

THE NEW IBAN *BILEK*-FAMILY STRUCTURE: A THREAT OR THE DYNAMICS OF OUR TIME
(*STRUKTUR BILEK-KELUARGA IBAN BARU: SUATU ANCAMAN ATAU DINAMIKA ZAMAN*)

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the impact of female-headed families on the Iban traditional *bilek* family structure. Hence, our study and data tend to stipulate that the increasing number of single mothers among the Iban is more likely or inevitably affect [if not] change the traditional structure of the *bilek*-family. In essence, the traditional family was previously absolute patriarchal in nature in terms of the hierarchical position and decision-making have continued to witness dynamic changes in the social realities. Accordingly, the absence of males as head of the family within this new form of *bilek* will further impact the role(s) and responsibilities that some contemporary Iban women are *forced* to shoulder. This study employed an ethnographic approach as a methodology because of the nature of the research. Snowball sampling was used as a sampling technique due to the challenges of identifying the participants for the study.

Keywords: Iban Traditional Family, *Bilek*-Family, New Family Structure, Single

Motherhood, Decision-Making, Iban Women

Abstract

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk meneroka kesan keluarga ketua wanita terhadap struktur keluarga bilek tradisional Iban. Oleh itu, kajian dan data ini cenderung untuk menetapkan bahawa peningkatan bilangan ibu tunggal dalam kalangan Iban lebih berkemungkinan atau tidak dapat dielakkan mempengaruhi [jika tidak] mengubah struktur tradisional keluarga bilek. Pada dasarnya, keluarga tradisional sebelum ini bersifat patriarki mutlak dari segi kedudukan hierarki dan pembuatan keputusan terus menyaksikan perubahan dinamik dalam realiti sosial. Sehubungan itu, ketiadaan lelaki sebagai ketua keluarga dalam bentuk bilek baharu ini akan memberi kesan kepada peranan dan tanggungjawab yang terpaksa dipikul oleh sesetengah wanita Iban kontemporari. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan etnografi sebagai metodologi kerana sifat penyelidikan. Persampelan *bola salji* digunakan sebagai teknik persampelan kerana terdapat cabaran mengenal pasti peserta kajian.

Kata kunci: Keluarga Tradisional Iban, Bilek-Keluarga, Struktura Keluarga Baru, Ibu Tunggal, Membuat Keputusan, Wanita Iban

1.0 Introduction

Besides socialization and wellbeing of members, family has always been identified as first and foremost, the fundamental unit of production and reproduction. Essentially, within families, important non-market transactions between men and women take place in all societies. Undoubtedly, contributions that men and women formulate in a joint family determine to a high degree the material and wellbeing of adults and children in that family. In fact, this is the principal source of distinct economic gender roles. Ironically, many societies in the past and even in today's world only recognised the birth-right and place of individual if such individual is a product of legally married couple. Thus, such understanding of the concept 'family' tend to position female headed-families as an outcast of social system and often portray them as dysfunctional and none conventional family unit. Nonetheless, with annual increase of divorce rate

worldwide and ever enlarging female headed families, the conventional family structure is continuously changing.

This study therefore, explores the impact of female headed families on the Iban traditional family structure. Hence, our study and data tend to stipulate that the increasing number of single mothers among the Iban is more likely or inevitably affect [if not] change the traditional structure of the *bilek-family*. In essence, the traditional family which was previously absolute patriarchal in nature in terms of the hierarchical position and decision-making¹ have continued to witness dynamic changes in the social realities. Accordingly, the absence of male as head of the family within this new form of *bilek* will further impact the role(s) and responsibilities that some contemporary Iban women are *forced* to shoulder.

2.0 Background

The Iban, the largest group members of the ethnic cluster referred as Ibanic complex. Their traditional homes are spread throughout North-Western Borneo. These unique ethnic group shares common cultural and linguistic features (see also Wadley, 1997:33). Within the North-western Borneo, most members of Iban call the state of Sarawak as their ancestral home. According to 1995 Malaysia national census, Iban

¹ Although works by G. Lemat (unpublished article) and more recently, M. Berma (2008) argued that traditionally Iban women have always been involved in decision making, however, consultation differs from requisitely acceptability. What is more these women were consulted because they were the backbones of food production and human reproduction in Iban society. Hence, in the absence of their spouses certain and urgent decision have to be taken to ensure the continuity and wellbeing of their families. Data have shown some decision are often revoked when the head of the family returns from his journey or *bejalai*

population numbered about 506,528 people, (that is one third of Sarawak population). Besides, smaller Iban populations reside within Brunei, Sabah (Malaysia), and West Kalimantan, Indonesia.

