recognition of this double meaning of *pun*, as both initiator and locus of continuity, helps illuminate the historical dynamics of Iban leadership. Thus in times of outward expansion, the Iban were able to throw up an array of effective leaders, who, as initiators of action and organizers of collective projects, led migrations, pioneered new areas of settlement, defeated rivals and competitors in war, felled the jungle, and founded new longhouses and *bilik*-families. Those who were successful in these undertakings were, and continue to be, remembered, and so form the principal founders and connecting links in the main-line genealogies by which the Iban remember and celebrate their ancestral past (Sather 1994:27). Those who can claim direct connection to these leaders stood, and continue to stand the best chance of becoming longhouse *pun* and *tuai* and of making their own genealogies the principal main-line *tusut* of the longhouses and riverine communities in which they live. Later on, in times of social and territorial consolidation, when the flow of migrants slows or ceases, successive generations of leaders, by invoking their genealogical links to these historical founders were able to assert a connection to this formative past, including its initiating "sources" (*pun*), and so were able to link their own claims to leadership to a potent image of societal origins and continuity. Hence, in this way, in long-settled areas such as the Saribas, genealogies and related oral historical narratives assume, in the competition for power and office, major political significance.⁶

Objective Inequality and the Absence of Stratification

In a final critique, Tania Murray (1981) offers what she describes as a "qualification" of Freeman's egalitarianism thesis. She challenges specifically his second point, namely that power, wealth and prestige are equally open to all. Basically Murray (1981:29) argues that "differential access to key means of production", namely to land for swidden cultivation, capital and other resources for investment in cash crops, produce marked inequalities between Iban families and that these inequalities give some *bilik* an enduring advantage over others. Such advantage, however, is never fully institutionalized. This is because of the existence, Murray maintains, of a well-developed "egalitarian ideology" which

prevents the crystallization of objective inequalities into a system of formal stratification. In terms of causality, Murray (1981:28) thus argues in her analysis for the relative autonomy of ideology.

In Murray's view a central tenet of Iban ideology is the premise that material success rests chiefly with the individual and is more or less commensurate with effort (1981:29). Here, however, reality, she suggests, is at odds with ideology. Iban *bilik* differ notably in the amount and quality of farmland they possess, with the result that some are much better positioned to succeed than others. Moreover, such advantage is heritable.

In Borneo, in some swidden societies, including, according to Rousseau (1987), the "stratified" Kayan, farmland is said to revert to longhouse management after each cycle of agricultural use.⁷ Cultivation rights are thus recongnized for only a single cropping, after which fallow land reverts to the community at large for future reallocation. In contrast, the Iban recognize permanent household rights of cultivation. Once land is cleared of primary forest, rights to its future re-cultivation devolve on the clearer's *bilik*-family and are inherited by successive generations of family members as part of the *bilik*'s estate. Thus, while equal rights prevail within the family, disparities in landholding are not only possible, but are the rule between *bilik*.

As long as stands of primary forest (*kampong*) remain within a longhouse domain (*menoa rumah*), individual families are able to enlarge their estate by annual forest felling (*berimba*). But once all land is felled, they must depend for future cultivation, from this point onward, on inherited plots of farmland cleared originally by previous generations of *bilik* members. It is at this point, when the community moves from a "pioneer" to an "established" system of swidden cultivation, that inherited inequalities in land-holding become permanent. Those who tend to be advantaged are most often core households whose members trace their ancestry back to the original pioneers and house-founders who first settled the longhouse domain and so initiated, and engaged over a greater number of generations, in the process of forest clearing. Such families have generally had a longer time in which to accumulate cultivation plots than those whose founders arrived later in the process. In this regard, economic advantage tends to reinforce the advantage which core families already enjoy in terms of their claims to local political and ritual leadership.

In the Saribas region inherited inequalities in land-holding are well documented. Except for the Rimbas, the principal tributaries of the main Saribas, including its upper reaches in the Layar, were first settled by Iban pioneers some 15 or 16 generations ago (Sandin 1967:16-23). The shift to an established pattern of swidden cultivation was completed, according to local genealogical traditions, some seven to eight generations ago, near the beginning of the nineteenth century, roughly one to two generations before the founding of the

Brooke Raj (cf. Cramb 1987; Sather 1990). Since then, the Saribas Iban have farmed inherited land, recleared each year from earlier cultivation and farmed by means of a long-established system of forest-fallow rotation (Cramb 1987; Sather 1985, 1990). Today no primary forest exists in these rivers, except for small ritually-interdicted islets (*pulau mali*), located chiefly along hilltops.⁸ In a detailed study of longhouse tenure, Robert Cramb (1989:284-285) has shown that for a representative upper Layar longhouse the most favoured 20 per cent of all *bilik*-families control 33 per cent of the total hill-rice plots within the community; the least favoured 20 per cent, only three per cent; while around a third of all *bilik* have insufficient land to observe an adequate cycle of fallow rotation. While better favoured families may lend or rent land to those who are less favoured, the extent of inequality is pronounced and its consequences are plainly visible.

The felling of primary forest "closes", Murray (1981:32) argues, "channels of social mobility", thereby ensuring the future material advantage of some households over others. The question she poses is why these inequalities have not given rise to institutions of formal ranking such as those that exist among the Kayan, Kenyah, Lahanan and others. Part of the answer, Murray suggests (1981:30-31), lies in migration. "The right of mobility is a key element", representing, she insists, "the crucial political difference" between the Iban and stratified communities like the Kayan, where chiefs strictly proscribe their subjects' movement (Rousseau 1978:86).⁹ For the Iban, freedom of movement acted as a check in the past on the authority of longhouse and regional leaders and levelled existing inequalities by allowing those who were disadvantaged to improve their lot by moving to new areas where unfelled land was still abundant. Here new *bilik* estates could be established and ambitious men could gain renown among their contemporaries and prominence among their future descendants as regional pioneers and *bilik*-founders.

The role of mobility, however, is both more limited and more complex than Murray's argument suggests. Although Iban *adat*, in principle, permits families to move "at will" (Freeman 1981:50), it imposes significant jural and ritual constraints on such movement (Sather 1993:73). In addition, migration was, and continues to be organized by groups, and, when it takes place, migration occurs under the guidance of recognized *tuai pindah*. Decisions to migrate are never made on a purely individual basis, but take place as part of a concerted enterprise involving other individuals and families, including, as we have already noted, an initiator (*pun*) and a migration leader (*tuai pindah*). Thus migration, as well as providing a means of social and economic mobility, was also bound up with competition for achieved status, and so was also an arena for future differentiation. Moreover, opportunities for migration were limited, even in the past. High levels of mobility characterized only frontier areas of recent territorial expansion, that in most areas of Iban settlement, disappeared early on in their

pioneering history. By contrast, in long-settled areas like the Saribas, migration meant for those who chose to emigrate abandonment of inherited farmland, fruit trees and other assets representing generations of *bilik* investment. Here emigration has occurred chiefly as a counter to the division of *bilik* estates following upon household partition and its effects have been mainly to preserve the agricultural viability of those families that have remained behind. Thus migration has tended, in the Saribas region at least, to reduce land-holding inequalities in the home area, both by removing the most seriously disadvantaged and by the reallocation of land among the remaining *bilik*. But, at the same time, migration also laid the foundations for new inequalities within the areas being settled. Thus migrant families, in pioneering a new area, attempted to lay claim to as large a cultivation reserve as they could by forest felling. In this way they sought to “historicize” their achievement, assuring by this means the future advantage of their descendants over the members of other households.

Finally, it must be noted that by means of the longhouse *aum* temporary cultivation rights may be extended from one *bilik*-family to another, as, for example, through the lending of plots of land for a single farming season (*nasih tanah*), or by gift or rental arrangements (Sather 1980:xix). Such temporary transfers are common and occur primarily as a way of ensuring that all families within a longhouse have access to sufficient land to provide for at least their minimal subsistence needs (Cramb 1989:282). In extreme instances of land shortage this may involve even the pooling of separate *bilik* holdings and their reallocation annually by the community as a whole (cf. Cramb 1987, 1989). An important corollary to Iban notions of equality under *adat* is a strongly developed sense that no family should be shamed or denied the minimal means necessary to assert its self-worth — hence none should be denied the requirements of survival, nor what is minimally required, provided they apply themselves, to compete with others for some modicum of respect. Here clearly egalitarian values play a role in the way in which Iban communities manage their land resources. Thus, in administering cultivation rights, specific *adat* rules, through decisions arrived at by the *aum*, may be modified, set aside, or applied by community consensus in ways that serve the overriding goal of maintaining some minimal degree of equality between longhouse families. These provisions — while not eliminating inequality — work to reduce its consequences, hence assuring, as a matter of community interest, a measure of longhouse equality.

