

## **Conflict Resolution Through Consensus Building: Experiences from the Dayak Iban Community of Sarawak, East Malaysia**

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### **ABSTRAK**

Makalah ini bertujuan mengkaji pengurusan dan penyelesaian konflik dengan merujuk khasnya kepada masyarakat Dayak Iban di Sarawak. Ia cuba membina hujah bahawa konflik dapat dikurangkan sekiranya manusia dapat diasuh supaya menerima hakikat terhadap peranan masing-masing dalam susunan sosial masyarakatnya. Konflik di kalangan orang Dayak Iban adalah pada paras minima kerana nilai sosiobudaya masyarakat tersebut menggalakkan saling pergantungan di antara individual Iban. Seseorang yang melanggar sebarang peraturan atau norma masyarakat akan cepat diasing dan dimarahi sehingga wujud perasaan sangat malu akan tindakan salah itu. Mengikut pengarang, penerimaan masyarakat Dayak Iban terhadap kedudukan dan peranan masing-masing dalam konteks sosial, ekonomi dan politik telah membantu menjalinkan hubungan sosial yang harmoni, memastikan keadilan ekonomi dan kestabilan politik. Di peringkat yang lebih tinggi, iaitu di peringkat masyarakat Malaysia, penerimaan konsep keadilan dalam konteks yang difahami masyarakat Dayak Iban inilah yang telah menjamin bahawa Dasar Ekonomi Baru (DEB) diterima umum dan berjaya mengagihkan kekayaan negara "sama rata" di kalangan masyarakat pelbagai etnik di negara ini. Dalam lain perkataan, pembahagian faedah pertumbuhan ekonomi mengambilkira keperluan sesuatu etnik sebagaimana keperluan ini ditaksirkan oleh golongan pemerintah.

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines conflict management and resolution, focusing specifically on the Dayak Iban society of Sarawak. It argues that conflicts can be substantially reduced if people are socialized to accept their respective roles in the socioeconomic and political structure of society. Conflicts among the communal Ibans are kept to a bare minimum because their sociocultural values promote harmonious interdependence among individuals. Those who transgress the community accepted norms of behaviour are quickly ostracized, reprimanded and made to feel greatly ashamed. Iban acceptance of their positions and roles within the social, economic and political structure of society has helped to maintain social harmony, economic justice and political stability. On a higher order, that is in Malaysian society, it is the realization of this sense of justice that made the NEP acceptable and successful in allocating the benefits of economic growth among the various ethnic groups in the country. In other words, each community according to its needs as seen by political leaders.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Conflicts abound in society because people are made to believe that they are equal. Certain religious doctrines argue that people, who are created in the images of his or her creator, are born equal. Building on this notion, many political, social and economic doctrines are constructed with the view to either sustaining or glorifying this religious

concept of "total equality".

Conflict arises because people have unrealistic ambitions. They easily become envious of the successes of others. When they fail, they start searching for the faults in others. Naturally, they refuse to acknowledge any shortcomings that they themselves might have and which could have been the main reason for their failure.

The concept of equality is highly relative. This was, and to some extent still is, strongly acknowledged by members of the Dayak Iban community of Sarawak. This acknowledgement has in many ways helped to lessen conflicts and make their resolution much easier to achieve. This case study examines some fundamental values of the Sarawak Dayak Ibans that address conflicts and their resolution.

## BACKGROUND

### *Who Are the Dayak Ibans?*

Descendants of the famed headhunters of Borneo, Dayak Ibans were once a seafaring, adventurous, adaptable and highly mobile people. Historical accounts show that it was these spirits that led them to migrate from regions such as the Kapuas in Indonesian Kalimantan to various parts of present-day Sarawak. Reasons for this migratory practice included: (1) their thirst for opening up of new land to settle; (2) their need to search for new fertile land on which to practise their shifting cultivation; and (3) their need to satisfy their urge to travel (*bejalai*)<sup>1</sup> (Sandin 1967).