Historically (both oral tradition and written documents), early 19th century witnessed a large population of Iban's movement or migration. History recorded that around this period large populations crossed from the headwaters of the northern tributaries of the Batang Lupar and Saribas rivers and migrated into the basin of the Rejang River, an area which now encompasses central Sarawak. Others migrated from the upper Batang Lupar, and crossed the border into what is now West Kalimantan—following the Leboyan and Kanyau (Embaloh) rivers and eventually reaching the Katibas, a tributary of the Rejang (Padoch, 1982:15).

According to Wadley (1997:43), these migrations consisted of both macro and micro-movements. On the micro-movements Wadley, explained that;

Households joined and split from longhouses and then relocated to other parts of the territories over a long period of time. Migrant families and, on occasion, entire longhouses, would make macro-movements, characterized by long-distance travel in search of new resources or to escape the threat of raiders. Newly-formed longhouses generally consisted of close cousins or siblings, who provided most of the leadership (ibid).

In comparison with other Borneo peoples, the Iban are exceptionally mobile (Kedit 1993:15). Kedit maintained that, the culture heroes of Iban mythology perform triumphant *bejalai*², undertaking feats which provide both inspiration for and models of conduct for *bejalai* aspirants (ibid). Hence the phenomenon is a vital component of the Iban people and society. Besides its historical importance, it is a means of earning money. As Kedit pointed out *bejalai* is more than a journey: rituals and their supporting myths constitute it.

In fact, both Kedit³ (1993), and Freeman (1953) acknowledged that mobility has been a dominant symbol of Iban society and culture. Kedit in particular stressed, that no institution has been more important to Iban expansion than *bejalai*. Nonetheless, he noted that it has been transformed over the decades with young Iban men leaving home to work offshore or outside of their longhouse locality. Conversely, this changing trend especially in relation to those that never return back to their root, are more common with the less or non-educated young men. Data obtained during our fieldwork point to the fact that most educated Iban men or women, may embarked on *bejalai* to gain knowledge or educational empowerment and often return after the end of their studies. What is very interesting; unlike most uneducated young that embarked on *bejalai*, most of these men or women usually undertake this journey with the family members -- especially their wives and children -- (for detail, see Kedit (2008) and Burma (2008)).

² One of the numerous terms used by the wandering Iban for venturing on journeys or trip

³ Please refer to Kedit's recent work on *Internal Migration on Sarawak*. A paper presented at the Borneo Research Council 9th Biennial International Conference, on 28-30th July 2008, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

Historically, the Iban people were predominantly farmers. Hence, the Iban subsistence economy was based on the cultivation of rice⁴ and the simultaneous management of forest resources (Wadley, 1997:83; Kedit, 1993). Like many other ethnic groups, the Iban culture and norms adhere to gender roles. The sexual division of labour is significant to cultivation as it strongly demonstrates a defined gender role and to some extent gender inequality: an obvious illustration of imposition patriarchal and domination. Consequently, this often questions the essence of classifying Iban's society as egalitarian. Because male's labour merely includes slashing, felling, dibbling during planting, and carrying in the harvest, while women are concerned with slashing, sowing, weeding, and harvesting, and equally taking over many of the male's tasks in the absence men (see Wadley, 2002:27 and Kedit, 1993). In fact, as indicated by Berma's study in 2008⁵ in Kapit, about 55 % women are still working the farm and only 13.5 % of men are found working on the farm. These are in addition to domestic chores, reproduction and nursing their young to adulthood.

⁴ Annually beginning in May, each household selects and prepares cultivation sites for hill swiddens, by slashing the underbrush followed by the felling of trees in July. By mid-August the felled vegetation is generally dry enough so that the fields can be burned and then planted with rice, through sowing and dibbling. After the rice is planted, the Iban build field huts where they stay while weeding and treating the rice with herbicide; guarding the crop is a main concern since it draws attention from pests as it begins to fruit and ripen. In February, the harvesting process begins by threshing the rice to separate the grain from the panicles followed by further processing including winnowing and storage (Wadley, 1997:84).

