

BREAKING NEW GROUND: FROM BEJALAI TO RECONSTRUCTION OF BILIK FAMILIES IN IBAN COMMUNITIES

The present study examined how external forces influence the institution of bilik family, its characteristics and evolution of its new form arising from these forces. Community as a social collectivity, like organisations and human kinds, is not static; it evolves from like-minded groups of people; it grows; it expands and can also become extinct. In the Iban community, the basic unit of social organisation and/or collectivity is a bilik family. The bilik family is analogous to the nucleus of a living cell. Viewing the community from an open system theory, this social organisation is not independent of its environment: social, economic and political institutions. As much as it can draw resources from its environment, a turbulent environment can also cause chaos to a social organisation that impinges upon its growth, expansion and even its lifespan over time. All members of a bilik family live under one roof and/or in the same bilik. In the past, the survival of a bilik family was tied to the collectivity of family labour as the primary input in subsistence production. Hunting and gathering activities were an integral part of the subsistence economy. Traditional division of labour was principally based on gender. Labour exchange during farming season was common place among bilik families in a longhouse. Today, it is being replaced by hired labour. Although rights of access to farmland, fruit trees, rivers and streams are given to members of a longhouse community, property ownership essentially belongs to a bilik family, which Apple (1986) terms as corporate ownership. For this reason, it is common to see families from outside the longhouse who still claim rights of access to farmland, fruit trees and other non-landed properties that belong to a bilik family. The same applies to the Iban inheritance system called *lanting*. In other words, bilik family, is more than a social organisation; it is an important production unit; it is the legal proprietor of family assets.



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Supporting Grant

UNIMAS 03(73)/547/2005(46)