

Development Policy and Human Mobility in a Developing Country: Voting Strategy of the Iban in Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the interaction between the development policy of the Sarawak government and the indigenous people in rural areas, by observing the mobility of rural-urban migrants. Over the last decade or so, the Sarawak government has been promoting various kinds of development schemes in rural areas, and the indigenous people, who are politically and economically marginalized, seem to act in compliance with the government policy for the purpose of securing development funds. Some scholars have criticized this kind of passive compliance as a “subsidy syndrome.” However, closer observation of the voting behavior of the indigenous people reveals that they strive to maximize their own interests, albeit within a limited range of choices. What is noteworthy is the important role played by rural-urban migrants in rural development. They frequently move back and forth between urban and rural areas, are leaders in the formation of opinion among rural residents, and help obtain development resources for their home villages. Examining the mobility of urban migrants during election periods is useful for reconsidering the dichotomy between development politics and the vulnerable agricultural community, and also urban-rural relations.

Keywords: Iban, Sarawak, voting activity, rural-urban migration, development policy, rural development

I Introduction

Based on my previous studies of rural-urban population mobility of the Iban, an indigenous people in Sarawak [Soda 1999a; 2000], it is apparent that rural-urban relations — more specifically, the mobility of indigenous peoples between rural and urban areas — is significantly affected by development-biased political system.

There has been much discussion over the reactions and responses of particular ethnic and minority groups to political decisions. A classic example is the rainbow theory of machine politics and its refutations, which attempted to show how ethnic minorities achieved varying degrees of influence and recognition in city politics in the United States [i.e. Erie 1988; Inglot and Pelissero 1993]. But when discussing the relationship between the nation state and ethnicity in the context of Southeast Asia, there are a number of questions that must be

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addressed such as the arbitrary drawing and control of ethnic boundaries by the government (in many cases, a hold-over from the colonial period), and the extreme vulnerability of indigenous minorities to the power of the political majority. Moreover, the emphasis on development policy in the post-colonial period and the recent trends of rural-urban migration of indigenous peoples have made the relationship between the developmental state and ethnicity more complicated.

Since the 1980s, empirical studies on the interaction between the nation state and ethnicity have critically examined the historical process in which ethnic categories have been created and settled by the colonial and post-colonial governments. These studies revealed the vagueness of such ethnic categories. The findings of these investigations have deepened our understanding of “ethnicity” and its relationship to nation states.¹⁾

Going beyond the concept of “ethnicity” itself, recent studies have dealt with the “vulnerability” of ethnic minorities or indigenous peoples. “Vulnerability theory” often discusses the conflicts between nation states and indigenous peoples over the distribution of resources, and criticizes the marginalization or exclusion of vulnerable peoples. Some scholars such as Hong [1987] and Inoue [2002] see themselves as benevolent advocates of peoples who are politically tyrannized in the name of development policy.²⁾

We can see these two trends of study as closely related research fields, if we consider the features of locality and regionality imposed on particular ethnic groups. In post-colonial Southeast Asia, an image has been created, whether appropriate or not, of the juxtaposition between the ethnic (or political) majority who live in the plains or urban areas and the ethnic minorities who subsist in the interior or on the periphery.³⁾ After gaining independence, Southeast Asian countries have attached much importance to economic and industrial development, especially in urban areas, by largely relying on foreign trade and investment from developed countries [Armstrong and McGee 1985]. Rural development policy, on the other hand, has been driven by two basic objectives. One is finding ways to fully utilize rural resources and land, which are often considered by the urban dweller and the political majority to lie “idle.” The other objective is to find ways to prevent rural (indigenous) peasants from migrating into the cities and to somehow encourage them to remain on the “periphery,” goals that are reflected in the temporary expedient of promoting rural agriculture.⁴⁾

In the case of Sarawak, the Malay/Melanau (Muslim Bumiputera), who mainly live in the

1) Useful examples in Asia are provided by the following studies: Nagata [1981], Harrell [1994], Segawa [1995], Winzeler [1997], King and Wilder [1982]. For case studies on Sarawak, see Pringle [1970], King [1982], Uchibori [1987], and Ishikawa [1997].

2) See also Lumb [1993], and articles in *Law and Society Review* 28(3) [1994]. Recently, there have been lively discussions in the field of “political ecology.” Details regarding the emergence of political ecology and its subsequent development can be found in Shimada [1998].

3) For example, see Ayabe [1994] and Russel [1989].

4) There is also the policy of population adjustment, such as encouraging migration from overpopulated areas to agricultural frontiers, e.g., the construction of FELDA in Malaysia, the transmigration program in Indonesia, and SALCRA in Sarawak. For example, see Bahrin [1988], Jawan [1994], and Elmhirst [1999].

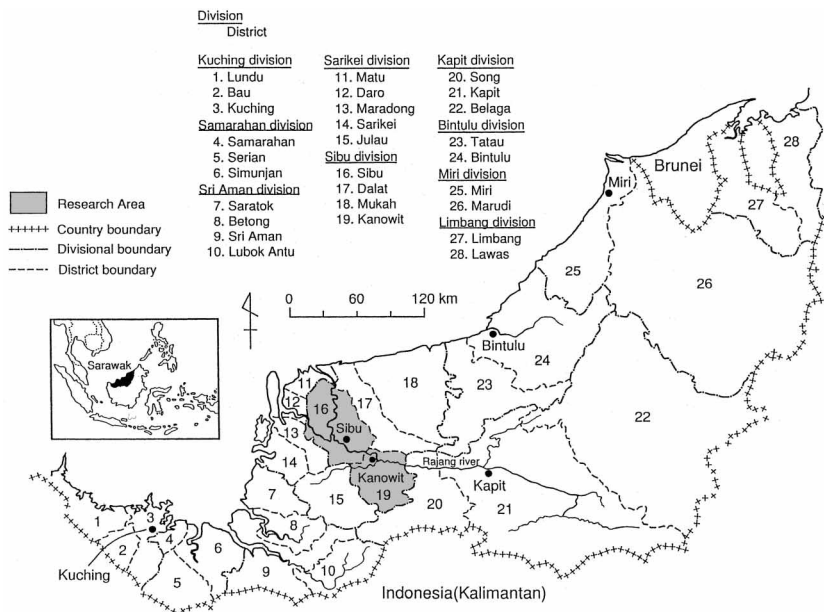


Fig. 1 Map Showing Administrative Districts in Sarawak

coastal plains, are considered a political beneficiary group in the context of Muslim-preferred policy, and the Chinese are widely considered to enjoy a monopoly on the urban economy. On the other hand, the “Dayak” have often been regarded as indigenous groups who live in the interior and subsist on traditional shifting cultivation [King and Jawan 1996]. At the same time, there seems to be a conscious effort by politicians — not only Malay and Chinese politicians but Dayak politicians as well — to frame the problem of regional disparities between urban and rural, or the advanced plains and the underdeveloped interior, as an issue of the relationship between the majority and the minorities. Although it is obvious that these two dichotomies cannot be considered strictly the same, politicians have often tried to identify regional disparities with ethnic differences — as the Dayak-based party did in the 1980s and 90s — in order to promote rural development. It is also expedient to attribute ethnic problems to regional disparities and a favorite device of the developmental state to secure a national consensus over the need for “balanced development.” In such situations, how do indigenous peoples (who are often regarded as “vulnerable peasants”) perceive themselves in the context of the nation state and how do they take part in the politics of development? In order to reconsider the above dichotomies, this paper analyzes the voting activities of rural-urban migrants in relation to the politics of development in Sarawak. Elections are a highly visible political stage-show, where rural proprietors can more easily interact with the nation state over the allocation of resources, and rural-urban migrants also appear on the scene as very important actors. As will be shown later, rural-urban migrants, who frequently go back and forth between urban and rural areas, are influential in resource management in their home

communities, and their mobility often reaches a peak during election periods in order to maximize their impact. By considering this mobility as a catalyst for involving rural populations in the politics of development, we may provide an alternate approach to the usual discussion of the interaction between the nation state and “vulnerable peasants.”