⁵ Madeline Berma, Beyond Rumah Panjai: Iban Women and Migration in Kapit Division. *A Paper presented at Borneo research Council 9th Biennial International Conference, on 20-30th July, 2008, Kota Kinabalu.*

3.0 Understanding Fundamentals of Iban's *bilek-family*

Concisely, the basic unit of Iban society is the *bilek*-family. It is a small numerical group. On the average, it is about five or six individuals; and of these, two or three are usually children. According to Freeman's (1992: 59) study of three longhouses in Saribas; it is very rare for Iban *bilek*-family to consist more than six individuals over the age of 15. Overall, the Iban *bilek*-family is essentially based on the elementary family, which, in about 50 percent cases, extend to include the grand-parent generation. This unique household is regarded as a domestic family—its members constituting a single household, and providing for their own subsistence as an independent group. In nutshell, the *bilek*-family is predominantly the unit of production and reproduction of the Iban cosmology. It is, therefore, the fundamental unit in Iban economic organization. Members of this family unit primarily and chronologically occupies only one apartment of the longhouse. It possesses most properties in its own right and it is *jure*; and it is the principal corporate group of Iban social structure.

Sutlive (1978: 48, 50) observed that, among the various families or house heads which make up a longhouse community, there is an existing network of cognate or bilateral kinship ties. But Sutlive stressed that the Iban longhouse is primarily an aggregation of independently owned family apartments. Further, Freeman (1970:1) and Kedit (1993) pointed out that, although these apartments are joined one to another to produce a longhouse, each of these apartments is an autonomous unit on its own. What is more, our study confirmed the above understanding and equally noted that the *bilek*-family as an essential component of Iban's culture and its uniqueness revolves around

sharing and with a strong attachment to the principles of "a caring society"⁶. Indeed, it is not by chance that the Iban terms for a family sharing [the same] are '*kami sebilek*' [we, the members of a *bilek*], or *sida sebilek* (they of the same *bilek*). Confirming our earlier representation, Freeman, (1958: 20; 1970:9) epitomized the *bilek*-family as the basic unit of Iban social and economic organization.

As noted above, the *bilek*-family is genealogically simple: a man and his wife, their children, together with the grandparents—either of the man's or his wife, but not both (see Freeman, 1970: 11-12; Jensen, 1974: 31-32). Yet, it is imperative and slight contradictory to sustain the notion that Ibans are egalitarian, unless such perception is based on the understanding that it is a non-hierarchical society, where individual(s) can inspire to achieve greatness based on differentiated gender roles and positioning as classified by the Iban tradition and customs. This understanding is rooted on the fact that gender roles are unambiguous way of life in every Iban society, community, and family. Empirical data (both from primary and secondary sources) established that each member of the *bilek*-family has a distinct and important role that they are expected to play by the *tuai-rumah* - a codified gender role.

Certainly, the application of gender categorization is clearly pertinent in the Iban society. Even within the *bilek* -family difference exists in the turn-by-turn sequencing of talk, the way men and women 'do' gender in interactional routines. Indeed, one will not

⁶ Caring society is social networks of closely related community or communal groups that ensures or provide social benefit for its members. Indeed, members' socio-economic welfare is often borne by other members as state's intervention or participation is minimal and sometimes lacking. Members perform or provide such services and assistances which in many advanced countries are the contractual obligation of the state.

dispute that categories are *inference rich*. As Sacks, (1992: 40-41), states, this means that 'a great deal of the knowledge that members of a society have about the society is stored in terms of these categories. This categorization has enhanced our understanding of the frame of Iban *bilek*-family structures (both *new* and old). Even though, the Ibans have been described as egalitarian society, yet during the socialization phases of childhood and adolescence, gender roles are inculcated and in many instance, it influences people throughout their lives (Kedit, 1993 & Sandin, 1980). For example, domestic chores are delegated to women while men chop woods (the closest the domestic duties men perform).