Murray argues, as her final point, that in order to understand why unequal access to land and capital resources have not resulted in institutionalized inequality, we must consider in addition the role of trade and labour relations in the traditional Iban economy.

The Iban have for centuries engaged in inter-regional trade, beginning well before European penetration of western Borneo. For the Iban, rice, the primary

food staple, was also traditionally a major item of trade, at least until the introduction of cash crops and more recently labour migration. Thus surplus rice, rather than being redistributed within the community, shared out, or used in feasting or for ceremonial exchange, was externally traded, mainly to coastal Malay enclaves, largely through riverine trading channels. Thus families with surplus rice [and, to a lesser extent, forest products] annually traded these items for durable prestige wealth, principally imported jars and brassware. As an apparent consequence of this trade, intra-community sharing was minimized, and even among kin, rice tended to be traded or sold rather than being shared in the form of gifts or by means of ceremonial exchange. In transactions between kin, other items aside from rice were traditionally given, and indeed still are, notably vegetables, fruit and domestic fowl. Each *bilik*, in terms of its rice production, thus sought to accumulate its own trading surplus, even in the face of uncertain swiddening conditions,¹⁰ thereby reinforcing its relative autonomy *vis-à-vis* others. Owing to these characteristics, Sahlins (1972:224) singles the Iban out, and indeed other Bornean swidden agriculturalists as well, as being atypical of "tribal societies" in the extent to which they limit the sharing of staple food surpluses.

The prestige goods which a household received in return for the sale of its rice, among other functions, served traditionally as a buffer against poor harvests.¹¹ As Freeman (1970:267) writes:

In good years when a surplus of *padi* has been gained, it is exchanged for gongs, which are then available in years of shortage. Each season some families succeed in producing a surplus, while others find themselves with a deficit; and so, year by year ..., scores of different families exchange gongs for *padi*, or *padi* for gongs. Jars, though to a much lesser extent, are used in the same way. Again, money — obtained from the marketing of forest produce — is often used to purchase *padi*; and of recent years, cash crops — particularly rubber — have become increasingly important.

Today cash crops and outside wages have very largely taken over the role of rice in trade, but the same principles hold, and the significant point to be made is that each family directs its surplus production to the acquisition of money and durable prestige wealth, and that, while this wealth serves as an insurance against want, it is used, as a rule, neither to increase future household production nor to gain control over the labour of others. In short, it is not institutionally invested to reproduce permanent economic advantage.

This long-standing involvement in trade also shapes, Murray (1981:42) argues, the nature of labour relations, the latter forming, in turn, "a crucial factor in the self-definition of the Iban". The chief norm, largely followed in practice, is that household land is worked by household labour. However, most families also

engage, at least two or three times during the annual rice-farming cycle in inter-family labour exchange. This is called *bedurok* and involves primarily close kin, friends and longhouse neighbours, collectively *kaban belayan*. The fundamental characteristic of *bedurok* relations is that they operate on a principle of strict reciprocity. Thus each household gives a day's labour to each of its *bedurok* partners in return for a day's labour from each on its own farm. Labour is thus exchanged for labour on the basis of strict parity and no household gains additional labour from its *bedurok* partners. In this sense, the exchange is a perfect expression of the principle I have labelled "equality". The advantage of *bedurok* is that farm-work is completed more quickly on each *bilik's* farm and that this work takes place in a sociable atmosphere.¹² Except for the infirm and very young, no one is normally exempt from farmwork, and each household, through its *bedurok* relations, keeps precise control over its labour credits and debts, exchanging labour with others only on the basis of strict equivalence. Thus, again, favoured households can not, as a rule, translate their material advantage into additional labour, nor can they gain through *bedurok* a share of the surplus production of other households. Rice, however, may be traded for labour, giving, as we shall see presently, an edge to those who are economically favoured.¹³

Here Murray (1981:40) argues that these features of Iban society contributed to the formation, and are themselves a reflection, of a distinctive "self-understanding", a collective "definition of self", that constitutes, she maintains, the "generative principle" behind much of Iban social practice, including the absence of ascribed ranking. Thus, in an ideological sense, the Iban define themselves as autonomous, freely-mobile individuals; independent producers, each person separately able to trade his surplus production for a profit, disliking authority, and unhampered by hereditary relations of subordination. This self-definition acts both as a prerequisite to interpersonal competition and, at the same time, makes the Iban "unwilling to work for others and hence curtails the development of [permanent] political and economic inequalities" (1981:35).

While Murray's essay sheds valuable light on the nature of Iban "egalitarianism", pointing up, in particular, the significance of objective inequalities, her distinction between ideology and practice is often obscure and at times circular. Here, I think, rather than arguing for the causal autonomy of ideology, it is more useful to see Iban society, at the level of cultural understandings, as combining, in an internally coherent way, both "hierarchy" and "equality", and it is primarily the implications of this argument that I pursue in the remainder of this paper.

Equality and Hierarchy

Most local communities reside within a single longhouse (*rumah*). The latter consists of a series of laterally-joined family apartments (*bilik*), a passageway (*tempuan*), and open galleries (*ruai*), each section of the structure being owned and maintained by a separate family. The household or *bilik*-family normally contains three generations — parents, a son or daughter, and his or her spouse and their dependent children. The Iban household is ideally a persisting group. It is characteristically perpetuated in each generation by one child, real or adopted, who remains in the natal apartment after marriage and so acts as the principal heir to the household's estate, including its *bilik*. This heir may be equally a son or daughter (cf. Freeman 1957). As we have noted, most longhouses in the Saribas region contain a set of core families whose members are related to one another by close cognatic ties and who claim descent, characteristically by known genealogical ties, through an unbroken line of *pun bilik*, from the settlement's original founders. Such households tend to occupy the central apartments within the longhouse and generally control a larger share of cultivation plots than others. Other households are related more distantly, typically tracing their connections to the community's founders through the genealogies of one or more of its core *bilik*.

A longhouse is typically founded by an accomplished leader, who, once it is established, becomes the community's "house source" (*pun rumah*) and usually also its headman or "house elder" (*tuai rumah*). The positions of "house source" and "house elder" are separable, however, and, subsequent to its founding, they may be held by different individuals. In fact, in the lower Saribas, this is generally preferred, mainly because it is felt that the ritual sacra which the *pun rumah* cares for should not be exposed to the "heat" (*angat*) associated with the trouble cases and litigation which the *tuai rumah* hears at his family's section of the gallery. While the headman typically deals with mundane matters and acts as a local intermediary between the community and the state, the *pun rumah*, as the living embodiment of the community's founding ancestors, performs mainly a ritual office. At its founding, and subsequently each time a longhouse is rebuilt, the *pun rumah* erects the first support pillar (*tiang pemun*). The erection (*ngentak*) of this pillar ritually initiates the main phase of longhouse-construction (cf. Sather 1993:74-75). Ideally this principal source post is erected at the centre of the longhouse structure and as soon as it is raised, the main support posts of each of the other *bilik*-families comprising the house are erected in order, one at a time, moving outward from the *pun rumah*'s central post, first upriver and then downriver (see Sather 1993:76-77). The *pun rumah*'s post can thus be said to centre and establish the principal orientation for the community as an internally structured-whole. The erection of the first source pillar is accompanied by a major sacrifice and invocations which together establish the pillar's status as the principal *tiang pemun* for the community as a whole and its custodian, the

pun rumah, as the owner of the *adat genselan*, the *adat* by which the longhouse is preserved in a “cool” or ritually benign state (Sather 1993:73). Longhouses are continually threatened with the intrusion of spirits and other malevolent forces, by social disharmony, and the breach of ritual prohibitions (*pemali*), all of which may cause the community to become “hot” (*angat*). When this occurs, the *pun rumah* is normally called upon to perform the rites by which it may be restored to a “cool” or ritually benign state (*penyelap*), including the blood lustration (*genselan*) of the central *tiang pemun* and the application of special cooling charms (*ubat penyelap*) generally kept attached to the top of this post.

