



Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities

Iban *Bejalai*: Dynamism and Sociocultural Adaptation in a Diverse Malaysian Society. An Exploratory Study of an Iban Community in Johor Bahru

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Iban Bejalai: Dynamism and Sociocultural Adaptation in a Diverse Malaysian Society. An Exploratory Study of an Iban Community in Johor Bahru

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Except where due acknowledgements have been made, the work is that of the author alone. The thesis has not been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature of any other degree.

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ABSTRACT

Iban migrant workers from Sarawak had started migrating to Johor for employment as early as the 1970s and their number continues to increase over time. The early settler comprised those migrant workers who either worked in Singapore or wishing to have cheaper accommodation and those who worked off-shore and were waiting for their next trip overseas. Apparently, Pasir Gudang at Johor Bahru was the chosen area to stay for its proximity to the Malaysian-Singapore causeway. The main purpose of the study among others are to investigate how the Iban adapt to the lifestyle in the new environment – socially, culturally, and economically and to identify the socio-acculturation challenges faced by them in the new place. The study employs a descriptive research design using a qualitative approach. Researcher has applied snowball sampling techniques where in-depth interview with key informants and focus group discussion are held with a small group of participants. The study found that the Iban migrants have adapted quite well to their new place or environment and are able to maintain their ethnic identity. They still can practice their culture and tradition without any interference. Of course, life was very difficult in the beginning but the Iban who were used to hardship managed to cope and overcome those obstacles. It is a success story of people who migrated from one place to another in search of “greener pasture”.

Keywords: Iban *bejalai*, migration, adaptation

Iban Bejalai: Dinamisme dan Penyesuaian Sosio Budaya dalam Masyarakat Malaysia yang Pelbagai. Kajian Penerokaan Komuniti Iban di Johor Bahru

ABSTRAK

Imigran Iban dari Sarawak telah mula berhijrah ke Johor untuk mendapatkan pekerjaan seawal tahun 1970an dan bilangan mereka terus meningkat dari masa ke semasa. Imigran Iban yang terawal ke Johor atas sebab bekerja di Singapura atau ingin mendapat tempat tinggal yang lebih murah. Selain itu, mereka yang bekerja “offshore” dan sedang menunggu perjalanan mereka seterusnya keluar negara juga telah memilih Johor sebagai tempat persinggahan sementara. Oleh itu, Pasir Gudang yang terletak di Johor Bahru adalah kawasan yang menjadi pilihan imigran Iban kerana berdekatan dengan Tambak Malaysia-Singapura. Tujuan utama kajian antara lain adalah untuk menyelidiki bagaimana orang Iban menyesuaikan diri dengan gaya hidup di persekitaran baru-sosial, budaya, ekonomi dan juga untuk mengenalpasti cabaran sosio-budaya yang mereka hadapi. Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk deskriptif iaitu secara kualitatif. Penyelidik telah menggunakan teknik pensampelan bola salji di mana temubual mendalam dengan informan utama serta juga perbincangan kumpulan fokus diadakan. Kajian mendapati bahawa imigran Iban dapat menyesuaikan diri dengan baik di persekitaran baru serta masih mampu mengekalkan identiti etnik mereka. Mereka juga masih mempraktikkan budaya dan tradisi asal. Walau bagaimanapun, kehidupan sangat sukar pada peringkat awalnya tetapi orang Iban yang sudah biasa dengan kehidupan mencabar telah berjaya mengatasinya. Ini adalah kisah kejayaan komuniti yang berpindah dari satu tempat ke tempat lain untuk mencari "padang rumput yang lebih hijau".

Kata kunci: *Iban bejalai, penghijrahan, penyesuaian*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine and analyse the status of Iban migrants in Johor Bahru. There have been reports by the media regarding the Iban migrants in Johor Bahru but little is known about their origins and motives for migrating. It was reported in 2015 that about 27,000 Ibans in Johor Bahru (Borneo Post, April 1, 2015) and this kind of study will contribute significance knowledge about Iban migration in a modern-day context and perspective.

In the 21st century, the movement of labour from rural areas to urban centres and/ or across borders is a global phenomenon. An explanation for such physical mobility regardless of whether it is in developing countries or developed nations in between western hemisphere can be traced to the multiplicity of factors. In the post-independence Sarawak, a dynamic transition from the agrarian sector to market economy apparently has changed people lifestyles and livelihood in an unprecedented manner. For instance, a native customary landscape is now being converted into plantation landscape, which triggers the mobility of farm labour to the plantation sector. Again, migration of labour from one sector to another sector can also be triggered by population growth, education, and training, displacement of people affected by the construction of hydroelectric power dams, roads, and even conservation project.