In the following section, I will first explain the establishment of the Dayak-based political party, the Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak or PBDS, and its advocacy of rural development. The third section will examine how the Iban in urban areas participate in rural development, especially from the viewpoint of voting activities. The fourth section will describe an election campaign where one of the main issues involved the establishment of a large-scale commercial plantation. This example clarifies the perspective of the Iban toward resource management in rural areas. Finally, we will examine the significance of the Iban migration strategy in so far as it relates to rural development.

This paper is based on field research carried out intermittently among Iban villages in the Kanowit district (in the middle basin of the Rajang River) and in an Iban community in the town of Sibü (Fig. 1), the regional center of the Rajang area between 1996 and 2000. The Iban of Sarawak in rural areas usually live in communal “longhouses,” in which participatory observation was carried out. As for the Iban community in Sibü, research was conducted in a residential area where former squatters were moved as part of a resettlement scheme by the Sarawak government.

II Mechanism of Development Policy in “Underdeveloped” Areas

1. *Complexity of Ethnic Categories in Sarawak*

Since the 1980s, family migration from rural to urban areas has increased among members of Iban society. While the portion of urban dwellers in the total Iban population was only 4.8 percent in 1980, it had grown to 18 percent in 1991 (Table 1), and is expected to increase further in the years ahead. This paper examines the relationship between the “living strategy” of the indigenous people and the government’s development policy, by taking issues of ethnicity in Malaysia into account.

Table 1 Population Rate in Urban and Rural Areas by Ethnic Group (%)

Ethnic Group	1947		1960		1970		1980		1991	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Iban	0.6	99.4	0.9	99.1	2.3	97.7	4.8	95.2	17.9	82.1
Chinese	24.0	76.0	29.4	70.6	34.7	65.3	38.4	61.6	67.0	33.0
Malay	20.2	79.8	14.3	85.7	17.6	82.4	17.8	82.2	43.0	57.0
Bidayuh	0.6	99.4	1.4	98.6	2.5	97.5	4.9	95.1	19.0	81.0
Melanau	2.4	97.6	4.3	95.7	6.7	93.3	14.0	86.0	28.5	71.5
Other indigenous	0.3	99.7	0.6	99.4	2.6	97.4	5.3	94.7	13.9	86.1
Total	10.8	89.2	12.6	87.4	15.5	84.5	18.0	82.0	37.5	62.5

Source: [Masing 1988; Malaysia 1995]

The category of population classified as “Iban,” apart from the question of its origin, invokes a rather clear ethnic boundary at present, and their identity as Iban also tends to be attributed to relatively simple criteria.⁵⁾ Rather, what matters more for the Iban themselves are the concepts of Dayak and Bumiputera, terms bestowed by politicians and the nation state on collective ethnic groups.⁶⁾ These obscure terms are often colored by politics and tend to create confusion.

Another point is the gap between the preconceived attitudes of the Dayak and their actual situation. Although the growing number of Dayak people who reside in cities is clear proof that Dayak cannot be equated with “rural” or “interior” people, the Sarawak government nevertheless tends to substitute “rural populace” and “interior community” for the Dayak community. This substitution is done to justify the country’s development policy by replacing the interests of specific ethnic groups with a national interest in reducing regional disparities.

Before we proceed, it is necessary to clarify the complexity of ethnic categories in Sarawak. According to Jawan [1994] and Jawan and King [1997], the term Dayak, in the strict sense, comprises the Sea Dayaks (Ibans) and Land Dayaks (Bidayuhs), but since the late 1980s, it has become increasingly common to refer to the Ibans, Bidayuhs, and Orang Ulu (various smaller non-Muslim indigenous groups) as Dayaks. Although these groups share certain similarities in their physical outlook, longhouse living, languages, and customs [Kedit 1989], Dayak as a collective term does not represent a single undifferentiated ethnic entity.⁷⁾ Rather, the term is only meaningful when political propaganda is needed, say in advocating development projects for rural areas or in advocating the unity of non-Muslim indigenous peoples.

In the national context of Malaysia, the general term Bumiputera is well known. This is a political term that was created to lump all indigenous peoples into one group. However, in terms of the beneficiaries of the New Economic Policy,⁸⁾ priority is clearly given to the Muslim Bumiputera, while the Dayak, mostly non-Muslim Bumiputera, are relegated to a “second class” Bumiputera status [Chin 1996]. Thus, in the context of Sarawak politics, we have to consider

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- 5) On the other hand, it is also relatively easy to “become an Iban,” and even among those who are categorized as Iban, there exist various ethnic identities such as Memaloh and Bekatan. See Uchibori [1994] and Okuno [2000].
 - 6) These terms are often used with political overtones. The category of Bumiputera was instrumental in defining the privileged status of indigenous peoples apart from Chinese and Indian, while Dayak, as mentioned later, was raised to inspire unity among non-Muslim indigenous peoples.
 - 7) For the different attitudes of each ethnic group toward the acceptance of the label “Dayak,” refer to Mason [1995].
 - 8) The New Economic Policy was introduced in 1970 with a two-pronged objective. The first was to eradicate poverty, and the second to restructure Malaysian society so that the Bumiputera would have a more equitable share in the Malaysian economy. In this policy, various kinds of preferential treatment were given to the Bumiputera. The New Economic Policy was superseded by the National Development Policy in effect from 1991 until 2000. Although this policy did not define numerical targets as did the New Economic Policy (e.g., New Economic Policy specified the target of raising the capital holding rate of the Bumiputera up to 30 percent), the basic line of the Bumiputera-preferred policy was continued. Therefore, so long as the “Bumiputera Policy” is understood as general measures adopted to raise the Bumiputera’s economic status, the government policy since 1991 can also be characterized as a type of Bumiputera Policy.

the three categories that make up the total population (1,635,731): Muslim Bumiputera (27.4%), non-Muslim Bumiputera (43.2%), and non-Bumiputera (29.2%).

Based on these categories, the Iban are the largest group among both the Dayak and the non-Muslim Bumiputera. Particularly in the middle and lower Rajang, where the Iban are the predominant indigenous people, Iban, Dayak, and non-Muslim Bumiputera are sometimes regarded as synonymous.⁹⁾

2. *Dayakism and Ruralism*

In examining the relationship between ethnic categories and Sarawak development policy, it is common knowledge that the government's development projects are only provided to supporters of the parties in power [Mason 1995; Aeria 1997]. This is most apparent in small-scale projects in "underdeveloped" rural areas.