What is significant for our purposes here is that the offices of “source” (*pun*) and “elder” (*tuai*) act to hierarchize the chief structural units comprising the longhouse community in the Dumontian sense of “encompassment” (1970). Thus, as we have noted, there are both family and longhouse *pun* and *tuai*. Within the longhouse, each *tuai bilik*, in matters of *adat*, comes under the authority (*kuasa*) of the *tuai rumah*. The incorporation of the *bilik* within the larger *adat* community — and the corresponding relationship between the *bilik* elder and the longhouse headman — are symbolized most explicitly in the rules that regulate the use of the family hearths (*adat dapur*), including their initial installation in the longhouse at the time of house-construction (Sather 1993:73).¹⁴ These rules symbolize the household’s jural presence within the community and the bounds that incorporate it in the longhouse as a whole. The rupture of these bounds, as, for example, when a family departs to take up residence in another longhouse, must be preceded by a ritual “throwing away of the hearth” (*muai dapur*) and the payment of ritual reparation to those who remain. Similarly, the relationship between the *pun bilik* and the *pun rumah* is expressed in the ritual priority of the central source post over the secondary source posts belonging to each of the other *bilik*-families in the longhouse. Not only is the central *tiang pemun* the first to be erected (*ngentak ke-dulu*), but it takes ritual precedence over the others in the rites that are believed to safeguard the community’s ritual well-being (cf. Sather 1993:75).

Beyond this level of internal encompassment and order represented by the *bilik* and longhouse, their respective “sources” and “elders”, and symbolized by the hearths and posts, Iban social organization, as it transcends and knits together these groups, is also “based”, as Freeman (1981:50) notes, “on the kindred”. Thus, “in the classless society of the pagan Iban, kindred relationships were [and remain] pervasive” (1981:63).

Indeed, for the Iban, these relationships are not only pervasive but they are also highly inclusive. Thus the term *kaban*, which Freeman (1960, 1961) glosses as “kindred”, refers, in fact, not only to an individual’s cognates, but, in its most inclusive sense, to friends, neighbours, affines and acquaintances — to everyone, in short, who is not a “stranger”, that is to say, not an *orang bukai*,

literally "other people". Within this highly inclusive social field, the Iban distinguish more narrowly between *kaban mandal*, close personal cognates whose relationships are generally traceable, and *kaban tampil*, affines or, loosely, kin by marriage. At one level, all Iban feel themselves to be *kaban*. But more effectively, interlocking kindred networks, reinforced by endogamous marriage, provide the basis on which a multitude of groupings are typically formed, extending maximally, as we have said, over the entire river region in which each individual lives. In the past such ties were employed by regional leaders and men of ambition to organize war parties, mount *bejalai* expeditions or migrations, and to help keep the peace and arbitrate inter-longhouse conflict. They were also called into play on major ceremonial occasions and when new longhouses were built.

Another feature of Iban *kaban* relations is their strong generational emphasis. This is expressed in both intra-generational unity and inter-generational asymmetry. Thus a strong bond of solidarity characteristically exists between siblings which extends intra-generationally, across each generational level. Thus cousins and close friends, for example, tend to couch their relationship in a sibling idiom, regularly addressing each other as *menyadi*, or siblings. On the other hand, relations between generations are characteristically asymmetrical and generally marked by authority and respect. Consistent with the highly inclusive nature of Iban *kaban* ties, respect relations are generalized outward from the three-generation household and are extended to embrace the entire social field of cognates, affines, friends and longhouse neighbours — to everyone, in other words, who is not considered "other people". This generalization of respect relations is achieved in part by the use of teknonyms. Thus everyone who engages in frequent social relations is addressed, depending on sex and parental status, as "grandfather (*aki*)", "grandmother (*ini*)", "father (*apai*)", or "mother (*indai*) of so-and-so", using the name of a particular child or grandchild, or by personal name in the case of individuals who have not yet married and attained parental [or grandparental] status. This pervasive use of teknonyms produces a sociocentric categorization of society into three generational levels. Every person is located according to generation, as a child, parent, or grandparent, ensuring the observance, within the longhouse and among kindred, of appropriate degrees of respect. While inter-generational ties are thus unequal, it is, nonetheless, an inequality that is consistent with the egalitarian premises of Iban *adat*, in that all persons pass through these categories in time, regardless of their birth or achieved status, provided that they marry and bear children.¹⁵ Moreover, while dividing the society into horizontal levels, these levels do not form a lineal order in that political and economic power tend to be concentrated in the parental generation at the middle. Although the young are generally unequal to the old, everyone, it is important to note, has the same opportunity to marry, bear children, and to grow old, hence even for those who otherwise

enjoy little success in life, they can usually look forward in time, should they live long enough, to an honoured status in the community as categorical “parents” or “grandparents”.

Finally, for the Iban, kindred relations are significantly structured by marriage. Iban marriage is very largely endogamous, both preferentially and in actuality. Iban marriage rules thus act to consolidate kindred ties and, secondly, to incorporate non-cognates and those in danger of becoming non-cognates back into the field of one’s close kin. For the Iban, sexual relations (and hence marriage) are prohibited between all cognates of the same household, between siblings (full and half), and all cognates of different generational levels (Freeman 1960:73-74). The first of these prohibitions effectively embeds the household in the wider field of *kaban* relations. Marriage forges bonds of affinity between households, which, with the birth of children and the passage of generations, are converted into cognatic ties. Beyond the prohibited range of siblings, endogamous marriage is strictly intra-generational. Thus,

The intermarriage of cousins constantly reinforces the network of cognatic ties linking individual Iban, and kin that might otherwise have become dispersed are brought together again (Freeman 1960:76).

The marriage of cousins thus incorporates affines (*kaban tampil*) and prevents the dissolution of existing cognatic networks. Such consolidation is a continuous process, as without intermarriage, cognates are likely eventually to become “strangers”.

The emphasis in marital relations is on intra-generational solidarity. Following marriage, affinal ties tend to be reinterpreted as homologous cognatic relations, with the dominant emphasis on the solidarity of affines of the same generation. This is expressed not only at the level of marital alliance — for example, in the absence in most Iban communities of bridewealth and other forms of marriage payment potentially expressive of status differentiation — but it may also be seen in the interpersonal relationships that exist between affines themselves, notably between husbands and wives, their respective parents (*isan*), and co-siblings-in-law (*ipar*). Ideally, and very largely in practice, each of these relationships is complementary and reciprocal. The explicit aim in marriage negotiations is to maintain status equality between marriage partners and their *kaban*, and, following marriage, husbands and wives (*laki-bini*) tend to be treated as a single entity, for example, when they are called upon to perform parallel or complementary ritual functions during public gatherings.¹⁶

The Political Economy of Traditional Inequality

While relations of inequality are apparent within the longhouse and beyond, the dominant principle of everyday social relationships, as represented, for example, by community *adat* and the deliberations of the *aum*, labour-exchange,

and intra-generational relations between kindred and affines, is clearly one of equality. But equally clearly, Iban egalitarianism belongs to the variety that Woodburn (1982:446-447) has called "competitive egalitarianism". Here, in contrast to the "non-competitive egalitarianism" of, for example, the !Kung and Hadza, in which "equality does not have to be earned or displayed ..., but is intrinsically present as an entitlement of all men", equality is, characteristically, "only a starting point, a qualification to compete in a strenuous competition for wealth, power and prestige" (1982:446), the outcome of which may, of course, be highly unequal.

But for the Iban, a further point of significance is that competition, particularly between males, centres largely on activities that are engaged in outside the local community. Hence, as we shall see, it is largely through deeds performed beyond the boundaries of the longhouse that unequal status within it was, and continues to be, measured.

Thomas Gibson (1990:125), in an insightful essay on warfare in insular Southeast Asia, has argued that the interior shifting agriculturalists of Indonesia, Borneo and the Philippines were historically involved in "a loosely integrated regional political economy" dominated, through coastal markets and trading states, by institutions of "raiding and coerced trade". While this economy allowed individual interior groups "a significant degree of autonomy over their internal political and ideological systems", the specific location of each group in terms of regional trade and raiding relations importantly shaped, Gibson (1990:125-126) argues, its members' attitudes not only towards war and aggression, but also, more importantly, with regard to hierarchy and social ranking. While some groups were victims of raiding and expropriative trade, others, like the Iban, dominated these relations at the expense of their regional neighbours.

