

The Iban of Sarawak

VINSON H. SUTLIVE, JR.



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COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY

To Joanne, Vins, Susan, and Tom.

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**WORLDS
OF
MAN**

**Studies in
Cultural Ecology**

**EDITED BY
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Foreword

Iban culture was forged in the sacred hills of inland Borneo. It was constructed on the principle of mobility: a mobility both in fact and in spirit. The shifting cultivation of dry rice, requiring long periods of fallow, made it necessary to seek new lands, and first among the qualities requisite for a person of stature was the capacity to pioneer new lands. Iban expansion was accomplished at the expense of neighboring peoples so that also among the necessary virtues was the courage to engage in head hunting.

Wherever geographic mobility is found, there also one tends to find social mobility—and this is the case among the Iban. With such mobility, in turn, is associated a pattern of personal independence and individualism—qualities that even Iban children display.

Individualism and personal mobility must be held in check, for the Iban, like people everywhere, are mutually dependent. It is a seeming paradox that a society built upon mobility should engage in one of the most elaborate of domestic architectures to be found in tribal society: the long house. These structures may extend over 250 yards and include up to 70 households, knitting together a community physically as well as socially. Thus mutuality in economic activities as well as in military ventures is assured.

Sutlive shows us not only these structured elements, but demonstrates how an elaborate set of beliefs and rituals binds together the individualistic Iban into a strong community. He shows us also how this culture fares under the impact of westernization—how the individualism and opportunism makes for adaptation to the new circumstances, but also how these new circumstances destroy the very source of these qualities.

The Iban of Sarawak, like the other books in this series, addresses itself to the ecology of cultures not in the narrow sense of production and the requisite patterns of institutionalized collaboration, but in the broader sense of recognizing that these activities involve the structuring of sentiments and the inculcation of personality attributes. We see in the rich metaphors of Iban culture the psychological dimension of the ecological forces to which the Iban are subject.

Walter Goldschmidt

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The people of Rumah Nyala, Imba, Nyelang, and Gaong provided me with unstinting hospitality. Together with Iban of other houses they patiently answered my questions and even managed to “ignore” me occasionally so that I could watch the more normal flow of life as a nonobtrusive observer—if a six-foot, 180-pound American can ever be such!

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INTRODUCTION

“The Universe has as many different centers as there are living beings in it. Each of us is a center of the Universe. . . .” (Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*)

The purpose of this study is to analyze the world of the Iban as it has developed in the hills of Borneo, and the changes it has undergone as the Iban have moved into new settings.

The Iban have placed themselves squarely at the center of their universe, thus sharing a widespread human propensity for ethnocentrism. Each longhouse community has been a microcosm of the Iban world on which the sun, moon, and stars have been focused. The cosmology of the Iban has been Ptolemaic as other societies have orbited them and then been drawn within the sphere of Iban ideas and activities.

Predictably, Iban means “human” and the name-bearers are “proud of it” (McKinley, 1973). Equally to be expected, the Iban have considered members of other ethnic groups as less than human because of their differences. Such groups have existed to be brought within the domain of humanity, i.e., Ibanness, through the universe-extending activities of raiding and head-hunting. Myth and ritual have legitimized the world view of the Iban whose unassailable confidence has made them venturesome and optimistic, the most aggressive of the peoples na-

tive to Borneo. Numbering 300,000 of Sarawak's one million people, the Iban are the largest of the state's indigenous groups.

Iban also may mean "wanderer." For centuries they have moved through the hills of Borneo, farming dry rice, gathering, hunting, and fishing, expanding in territory as well as numbers. During the past century they have moved into the delta plains of the Rejang and other river valleys, where they now grow wet rice, rubber, and pepper, and work for wages. Within the past two decades several thousand Iban have moved into the towns of Sarawak—Kuching and Kapit, Simanggang and Sibul—and a few have moved on to Singapore, West Malaysia, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The expanding world of the Iban has reflected and reinforced the norms of social and cultural mobility. Pioneers became folk heroes who helped ensure the survival of their people by breaching the boundaries of the known world and opening up new land. The small nuclear family was selected as the fundamental unit of Iban society. And the longhouse—difficult to describe and impossible to imagine—was an eco-ritual center of existence to be occupied for several years before being abandoned as families moved into new areas.

The travels and territorial expansion of the Iban have brought them into contact with other ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, Bukitan, Melanau, Kayan, Europeans, and others. Confronted with beliefs and behavior different from their own, the Iban have eschewed insularity as they have attempted to come to terms with the plurality of life-worlds. That they have been remarkably successful is apparent in the persistence of many features of traditional Iban culture, including the fierce pride shown in their own identity.

Iban culture expresses the philosophy that the attitudes of men are ambivalent and that life is ambiguous. Thus, the Iban have peopled their world with gods who are to be followed because they are helpful, and with evil spirits who are to be feared because they are harmful. This philosophical orientation has helped immunize the Iban to traditional tensions, such as the conflict between the rituals of individuation and the demands of subservience to the group, and to stresses in situations of change, such as the abandonment of "the ways of the ancestors" for the acceptance of institutions of other societies.