Politicians in Sarawak refer to this rural-biased development policy as "ruralism." This "ruralism" policy is related to the political term "Dayakism," which was advocated by a Dayak-based party, the Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS), as the party's doctrine.

The PBDS was formed in 1983 when it split from the Sarawak National Party (SNAP). The SNAP had been part of a coalition government (Sarawak Barisan) and represented the interests of the Dayak community. However, in 1980, a dispute arose over who would succeed President Datuk Dunstan Endawie when he resigned. The most likely candidate was the then Deputy President, Datuk James Wong (a Chinese), but a faction of young highly educated Iban members protested that SNAP, as a Dayak-based party, should nominate a Dayak as President. However, the senior Iban members, whose educational level was relatively low, supported the Chinese candidate because they did not want to see their influence in the party challenged by the young educated generation.¹⁰⁾ This incidence was seen as a confrontation between "multi-racialism" promoters and Dayak sympathizers on the one hand, and as friction between different generations on the other. In short, it was a combination of political and ethnic strife within the party that led to a confrontation among the Dayak (mostly Iban) members. As a result, the young Iban members were defeated by the faction favoring the Chinese candidate at the party's general meeting in 1981, so the younger members broke away from SNAP to organize a new Dayak-based party, the PBDS, in 1983.

The principles of the newly established PBDS may be summarized as follows:

SNAP no longer plays its original role of helping to alleviate rural poverty in the Dayak community, even though the socio-economic status of the Dayak is well below the national average. In the context of the New Economic Policy, the government should consider how to eradicate poverty among the Dayak who live in remote rural areas. The PBDS seeks to ensure that the voice and the interests of the Dayak are reflected in national policy.

9) If we consider the Dayak groups who have converted to Islam (*masuk Melayu*) or a number of non-Muslim Melanau subgroups, it is apparent that the concept "Dayak" does not strictly coincide with that of "non-Muslim Bumiputera." In this paper, the convoluted issue of ethnicity will not be addressed.

10) On this point refer to Mason [1995].

Although the principle of the PBDS to pursue benefits for the Dayak community and its slogan of Dayakism were often criticized as “chauvinistic,” the PBDS adopted the slogan not in opposition to other groups, but rather as an affirmative political label envisaging the unity of disparate non-Muslim indigenous groups under one political party [Mason 1995]. Jawan appreciates that it was not a chauvinistic slogan but rather a “communal” one with a goal that was similar to other parties such as Malay/Melanau-led Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) and the Chinese-led Sarawak United Peoples Party (SUPP). Yet the formation of the PBDS clearly posed a threat to the stability of both the PBB and the SUPP in the Sarawak Barisan [Jawan 1993].

The term “Dayakism” was mainly adopted as a deliberate attempt to emphasize the unity of the Dayak, or the non-Muslim Bumiputera, and the development or alleviation of poverty among the Dayak in rural areas. By stressing that most of the Dayak still live in the interior, the PBDS advocated investment in rural development. Thus, during the campaign of 1987 and the 1991 elections for the State Assemblymen, “rural development” became the main theme of the PBDS, and the term “ruralism” emerged in this political context in Sarawak.

Immediately before the 1987 state election, the PBDS left the state coalition government (though not the federal coalition) in order to challenge the Sarawak Barisan state coalition. When the polls closed, of 48 allotted seats, the Barisan parties secured 28 seats, the PBDS 15 seats, and the Parti Rakyat Malaysia Sarawak (PERMAS; a Muslim-based opposition party) 5 seats. After the election, the PBDS lost considerable power when 8 of its State Assemblymen defected to the Barisan parties. In the 1991 state election, the PBDS candidates were returned in 7 out of 56 constituencies. Immediately after this election, the PBDS applied to rejoin the state coalition.

The PBDS decision to rejoin the coalition was based on the realization that, as long as they were part of opposition, their constituencies could never benefit from the subsidies made available for development. After the 1987 and 1991 elections, those constituencies which had voted for the opposition were in fact not allocated any development funds, and numerous rural communities that had supported the PBDS were excluded from the government development plans. In short, the retaliatory measures taken by the Barisan government made it very clear that the PBDS could never realize its goal of “ruralism” so long as it remained in the opposition. As another condition of rejoining the state coalition government, the PBDS was forced to declare its commitment to a “multi-ethnic party,” and could therefore no longer advocate “Dayakism.”

The Dayak community was reluctant to support the PBDS partly because of its reputation for intractability,¹¹⁾ and also because it was generally recognized that Dayakism was ultimately

11) The PBDS seceded from the Sarawak State coalition, although it still remained in the federal coalition (Barisan Nasional), which seemed to the electorate to be a glaring contradiction. Furthermore, the PBDS challenge to the state coalition was done without putting forward a candidate for chief ministership of Sarawak in the event of its victory in the election. The failure of the PBDS to show a more aggressive attitude in scrambling for political power disappointed its supporters.

an Iban-centric idea.¹²⁾ Beyond that, the lukewarm attitude of the Dayak also reflected their misgivings over the practicability of the PBDS's ideals. In other words, the Dayak themselves were keenly aware that the whole notion of "ruralism" — priority on rural areas in the allocation of development funds — was something that the PBDS could not deliver on as long as they kept out of the coalition for the simple reason that the PBDS lacked any source of funds.

3. *Distribution of Development Projects and "Subsidy Syndrome"*

It is true that in Sarawak a large sum of money has been invested in rural development projects under the name of "ruralism" over the last decade or so [Chin 1996]. To the extent that this funding can be attributed to a new awareness on the part of the government of the importance of the Dayak for political stability, perhaps the recent up-and-down behavior of the PBDS (part of the coalition, opposed to the coalition, then back part of the coalition) did have some significance after all. In this sub-section we examine the process of budget distribution for rural development schemes over the last few decades and the reality of the so-called "subsidy syndrome" among the Iban.

Among the many kinds of development projects provided by the government, the indigenous peoples in rural areas are primarily interested in "Minor Rural Projects" (MRPs), subsidies made available to improve rural infrastructures such as the repair of longhouses, distribution of generators, supply of water and electricity, construction of jetties and bathing places, and the extension and repair of minor feeder roads. These MRPs are generally undertaken at the request of the rural residents themselves. For those who live in the interior, filing an application to request an MRP is a useful expedient for it permits the local residents to express their urgent demands immediately.

In the name of "ruralism," the Sarawak government has invested a great deal of money to comply with these requests by rural residents. Observing this response has made residents keenly aware that demanding subsidies from the government is the quickest and easiest way to fund minor development schemes or living condition improvements. Ngidang [1995] and Aeria [1997] refer to this typical attitude of rural inhabitants as the "subsidy syndrome."

However, the prospect of a favorable response to an MRP petition is largely dependent on whether the petitioners have access to politicians. The government makes a pretense of receiving MRP requests from any rural constituent, but it is clear that there is political manipulation involved in determining which requests are accepted to become projects. Indeed, the decision-making process of approving MRPs and allocating funds is so unclear that ordinary people really never know the status of a request or whether funding is likely to be approved. This opacity is related to the fact that Divisional Residents (hereafter, Residents) and District Officers (DO) have little influence on the state government in the planning of development projects, which is described as follows.