Historically, down through the beginning of the twentieth century, the Iban flourished as the most expansionistic and successful of all inland shifting agriculturalists in western Borneo (Pringle 1970). Today the Iban number nearly 500,000 and form the largest single indigenous group in Sarawak. Iban longhouses are typically located along the banks of relatively large, navigable rivers and their tributaries, facilitating communication and making possible an often intense involvement in inter-regional trade. At the same time, the existence of rivers has allowed the Iban to mobilize in much larger numbers than other, more remotely located shifting agricultural groups. In the past, their settlement along major rivers also meant that, in order to survive, the Iban had, very early on, "to adopt more aggressive tactics in their own defense" (Gibson 1990:138). Aggression became an integral part of Iban relations with the outside world, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Iban had emerged as a warring, highly expansive population, sweeping, as they moved north and eastward through central Sarawak, virtually all others before them, including

a number of stratified communities. Following their pacification, which continued into the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Iban became widely travelled traders and migrant labourers (see Sandin 1994:235ff.; Sather 1994:21-24).

Within this regional setting, the Iban saw themselves, in relation to the external world, largely in predatory terms — as predators on neighbouring tribes, whom they raided for heads, captives and land; on the environment whose forests they felled for farms; and on the regional economy, where they traded rice and forest products and earned wages, or where they gained prestige wealth, as surplus producers, migrant workers and traders (cf. Gibson 1990:140). It was from this predatory engagement with the outside world that prestige, power and wealth were, and, to a large degree continue to be won.

The political economy of the Iban was to a significant degree historically geared to this externally-located quest for achieved status. As we have seen, each household directed its surplus rice production primarily to trade. In addition, traditional methods of swidden cultivation were such that the labour of younger, more able-bodied men was required for less than half of each farming year. Returning to the longhouse for threshing in early April, and staying on through the *gawai* season that follows, men were generally free to leave again after the completion of the felling and clearing of new farms, between late June and August. Most households contain enough women and older men to free them during the rest of the year for such activities as *bejalai*, trading, labour migration, and, in the past, warfare and raiding. Historically, it was primarily through these activities, engaged in outside the longhouse, and also through the partial appropriation of the labour of women and the elderly within it, that Iban males won power, wealth and reputation.

For young men reputation was ordinarily gained initially through *bejalai* — by accomplishing successful journeys abroad (Freeman 1970:223). Later, after a man had married and began a family, prestige and reputation were gained chiefly by successful farming; the acquisition of prestige wealth, mainly through trade and the sale of rice; and, above all, in middle and later life, by success in warfare and headhunting. Greatest honour attached to those who led major migrations, or who, as *tau' kayau* and *tau' serang*, commanded warring expeditions and major raids. Besides taking heads, the Iban also took their enemies captive, chiefly for sale or ransom, although captives were also enslaved in the past. However, as Freeman (1981:43-48) rightly insists, slaves (*ulun*) never formed a permanent, hereditary stratum in Iban society, but, instead, were eventually either ransomed or adopted into an Iban household, usually that of their captor. Manumission by adoption (*betembang*) was marked by a declaration by the head of the adopting *bilik* that its members would kill anyone who persisted in referring to or treating the former captive as a slave (Sandin 1980:81-83). Thus

captives were enfranchised and socially incorporated into the community and even *bilik* of their captors.¹⁷ A man who successfully killed in war (*dengah*) was entitled to the use, particularly on public occasions, of an *ensumar* or "praise-name". In all these competitive undertakings, it was, and continues to be, not only skill, daring and personal prowess that was, and continues to be honoured, but, more importantly, the ability, as a leader and initiator of projects, to inspire and organize collective action, and to attract a following and to lead them, as a *tuai*, in the realization of a collectively shared purpose. Thus achievement was never entirely directed toward individualistic ends (Sather 1994:10).

Although Freeman is right that prestige and reputation are not strictly hereditary, and can be won only by individual effort, the outcome of this quest for honour and prestige was, as we have already noted, markedly unequal. Equality was only an initial precondition, the underlying social state from which individual men and women were expected, in varying degrees, to distinguish themselves. As Gibson (1990:140) observes,

The over-all ethos is one of achieved ranking. Every individual is expected to prove himself, but there is a finely graded ladder of achievement, with the ranking of individuals according to merit the ultimate goal.

At the bottom of this ladder were families who suffered chronic shortfalls in rice production, who were often unable to feed themselves, and who lacked the prestige wealth needed to fall back on in times of scarcity. Such persons lived in chronic debt to others, and, as a result, were obliged to repay their debts in part, or in whole, with family labour. In relation to their creditors, such families therefore existed in a state of long-term debt-liability (cf. Freeman 1981:49). Such persons were known as *jaum* or *pengurang*.¹⁸ As a rule, only those in extreme need assumed such debts, becoming, in effect, unequal suppliers of labour to their creditors, and although they otherwise enjoyed, unlike captive slaves (*ulun*), the same basic rights as other longhouse members, until they repaid their debts, they lacked the necessary means to compete with others for social position within the community and were generally unable to participate in the major Gawai rituals held in their longhouse and so were precluded from seeking public recognition for their deeds. Hence *pengurang* families were effectively debarred from asserting their equality and from competing with others in the prestige system. At the other end of the achievement ladder were the *raja berani*, the "rich and brave". The *raja berani* were, to begin with, men whose *bilik* produced surplus rice crops year after year; who were successful in amassing prestige wealth, and whose lives gave evidence of supernatural favour and inspiration. Those who received dream authorization and excelled as war leaders were additionally recognized as *tau' serang*. Very often those who attained

prominence were said to possess, besides spiritual inspiration, *seregah*, meaning “personal forcefulness”, the power to cause others to take notice, to inspire respect or possibly even fear. Thus, it is said that a timid man is “without *seregah*” (*nadai seregah*); a diffident man has only a little (*seregah mit*); while a successful leader characteristically possesses an abundance (*seregah besai*). Significantly, *seregah* is not something that a leader is born with, but is acquired and cultivated in the course of life.

For an ambitious man, acknowledgement as a man of substance was only the beginning of a life-long quest for renown (*benama*). There existed an ascending sequence of ritual festivals, known in the Saribas region as the *Gawai Burong*, by which if he so chooses, a man might seek to gain public recognition of his achievements, particularly in warfare and other male domains, including today politics and business (Sandin 1977). “Such rituals, the more complex of which (lasting for four or five days)”, were arranged in a sequential scale, with the sponsor “taking the invocation a stage further each occasion until, over a span of forty or more years, the sequence was completed” (Freeman 1981:40). Achievement was thus validated through ritual sponsorship and participation in a graded scale of *gawai* rituals, with the pursuit of the full sequence absorbing, for most Iban leaders and men of wealth, their entire adult lifetimes.

Textiles and “Women’s Warfare”

For women weaving constituted the chief counterpart to male warfare. Thus, for a woman, the foremost means of acquiring achieved status was through the weaving of textiles, in particular *pua’ kumbu’* or ritual *ikat*-cloth. While undyed cotton provides the Iban with a metaphor of equality — finished cloth, by contrast, represents the very embodiment of rank and status distinction. Just as men gained and made public display of their standing through their sponsorship and participation in *gawai* rituals, so too, woven cloth is ranked (*be-rintai*) — its ranking determined by the nature of its designs, the status of its weaver, and the particular ritual or stage of ritual in which it figures as a suitable object. *Pua’ kumbu’* are essentially sacred cloth. They differ according to their ritual use and the significance of their designs and are employed in every facet of Iban ritual life, to define ritual space for example, or to create and bridge boundaries between the human and supernatural worlds (see Empiang 1991:81).

Pua’ kumbu’ designs, in addition to their specific ritual use, are identified by the skill, seniority and expertise of the particular woman who weaves them (cf. Empiang 1991:80). As an embodiment of status, individual cloth designs are graded and each woman weaver is expected, in the course of her career, to progress systematically in her art, stage by stage, being (Empiang 1991:80),

... guided through each stage from the preparation of the cotton ..., the tying of threads, the dyeing process and the selection of a design [by more experienced women, with] ... each stage circumscribed by ritual.