Borneo Island has been recognized as having major shifting cultivators in Southeast Asia. Their homeland is in the upper areas of Kapuas River in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, but they have been well known for their aggressiveness and high mobility and they have never been stopped to migrating into expanding around the whole Sarawak in the last 400 years (Kendawang et al., 2005).

During the Brooke or colonial era, a general tendency of the Iban people was to move to the frontier regions. This pattern of physical mobility was highly correlated with migratory shifting cultivation (Freeman, 1970) because by nature a subsistence livelihood practised by the Iban required hunting and gathering activities to support such livelihood. For that reason, pioneering Iban shifting cultivators moved from one place to another where natural resources were in abundance. Today, with depletion of natural resources in the frontier regions, descendent of pioneering Iban are now moving in the opposite direction, i.e., migrating away from the periphery to the centre in search for an alternative livelihood in an imaged world of prosperity.

In Iban culture, movement of people from a longhouse to a far way place has long been associated with *bejalai*. The institutionalized custom of male's journey, in particular, has been thought to be symbolic of Iban's mobility (Soda & Seman, 2011). In Iban society, adult males often leave their villages for a considerably long period – from a few months to a few years. Through this journey, Iban men accumulate rich experience in their Iban society, so *bejalai* has played an important role for adult males to enhance their social prestige. While the purposes of the *bejalai* journey in the past were diversified from spouse-seeking, searching for preferable land for swidden agriculture, collecting non-timber forest products,

barter trading, to headhunting expedition, since the 1960s it has become almost synonymous with engaging in wage labour outside the village. Some Iban people never returned from their *bejalai* journey and settled in somewhere else (Soda & Seman, 2011).

Since 1980s, there has been a significant change not only in the way Iban perceived *bejalai* culture, but also a manner in which they internalize the purpose of exiting from their longhouses. So, the analysis of *bejalai* radically shifts from the thesis of adventure (Kedit, 1993) to economic pursuit for a number of interrelated reasons (Ngidang, 2005). Through the process of *bejalai*, they built and scrapped Iban communities in various locations at their convenience, which represented well Iban's instability and flexibility as a migratory population.

There are two groups of economic migrations. The first group involves a temporary exit from longhouses where longhouse dwellers were employed in off-farm jobs mostly in construction sites for several months and then went back to their respective longhouses. The second group involves a permanent exit from the longhouses, most of whom became squatters. Some were being resettled and given residential lots to build their house, while others bought low-cost houses (Ngidang, 2008).

While migrant workers play a significant role in urbanization process sometimes by taking up odd and dirty jobs, which educated urban dwellers do not want, they continue to be socially marginalized and even lose their dignity in the process. In the absence of skills and education, many failed to achieve their aspirations of having a better life in towns; only very few have succeeded. So, the issue of dignity is carried forward to the second and

subsequent generations, depending very much on their children educational achievement to redeem that lost hope.

Permanent exiting from longhouses can also be detrimental to resource stewardship if there is no surviving family member to look after their land as absent landownership often leads to conflicting claims (Ngidang, 2010). In order to overcome such problem, many Iban migrants today practice and maintain dual-residency, having homes both in towns while keeping family units or *bilik* in their longhouses in the rural areas. This pathway to economic betterment can be beneficial if saving is redeployed or ploughed back into land development provided, they can get access to the land resource.

The journey of rural Iban from the peripheries of Sarawak to the industrial zone in Johor Bahru depicts a high expectation of better life for the educated few, and an escape route from rural poverty for many. For the latter, the journey did not end with a newfound factory job/ or as labourers in the construction sites, or even as waiters in coffee shops, but an ongoing struggle, changing from one job to another, and to point when they decided to organize themselves as a petty trader.

Choice of destination and levels of benefits and risks, however, vary significantly, according to the economic and social power of the migrants (Ullah, 2010). For skilled and professional people, they cited better education opportunities for their children, access to specialized jobs, wider opportunities for self-actualization and better healthcare system in destination countries as major reasons for their decision to migrate.

Studies show that displaced people initially try to relocate themselves within the village, then neighbouring villages and gradually move to urban areas when no other livelihood option is available in their known rural surroundings. In most cases also, migration theories pointed out that people who migrate from rural areas to the cities are motivated by the expected higher wages. Todaro (1994) also revealed that youth's migration from rural to urban areas usually associated with demographic, educational and economic factors. House and Rempel (1980) also find that high wages and better employment opportunities in urban areas attract migrants. Lim (1993) argued that migration is related to prospects for upward occupational/ social mobility, higher wages, more job opportunities, etc. Initially, they try to earn a living from wage labour and other off-farm activities, but once they are in an urban setting, they look for jobs in different parts of informal sectors (Siddiqui, 2003).