12) According to the 1991 census, Iban accounted for 67 percent of the total Dayak population. Iban leadership of the Dayak community is obvious, but the lack of consideration toward other Dayak groups dampened interest in the unity of the community.

In 1987, Prime Minister Mahatir directed each DO to prepare a “District Development Plan” (DDP), and most of the DOs from peninsular Malaysia responded positively. Since the DOs themselves prepared the DDPs with the assistance of consultants and various kinds of committees, the DOs could strengthen their influence on the development schemes in their own districts by assuming the status of Chief Planning Officer or Chief Development Administrator [Solhee 1994: 10].

In contrast, no district in Sarawak submitted a DDP. According to Solhee, the Sarawak government did not issue a directive to the DOs to prepare DDPs, because the government sought to strengthen centralization at the state government level and keep the decision-making authority concerning development issues to itself. In effect, as Solhee points out, the authority and influence of the Residents and the DOs in development activities have been gradually eroding over the last decade. In some cases, the Residents and DOs are not even officially informed of the development activities taking place within the boundaries of their areas [*ibid.*: 13].

In Sarawak, even the authority to authorize farm subsidy programs or minor projects such as MRPs is not vested in the Resident or DO; rather, the individuals filling these positions are relegated to the role of mediator between the ministries or agencies and rural residents, or at most, they are given figurehead positions such as Chairman of Development. Consequently, rural residents also tend to neglect the DOs. Although MRP requests are supposed to be submitted to the local DO, most rural residents bypass this formal procedure and try to submit their requests directly to the elected leaders in their areas or to local branch offices of the government parties. Their behavior in this instance is based on the recognition that the DO has little influence on the decision-making process of authorizing rural development projects. The longhouse communities with access to politicians in particular have found that it is swifter and more reliable to approach politicians directly than to go through the formal process with the DO to get an application accepted. This weak position of the DO in planning minor projects is even more apparent for larger scale development schemes such as the development of plantations and major road construction, where their influence is practically nil.

By reducing the power of administrative officials, the Sarawak government has succeeded in consolidating direct influence of the government parties over the rural population. In other words, the enhancement of the rural development doctrine and the rise of the subsidy syndrome paralleled the establishment of patron-client relations between assemblymen and the constituents of rural areas. One interesting aspect of this development that is only very seldom noted is that urban residents often intervene in the patron-client relations in rural areas. In the following sections, we will discuss this issue on the basis of data obtained through field research both in rural areas and in the communities of urban migrants.

III Development Fund Distribution and Voting Activities of Urban Residents

1. *Urban Residents' Participation in Rural Development Projects*

When the Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak was established in 1983, the party's advocacy of

“Dayakism” and “ruralism” seemed to be based on the recognition that the Dayak are economically disadvantaged because they live in remote rural areas. However, this sense of being marginalized in society and social entitlement developed not only among the rural Dayak but also just as strongly among the Dayak in urban areas. In particular, the Dayak — most of whom are non-Muslim Bumiputera — feel very strongly that the privileges extended to the Bumiputera as part of the New Economic Policy go overwhelmingly to the Muslim Bumiputera and that the Dayak have been largely excluded from the socio-economic mainstream.

The author has conducted field research on the living strategies of the “urban poor,” with particular emphasis on the Iban migrants from rural areas who previously lived as squatters in Sibu,¹³⁾ a regional center of the Rajang Basin. Based on data obtained through field research in Sibu, in this section we will examine how the “urban poor” participate politically in rural development projects.¹⁴⁾

In Sarawak, there are two kinds of public elections: one is the general election for the Parliament of the Federation, and the other is an election for the State Assembly. Both adopt a single-member constituency system. In these elections, all citizens aged 21 years and over are qualified to vote and can choose their polling place regardless of their current residence.

According to the author’s interviews with 132 Iban household heads who were previously squatters but currently live in a resettlement area, 44 household heads (33.3%) stated that all of the household members registered their votes at the polling place in their home villages. In addition, some 31 other households (23.5%) were divided with some members of the household registering their votes in home villages and other members in the same household registering their votes in Sibu. Altogether, 75 households (56.8%) included members who registered their votes in rural constituencies (Table 2).

This behavior of Iban who are resettled in the city registering their polling places back in their home villages is called “return voting” and is based on giving careful consideration to the stability of future life. The Iban in the study area have acquired legal residential lots in the resettlement district and appear to be leading fairly stable lives in the city, but they have the recent memories and experience of being squatters. They remain very much in the lower class of Sibu, and most Iban in Sibu anticipate a substantial fall in income after retirement which will make it difficult for them to stay in the city. Many Iban therefore plan to eventually move back to their rural subsistence agriculture-based communities where it is far cheaper to live. This lifecycle pattern in which urban Iban anticipate going back to their longhouses in later life accounts for the “return voting” behavior of returning to one’s home village to vote. This is because they see it as self-evident that rural development projects are concentrated in the constituencies where the government parties stand to gain wider support

13) This squatter settlement emerged at the end of the 1970s on the swampy riverbanks on the outskirts of Sibu (about 4 kilometers from the town center), where not only the Iban but also Malay, Melanau, and Chinese lived. In 1991, the squatters were presented with a resettlement scheme by the Sarawak government and consequently obtained legal residential lots. The details of this process are explained in a previous paper [Soda 2000].

14) The voting activities of the Iban in urban areas were partly discussed in Soda [2000].

Table 2 Distribution of Registered Polling Places among Each Household

Plan for the Future	Voting Distribution				Total
	Whole Membership of Household Vote at Longhouse	Some of Household Members Vote at Longhouse and Others in Sibu	Whole Membership of Household Vote in Sibu	Others/Unknown	
Return to longhouse after retirement	38	16	14	5	73
"Double residence"	6	12	1	0	19
Stay in town	0	0	23	0	23
Undecided/Unknown	0	3	9	5	17
Total	44	31	47	10	132

Source: [Soda 2000]

among voters and elections are the most straightforward means for the Iban to demonstrate their intention of supporting the parties in power.

The Sarawak government adopted a ballot-counting system that reveals a detailed breakdown of the voting results of each longhouse [Mason 1995], thus making it easy for the government to identify any longhouse that voted for an opposition candidate and retaliate by withholding rural development funds. Conversely, a longhouse that raises its percentage of votes supporting the government parties increases its chances of obtaining various kinds of development funds to improve living conditions in the longhouse. In short, the "return voting" behavior of the urban Iban is done to help raise a longhouse community's rate of support for the party in power, which also serves the long-term lifecycle interests of the voters who intend to return to their villages some day.

Indeed, voting is the easiest way for the populace (including the poorest people) to participate in politics in Sarawak, but in every election over the past decade or so, the government parties have been almost guaranteed to win a sweeping victory. Thus the Iban of the study area do not view elections as a way to make their opinions reflected in Parliament or the State Assembly, but rather as an opportunity to demonstrate their pro-government support to extract economic benefit.