As in warfare, success is believed to require, in addition to diligence and aptitude, spiritual inspiration and gifts of charms (*pengaroh* or *batu*), and through her art a woman is similarly expected, like a successful warleader, to enter into a special relationship with the supernatural. Consequently, like warfare, weaving, too, is also believed to be dangerous. Should a woman breach "the naturally sequenced order sanctioned by the spirits" — attempting a skill or a design beyond her level of attainment — her life is said to be imperilled. Each progressive stage of expertise was marked traditionally by the mastery of distinctive designs and by the increasing width of cloth that a woman was permitted to weave. In addition, in the Saribas, after the introduction of chemical dyes at the end of the nineteenth century, a weaver's status was also denoted by vertical coloured bands added as side borders, the order of colours being indexical of these stages of expertise.¹⁹ Instruction continued until a woman was acknowledged as having attained the stage of *indu nenkebang indu muntang*. At this stage, she was free to weave ritually dangerous patterns, provided she was sufficiently ambitious and daring, and to invent new designs inspired by her dreams. The highest level of attainment is that of *indu nakar indu gar* (or *tau' nakar, tau' ngar*), the phrase meaning, essentially, "women who know how to measure the mordants and perform the rites [with] divine assistance" (cf. Gavin 1991:4).²⁰ These women are recognized as the most proficient of all weavers and are said to be able to mix the mordant solutions. Completing the *nakar* process successfully is an extremely difficult undertaking and is called, fittingly, *kayau indu*, "women's warfare" (Gavin 1991:5). *Nakar* is performed ceremonially through a ritual called the Gawai Ngar (see Gavin 1991). Here the ritual mixing of mordants is sponsored by a group of women weavers and is led by the *tau' nakar tau' ngar*. In the sense that it valorizes her status, the Gawai Ngar thus functions like the Gawai Burong, except that the *indu tau' nakar* is not the sponsor of the ritual, but its chief officiant.

In the past those women who attained the status of *indu nakar indu gar* received special honours. Thus, traditionally they received from male warriors the newly-taken heads of slain enemies in their *pua' kumbu'* and at major *gawai*, including the Gawai Burong, they were called on to sing praise songs to the trophy heads (*naku antu pala'*) and to receive the pig's liver for divination by the male elders. Expert weavers were also honoured during other male-sponsored rituals, and upon her death, an *indu tau' nakar* could expect to receive the highest *adat mati* that a woman was awarded, higher than that received by all but the most honoured of Iban men. During the Gawai Antu, she alone prepared the

special *garong* baskets, dyed brilliant red called *kebur api*, that were used to commemorate the deceased *indu tau' nakar* of previous generations.

Ritual and Hierarchy

Within the wider riverine society, ritual formed the main arena, for both men and women, in which personal accomplishments were traditionally translated into socially acknowledged status. For the Iban, ritual also gives evidence of spiritual favour and provides the chief means by which participants may enlist further spiritual aid in their quest for still greater power and renown. "It was in this testing milieu", as Freeman (1981:40-41) observes,

that Iban leaders emerged. They were required, initially, to be men of substance and prowess in action; yet, much more important was the securing, in their ritual and spiritual lives, of the approval and support of the gods, for it was from this ... that their special charisma stemmed.

Not only was the status of the Gawai sponsor valorized within this ritual arena, but precedence among its participants was also given overt representation. At the heart of every *gawai* is a complex allegorical invocation (*pengap* [or *timang*] *gawai*) performed by a company of bards (*lemambang*) comprised of a lead bard, answering bard and chorus (Sandin 1977:6-14; Sather 1994:62-63). In this invocation, the gods — at the invitation of the spirit-heroes and their messengers, acting as intermediaries — descend to the earthly world to join the Gawai, bringing with them charms (*pengaroh*) and other spiritual gifts with which to repay the hospitality of their hosts. Here, on the latter's behalf, they are welcomed and entertained by the *Orang Panggau*, the Iban spirit-heroes and heroines. Both gods and spirit-heroes inhabit an unseen world of extraordinary deeds of valour, wealth, fame, spiritual power and honour, characterized by a finely graded hierarchy of achieved precedence and social standing. The chants of the bards both invoke and depict this world. Thus, they follow the journey of the gods as they travel through unseen regions of the cosmos, gaining wealth and spiritual power, clearing farms, or defeating enemies, echoing in these deeds the journeys of Iban men of reputation, on *bejalai*, migration, or as they travel to war or to fell the forest for new farms.

As the gods and goddesses descend to this world, they arrive, one-by-one, in inverse order of status. The last to arrive and be received is the principal god and his wife for whom the *gawai* is being held. Thus, in the case of the Gawai Burong, the principal deities are Singalang Burong, the Iban god of war, and his wife, Endu Sudan Berinjan Bungkong. As the human hosts validate their reputation and seek spiritual favour by feasting their guests, so the spirit-heroes and heroines, acting as hosts in the invisible world, feast the gods and goddesses on behalf of the human celebrants and sponsors. In the Gawai the human participants thus emulate (*nunda'*) the actions of the spirit-heroes, heroines, gods

and goddesses, making visible the unseen world invoked in the songs of the bards.

During the performance of a *gawai*, a major task of each household is that of *digir* or *bedigir*, meaning literally, to seat or arrange the celebrants within its section of the longhouse gallery "in order", "to line [them] up", arranging them in a linear ordering in emulation of the gods and heroes, according to their age, sex, generation and achieved ranking. Thus, at major junctures in the proceedings, for example, before feasting and oratory, sacrifice, or ritual processions, the *tuai gawai*, or principal sponsor, waves a cock along the longhouse galleries to signal to the individual *bilik* hosts that it is time to *bedigir*, to arrange the seating of the guests "in a line" according to their age and achievements. Thus, for each *bilik*, someone must be delegated to lead the guests to their seats and to arrange them in their correct order, beginning first with the oldest and most distinguished guests. At times during a *gawai*, guests and hosts are free to move from one gallery to another, mingling with other celebrants, and sitting wherever they please to gossip and joke with their friends and relatives, but at major ritual junctures, this order of precedence must be recreated, especially when food and drink are served (*nyibor*), for oratory, offerings and processions. Thus, for seating, the most honoured male guests are seated along the upper gallery (*dudok diatas*). The most honoured of all visitors are seated at the gallery belonging to the *gawai* sponsor (*tuai gawai*), while others are seated at other family galleries. The highest ranking sit at the middle of the sponsor's upper gallery and are flanked on each side, moving outward in both directions, by guests of descending age and achievement. Men of the host longhouse sit in a line along the middle gallery facing them, with the *gawai* sponsor seated at the centre of his middle gallery facing opposite his highest ranking guests. Women sit behind the men on the lower gallery or are received by their female hosts inside the family *bilik*. In this ordering, an idealized world of precedence is thus given concrete representation, as a finely individuated array of visitors and hosts, as celebrants are ranged along the galleries for feasting, or as they are called upon for oratory, to make offerings, or to circumambulate the longhouse interior in ritual processions.

Each time a *gawai* is held, an individual's achieved status is thus open to reassessment, and, with the passage of years and the birth of children and grandchildren, his or her age and generational status thus also change, and these changes are similarly registered, so that, through repeated participation in *gawai*, a continuous re-ordering of status relations takes place and is publicly acknowledged.

Major *gawai* rituals, although sponsored by a single individual [the *tuai gawai*], and hosted by the separate households that make up the sponsor's longhouse,²¹ activate a much wider sphere of relations, bringing together as

guests (*pengabang*) and supporters (*kaban*) a far larger group of related longhouses and *bilik*, whose members are allied to one another as *pesamakai* or “co-feasters”. In the absence of chieftainship, or of a formal hierarchy of supralocal political offices, *gawai* rituals played in the past, and continue to play, an important role in Iban society, helping to maintain its wider social and cultural cohesion. All major regional groups of Iban share a basically similar *gawai* tradition, although with important differences of detail, and through ritual feasting, inter-longhouse ties are reinforced and personal achievement is given recognition within a larger regional sphere composed of neighbouring longhouses arrayed along the same river or tributary system. In the past this same regional society also formed the primary social field within which the influence of *tuai menoa* and *tau' serang* was acknowledged and from which war parties were recruited and provisioned. Thus traditionally those who feasted together, as well as competing with one another for status, also fought together, intermarried, and settled their differences by arbitration. Unlike the essentially egalitarian longhouse, it was here, within this wider social field, that differentiation was given public expression.