Iban society as well has become apparent because it used to be religiously monogamous, and so there are no compound families. Again, the development of extended families is precluded by a strong tendency towards partition as soon as a *bilek*-family increases in size and collateral elementary families begin to emerge (see Freeman, 1992:12-13). Among the Iban, at least one of the children of a family, when she or he reaches maturity and marries, will [always] remains in the parents'; an element that is not often applicable to the new *bilek*-family especially those headed by single mothers (see below for further illustration). All the other children of the family may marry out and so become members of other units, but one always stays in the natal *bilek*. In this way the Iban *bilek*-family achieves continuity through time, as from one generation to the next; one elementary family grows out of, and succeed another, in unbroken sequence. Thus, except for new, which is the outcome of recent partition, most *bilek*-families could extend through three generations and through four. However, in the case of the new *bilek*-family, only time will tell if it will follow similar trend. This

continuity through time of the *bilek*-family is the cardinal feature of Iban social structure. While birth, marriage and death—and divorce—regularly change the personnel of the *bilek*-family, the complex property and other rights which give the *bilek*-family its separate identity are not affected. It is primarily as an allodial unit that persists from generation to generation. Thus, at any given moment in time, every Iban man, woman or child, is a member of one particular *bilek*-family and one only.

According to the oral tradition and supported by writers like Freeman (1992), Sutlive, Patterson (2008) [part of data gathered during our fieldwork]; individuals become members of a *bilek-family* through the following process of recruitment. An individual gains membership of his or her in one of these four ways: by being born, adopted, incorporated and most importantly, through marriage. Freeman noted that;

Iban marriage is very largely endogamous, both preferentially and in actuality. Iban marriage rules thus act to consolidate kindred ties and, secondly, to incorporate non-cognates and those in danger of becoming non-cognates back into the field of one's close kin. For the Iban, sexual relations (and hence marriage) are prohibited between all cognates of the same household, between siblings (full and half), and all cognates of different generational levels (1960:73-74).

Consequently, each *bilek*-family possesses both land and property on its own right. The same goes to ritual; each *bilek*-family is a discrete unit with its own magical charms (*pengaroh*) or set of ritual taboos (*pemali*) and special kind of sacred *padi* (*padi pun*) (see Freeman, 1958; Jensen, 1974). Buttressing this view concisely, Sutlive, (1978:39) noted, there are no large-scale corporate kin groups among the Iban *bilek*-family, therefore save as a very important social unit. Freeman sustained this view in his study of the Ibans, when he pointed out that each is like a sovereign country' ('*siti bilek, baka menoa siti*'), which functioned as a primary social unit (1958:20-22). According to Freeman (1970:3), the *bilek*-family owns and occupies one of the separate family apartments of the longhouse. Each traditional longhouse consists of , *sadau*, *ruai* and *tanju* (open veranda); while in the modern⁷ longhouse, there usually has a slightly different structure, including a living room, a kitchen, a toilet or a shower room, a *ruai*, a *tanju* and a *panking* (bedroom). The Ibans as a unique ethnic entity has been described by some writers as egalitarian society (see the criticism above). This is often reinforced by the understanding that within the *bilek*-family siblings are equal. Notionally, the siblings have the same rights and the same obligations. However, as noted above, equal right is easy to substantiate to certain degree, yet, obligations especially, at domestic and agrarian levels are based on gender roles and categorizations. Although, family members are joined by strong bonds of solidarity but often widows that are not favoured prior to the death of their spouses are discriminated and often treated as outcast or forced to move out of the *bilek*-family to form a new family structure otherwise

⁷ This has nothing to do with the *new* -family

move back to her original *bilek*-family. Indeed, as Freeman and others noted, the *bilek*-family is not a simple group, for it contains within its boundaries two different elementary families especially when siblings marry, and children are born, this result in the intrusion of new and rival loyalties.

However, decision making at household level or *bilek*-families are different from individual decision making. Essentially, gender roles structure orientation influences household decision making. Influence at traditional *bilek*-family is a prerogative of head of family which in many cases is the oldest male member of the family. Such prerogative and influence are often solely allocated to male members during the religious or festive activities. In fact, large body of empirical data points that Iban is a patriarchal society. Data shows that gendered behaviours are products of socialization. For instance, children learn to be male and "female" by observing and imitating parents and other adults. Such behaviours are often internalized, hence, conformity to gender stereotype and role expectations. Besides gender based assignment especially from childhood of chore in families endures and follows through life course. Indeed, the Iban society confirms that the general structure shows that men have power over women. Even though, the apparent dominate power of male member of *bilek*-family is not visibly portrayed yet, a systemic bias against women is very common. Within the traditional *bilek*-family men hold the positions of power: head the family unit and the leaders of Iban social groups. Even instance, that women head the family as it is in the case of many *new* *bilek*-families, headed by single mothers the way society *perceived* women in power as an exception to a collectively held view of women's "role" in society.