This strategy is based on their perception of themselves as marginalized people. Many of the Iban in urban areas have a common perception that can be summarized as follows: the Chinese can acquire the necessary know-how to accumulate wealth through various kinds of networks, and the Malay (Muslim Bumiputera) have practically unconditional access to government subsidies because of the government's policy of Muslim bias and preference. However, it is practically impossible for the Dayak and the Iban to improve their situation through their own efforts because they lack both know-how and funds; moreover, the Dayak have been politically marginalized after a series of political defeats and splits in the Dayak-based parties. This perception has led the Iban to conclude that in order to obtain their share of subsidies and public funding they must assume a subservient attitude toward the govern-

ment. In other words, they think that applications for development projects require a demonstration of pro-government sentiment, which is often manifested by “return voting” for the government in power. This behavior should be understood as the result of deliberate decision-making through a process of elimination accompanied by a certain degree of resignation rather than a superficial “subsidy syndrome.” The resignation comes from the fact that the Iban recognize that their influence on state level politics is limited and they also lack common political objectives [Jawan and King 1997]. Rather, Iban voters tend to be more interested in more personal or regional issues and their votes can be readily swayed by local issues affecting their everyday lives [*ibid.*: 55]. This tendency is reflected in the diversity of the Iban voting record, which will be discussed in the remainder of this paper.

2. *Diversity of the Voting Record among the Urban Poor*

In the Kanowit district, which is located in the middle reaches of the Rajang Basin, the number of registered voters greatly exceeds the resident voting age (20 and older) population as shown by the 1991 census (Table 3). This means that a sizable number of people return to the district from urban areas during elections, a movement that is indicative of “return voting.” However, a closer examination of the situation based on extensive interviews with the Iban in the study area revealed that the urban dwellers did not necessarily “return” to their own home villages during election time, and that their voting behavior actually included a number of different patterns. Here we will consider a number of typical cases that highlight the active and strategic aspects of Iban voting behavior.

The first case illustrates the “return voting” pattern described earlier where voters are thinking ahead to their future life in the longhouse community. Yet even among the 73 out of 132 households whose heads stated their intention to return home after retirement, some 16 households (21.9%) split their registered voting places between the parents and children or between husband and wife. There are two main reasons behind this pattern of behavior. The

Table 3 Number of Registered Voters and Census Population of 20-year-old and Over in Kanowit District

	Total	Ethnic Distribution (percent)			
		Malay Melanau	Chinese	Iban	Others
1987 Election for the state assembly	13,936	2.65	14.98	82.38 (Dayak)	–
1990 Election for the parliament	16,154	1.58	12.85	85.11	0.45
1991 Election for the state assembly	16,154	2.06	14.67	82.92	0.34
1995 Election for the parliament	18,049	5.00	20.00	75.00	–
1996 Election for the state assembly	17,513	1.70	13.52	83.93	0.85
Census population of 20-year-old and over (1991)	13,027	–	–	–	–

Source: [*New Straits Times* various issues; *Borneo Post* 1996; Malaysia 1995]

first is closely related to the way in which they acquired legal residence in Sibü. In the late 1980s when they were still squatting on a riverbank in the southern part of Sibü,¹⁵⁾ the Iban of the study area struck a bargain with locally elected officials: the Iban could obtain legal residential lots within the new resettlement area in exchange for their votes cast for the government parties. These people are thus faced with a dilemma: they consider it important to register their votes in their home villages to promote local development, but at the same time they feel obligated to vote for Sibü leaders for their help in obtaining legal lots. Consequently, a few members of these conflicted households register at a polling place in Sibü. Of course another reason for voting in town is that they live there, so naturally they are inevitably concerned with the improvement of their living conditions in the resettlement area. Just as in the rural areas, the development of urban infrastructure in Sibü — putting in drainage systems, paving roads, installing telephones in each household, extending regular bus routes, etc. — is achieved by submitting petitions to the politicians in power. It is for this reason that some in the Iban community consider it important to express pro-government sentiment by voting in Sibü. At the same time, these people acknowledge that they might transfer their voter registration place somewhere else as their strategic needs change in the future.

The second case exploits the fact that, under the existing system, voters can choose any polling place irrespective of where they actually live. In effect, this makes it possible for those in power to redistribute votes from one constituency to another. For example, residents in a district where the Barisan candidate is sure to be elected may be requested to vote in a different district where the opposition party is influential. In the course of his research, the author found three household heads who registered their voting places not in Sibü or their home villages but in other districts purely at the request of powerful leaders. Maintaining and cultivating connections with influential politicians is a way to secure development projects for one's home village. Cooperation may have other benefits as well, such as appointment to the posts of *penghulu* and district councilor, enabling a more active role in power politics.

The third case revolves around the fact mentioned earlier that rural development funds are unequally distributed to rural constituencies according to political decisions made by the Barisan parties. Furthermore, the amount of money and materials dispersed in a constituency largely depends on the local candidate's competence in procuring funds. With this situation in mind, four household heads in the research area stated that they often transferred their voting registration to a constituency where it was easier to obtain development projects. Under the terms of the Minor Rural Projects (MRPs), the applicants can demand the provisioning of actual goods (electric generators, building materials, outboard motors, and so on) from the local government party branch. Indeed, some cases have been reported where the applicants have been able to acquire cash income through illegal channels. Even in these cases, the critical

15) According to research conducted in 1991 by the Land and Survey Department, Sibü, the Iban occupied some 605 squatter houses. Considering that the Dudong constituency, which includes the squatters area, had only 18,619 voters (in the 1991 election for State Assemblymen), it is thought that the squatters had some influence on the elections.

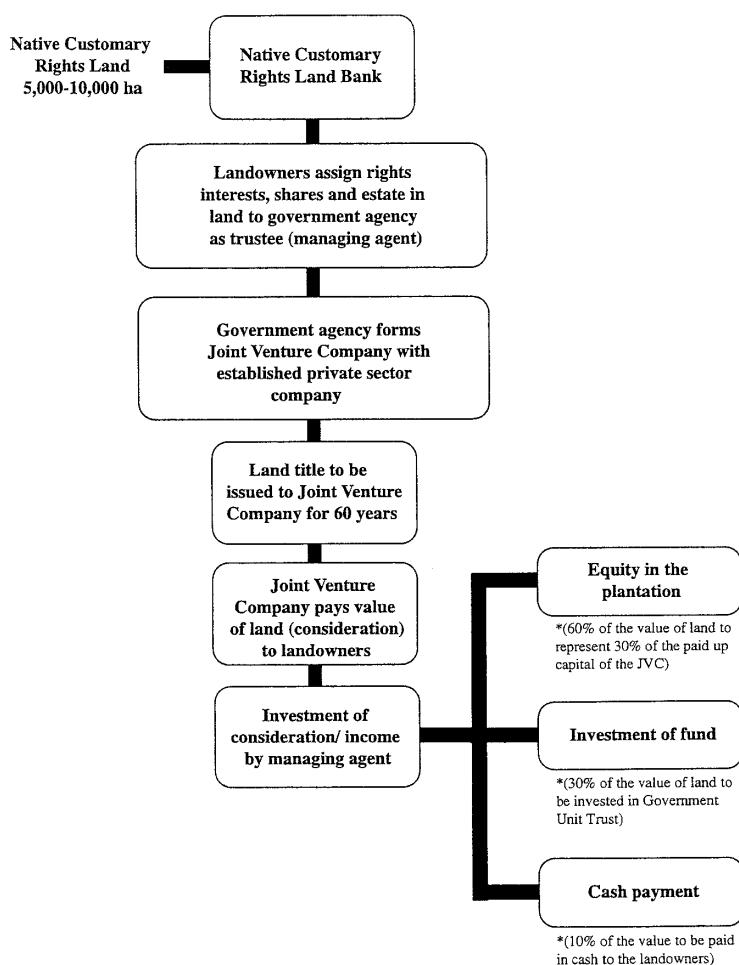


Fig. 2 Joint Venture Model of Oil-palm Plantation

Source: [Sarawak 1997]

* The percentage of distribution indicated above may vary according to the value of the land, the cost of the project and its debt equity ratio.

factors are one's connections with influential people in the local party branch, and whether these political patrons come from the same ethnic background.