Another strand of research suggests that non-economic factors may influence the migration decision. For example, high population density in rural areas may lead to an outflow of some of the rural population to urban areas (Bilsborrow, 1987). Other studies suggest that the lure of presumably better living conditions in the city—such social amenities, better housing, and so forth—attracts rural migrant (Agesa & Sunwoong, 2001).

Iban migrant workers from Sarawak had started migrating to Johor for employment as early as the 1970s and their number continues to increase over time. The early settler comprised those migrant workers who either worked in Singapore and wish to have cheaper accommodation in Johor Bahru, and those who worked off-shore and were waiting for their next trip overseas. Apparently, Pasir Gudang at Johor Bahru was the chosen areas to stay for

its proximity to the Malaysian-Singapore causeway and where there relatively cheap housing. The temporary settlers have over time developed into a community as they brought in their families from Sarawak to stay there when they worked overseas as off-shore workers, or when the commute to Singapore to work in the oil and gas industry there. Their family members took the opportunity to get employment in factories situated in the industrial suburb.

1.2 Problem Statements

The history of human civilization has noted that the process of people moving from one region to another is natural. This is clearly recorded in the term 'nomadic' which means not staying permanently. Nomadic activity is a natural activity carried out by our ancestors and inherited until now. Their primary motivation is to find a place of livelihood to get a place to settle. If this is brought into the contemporary context, then the motive can be identified is to find a job. When we use the context of antiquity, then cross-border and even the state is not a serious problem. However, today, the issue of state boundaries and human movement or known as migration becomes a serious problem handled by the government (Zulfikar, 2018).

Conceptually, migration is a spatial issue involving movements of people from their place of residence to a new destination by crossing administrative borders for a certain period of time. There are several categories of migrants. Based on the coverage area, migration can be classified into internal (domestic) and international, and based on the time span, it can be categorized into life-time migration, current migration, and frequent (or circular) migration.

Life-time migrants are those born in a different place than their current place of residence. Current migrants, on the other hand, are those who have migrated to a different place in the last five years or similar period. Frequent or circular migrants are those who move many times over a certain period of time. (Wekke & Suyatno, 2015).

Moreover, based on the intention to stay, migration can also be grouped into temporary and permanent migration. These different time spans and intents are not strictly or uniformly imposed in the categorization of migration in this thesis, as official data are typically very unclear about the definitions and criteria. This lack of clarity is unfortunate, since the economic and policy implications for each type and motivation for migration are very different. More interestingly, analyses or concerns on migration from the host country's perspective often perceive migration as permanent, and as such to be a source of problems (in addition to potential benefits). On the other hand, from the migrant's perspective, migration is often seen as temporary, incorporating the expectation that migrants will return home to bring also the social, political and other remittances (i.e., better knowledge, skill, wider exposure, more experience etc.) in addition to financial flows remitted during the migration period (Sugiyarto, 2014; Wekke, 2013).

Migrant workers are a different community as they have left their country of origin and entered to a new nation where the social life, they had to deal with are different. This is because social life is very important, since an individual has an ideology, special sociocultural background and religious affiliation. It is, thus, an important phenomenon to assess the perception of migrants about social life, the nature of their involvement in the

social setting, the meaning they attach to it and their priorities and preferences in interacting with others (Uddin & Mohammed, 2020).

Looking at the history of Iban migration one can see that there are numerous reasons why the Iban migrated from one place to another. In the past, it has been closely associated with resources and to find new land for agriculture purposes (Kedit, 1993). However, as the socioeconomic status of the community changed (such as level of education, income level), the number of people migrating out from the rural areas to urban areas had increased. One of the most popular destinations outside the state of Sarawak where the Iban population has settled in great numbers over the last few years is Johor Bahru. It is believed that such movement of Iban to Johor Bahru is linked to the economic opportunities available either in the Johor Bahru itself or in the nearby country, Singapore.

Another question concerning their mobility is the reconsideration of the concept of 'indigeneity.' The Iban have been represented as typical of 'native' or 'indigenous' people in Sarawak. Apart from the conventional description of 'sedentary inhabitants' and 'migratory movers' in a dichotomous way, the word 'indigenous' generates the impression that the Iban have long settled in certain places in Sarawak and hold a priori vested rights. However, the history of the Iban in Borneo in the last few hundred years was the ceaseless exodus from the present-day Indonesia to Sarawak, and also the acts of invasion that eliminated or absorbed many other smaller ethnic groups. Even if the directions and patterns of their migration were relatively unchanged, their moves were sometimes considered as transnational or sometimes domestic depending on the historical context. In recent years, the

mobility of Iban people has become more diversified and long-ranged. Today, we can find many Iban settlements in the Malay Peninsula (Soda & Seman, 2011).