While achieved rank and generational seniority are thus subject to constant ritual reassessment throughout an individual's lifetime, at death a final stock is taken of each person's accomplishments and, on this basis and in terms of the age and generational status he or she has attained, an *adat mati* or death *adat* is awarded by the deceased's kindred and community elders. This *adat* is figuratively reckoned, like a fine, in terms of grades of prestige wealth. *Adat mati* determines the details and duration of mourning observances and the type of *garong* basket that is woven for the deceased during the *Gawai Antu*, the final memorial rites for the dead held roughly once in every generation (Sather 1993:95ff). In the Paku region of the Saribas, there are eleven major grades (*ripih*) of *adat mati* represented by different *garong* basket designs. Five of these are reserved for children and for young men and women who have not yet married or attained parental status. The remaining six are awarded to adults. Gender is not distinguished, but the four highest grades are awarded on the basis of predominantly masculine achievement. The weaving of the baskets, and the collection of building materials for the construction of tomb huts, together open the first stage of *Gawai Antu* (Sather 1993:94). Following the main festival rituals, during which the collective dead of the community are recalled to this world, the *garong* baskets are removed from the longhouse and installed in the tomb huts erected during the concluding stage of the *Gawai* over the graves of the dead in the longhouse cemetery (*pendam*). Thus, for the Saribas Iban, achieved rank is not only fixed at the time of death but, on this occasion alone, and during the mourning and memorial rites that follow, it is specifically registered in *adat* distinctions which differ according to achieved rank.

In death, however, an individual's accrued status is also removed from the living world and transposed to the Otherworld of the dead (*menoa Sebayan*), a

transposition symbolized by the transfer of the *garong* baskets from the longhouse to the cemetery, where they are placed in the tomb huts, together with furnishings such as miniature sunhats, carrying baskets and fish traps, meant to serve the spirits of the deceased in the Otherworld. This transposition also applies to any marks of precedence, such as praise-names and honorifics (*julok*). These, too, are believed to be taken by the deceased on his or her journey to the Otherworld, where they remain attached to his person and therefore unavailable for inheritance by his descendants. In a sense, the relationship between the living and the Otherworld reverses, for the Iban, that of their Malay neighbours. Unlike the Iban, the latter live, in life, in a highly stratified society, but in death, they are stripped of all marks of status and buried in a plain white shroud, so that they enter the Otherworld, without distinction, as equals, much in the same way, conversely, as the Iban believe that the newborn enter the living world as undifferentiated equals, to begin, like undyed cotton thread, their social careers. For both, death may be said to transform the relationship that exists between equality and hierarchy, but in opposite ways.

This removal of the deceased's achieved ranking from the social world of the living — and its transposition to the Otherworld of the dead — is of utmost social significance. Here the ritual transformation effected by the Gawai Antu reverses, in a critical sense, that of the Gawai Burong and other major *gawai* celebrations, including the Gawai Ngar. For the Saribas Iban it completes a symbolic economy by which inequality and ritual are inter-related. Rather than replicating an unseen spiritual hierarchy in the human world, human hierarchy, in death, is given a final transposition to the Otherworld of the dead. Removed from this world, the deceased's rank, his praise-names, fame and other intangible marks of his or her status are thus rendered uninheritable. They remain attached to the individual who achieved them and therefore cease to have any living presence in "this world". As a consequence, the deceased's sons, daughters and other descendants, must begin life anew, like all others, equal and undifferentiated, and must win a place for themselves in the visible society of the living by their own efforts and through projects of their own devising.

Conclusion

The representation of Iban society as "egalitarian" has stirred considerable contention. For most anthropologists who have worked with the Iban, the debate is a source of no little misgiving. On the one hand, competition and achieved inequality occupy a central place in Iban society. On the other, Rousseau's (1980) view that an "egalitarian rhetoric" masks hereditary leadership and a tripartite system of stratification (1980:57) is based upon a profound misreading of the Iban ethnography (cf. Freeman 1981).

My purpose in this paper is essentially to move the debate from its present impasse by introducing two additional dimensions. First, I have sought to relocate

the analysis of relations of equality and hierarchy within a wider field of action, stressing the significance of external relations in generating inequality within Iban society. I have also tried to show how cultural understandings shape and give cognitive meaning to the existence of **both** equality and inequality. Secondly, I have sought to highlight the role of ritual, particularly in giving social expression to hierarchy. Not only does ritual sponsorship provide the chief means by which personal achievement is translated into social ranking, but ritual practice also gives concrete shape to Iban constructions of hierarchy, representing them, as we have seen, as a recreation of the unseen world of the gods, spirit-heroes and the dead.

My main argument here is that Iban society is most usefully seen — not as unequivocally “egalitarian” — but as structured around an articulation of principles of both “equality” and “hierarchy”, with relations of equality predominating internally — especially within the local longhouse community — in *adat* and relations within the family and between kindred and affines — while hierarchy is externally derived and, as a rule, valorized within a larger regional society through major ritual gatherings or *gawai*.

While it tends to be assumed that the stratified societies of Borneo evolved from more egalitarian ones, an assumption linked in some instances to the tendency, noted at the beginning of the paper, to “naturalize” equality, seeing it as socially anterior to hierarchy, it is quite possible that Iban “egalitarianism” represents a recent and highly specialized development, evolving historically as a successful adaptation to a regional system of inter-tribal raiding and trade. Along these lines, Gibson (1990:141) has suggested, more generally, that the frequent absence of formal hierarchy among inland shifting agriculturalists in insular Southeast Asia represents a defensive response to lowland and coastal states.

All these societies represented specialized adaptations to the regional political economy. All lack instituted hierarchy. The extreme emphasis on individual autonomy and rejection of super-household authority evident among them must be seen as a rejection of the political values of their predatory lowland neighbors. Far from constituting primordial classless societies, they must be seen as political groups which have been able to maintain significant degrees of autonomy only by developing special social mechanisms for evading control by the lowlands.

The situation among inland shifting agriculturalists in Borneo is far more complex than represented by the examples that Gibson uses for these generalizations. Here many inland groups did in fact develop instituted stratification, with the role of the upper stratum closely linked to leadership in war and control over external trade (cf. Morris 1980). In contrast, the Iban social system, combining initial equality with achieved, ritually valorized ranking, is closely bound up,

as I have tried to show in this paper, with a markedly successful adaptation, as vigorous predators, within a wider inter-regional economy of trade, conflict and migration. In this regard, there is some merit, I think, in Rousseau's (1980:60) suggestion that a major difference between the "stratified" Kayan and the "egalitarian" Iban was historically that Kayan "structures of exploitation" were internal, existing between the strata comprising Kayan society, while among the Iban "exploitation" was directed externally, at outsiders.

In this connection, we might speculate, I think, that relations of internal equality contributed to the major advantage that the Iban enjoyed in their competition with other "tribal" groups in western Borneo, namely their ability to maintain a high degree of cultural homogeneity in the face of territorial expansion and the extensive incorporation of captives and other outsiders through marriage and adoption. Hierarchy, at least in pre-state societies, tends to foster cultural differentiation and, in Borneo, as Brown (1973b) has shown, it often leads to the genesis of ethnic and subethnic divisions, while egalitarianism tends, by contrast, to be assimilative, breaking down such divisions. In this respect, equality very likely contributed to the powerfully assimilative nature of traditional Iban society. At the same time, Iban society, existing as it did historically in a social context of warfare and trade, also incorporated ritual elements of hierarchy, rewarding, within this context, those who excelled at gaining mastery over the external world. Thus personal achievement was linked through ritual to the common interests of society at large, ensuring that those who succeeded did so in ways that perpetuated the Ibans' predatory advantage over their neighbours.

References

Alexander, Jennifer

1992 Must ascribed status entail inequality? Reproduction of rank in Lahanan society. *Oceania* 62(3):207-226.

Allen, Michael

1987 Hierarchy and complementarity in Newar caste, marriage and labour relations. *Mankind* 17(2):92-103.

Appell, G.N.

1978 The status of social anthropological research in Borneo. In George N. Appell and Leigh R. Wright (eds) *The status of social science research in Borneo*. Southeast Asia Program, Data Paper No. 109. Ithaca: Cornell University.