As I have demonstrated, the "return voting" and other voting behavior of the Iban represents a deliberate and straightforward strategy to improve the stability of their lives.¹⁶⁾ It was shown that even those who have secured a legal residence in the city often transfer their voting registration and distribute the household members' votes to different registration

16) Aside from the above cases, there have been instances of double and even triple voting registrations in different constituencies, or other instances of bargaining for votes or selling votes. These are illegal activities.

sites. It is apparent that the Iban in the study area keep a constant watch for any opportunity to leverage the power of their voter registration to win concessions from patrons in order to improve living conditions not only in their current urban neighborhoods but also back in their home villages where they are likely to retire later in life.

IV Large-scale Development and Land Resource Management

The behavior of the Iban calculated to gain Minor Rural Projects (MRPs) described in the previous section is predicated on overwhelming victory at the polls by the government parties. In 1996, for instance, when the election for the Sarawak State Assembly was held, the parties in the alliance captured 57 of the 62 seats.¹⁷⁾ This sweeping victory by the alliance had been expected before the election, so controversy over policy occurred in very few constituencies. One rare instance where a dispute did occur in the 1996 election was in the Machan constituency in the Kanowit district. The point at issue was relatively clear and involved the land resource management of a newly planned oil-palm plantation in the area. In this section, we will examine the trends of the 1996 election, particularly as pertaining to large-scale developments having greater impact than the minor projects described earlier.

1. *Dispute over the Opening of a Large-scale Plantation*

In the Machan constituency in the Kanowit district, the 1996 election was the de facto battleground between two candidates: the incumbent assemblyman from the Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (in the alliance), who forcefully advocated the oil-palm plantation project, and new independent candidate who had a very different view on how the plantation should be constructed.¹⁸⁾ The independent candidate had a hard time getting his views expressed in the mass media, but based on a personal interview with the candidate, his basic contentions could be summarized as follows:

The oil-palm plantation scheme promoted by the third sector or by a Joint Venture Company wanted to utilize Native Customary Rights Land¹⁹⁾ over which the Iban had already established usufruct based on history and customary usage even though no legal title had yet been issued. The Joint Venture Company was to “lease” the native land and return a part of the profits earned by the plantation management to the Iban “landowners” (Fig. 2). However, the scheme required the Iban to recognize that the title to the native land would be issued in the name of Joint Venture Company. Although the title was limited to a set term of 60 years, this seemed like too long a period considering that oil-palms only produce oil for 25 to 30 years. The independent candidate felt that, since the land is valuable property for the Iban, the management of land resources should be put into the hands of the Iban. The proposed scheme could very well end up depriving the Iban of their land. All ambiguity regarding the land’s management should be scrupulously eliminated from the plantation scheme, and it should be modified to clearly stipulate the rights of landholders.

17) Of the remaining five seats, three seats (all from urban constituencies) were occupied by the Chinese-based opposition party.

18) In addition to these two candidates, there was another independent candidate who drew very little public support.

19) Regarding the concept of Native Customary Rights Land and its related problems, see Soda [1999b].

In the view of the Iban, large-scale development projects have been closely related to land problems. Aside from their infrastructural benefits, large-scale projects such as irrigation systems and commercial plantations involve sensitive issues of land management, which almost inevitably causes conflicts between residents and developers, or sometimes even among the local residents themselves.

Most of the land in the interior of Sarawak is categorized as Native Customary Rights Land, where no legal land title is issued. Indeed, indigenous peoples are allowed to utilize a parcel of land based on *adat* (custom), so long as they can prove that the land was cleared by themselves or by their ancestors before 1958. These customary rights notwithstanding, the land law of Sarawak provides that the native lands “legally” belong to the Sarawak government. There is a general feeling of unrest among the Iban over this dual land “ownership” situation. They worry that “their” land might be unfairly utilized by the government in the name of development projects, or that their customary right to use the land might even be taken away from them. Plantation projects in particular exacerbate this feeling of unease because of the requirement that the land title be issued in the name of the Joint Venture Company. Thus the independent candidate’s articulation of these issues accurately represents the vague feeling of unease over the security of their land rights that is prevalent in Iban society.

Meanwhile in the government-controlled press, the independent candidate was portrayed as objecting to the plantation scheme and interfering with the economic development of rural areas.²⁰⁾ This of course was a distortion because the candidate was never against the plantation scheme itself. Indeed, he himself had tried to promote a commercial oil-palm plantation in the same area in cooperation with a private developer instead of depending on a government agency. From the latter part of 1993 and into 1994, the independent candidate gathered people from the longhouses in the affected area to discuss the land issue.²¹⁾

Although the independent candidate of the Machan constituency was considered an exceptional person who could challenge the incumbent on even terms, he lost by a majority of 4,619 to 2,389.²²⁾ For the indigenous voters in the Machan area, the 1996 election seemed to offer two choices: they could either support the independent candidate and remain in relative poverty unless they themselves found a way to pursue the “development” without any government subsidy, or they could vote for the incumbent from the party in power knowing that without any government subsidy they would face economic stagnation, even though many voters were suspicious of the government. One can interpret that the defeat of the independent candidate was simply because the people selected the latter choice. But the question now arises: did they really have a choice?

Another interpretation emerged from interviews with those who favored the independent

20) For example, see the *Sarawak Tribune* [19 August 1996; 20 August 1996] and the *Borneo Post* [3 September 1996].

21) However, due to the torturous and drawn-out process of ironing out differences of opinion among longhouse communities, the application to open the plantation was eventually withdrawn.

22) Another independent candidate gained only 121 votes.

candidate. Some of those who voted for the independent did not see a clear separation between the government party and the opposition side. Indeed, some of those who supported the independent candidate half expected that if he had won the election, the party in power would have invited him to join it in a few years, and in that position he would have been able to deliver government patronage to his supporters. There had been other similar instances where an independent candidate joined the parties in power after being elected. During the author's interview with those close to the independent candidate, they mentioned another oil-palm plantation in the Sarikei district where (according to them) the local residents had been able to establish land ownership after the land had been developed by government agencies, and they believed that the plantation in their district could very well follow this precedent. Aside from the issue of land ownership, they contended that there was not much difference between their attitude towards land development and the government policy. This reinforced their belief that the independent would have probably joined the party in power.

My interviews revealed that the supporters of the independent were not just expressing their opposition to the government policy or throwing their votes away on a candidate who could not possibly win; rather, they regarded their action as a pragmatic and expedient defiance of the government in order to make inroads into the power structure and derive greater benefits from the government in the near future. It can be said that their attitude made the incumbent candidate feel insecure about his seat thus forcing him to negotiate and offer concessions to the voters.

