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**IBAN BEJALAI: ITS EFFECT ON IBAN WOMEN IN  
CONTEMPORARY SARAWAK**

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**IBAN BEJALAI:  
ITS EFFECT ON IBAN WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY  
SARAWAK**

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**Introduction**

*Bejalai* is when Iban man (usually) travel to foreign lands or to areas outside of his longhouse, for a certain period of time, for the purpose of acquiring wealth, status, prestige, and knowledge. Although *bejalai* was common and not confined to the Iban, it has become a permanent element in Iban culture. *Bejalai* practice was and is still prevalent among the Iban men, which can be attributed to two main reasons: (1) related to the Iban value systems which placed great importance to personal achievement, military or leadership prowess, acquisition of knowledge and wealth; and (2) economic purpose (more important in modern days).

Although the materials and resources on Iban *bejalai* are quite extensive, in-depth studies covering the effects of *bejalai* on women are scanty. Kedit (1993), for example mentioned the effects of *bejalai* on women briefly in his work, although he did cite several cases of divorce, adultery and separation which he attributed to *bejalai* practice. Thus, this paper attempts to fill in the gap left by Kedit, by looking specifically on the impacts of Iban men migration on women. I will be looking at a particular group of women, locally known as *indai blue* who have been portrayed as being impetuous, bold, assertive, unfaithful, a 'loose' and 'immoral' women. There are various interpretations or generalization has been made in regards to the term *indai blue*, and as such this paper attempts to explore the term *indai blue* further and the underlying factors behind *indai blue* behaviors and activities.

Before I discuss the relation between the *bejalai* and the *indai blue* phenomenon, I would like to briefly explain the term *bejalai* in Iban culture or in the context of Iban community. Although the *bejalai* is practiced by other ethnic groups in Sarawak, the Iban, however, take *bejalai* to another level by placing three of Iban most important values –military prowess, egalitarianism<sup>1</sup> and valor for equality -- onto it. In addition to that the Iban adventurous nature in seeking journeys, wealth, fame and individualism have resulted in migration (non-permanent form or *bejalai*) of Iban men to foreign lands to look for jobs, experiences, status and prestige

### **The *bejalai* concept in Iban culture**

The *bejalai*<sup>2</sup> practice is very common among the Iban especially among the Iban men. In fact, *bejalai* is one of the social obligations required not only because of the social importance –acquiring wealth and fame -- attached to it, but also due to the nature of the Iban themselves; their adventurous nature in seeking journeys, expansionism, individualism, and their thirst to seek for wealth, status and fame. The materials and resources on Iban *bejalai* are quite extensive, however, most of the works done previously are mostly disperse and general (Freeman, 1950 & 1970; Sutlive, 1992), with an exception of Kedit's work. According to Kedit, "The long absence of the husbands often leaves their wives to seek other 'companions' due to loneliness (Kedit, 1993:84). He further argues that loneliness and long separation often resulted in divorce and adultery. In addition to that Kedit also reports that some of the men who re-married while on *bejalai*.

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<sup>1</sup> This is evidence in Masing (1998) statements when he states that *bejalai* "...focuses on four cultural values/Iban values system: equality; meritocracy; humility, and intelligence. The egalitarian nature of the Iban character makes the pursuit of equality in social, economic and political standing almost an obsession. The Iban, like most communities in the world, value intelligence. The tradition of *bejalai* was not only to get prestige and wealth, but also for the acquisition of knowledge (*ngiga penemti*). Thus, the Iban who had been on a *bejalai* was considered to be worldly wise and was respected by the community (57); the lack of structured social mechanism means that social mobility within the community is not restricted by class or incidence of birth. By being 'almost formless and lacking in social structure,' the society will be more flexible in meeting changing circumstances. It was this flexibility in the Iban social systems which allowed them to move, with great pace, from Kalimantan, Indonesia, to Sarawak in a matter of few hundreds years. Pp. 57-58.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Ngidang (2002) asserts that "*Bejalai* is a global phenomenon. Today, some Iban are working off shore of Europe, in the US and in the Middle East, and some have tried their fortune in Papua New Guinea. All these are variants of Iban concept of *bejalai* in different forms and purposes." P.8.