Although the Iban migration to Malay Peninsula, particularly in Johor Bahru is a common phenomenon nowadays, however, there is yet to be found any research that has been done specifically related to their sociocultural and socioeconomic condition or implications. There was research on Iban migration in Masai, Sabah, but the focus is more to the their sociocultural and the environment setting that are different if compare to Johor Bahru. The gap of years of the migration also very much different as Iban migrated to Sabah, particularly in Masai are as early in 1930s. Iban migrated to Sabah has come to fifth or sixth generations and their migration are widely known as “journey with no return”. Whereas, the Iban migrated to Johor Bahru are significantly huge from the late 1980s to late 1990s due to economic attractions both Singapore and Johor Bahru itself. Therefore, the Iban migrants in Johor particularly, are still with its first and second generations. There are some factors that influenced the migration and its implications to both sociocultural and socioeconomic among the Iban immigrants. These could become a pertinent issue for this first ever study about the Iban *bejalai* in Johor Bahru.

There are some key questions with regard to this migration, such as 1) What are the factors that influenced why the Iban Community migrated to Johor Bahru and the implications on both the sending and receiving areas? 2) What are the socioeconomic condition among the Iban immigrant community in Johor Bahru? and 3) What are the

implication the new livelihood to their cultural practices? These are some of the pertinent questions which the study is trying to find answers for.

1.3 Research Objectives

The primary purpose of this study are to analyse and discuss the factors that influenced the Iban Community migrated to Johor Bahru and its implications on both the sending and receiving areas; the socioeconomic condition among the Iban immigrant community in Johor Bahru, and its implication the new livelihood to their cultural practices.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. analyse the factors for the Iban migration to Johor Bahru and its implications on both the sending and receiving areas;
- ii. discuss how the Iban migrants in Johor Bahru adapted with the new environment; and
- iii. discuss how the Iban migrants in Johor Bahru adapted their cultural values, material and non-material, in the new urban environment.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Migrant workers left their country of origin and had entered a new nation or state where the social life, they had to deal with are very much different in term of sociocultural

perspectives and economic practices as well. Some of the migrants believe that social life is very important to uphold their ideology, special sociocultural background and religious affiliation. Therefore, it is very important to assess the perception of migrants about the social life and also the nature of their involvement in the social and economic setting.

This study is amongst the firsts of its kind to seriously study the ethnic Iban migrant community in Peninsular Malaysia, particularly in Johor Bahru. The fact that the Iban immigrants are living in an environment culturally different from their place of origin makes it more interesting to investigate. The social and political environment in which they settled is uniquely different from their place of origin. This environment will have an influence on the present culture and subcultures of the migrants. In short, the study will contribute new knowledge on how the community is adapting to the new place within the dominant cultures uniquely different from theirs.

Furthermore, this migration to Johor Bahru symbolises the culture of the Iban which has been going on from time to time. The findings from this study will help to highlight the social, political and economic problems associated with the migration of Iban migrant workers to other growth centers in Malaysia. Specifically, this study examines the factors that influence the intention of the Iban workers migrating permanently in other part of Malaysia, explore the factors that encourage prospective migrant to migrate, seeks solutions to the problems often faced by migrants, and provides recommendations to related parties.

Furthermore, the spatial expansion process of the Iban population has attracted scholarly attention, and abundant research works have been accumulated in the fields of anthropology and other disciplines (Sutlive & Sutlive, 2001), but most of the researches had been conducted within the state of Sarawak, Malaysia. Although it is a well-known fact that the state of Johor in Peninsular Malaysia, particularly in Johor Bahru itself, has a considerable number of Ibans, though the actual number remains relatively unknown.

1.5 Limitation of the Study

This study focused mainly on the social and cultural adaptation of Iban migrants in Johor Bahru. There are also other variables that might play an important role in the sociocultural adaptation such as economic and education purposes but are not included and examined in this research.

The other limitation is, of course, the site of the study, Johor Bahru, which is unfamiliar for the researcher and it has caused the delay to identify strategic participants or cases. However, the unfamiliar issue has been mitigated through length of field works done by researcher. The area of study also focuses in Pasir Gudang district due to majority of the Iban are stayed in the said area. As such, any generalisation of the findings beyond the area of study should be made cautiously.

There are some elements of biases and subjectivity in this research. This is because the findings of the study are based on the limited source of documentation available from the relevant authorities, the key informants and associations that based in Johor Bahru.