2. *Management of Land Resources*

The political episode described in the previous sub-section is very revealing from the perspective of understanding land management and urban-rural relations.

The incident provides a window through which we can clearly observe the Iban's changing perception of land management. The event raised their consciousness of land "ownership." Most of those who stood behind the independent candidate were not against the plantation scheme itself, but were ready to approve the scheme if only the land title could have been issued to individual landowners. During the election campaign there was no discussion at all regarding land resources from the viewpoint of conserving the natural environment. The author also found very few people who objected to the scheme on the basis of wanting to conserve their own farm land.²³⁾

In a previous paper the author described how the residents in the longhouse communities of the Kanowit district utilize their land for planting paddy within very narrow spaces, and rubber trees covering all the hilly areas have been left untapped for many years [Soda 1999b]. Currently, very few people earn a subsistence by small-scale agriculture alone. Rather, most people rely on their modest pensions, occasional contract work, and financial

23) Most of them seemed prepared to approve the plantation scheme on condition that they could secure a small parcel of land for planting paddy and title deeds to the land intended to be developed for the plantation.

assistance from their children. Planting oil-palm trees on their “underutilized” land would therefore not immediately threaten their lives. Indeed, many Iban concede that it is unproductive to leave their land idle.

The idea that their land is “underutilized” seems incompatible with the organic cycle of traditional shifting cultivation that requires a fairly long fallow period.²⁴⁾ Regarding land utilization, the residents seem to place more emphasis on the economic value of their land in the modern sense. If that is the case, it is only natural that they would attempt to establish a legal basis for their occupation or ownership of the land based on customary law before agreeing to a large-scale development project on the land. This attitude can be considered a manifestation of their heightened consciousness of land ownership.

The second point that needs to be made in this context is that those playing a leading role in the management of land or in the decision-making that is involved in the disposal of land are not necessarily longhouse dwellers. Even though some parcels of land in the villages around the town of Kanowit are already registered in the names of individual villagers, the actual title deeds are often kept by their children who live in the cities, not by the villagers themselves. This accounts for the fact that when important meetings are held in villages regarding the disposition of land, one can observe many town dwellers present at the “longhouse meetings.”²⁵⁾

In 1998, when questionnaires regarding the disposition of land were distributed to individual villagers, or when villagers were considering whether to sign contracts permitting development of land for the oil-palm plantation, most of them called their relatives or children in the city to ask their advice. These relatives who reside in urban areas are very influential in the decision-making process of longhouse communities, as will be shown in the next section.

V Leadership of Longhouse Communities and Urban-rural Relations

1. *Opinion Leaders as Town Dwellers*

The independent candidate for the assemblyman position of the Machan constituency in the 1996 election was an executive in a foreign-affiliated company in the town of Miri. During the election campaign he established his headquarters in a longhouse in the Kanowit district and set out on a stumping tour throughout the constituency. His important supporters were retired

24) From the viewpoint of the traditional cycle of shifting cultivation, “underutilized” land is important as fallow land. But in this case, the word “underutilized” (*nadai guna*) indicates the remote possibility of using the land for swidden agriculture in the near future, or it refers to the condition of land covered by rubber trees that are left untapped. Therefore, these types of un-tended land are now rarely recognized as “fallow land,” but tend to be regarded as idle.

25) Therefore, important longhouse meetings tend to be held on the weekend for the convenience of the urban dwellers. The most popular means of notification is by word of mouth brought by those who frequently move back and forth between urban and rural areas. Communications through message-exchanging programs provided by local radio stations are also important for rural residents. There are still very few longhouses with telephones installed, but recently some longhouse dwellers have started using mobile phones.

officials (former teachers, policemen, soldiers, and so on) in longhouses and clerks in private companies who, though they generally lived in urban areas, took time off to come back to the village during the campaign. Working behind the scenes were low-ranking government officials on active duty in urban areas.²⁶⁾ Although these people currently do not hold any positions in the power politics, the villagers nevertheless expect them to provide informal connections with political network. Under the direction of these people, the canvassing tours of the independent candidate were arranged.

In short, the urban dwellers from longhouses and the villagers who had lived in urban areas for prolonged periods played a critical role as opinion leaders in longhouse communities during the 1996 election period. Indeed, the influence of these people in rural communities extends beyond occasional events such as elections. Their influence is apparent from the fact that the headman of a longhouse community (*tuai rumah*) is sometimes found to reside not in the longhouse but in an adjacent city.

My interviews with 132 household heads in the resettlement area in Sibu town revealed the presence of 6 incumbent *tuai rumahs*²⁷⁾ and 2 *ex-penghulus* (chief of a certain domain). They make frequent trips back and forth between Sibu and their longhouse in the country. During their absences from the longhouse, their duties are taken over by an official in a rural branch of the party, a local teacher,²⁸⁾ a councilor in the district, or by an *ex-penghulu*. This is partly because in rural areas even capable people or those with good educations have little access to job opportunities in the private sector, but only in the public sector. Another reason is that those who are in the public sector such as public servants, *penghulus*, and local councilors come under the control of the government. At present, councilors, *penghulus*, and other government officials are appointed by the Sarawak government. Not surprisingly, most of them are proponents of the government.²⁹⁾ From the village standpoint, these people are channels of access to the government, or at least to the local branch of the government parties. These locally influential people also move regularly between town and country in much the same way as the *tuai rumahs*.

The longhouse community in the Kanowit district, which served as the base of the independent candidate during the 1996 election period, was branded as anti-government.

26) The officials who openly participated in these campaigns were transferred to distant places immediately before the voting date through the oppressive intervention of the Sarawak government. Therefore, most government officers try to stay clear of political activities.

27) Concerning the work experiences of these *tuai rumahs*, one is currently a taxi driver, one formerly served in the Department of Welfare, one worked for a state hospital as a professional driver, and two were contract workers. The remaining one had no work experience in Sibu.

28) Since primary schools are found even in the remotest parts of the country, one cannot overlook the political influence of schoolteachers in rural communities.

29) Immediately after the 1987 state election in which the PBDS challenged the state coalition government, many government servants who supported PBDS were forced to resign, and councilors and *penghulus* on the PBDS side were replaced [Mason 1995]. Even in the mass media, politicians often reaffirm that the government has the power to replace such local representatives as *penghulus* and councilors. In practice, the power to appoint those local leaders is under the jurisdiction of local branches of the government parties.

Within the community the division of opinion raised questions about the propriety of supporting him. When the then *tuai rumah* handed over his position to the defeated independent in 1999, the new leader tried to reunify the community and resume access to the government by emphasizing the proportion of pro-government supporters within the community and by allotting important roles to those who could maintain close ties with the wider society beyond the village. Among the reassembled members of the JKKK or Village Development and Safety Committee, the chairperson of the committee (*tuai rumah*) was then the head of a company who usually lived in the town of Miri, the vice-chairperson was a one-time schoolmaster, the secretary was a teacher still actively teaching, and the treasurer was a public servant (a driver for a state-operated hospital). Other positions including chairmanships of seven bureaus³⁰⁾ were assigned to two government servants (a soldier and a staff member of the Public Works Department), two former government employees (a policeman and a staff member of the Agriculture Department), two former teachers (one of whom had also served as a councilor of the Kanowit district), and one woman without any previous work experience (her late husband had been a state assemblyman, and she herself chaired the women's committee of the Kanowit Catholic Church).