In contemporary Sarawak, Dayak Ibans presently number about 450,000, constituting therefore about 30% of the total state population (Annual Statistical Bulletin Sarawak (ASBS) 1988: 13). They are the largest indigenous group, followed by the Malays who constitute about 21%, the Dayak Bidayuhs 8%, the Melanau 6% and the Dayak Orang Ulu 5%. Collectively, the indigenous groups are also referred to as *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) (Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Article 161A). Chinese comprise the remaining 29%.

The majority of the Dayak Ibans live in longhouses in the far-flung rural areas of Sarawak, principally along the Rejang and the Saribas river banks. In 1980, about 95.2% of the Dayak Ibans were reported to be rural dwellers (Sarawak 1983). The

majority of them continue to be found in the traditional Dayak Iban enclaves of the Saribas and Rejang river basins. Saribas is presently home to about 25% of the Dayak Ibans, while another 33% live in the Rejang basin (Annual Statistical Bulletin Sarawak 1988: 13).

The majority of the Dayak Ibans continue to rely on shifting cultivation as their principal means of livelihood. In 1960, about 98% of the Dayak Iban labour force were engaged in agriculture and agricultural-related activities. By 1970, the percentage of Dayak Ibans engaged in this sector had dropped to 94.8% and in 1980 to 88.2% (Annual Statistical Bulletin Sarawak 1970: 41; 1980: 18-19; 1984: 37-38).

### *Bilik-Family*

The basic socioeconomic and political unit in Iban society is the *bilik*-family (Freeman 1970). A *bilik*-family usually comprises two or more generations living in the same family unit called a *bilik*<sup>2</sup> (compartment). Generally, the Dayak Iban practise an extended family system. This customary practice is further sustained by marriage tradition; married couples are encouraged to stay within the bridegroom's *bilik*-family before they start to form their own *bilik*-family.

The *bilik*-family is an important social, economic and political institution of the Dayak Ibans (Jawan 1991). First, it provides a Dayak Iban with a sense of identity. A person is not only born into a *bilik*-family from which he/she is descended (*purih*), but acquires from it an orientation with which to deal with the outside world.

Second, the *bilik*-family is an economic unit which helps to sustain family self-sufficiency. A high degree of solidarity between members of the extended family is only to be expected. Division of labour within the *bilik*-family based on gender, age and physical ability is an accepted practice. There is nothing derogatory about defining or

<sup>1</sup> Literally "to walk". For a more detailed account of this Dayak Iban culture, see, for example, Kedit (1993); and for the review of Kedit's book and the custom see Jawan (1995).

<sup>2</sup> Literally, "a room"; but in this case, it refers to a family living compartment with sections for such activities as sleeping, dining and cooking.

delineating activities based on such dichotomies as gender or age. Its acceptance has contributed to the maintenance of a harmonious balance in the *bilik*-family, community and society. For example, the burning and felling of trees to clear land for farming is normally undertaken by men; certain jobs carried out during the farming cycle, such as clearing the shrubs, are usually left to the women and children; and the guarding of the rice fields and orchard farms is generally expected of elder members of the *bilik*-family.

Third, the *bilik*-family is a basic political institution in which there are well-ordered relations between its members. In the *bilik*-family, the elders are synonymous with authority; this is further reinforced by the *adat* (the proper way of doing things; customs and traditions) which legitimizes relations, grants duties and prescribes obligations between members of the *bilik*-family. It is not generally expected that younger members of the *bilik*-family would openly go against the wishes or advice of their elders. On the whole, younger members of a *bilik*-family are generally expected to seek and respect the advice and opinions of their elders.

#### Longhouse

A longhouse (*rumah panjai*) is a series of *bilik* (family compartment) joined together to form a long house. The longhouse shares a common roof (*perabong*), a covered verandah (*ruai*) and an open platform (*tanju*) which runs the length of the longhouse. The *ruai* is a focal point of many activities such as the holding of a harvest festival (*gawai Dayak*) and other festivities and the entertaining and receiving of visitors.