4.0 The dynamics of family structure and its impact

In the first section of this article, we outlined and examine the traditional Iban's *bilek*-family. Our discussion emphasized the imperious position of male family members. Not only do they control and partially monopolies all aspect of family production and reproduction but in most socio-religious activities and associations. Although, the renowned Tan Sri Datuk Gerunsin Lembang in his unpublished paper—*State and Society*, observed that; "native society is primarily democratic, open society, non-stratified, individuals irrespective of sex have equal opportunities to be leaders in any field be it social or political, nevertheless, he posed to acknowledge that; "this 'seemingly equality' among men and women in Native Society does not always work in reality". In his presentation, the author enclosed; "there seems to be an invisible process which is at work against the interest of women. It appears that women are 'disadvantaged' in most walks of life and that the 'take for granted equality' in the system does not ensure operative equality". Perhaps, this disadvantage will be best understood in the following illustration;

When we insist that what are not the same natures ought not to have the same pursuits, we cling to the verbal point most bravely and contentiously, but we have never inquired at all of what kind were the sameness and the difference and with reference to what we were then distinguishing them, when we proposed to give different pursuits to different natures, and

the same pursuits to the same natures (Ashto-Jones and Olson 1991:153).

The disadvantages of women as noted by Lemat, in many ways often increase the predicament many females headed families of the new *bilek*-family's visage. However, their position as head of the family, demystify the place of women in the old *bilek*-family structure and organization.

Indeed, the history and traditions of Iban's people, often revere the male members of their society and family in particular, enhance most important decision-making are delegated to them to make. In this section therefore, our discussion will dwell mostly on one of the new-fangled and noticeable family structure carved out of the former. This is the female-headed-families. Although, not entirely a recent pattern as many widows in the past have remain within the *bilek*-family, and in many ways worked to sustain their traditional *bilek*-family. Freeman noted this trend in his work, when he observed that;

Widows and widowers; that is men and women who, despite the death of their spouses, are still living as members of their deceased spouse' -family ... divorcee: that is men and women still living as members of their former spouses' bilek-families, despite the fact that their former spouses—now divorced—have taken up residence elsewhere (1992:24).

In fact, as mentioned above, the Ibans widows have every right to stay on as members of their deceased husband (See Freeman, 1992). Although, history and traditions of the Iban's people noted the existence of single mothers and their families in the old Iban society but their position and roles today are different and phenomenal. Then, if a married woman lost her husband, she was given options either to choose to remain with her dead husband's *bilek* or move back to her parents' *bilek*. If she chose the former, she automatically inherits her dead husband's lands and other properties. Thus, her parent-in-laws will adopt her as their daughter. However, if she chose to remarry to someone outside her late husbands or move back to her parents' *bilek*⁸, she will automatically relinquishes all right to the *pun-bilek* and sometimes her children too. This was very common when such family has no child to head the family in the future.

Theoretically, either male or female can be designated as the head of the family. However, in practise, women were regarded as non-custodian of the traditional *bilek*-family and they have little or no right to make decisions that matters to the *pun-bilek* family. Because, even though single mothers in female headed families are the sole decision-makers, they still seek advice from male families' members such fathers, uncles, brothers, or even sons in some imperative matters relating to their families. Although, many of our respondents, stressed that it is more of a courtesy than mandatory. Yet, it is obvious that such action is often based on the assumption that 'nature' has designated male as the head of families and societies. Most of these respondents, responded that from time to time they consult the mothers, but the

⁸ Ibans are not allowed to inherit their dead relatives' wives but maybe advised to marry such wife due to specific circumstances such as pregnancy.

responses they received from them is often; "Why don't we wait for your father or uncle and see what they have to say...." Nonetheless, it is pertinent to point out that although traditionally, Iban woman have always been involved in decision-making, it was usually limited to paddy farming, household chores and other non-important matters. However, migration and absence of male within this *new-bilek* have 'moved these women away from situations where they were under traditional patriarchal authority to situations in which they can exercise greater autonomy over their own lives', (Berma, 2008).