As observed above, community leaders do not necessarily stay in their longhouses all of the time. The key qualities of a leader are not only the leader's ability to maintain harmony within the community but also to maintain close connections to the outside society, especially to the parties in power.³¹⁾ Thus, longhouse communities do not necessarily choose their leaders from among the longhouse dwellers. Rather they tend to support leaders — regardless of their current place of residence — who can link the rural to the urban, or the longhouse community to local assemblymen.

2. *Moving between Urban and Rural Areas*

Early in the paper it was mentioned that among the 132 interviewed household heads, 73 persons (55.3%) stated their intention to retire in the longhouse, and 19 persons (14.4%) wished to maintain their residence both in the longhouse and in town, and more than half of these already enjoyed this “double residence” status. Among these 132 household heads, 75 percent visit their home village at least once a year, and 34.8 percent come back to the village almost every month.

It is easy to understand that these tendencies are a reflection of the Iban's migratory or nomadic traditions. Yet they also emphasize that it is important for them to establish

30) These seven bureaus are in charge of revitalization of activities concerning “Youth & Culture (Belia & Kebudayaan),” “Women & Livelihood (Wanita & Urus Rumah Tangga),” “Economic Development (Pembangunan/Ekonomi),” “Welfare (Kebajikan),” “Security & Hygiene (Keselamatan & Kesehatan),” “Education (Pendidikan),” and “Religion (Keagamaan).”

31) When rural people apply for development projects, the application will be viewed in a favorable light if it bears the signatures of persons who have strong connections with the government. In short, what is important is how to develop and maintain close ties with *penghulus*, councilors, high administrative officials, and so on.

residences in both urban areas and in the longhouse community in order to participate in various kinds of activities and to assert their rights on behalf of the village. In other words, their frequent moves back and forth between town and longhouse is motivated by a desire to make their lives in some degree more stable, and also to link their urban activities with those of the longhouse at the level of ordinary life [Soda 2000].

Most interior areas of Sarawak still have no telephone or newspaper delivery service. Even though television sets are becoming increasingly popular with the diffusion of power generators, there is no Sarawak-based TV station. Except for message-exchanging programs provided by local radio stations, there is no form of mass media that provides information relevant to the daily lives of people in the interior. Therefore, the frequent returns of urban dwellers to the village provide valuable opportunities for the longhouse communities to acquire information about what is going on in the wider world. The return of those with political access is especially important considering the central role of the government parties in authorizing rural development projects that are crucial to the development of longhouse communities.

Over the last decade, the Sarawak government has frequently emphasized its goal of distributing funds not with an “urban bias” but strictly to support rural development, a message that is directed specifically toward the non-Muslim Bumiputera, who make up the vast majority of inhabitants in the interior. In other words, the government is acknowledging those excluded from the earlier urban-biased development policy and is attempting to quell discontent through the distribution of government subsidies among rural population. Some Iban are forgiving and appreciate the government’s attitude. Yet considering that many Iban intend to establish homes in both urban and rural areas and constantly move back and forth between city and country in a never-ending quest for development funds and subsidies, it is almost meaningless to sort out winners (beneficiaries) from losers in the “development games” in relation with rural-urban disequilibrium.

Although acquisition of a legal lot in Sibuan guarantees their right to permanent residence in the city, many Iban in the research area feel it would be difficult to continue to live in town after retirement, and expect to move back to the longhouse. This perception reinforces their political behavior in maintaining both a current residence in town and a future living base back in the longhouse. Their mobility such as manifested in return voting from urban to rural areas and their ingratiating behavior toward the government parties can be viewed as deliberate strategies for securing government subsidies and funding for development projects. Even when they appeared to challenge the party in power, the true intention of the Iban was to make inroads into the power structure and derive certain benefits from greater access. Thus it is inappropriate and a gross simplification to consider the “fawning attitude” of the Iban (which Ngidang [1995] refers to a “subsidy syndrome”) as nothing but a blind and haphazard pursuit of subsidies.

VI Concluding Remarks

Since the 1970s, Southeast Asian countries have been trying to replace class struggles or conflicts over the distribution of resources with a “national consensus of economic growth” by emphasizing the priority of “development” [Shiraishi 1994]. In order to grasp the meaning of development policy in the context of Southeast Asia, where countries typically have multi-ethnic societies, it is also important to focus on the response of each ethnic group to the politics of development.

The political behavior of the Iban regarding development projects seems to be a pragmatic response calculated to obtain economic benefit. It may be possible to explain Iban behavior with the concept of “everyday forms of resistance” conceived by Scott [1985]. However, I would argue that Iban behavior as described in this paper differs from Scott’s concept in at least two respects.

First, the objectives of Iban activities go well beyond the mere level of subsistence. Rather than viewing their activities as passive and low-profile tactics to minimize their disadvantage, I see their behavior in a more positive light as a struggle to maximize their own interests, albeit within a limited range of choices. Secondly, although the Iban may exhibit some signs of resistance in their day-to-day efforts to gain benefits, it is clear that their primary efforts to gain advantages are through legitimate political means such as influencing elections.

Their strategies are not limited to such low-profile techniques as dissimulation, foot-dragging, pilfering, and feigned ignorance. Rather, they sometimes act in compliance with government policies, they sometimes withdraw economic benefits from unconnected constituencies by moving their voter registration place, and they sometimes show temporary defiance towards the government in order to penetrate the power structure. These strategies take on a very different aspect from “everyday forms of resistance.”

What should be emphasized here is that the key actors of these various efforts are mobile urban dwellers who frequently move back and forth between urban and rural areas. Their proactive efforts to secure economic benefits are sometimes reflected in the transfer of their voting registration from one constituency to another. This act could have an impact on the allocation of development funds that are politically motivated to redress regional disparity.

Given their great mobility and role of opinion leaders in longhouse communities, these urban Iban act as intermediaries between longhouse residents and politicians, or between “vulnerable peasants” and development politics. In this sense, urban dwellers play a pivotal role of involving longhouse communities in political interaction. At the same time we cannot simply regard the longhouse residents as passive observers of the political scene. As was mentioned in section V, the longhouse residents themselves choose their leaders from those who live in urban areas and have access to politicians. Thus indirectly the local rural folk also take some initiative in trying to involve themselves into the politics of development policy.

In this paper, the author discussed the issue of resource distribution in Sarawak, by using the urban inhabitants of an indigenous people as an instrument of analysis. Regarding these

people as intermediary between urban and rural areas was useful for reconsidering the dichotomy between the developmental state and “vulnerable peasants,” and between urban-biased development and “ruralism.”

It is certain that the population of indigenous peoples residing in urban areas has been increasing along with economic growth, promotion of development projects, and the spread of urbanization. Although the Iban are still in a marginalized position in Malaysian society, the range of their social and political activities is constantly expanding. It will thus become increasingly important to focus greater attention on the political roles of marginalized peoples in urban areas — ethnic minorities, the urban poor, so-called urban villagers, and so on — in the years ahead. This is all the more pressing considering that rural development is held up as one of the important political goals of the nation state in many third world countries. A deeper understanding of this subject is also essential in discussing the relationship between development policy and ethnicity in the Third World.

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