1986 Kayan land tenure and the distribution of devolvable usufruct in Borneo. *Borneo Research Bulletin* 18:119-130.

Ave, Jan, Victor King and Joke deWit

- 1983 Introduction. In *West Kalimantan: a bibliography*. Dordrecht: Foris Publications.
- Béguet, Véronique
- 1993 *Sama bilik*, le pot, le feu, les nattes. Les relations sociales au sein des maisonnées Iban de Bornéo. MA thesis, Université Laval.
- Boehm, Christopher
- 1993 Egalitarian behavior and reverse dominance hierarchy. *Current Anthropology* 34(3):227-240.
- Brown, Donald E.
- 1973a Inter-hierarchical commissions in a Bornean plural society. *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 1(1):97-116.
- 1973b Hereditary rank and ethnic history: an analysis of Brunei historiography. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 29:113-122.
- 1979 Iban leadership. *Sarawak Museum Journal* 27:15-23.
- Chan Chok Khuang, Henry
- 1991 Historical development of the Belaga Kayans and their land tenure system: a case study of a Kayan community in Sarawak. M.Phil. dissertation, Institute for Advanced Studies, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.
- Cramb, Robert
- 1987 The evolution of Iban land tenure: a study in institutional economics. PhD dissertation, Monash University.
- 1989 Explaining variation in Bornean land tenure: the Iban case. *Ethnology* 28(4):277-300.
- Dumont, Louis
- 1970 *Homo hierarchicus*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Empiang Jabu (Datin Paduka)
- 1991 *Pua kumbu* — the pride of the Iban cultural heritage. In Lucas Chin and Valerie Mashman (eds) *Sarawak, cultural legacy*, pp.75-89. Kuching: Society Atelier Sarawak.
- Fallers, Lloyd
- 1973 *Inequality: social stratification reconsidered*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Flanagan, James
- 1989 Hierarchy in simple societies. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18:245-266.

Flanagan, James and Steve Rayner

- 1988 Introduction. In James Flanagan and Steve Rayner (eds) *Rules, decisions, and inequality in egalitarian societies*, pp.1-19. Aldershot: Gower Publishing Company.

Freeman, J.D.

- 1955 *Iban agriculture: a report on the shifting cultivation of hill rice by the Iban of Sarawak*. London: H.M. Stationery Office.
- 1957 The family system of the Iban of Borneo. In Jack Goody (ed.) *The developmental cycle in domestic groups*, pp.15-52. Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology, No. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1960 The Iban of Western Borneo. In G.P. Murdock (ed.) *Social structure in Southeast Asia*, pp.65-87. Chicago: Quadrangle Books.
- 1961 On the concept of the kindred. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 91(2):192-220.
- 1970 *Report on the Iban*. LSE Monograph, No. 41. London: Athlone Press.
- 1981 *Some reflections on the nature of Iban society*. Occasional Paper, Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies. Canberra: The Australian National University.

Fried, Morton

- 1967 *The evolution of political society: an essay in political anthropology*. New York: Random House.

Gavin, Trude

- 1991 *Kayau Indu, the warpath of women (a ngar ritual at Entawau, Baleh, 1988)*. *Sarawak Museum Journal* 42:1-41.

Gibson, Thomas

- 1990 Raiding, trading and tribal autonomy in insular Southeast Asia. In Jonathan Haas (ed.) *The anthropology of war*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Heppell, Michael

- 1975 Iban social control: the infant and the adult. PhD thesis, The Australian National University.

King, Victor T.

- 1976 Some aspects of Iban-Maloh contact in West Kalimantan. *Indonesia* 21:85-114.

1978 Introduction. In Victor King (ed.) *Essays on Borneo societies*, pp.1-36. Hull Monographs on South-East Asia, 7. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1985 *The Maloh of West Kalimantan*. Dordrecht: Foris Publications.

1990 Cognation and rank in Borneo. In F. Husken and J. Kemp (eds), *Cognition and social organization in Southeast Asia*. Leiden: Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde Press, pp.15-31.

Lakoff, Sanford

1964 *Equality in political philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Leach, E.R.

1950 *Social science research in Sarawak*. London: HMSO.

Mashman, Valerie

1991 Warriors and weavers: a study of gender relations among the Iban of Sarawak. In Vinson Sutlive (ed.) *Female and male in Borneo*, vol. 1, pp.231-270. Williamsburg: Borneo Research Council Monograph.

Morris, H.S.

1978 The coastal Melanau. In Victor King (ed.) *Essays on Borneo societies*, pp.37-58. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1980 Slaves, aristocrats and export of sago in Sarawak. In James L. Watson (ed.) *Asian and African systems of slavery*, pp.293-309. Oxford: Blackwell.

1983 Kinship and rank among the coastal Melanau of Sarawak. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, Seminar on Cognatic Forms of Social Organization in Southeast Asia, January 6-8th.

Murray, Tania

1981 People on top (*orang ka-atas*): the question of Iban egalitarianism. *Cambridge Anthropology* 7(1):28-46.

Ngo, T.H.G. Mering

1991 Ambiguity in property rights: lesson from the Kayan of Kalimantan. Paper presented at Interdisciplinary Conference on the Interactions of People and Forests in Kalimantan. New York Botanical Garden, June, 1991.

Nicolaisen, Ida

1986 Pride and progress: Kajang response to economic change. *Sarawak Museum Journal* 36:75-116.

Pringle, Robert

- 1970 *Rajahs and rebels: the Iban of Sarawak under Brooke rule, 1841-1941*. New York: Macmillan.
- Richards, Anthony
- 1981 *An Iban-English dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Rousseau, Jerome
- 1978 The Kayan. In Victor King (ed.) *Essays on Borneo societies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.78-91.
- 1979 Kayan stratification. *Man* 14:215-236.
- 1980 Iban inequality. *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land en Volkenkunde* 136:52-63.
- 1987 Kayan land tenure. *Borneo Research Bulletin* 19:47-56.
- 1990 *Central Borneo: Ethnic identity and social life in a stratified society*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Sahlins, Marshall D.
- 1958 Review of J.D. Freeman's Iban agriculture. *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 67:311-313.
- 1972 On the sociology of primitive exchange. In *Stone age economics*, pp.185-275. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Sandin, Benedict
- 1966 Iban hero dreams and apparitions. *Sarawak Museum Journal* 14:91-123.
- 1967 *The Sea Dayaks of Borneo before white Rajah rule*. London: Macmillan.
- 1977 *Gawai Burong: the chants and celebrations of the Iban bird festival*. Penang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- 1980 *Iban adat and augury*. Penang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- 1994 *Sources of Iban traditional history*. Clifford Sather (ed.) Special Monograph, No. 7, *Sarawak Museum Journal*.
- Sather, Clifford
- 1980 Introduction. In Benedict Sandin, *Iban adat and augury*, pp.xi-xlv. Penang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- 1985 Iban agricultural augury. *Sarawak Museum Journal* 34:1-35.
- 1989 Traditional Iban society: reflections on some dialectical themes. *Sarawak Museum Journal* 40:51-57.
- 1990 Trees and tree tenure in Paku Iban society: the management of secondary forest resources in a long-established Iban community. *Borneo Review* 1:16-40.

- 1993 Posts, hearths, and thresholds: the Iban longhouse as a ritual structure. In James J. Fox (ed.) *Inside Austronesian houses*, pp.64-115. Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Canberra: Australian National University.
- 1994 Introduction. In Benedict Sandin, *Sources of Iban traditional history*, pp.1-78, 268-271.
- Sellato, Bernard
- 1987 Note préliminaire sur les sociétés "à maison" à Borneo. In Charles McDonald (ed.) *De la Hutte au Palais: Sociétés à Maison en Asie du Sud-Est insulaire*, pp.15-44. Paris: CNRS.
- Sutlive, Vinson
- 1978 *The Iban of Sarawak*. Arlington Heights: A HM Publishing Corporation.
- Wagner, Ulla
- 1972 *Colonialism and Iban warfare*. Stockholm: Obe-Tryck Sthlm.
- Woodburn, James
- 1982 Egalitarian societies. *Man* 17:431-451.

Notes

¹ Here, in formulating these distinctions, I have benefited greatly from the comments of Robert Barrett. I also wish to thank George Appell, Aletta Biersack, James J. Fox, Trude Gavin and Vinson Sutlive for their valuable comments.

² See, for example, Appell (1978:61-62), Ave, King and DeWit (1983:16-28), King (1978:27-32, 1985:205-209, 1990), Morris (1978:37) and Sellato (1987).

³ Béguet (1993) contests this, noting that in a strict sense in-marrying spouses are not granted these rights automatically but must win them through prolonged residence and by gaining the confidence of members born into the *bilik*.

⁴ Spiritual guidance was believed to be essential to military success. No matter how skilful a man might be as a warrior or tactician, without dream authorization, he could never lay claim to the status of *tau' serang*. The best known historical example of this is Penghulu Bantin, the brilliant, turn-of-the-century Ulu Ai rebel warrior who, though he led the largest uprising against Brooke rule in Sarawak history, was never acknowledged as a *tau' serang*, but fought throughout his career under the leadership of Ngumbang, who, unlike Bantin, possessed the requisite dream "commission" (Sandin 1966:113-115; Pringle 1970:220).