Despite this rather small progress, female members of the *bilek*-families are quite often merely consulted when important decisions are made. But the degrees to which their outputs are considered remain minimal to say the least. Although Lembat in his article noted that women's opinion is essential to the continuity of the family existence and production, however, they need to consult them especially in rice production, are often on the account that women contribute enormous amount of labour toward the production and distribution of rice crops. Even then, many older generations of the Iban community we interviewed, continued to argue that women are incapable of expressing their decisions, due to intelligent level among them. Such assumption as noted above is often associated with authoritarian character of the traditional family structure which concentrates decision-making powers to the eldest male members (see Rao 1982). Indeed, women are traditionally less involved in decision making at all levels. As argued by Jan and Akhtar (2008), and supported by our findings in the field, women's important role is not recognized and, therefore, still not accepted in decision-making members. Even with the *new* family structure, women level of decision-making in community is still

very low and their participation is mostly stressed intrusive and pushy. But such labelling are only whispered in streets rather than in the households headed by females in the *new bilek*-families of the Iban society.

5.0 The *Bilek*-Family and Urbanisation/ Migration

Early writers and data acquired from our fieldwork, associate the increasingly urbanization of Malaysian environs and globalization as a combined factor that are constantly redefining and in many ways, detecting the trend of social realities in this multi-ethnic societies. The Iban's society (and culture in particular), although often associated with migration in the form of *bejalai* or others, have equally been redefined. For example, prior to the current trend, members of *bilek*-families that migrate outside the regional parameters were still considered as members of their original long-houses or *bilek*-families. But in today's dynamic society, it is often unclear whether married⁹ couples in the cities are now affiliated to, or independent of, their parents' households. Although, according to many participants; predominantly members of the old school in Iban's *Adat*,¹⁰ new homes set up by their children that migrated to the cities are considered part of the parents' household. Part of the argument is based on the understanding that family members often travel back and forth of their rural and urban homes and still assist each other. That implies the continuity of the principle of "caring society". Secondly, on the understanding that, married couples in the cities are considered to retain the right to inherit their parents' household on either the husband's

⁹ In the Iban language, leaving home and moving to the spouse's home upon marriage is called *ngugi* or *nguai*. When adult children leave home to get married and set up a home of their own, they are considered to be independent (*kadiri*).

¹⁰ The Iban's code of Conduct

or wife's side. When this occurs, the person marrying outside the original *bilek*-family ceases to be a member of the original household. This is a broad interpretation of their traditional custom.

Yet, many families in the cities, and particularly female headed families, have in many ways shown a clear characteristic that detached them from the traditional *bilek*-families. For instance, many females headed families we encountered or interviewed in the course of this research lacked the social network or support system associated with the former. What is more, their family composition lack the dominant male's_power-over¹¹ that are often associated with male dominance (see the discussion below).

This redefinition of this unique society occurred in series and over a long period of time. However, the catalyst of the current redefinition can be directly or indirectly associated with the introduction of cash crop production in the Iban's areas by the state government. Although not exclusively 'cash crop' introduction, other factors such as marriage, economic opportunities and modern facilities in urban centres, children education, job, transportation network, increasingly urbanisation and government policies equally played vital role yet this facet initiated phenomenal precedence.

It is undoubtedly factual that the production of cash crops is both space and labour-intensive; hence many people from the longhouses and the *bilek*-family members in general expected large development effects. Moreover, it has a lot to do with the pull (e.g., urban bias) and push (e.g., land scarcity) factors feeding rural exodus

¹¹ Possession of control, authority, or influence over others

(see Harris and Todaro 1970, Bates 1981, Bairoch 1988, Kedit 2008, Berma, 2008). There is no questioning the logic behind the introduction of cash crop to the Iban communities. Because the understanding is related to the notion that cash crops income allows individuals and families to pay the fixed costs of the primitive accumulation of physical capital, such as roads, schools, health facilities and not to mention, its human capital (farmers investing in the education of their children) and probably establish social capital (trade networks form). However, the complementary explanations found fault with execution of the project and non-in-depth study on the repercussion of this project on the *bilek*-family structure of the Iban's people.