A longhouse can be as short as four or five doors and as long as forty doors.<sup>3</sup> It is headed by a popularly elected<sup>4</sup> headman called a *tuai rumah*, who is usually male.<sup>5</sup> In traditional

Dayak Iban society, the headman's authority was non-formal because it was, unlike today, not backed by legitimate authority to enforce compliance. Nevertheless, a headman still exercised considerable power because of several factors. First, he was popularly elected. Second, his non-formal authority was, and still is, backed by *adat* which is revered by the Dayak Ibans.<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, he always consulted other elders and relied upon precedents before passing judgements in any dispute hearing (*betugong/baum*). Fourth, he may also simultaneously hold other prestigious leadership positions which therefore enhance his standing as a headman.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, he has had the necessary dreams, which is an essential element of leadership in Dayak Iban society (Sandin 1962).

#### DAYAK IBAN CULTURE

Dayak Iban society has been described as classless and highly egalitarian (Freeman 1970). The community was said to thrive on self-sufficiency through personifying high degrees of competition, co-operation and individualism. Underpinning all these values is the *adat* which justifies and legitimizes interactions based on them (Jawan 1991).

The *adat* is the single most important factor governing interactions within and between the temporal and spiritual worlds. The *adat* deals with the proper ways of maintaining balance in society. In this sense, it not only prescribes proper conduct between individual Dayak Ibans but also between them and their gods (*petaras*). Conflict is therefore seen as disturbing the balance, and hence its resolution must be swift and amicable to all parties concerned.

Although the longhouse is home to many individualistic and highly competitive Dayak Ibans, conflicts are not as common as might

<sup>3</sup> One door corresponds to one *bilik* or one *bilik*-family. Taking a modest average of about 7 persons (e.g. grandparents, parents and three children of the latter) per *bilik*, a longhouse of a modest length of 30 doors can easily comprise about 210 individuals.

<sup>4</sup> The equivalent term in Dayak Iban is *dituduh ka bala maioh*.

<sup>5</sup> However, in recent years (as early as the 1970s), women have ascended to the position.

<sup>6</sup> The position of the headman is now recognized by the government, from which he or she draws a specified yearly allowance. The authority of the headman is now backed by legislation, particularly as a result of the adoption of the Iban Adat 1993.

<sup>7</sup> In the Dayak Iban society, a person ascended to a position of leadership after having proven his worth in certain fields such as head-hunting (warleader [*tuai kayau*]) and in the opening up of new land (regional chief [*tuai mubok menua*]).

be expected. This is attributed to a number of reasons. First, although Dayak Ibans are highly egalitarian, they accept the fact that their society is classless and that people, to some extent, may be born equal. They also acknowledge that in reality people are not equally endowed and that their *petaras* are not the just biblical God because, as their experiences teaches them, their *petaras* bestow favours on some and not on others. Thus, those who have received the blessing of the gods and who may have moved on to positions of authority are not to be envied. Instead, they should be listened to and respected.

Second, Dayak Ibans are taught to be respectful of their elders. It is persistently driven into the psyche of the Dayak Ibans that to go against their elders is to invite misfortune by being cursed (*tulah*). While going against elders may not eventually lead to misfortune, the fear that this belief generates among potential delinquent siblings may be enough to at least prevent a disagreement developing into an open and explosive confrontation.

Lastly, Dayak Ibans detest conflicts, especially between members of the same *bilik*-family. Those who engage in conflicts earn the label of "not conforming to the *adat* ways" (*nadai adat*). This brings great shame (*malu*) not only to the individuals involved, but also to their *bilik*-families, who are then seen as having failed in some way in the social upbringing of their offspring. The shame of not conforming to the *adat* ways is also a deterrent to conflicts between members of different *bilik*-families because those who engage in conflicts are seen as social outcasts unfit to be members of the longhouse community. Although Dayak Ibans are highly individualistic and mobile, there are relatively few recalcitrant members because leaving one longhouse community to join another would still mean having to subject themselves to similar social norms based on the *adat*.

Among the Dayak Ibans, conflict is seen as pervasive in nature. This is especially so as conflicts disturb the harmonious balance in society – between people and also between

people and nature. Thus, although a conflict may develop between two individuals or *bilik*-families, the consequences may affect the whole community.

### CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflict management falls within the scope of the authority of the headman (*tuai rumah*). In this respect, the role of a headman is similar to that of an arbitrator or a judge. As his authority in traditional Dayak Iban society was not backed by any formal authority to enforce compliance to his verdicts, a headman's personal qualities as a leader carried a strong bearing among his subjects. Among the recognized qualities or traits of a headman were an extensive knowledge of *adat*, impartiality and high morals and integrity.

Notwithstanding the above qualities or traits, *adat* alone was enough to ensure that the decisions of even the weakest of headmen would be complied with by his subjects. This is even more so now that a corpus of Iban *adat* (Iban Adat 1993) has been passed by the state legislative assembly, therefore making what was previously "*adat* law, customs and traditions" enforceable and backed by the authority of the state. However, compliance to a headman's informal authority has never been based on the force of the civil sanction. Its effectiveness was, and will continue to be, based on two important factors: (1) the element of shame felt by the individuals and their families; and (2) the fear of supernatural retribution that may befall the individuals, their families and their communities.

When disputes are lodged, a headman first attempts to give the disputing parties a cooling-off period. This is usually done by fixing a date for the arbitration conference (*bertugong* or *bicara*) some days after the complaint is first received. During this time, a headman would make an effort to find out from the disputing parties if their differences could be settled amicably between them, instead of being brought out in an open arbitration conference. The main concern of a headman is to prevent disputing parties from appearing in an open arbitration conference where all will be exposed and where tempers may flare. This would make future reconcilia-

tion between the disputing parties almost impossible to achieve. But if this effort fails, the pre-arranged arbitration conference is then held.

An open arbitration court is normally held in the evening immediately after dinner on the headman's section of the common or covered verandah (*ruai*). No prior notice is issued. Residents of the longhouse are only informed of, and invited to attend, the proposed conference minutes before it is about to start. There is no restriction as to who can attend the open court.<sup>8</sup>

When all parties involved in the litigation have arrived, the proceedings begin with the headman explaining the purpose of the conference. There are several ways in which a headman may mediate or arbitrate disputes. As he already knows the nature of the dispute, a headman may merely relate the facts of the dispute and then pronounce his/her judgement. Neither side is called to make or present its case and witnesses. The main argument behind this method is to prevent "dirty linen being washed in public" and thereby reducing any chance the disputing parties might have to mend their differences.<sup>9</sup> However, the effectiveness of this method depends a great deal on the personality of the headman. This method can be effectively used by a leader who is accomplished and therefore a highly respected and feared figure in the longhouse community.

Alternatively, the headman may apply the "fight-it-all-out" method. In this approach, a headman calls upon the plaintiff to present his/her case and to call testimonies of relevant witnesses. The defendant is then given a chance to make a defence and to call witnesses. When all sides have been heard, the headman considers the case, asks opinions of elders and other headmen who may be present and then pronounces his judgement.

Wrongdoings usually fall into two cate-

gories: (1) wrongful acts that are injurious to others; and (2) wrongful acts against nature (prohibitions or *pemali*). Disputes can involve either one or both elements. In respect of the first offence, resolution usually takes the form of a fine intended to be a deterrent to potential *adat* breakers. Although the fine is minimal in monetary terms, the social stigma of having broken the *adat* law, customs and tradition is an act heavily frowned upon by members of the community. For the second offence, the fine (*meri pemali*) is meant to restore the balance between the temporal and spiritual worlds (*nyelap ka menua* [lit.: to cool the world]) that has been disturbed by the act of transgression (*ngangat ka menua* [lit.: to heat the world]). Resolutions of transgression against nature may also require that a special ceremony be held in order to appease angered spirits and to seek their continued blessing and good fortune.

#### IMPLICATION AND APPLICATION

The important lesson of this Dayak Iban tradition is that "people must learn to acknowledge and appreciate their position in society. They must therefore act accordingly and should only make claims that are within their respective social status or positions. There are usually no less than about a hundred individuals in an average longhouse. However, contrary to what this might suggest, conflict is not a common occurrence among these individualistic and highly competitive Dayak Ibans.