⁵ Literally, *tusut* means "tangled" or "knotted" (Richards 1981:405). Iban society is bilateral and oral genealogies are commonly compared to a cast-net (*tusut sigi' baka jala*). Thus when strangers meet they may *betusut*, "recite their *tusut*", in order to establish — i.e. "disentangle" (*nusut*) — a common ancestor from whom they "are jointly descended" (*saturun*). On this basis, they establish themselves as "kin" and determine the generational distance (*serak ke dulu'*) that separates them (see Sather 1994:47-55).

⁶ In contrast, *tusut* traditions understandably appear to be much less developed in recently settled Iban areas such as the Baleh studied by Freeman. Although they are best documented for the Saribas, extended *tusut* are also known from the Batang Ai and other long-settled areas of the Sri Aman Division. For a discussion of the connection between migration, political leadership and the *tusut*, see Sather 1994:47-57, 268-271).

⁷ This aspect of Kayan land-tenure, as reported by Rousseau, is highly problematic, however, and has been disputed by others (cf. Appell 1986, Chan 1991, Ngo 1991). Unfortunately, patterns of land control remain poorly documented among most "stratified" communities in Sarawak, making it difficult to compare them with the Iban and to speculate on the possible connections between stratification and

control over agricultural resources. In some instances, for example with the Maloh of Kalimantan Barat, these patterns are said to have broken down to such an extent that their "traditional" forms are no longer recoverable (cf. King 1985). According to Rousseau, Kayan aristocrats did not have redistributive powers over land traditionally nor did they, he claims, control larger areas of land than commoners (1979:223; 1990:200-201). This latter claim would also seem problematic, given their presumed greater command of labour (see, for example, Alexander 1992:213).

⁸ Even these are often in mature secondary forest.

⁹ There is some evidence, however, that these powers, if not entirely the product of colonial intervention, were greatly strengthened during the early years of colonial rule. Thus, Nicolaisen (1986:83) argues that nineteenth century Brooke rule, rather than undermining stratification, promoted the differentiation of ranked strata in Punan Bah society and formalized and extended "aristocratic" privileges. Whereas previously aristocratic authority had depended on public support, aristocrats were given the right to prohibit the movement of commoners between longhouses and to impose fines on those who attempted such moves (see also Alexander 1992:209).

¹⁰ Some indication of the extent of this uncertainty can be gained by the fact that during the 1949-50 farming year, when Freeman carried out his now classic study of swidden cultivation among the Baleh Iban, two-thirds of the households in the longhouse he studied failed to obtain enough rice to meet their subsistence needs (1970:266). The harvest was one of the poorest in memory, but even so, the important point to be made is that families with sufficient rice continued to sell their surplus, despite the prevailing scarcity (1970:272-273).

¹¹ Thus still further reducing the need for sharing between households as a means of making up subsistence deficiencies in times of need.

¹² In the past, when raiding and inter-regional warfare were endemic, *bedurok* relations also provided security to those working outside the longhouse.

¹³ The outcome was traditionally a form of debt relationship, discussed presently, in which the creditor expects repayment in the form of *bilik* labour. Hence, it is not entirely accurate to say, as Murray does, that there were no traditional means by which one family might gain command over the labour of another.

¹⁴ Thus, for example, the hearths should be installed in the same order as the erection of source posts and the first fire to be lit, after they are installed, is at the *tuai rumah's* hearth, with each of the other households lighting their first fire from the headman's *dapor*, thereby signifying, through these rules, the latter's precedence within the house (Sather 1993:73).

¹⁵ In contrast, among "stratified" groups in Borneo generational terms may be applied to mark rank distinctions. Thus, for example, among the Maloh, King (1990:18) reports that aristocrats address commoners by "child" or "grandchild" terms, while they in turn are addressed by the latter as "parents" or "grandparents". This does not seem to be the case among the Lahanan, however, who appear to practice a teknonymic system much like that of the Iban (Alexander 1992:217).

¹⁶ These structural features point up several important aspects of Iban "gender equality" — itself a significant aspect of the egalitarianism debate — but one which I can only touch on here, as it clearly calls for fuller treatment in its own right (see Mashman 1991). The tendency to treat husbands and wives as a single entity is also reflected in Iban genealogies. Thus, *tusut*, when they are recited, generally consist of personal names (*nama*) connected by *bebini* ("took a wife") or *belaki* ("took a husband") and *beranak ka* ("bore a child"). Thus, for example, *Sawai belaki diambi' Kaya, beranak ka Jantan, bebini ngambi' Jemat ...* ("Sawai took a husband Kaya [and they] bore Jantan, [who] took a wife Jemat ..."). Thus the name of the descendant through whom the *tusut* is traced does not normally occur alone but is usually paired with that of his or her spouse, as in the examples just cited (e.g. Sawai and Kaya; and Jantan and Jemat). Thus, in each generation, genealogies are typically traced through sets of married couples. This pairing of husbands and wives makes it possible to connect branch-lines with main-line genealogies, reflecting the bilaterality and highly ramifying nature of Iban kinship. It also reflects *bilik* composition and the importance of marriage generally in maintaining kindred relations (see Sather 1994:47-55).

¹⁷ However, it must be added that former slaves and their descendants were, and in some instances continue to be, socially and economically disadvantaged. With limited ancestry, such persons generally have less access to land and other resources than others. In addition, other families, particularly core households whose members are especially conscious of ancestry, are normally reluctant to marry their children into families founded by former slaves, or those connected by marriage with former slaves or their descendants. Public reference to slave ancestry is a fineable offence, making it a difficult topic of inquiry. However, in the Saribas, it is widely believed that the descendants of former slaves were

disproportionately represented among those who migrated during the nineteenth and early twentieth century to the former Third, Fourth and Fifth Divisions. If so, this would suggest that the practice of enfranchisement may have contributed to the further expansion of the Iban.

¹⁸ *Pengurang*, from the root, *kurang*, “want”, “deficiency”. Although Sandin (1980:80) lumps together what he calls “debt-slaves” or “serfs” (*jaum*) and “captive slaves” (*ulun*), the two statuses, as Freeman (1981:49) rightly stresses were, in fact, very different historically. Thus it is a serious error to describe the *pengurang* as “slaves”. Those to whom a *pengurang* owes labour, *padi*, or other debts, did not, in fact, “own” his person in the sense of being able to transfer rights over his labour, etc. to other persons through sale or exchange, nor did the *pengurang*’s creditors have command over the debtor and his family outside of the debt relationship. Thus once the individual repaid his debts, he ceased to be a *pengurang*. However, the existence of a status of long-term debt-liability poses a serious challenge to Freeman’s view of Iban society. As indicated here, *pengurang* suffered serious disabilities. He and his household were in effect excluded from competing in the prestige system; and they lacked the means to take part in Gawai rituals, and to compete for positions of longhouse leadership.

¹⁹ The Saribas saying cited at the beginning of this paper refers specifically to these bands, which were a distinctive innovation of Saribas weavers (Trude Gavin, pers. comm.). “Yellow”, “green” and “blue” were not colours used in traditional *pua’ kumba’* cloth. Rather, the dominant dye was, and remains, red. In Iban the principal term for red is *mansau*, which has also a double, deep-language meaning of “cooked” or “ripe”. Hence the principal distinction in ranking cloth is between contrasting degrees of “ripeness” (*mansau*) and “rawness” (*mata’*), with the status of the most proficient weavers measured chiefly by the depths and intensity of “redness” that they are able to achieve through their knowledge of mordants and dyes.

²⁰ *Indu tau’ nakar tau’ ngar* were, Datin Empiang (1991:81) claims, often of “an ancestral line of weavers and dyers” who acquired their knowledge of dyes and inherited charms from their families. The status, however, like others in Iban society, was essentially achieved and required the acknowledgement of other women weavers. While many women had a knowledge of mordants, very few were willing to assert this knowledge publicly, and to gain the status of *indu tau’ nakar*, a woman had to be engaged by others as their leader in the process of mixing and applying mordants (*nakar*).

²¹ Given the voluntaristic nature of all group undertakings in Iban society, when a *gawai* is being held, the individual families residing in a longhouse are always free to opt out, if they choose to, or should they lack the economic means or kindred support to participate in the ritual as hosts.