The Iban are one of the best-described societies of hill farmers in the world. Derek Freeman's outstanding studies (listed in the bibliography) have put the students of man in his debt. But the Iban no longer perceive themselves exclusively or even predominantly as hill farmers; they now are people of all work, and include doctors, lawyers, and Members of Parliament.

The Iban have shown what has been described by some social scientists as an amazing ability to adjust to new environments. This ability may be dismissed as nothing more than adaptability common to all human beings; to do so, however, overlooks the fact that, unlike some societies whose members have been overwhelmed in situations of change, the Iban have suffered neither a debilitating social disorganization nor a traumatic cultural disorientation. Rather, with a remarkably "liberal conservatism" they have shown a positive inclination toward change which has predisposed them to seek new experiences and to think new thoughts, quite purposefully engaging in "the dialectics of social life" (Murphy, 1971).

This book is based upon research conducted among the Iban of the Sibü District between 1969 and 1972. The Sibü District is an irregularly shaped political unit (see map) of 1,305 square miles. The district is divided into urban (20 square miles) and rural (1,285 square miles) areas. The town of Sibü, with a population of 70,000, is the political, economic, welfare, and entertainment center of the vast Rejang Valley with a population of more than 220,000 people.

My fieldwork concentrated on Iban in rural and urban settings. In the former setting my studies were on the communities of Rumah ("house" [of]) Nyala, Rumah Imba, Rumah Nyelang, and Rumah Gaong, each community being named for the "headman of the house" (*tuai rumah*). Rumah Gaong is the least acculturated of the four communities, and together with data collected from more remote upriver communities, provided information that I have used in the description of the more traditional hill culture. Until eight years ago Rumah Gaong was relatively isolated from external influences, when compared to other Iban communities in the district. Located at the headwaters of the Sengan River, Rumah Gaong was accessible only by river travel or footpath, requiring half a day's travel time or longer to reach Sibü. It is important to note that even

though Rumah Gaong is within the Sibü District, in many respects—construction and appearance of house, dress, behavior, and rituals—the community retains certain features of aboriginal culture which have been lost by presumably more “traditional” upriver communities whose members have greater and more frequent exposure to external influences.

The reader should understand that the Iban hill culture is an analytical construct based upon observations of Rumah Gaong and other less acculturated longhouses. I traveled and lived among the Iban for eleven years between 1957 and 1972, and the account of the hill culture is a distillation of innumerable impressions as well as my field notes.

Rumah Imba and Rumah Nyelang lie about halfway between Rumah Gaong and Sibü, off a spur of the Sibü-Kuching Road. These communities combine folk traditions and elements of modern society. Some units in both houses were built by the residents, others by professional Malay carpenters. The people in both communities farm dry and wet rice. About half of the families in both communities are Christian, and all make use of shamanic or Christian rituals in the treatment of illness.

Rumah Nyala can be reached by a five-minute walk from the jetty or end of a road, each about half an hour's travel time from Sibü. Although the residents of Rumah Nyala retain longhouse domicile, the community is one of the most acculturated, decidedly different from Rumah Gaong and upriver Iban. Long and frequent exposure to the people of Sibü has made them more sophisticated in their dealings with members of other societies, leading more conservative Iban to ask whether the people of Rumah Nyala are still “real” Iban? No such question exists in the mind of the residents of Rumah Nyala, despite the fact that some of their members have moved into Sibü and others commute to their work in town each day.

While there are many similarities between the Iban who are the subjects of this study and those of the Sut River described by Freeman, there also are important differences, reflecting in part the earlier time when Freeman's study was made and in part the different settings. Unlike the far more isolated Iban of the Sut—who today are much like Freeman found them twenty-five years ago and, in their extreme conservatism, are atypical of the majority of Iban who are open to change—the

Iban of the Sibü District have accommodated to numerous foreign influences, especially within the past twenty years.

Today few Iban in the district live more than two hours from Sibü, which is accessible by private boat, car, bicycle, public launch, ferry, and taxi. Radios are found in every longhouse and provide daily communication from the state and abroad. Contacts with residents of Sibü and tourists have whetted the appetites of Iban for knowledge of peoples whose ways are different from their own. I have spent many nights attempting to describe television, as yet not introduced into Sarawak, and to answer questions about moonshots.

In addition to the intensive study of the four communities already named, I conducted censuses of thirty-three other longhouses in the Sibü District. The use of censuses made by district administrators in 1958 and 1966 provided information for the study of changes in longhouse organization and family structure.

In the town of Sibü I administered questionnaires to a random sample of 200 Iban in order to determine the areas from which they were coming, motives for moving to town, employment, and persistence of kin-ties and cultural norms. I collected life histories of nine Iban in order to gain further insight into the circumstances of the urban migrants.