Among the egalitarian Dayak Ibans, equality is accepted and highly valued. But their perception of equality differs from the biblical interpretation. In Dayak Iban society, it is accepted that people are not born equal. Neither are Dayak Iban gods (*petaras*) just because they pick and choose mortals to be endowed with special abilities. According to the Dayak Iban religion, some are born destined for greatness; others are not. To the Dayak Ibans equality merely implies that there is no institutionalized restriction on opportunities within the socio-culturally accepted sanctions. All may compete equally, but those who may have

<sup>8</sup> This has led a certain Dayak Iban scholar to erroneously conclude that there was absolute equality in the Dayak Iban society; for a critique of this view see Jawan(1992).

<sup>9</sup> In Western tradition, this specific role played by the headman is known as third-party intervention. Its success is highly dependent on the latter's "... special skills and expertise.." (Hill 1982).

received divine intervention are more likely to succeed than those who have not.

Conflicts emerge when people stake claims that are beyond what is generally permitted to and expected of them. For example, it is unrealistic for all members of a hunting party to make equal claims to the division of the spoils as each member may have contributed differently to accomplishing the task. In this case, equality means dividing the spoils based on a person's contribution and position in the activity (*pedua badak, mit kelikit besai kelikai*). Hence, a leader (and an organizer) of the hunting party may have contributed little to the actual work of catching the fish, but it is not expected that he will be given a smaller share. Instead, his share may be bigger than that of others by virtue of his position.

On a larger scale, the success of maintaining harmonious inter-ethnic relations at both the state and federal levels of government in Malaysia can be attributed to the promotion of a similar notion to the Dayak Iban concept of equality and justice. For example, in Sarawak, the practice of involving all major ethnic communities in running the state government has led to political stability and legitimacy. But when this practice is cast aside with the exclusion of the majority Dayak Ibans, the acceptability and popularity of the ruling party is put into question, as events surrounding the removal of Abdul Rahman Yaakob in 1981 revealed and as shown by the diminishing popularity of the ruling coalition in 1987 when its majority was drastically reduced from the previous two-thirds to a three-seat majority.

In peninsular Malaysia, the exclusion of the Malays from the mainstream economic activities prompted an ethnic upheaval and rethinking that led to the emergence of the New Economic Policy (NEP) to address this inequality. With the NEP came the redefinition of "equality" and socio-economic "justice". Under this policy, "just" distribution of the socioeconomic benefits of economic growth was defined in terms of the proportion of each ethnic group in the national population. Competition and equal access were still maintained, but confined to each ethnic

quota of the national pie.

In general, this policy has contributed much to Malaysia's post-1970s success in maintaining a harmonious balance between its many competing ethnic groups. Undoubtedly this policy's success has been heavily dependent upon the ability of the Malaysian economy to expand, thereby ensuring that the allotted pie continued to grow large enough to satisfy all individuals within each ethnic community. In a way, the NEP also worked to reduce ambitious and unrealistic demands and counter-demands of one community on the others.

### CONCLUSION

Conflicts and tensions can be contained if people are made to realize, accept and respect their respective positions in the social, economic and political structure of society. This is even more attainable in a society where the idea is strongly supported by its sociocultural values such as those of the Dayak Ibans because the acceptance of this hierarchy entails that one knows what is reasonably due to oneself and to others within the context of relative equality. To ensure the maintenance of stability and harmony, any change to this situation must be coupled with, and sanctioned by, the changing sociocultural values of the community.

In Dayak Iban society, the resolution of conflict is not a "win-lose" or zero-sum game consideration, but a "win-win" or a variable sum game circumstance.<sup>10</sup> This is where the acumen of a headman is most needed to bring about fast and acceptable solutions.

In the Malaysian political context, the introduction of the NEP was the defining of the proportion of pie according to the social and political position and prominence of each respective community in the national population. It was the acceptance of this situation which also guaranteed a win-win situation for all ethnic communities that good inter-ethnic relations have flourished.

<sup>10</sup> For discussion of zero sum or variable sum game, see Kriesberg (1956).

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