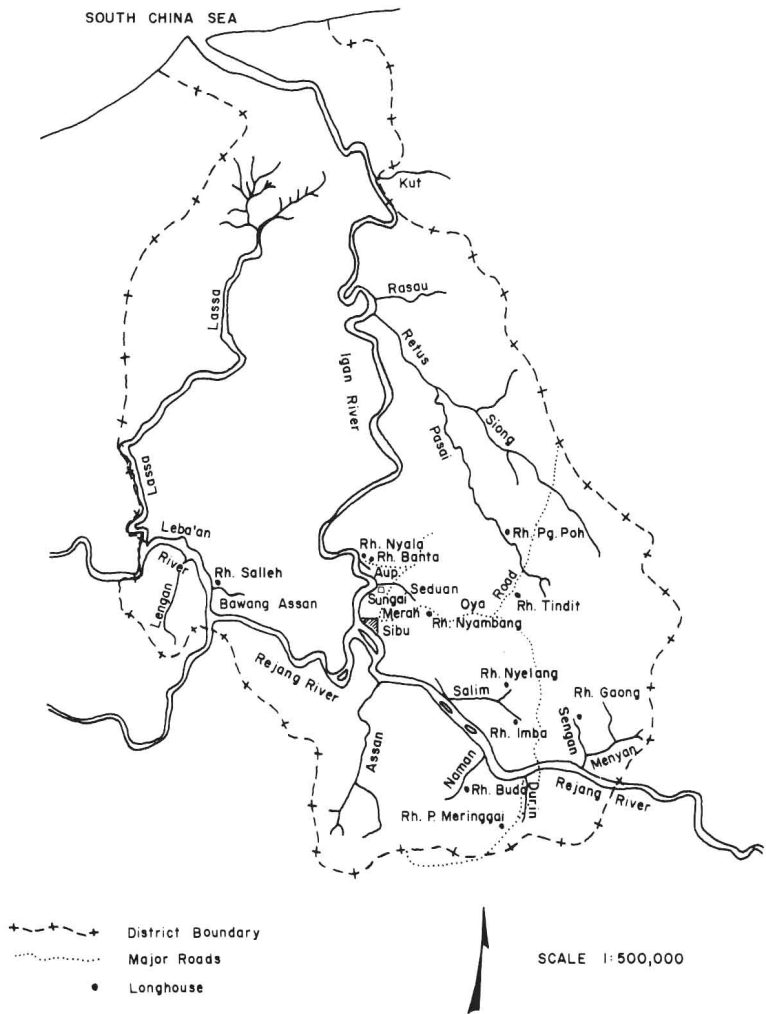
Although the term "Iban" is used generally in this study to describe members of a society who share a common language (with several dialects), common principles of social organization, and common norms, and while much that is contained herein is applicable to Iban in other parts of Sarawak, this is a study of the Iban of the Sibü District. I am aware that anecdotal vetoes may be adduced to numerous points, for the Iban show great diversity. I can readily accept as correct objections that "the Iban of such-and-such a place are not like that," and acknowledge the particularistic character of my study. A perceptive Iban once said, "All of us Iban, in every house, are different." (*Samoa kami Iban, alam tiap buah rumah, sigi' lain.*)

The spelling of Iban words follows the orthography devised by the Inter-Church Committee on Translation. The reader may find it helpful to remember that the following letters are pronounced as in the examples: /a/ as in "father;" /e/ as in

“happen,” i.e., as a schwa; /u/ in first syllables as in “rumor,” in other syllables as in “put.” Generally, ultimate and penultimate syllables are stressed and nasals such as /n/ or /ng/ mark the beginning of syllables rather than their ending as in English. Glottalization, the cutting off of wind by the glottis as in the English negative “uh-uh,” occurs commonly in Iban after vowels in final position and is indicated by the apostrophe (/’/) as in *sigi’* above.

All monetary figures are in United States currency (reflecting the author’s ethnocentrism) based on an exchange rate of 2.75 Malaysian dollars to one United States dollar.

Figure 1. The Sibü District.



Chapter 1

THE SETTING

Natural conditions of Borneo have had marked influences on the Iban. As they have adapted to a habitat with distinct zones, the Iban have developed a variety of responses, technical, ritual, and ideational. These responses have been implemented in the techniques and rituals designed to acquire the food and other materials considered necessary for life. The responses have been evident in the different ways in which the Iban have learned to cope with the various environmental influences to which they have been subjected. They have been expressed in the remarkable sensitization of the Iban to virtually every part of this environment, and in turn, encoded in a vast oral literature.

The Iban have built their world out of the natural, social, and metasocial orders to which they have perceived themselves as belonging. Plants, animals, hills, sun, moon, stars, ancestral spirits, and other groups have been brought together in the ethno-science and mythology by which the Iban have developed and manipulated the symbols which have helped them understand their world and rationalize their behavior.

In order to understand the distinctive ways of life of the Iban it is necessary for us to consider some of the characteristics of the settings in which they have lived. This is not to imply that the Iban culture can be understood simply in terms of environ-