Although the issue of cash crops is not the subject matter of this work, however, it is vital to placidly acknowledge its relationship to current Iban migration or *bejalai*, its impact on establishment of the *new bilek*-family. Certainly, while cash crop project has always been acclaimed as successful and subsequent projects were modelled it, its consequences in terms of dramatic changes to the Iban's family structure and production has left its mark as a permanent feature. In fact, many families were obligatorily urged to produce cash crops such as rubber, cocoa and peppers replacing the traditional food products the Ibans were known for which is, paddy farming. Although, paddy farming among the Ibans were basically non-mechanized, nonetheless, it created a mutual bond (between people and lands; families and production; land/culture/custom/religion and communal well-being) and ensure families are united and cooperates towards members' economic sustainability because families

do not only contribute labours but towards the wellbeing of others within the same *bilek*-families.

Conversely, the introduction of crops means a high demand for loans, large capitals, lands and replacement of human labours with machines. Accordingly, this translated into economic classes. This economic class, directly or indirectly weaken the *bilek* bonds and creating rivalries among many *bilek*-families especially over land properties. What is more, the production of cash crops was not an automatic passport to wealth and wellbeing given the contradictory factors associated with cash crops simply because fluctuation in prices of these crops also forced these farmers to abandon their crops and moved to town or elsewhere, to look for a more stable income employment. Besides, many *bilek*-family members with little or no production means often embark on *bejalai* in the hope to acquiring wealth and riches to preserve the pride and prestige of their homestead. This gave rise to high number of both internal and external migrations by many Ibans youths and middle aged men and women too (see Kedit, 2008 & Berma, 2008). Although, most of the females (some males too) migrated overseas or outside their homestead in pursue of education and skills.

The fallout of this vast migration in many ways redefined the Iban's *bilek* family and equally gave rise to *new* family structure mostly headed by female or a mother figure of the *new bilek*-family. As the dawn of this new era breaks, many young Iban men joined the timber and logging companies. Those with wives and children left them behind and others that are engaged or with girlfriends went to work with promises of coming with loads of money. Our findings from Kapit shows that many of the later, came

back to marry their sweet hearts and after the honeymoon was over went back to work with logging companies. According to our data, some failed to fulfilled their promises to their fiancées and do not return to marry them. "A blessing in disguise" echoed one respondent. Because many of those that left their wives and children or unborn babies behind left them hanging on a rope: they were not divorced nor did they marry. Data obtained from Kapit Customary Court Registry, shows that parents and sometimes relatives of these women usually after many fruitless waiting and searching and endless waiting for their husbands, applied for the dissolution of the marriage because it concluded that such men must have absconded. A common response many respondents we spoke at the premises of this institution are; "we cannot locate our husbands"; "we don't know where they are", "they simply disappeared and there is nothing we can do than to seek for dissolution of our marriage", "we cannot wait for them forever". Even the resident registry and *tuai rumah* and other related official echoed similar or the same helpless responses.

Such social malevolence act is even more common with many Iban men that embarked on *bejalai* overseas; especially those working with companies based in South Africa, Solomon Island, Papua New Guinea etc. As we recalled, respondents in this category, explained that, their ex-spouses, remitted money for family maintenance as long as they were not cheating on them or seeing other women in their environment. In accordance with these respondents, most of their ex-spouses married foreign women, abandoned their wives, children and equally abandon their responsibilities at home. We made effort to verify these respondents' statements in order avoid being subjective in

our research and present this social reality as factual as possible. Hence we embarked on more aggressive data collection on this social transformation and events. Thus, data which confirmed the above accounts were gathered from respondents in Song, Sibujaya, Julau, Kanowit etc. Indeed, about 74% of the respondents (both male and women) confirmed those statements obtained from our earlier respondents from Kapit and its surroundings.

The concise illustration above is unavoidable as it enhances readers understanding of the subject matter of this paper. Although, a mere observation, may not clearly provide the dynamics or the transformation of Iban *bilek* -family as many single mothers established pseudo *bilek*-families, yet an empirical analysis will a transformation in process due to various factors which include; early marriage and early divorce, increase in the number of newly married men with little education and skills embarking on *bejalai*, and globalization pressure on family structures.

The increase in female headed household has played a role in changing social structures in the Iban *bilek*-families. For instances support systems for the elderly are being eroded, families are often separated for extended periods, and sometimes indefinite as many of these women juggled between jobs and family responsibilities. What is more, as the number of female headed families increased in the rural areas, it reflects on the age of the population. Our findings indicate that population ageing in rural areas has major implications for agricultural production, food security, health services, labour markets and the process of development itself. In addition, families, the basic structural unit of rural societies have continued to experience rapid and significant

demographic change, in many instances leading to reduce family support for older persons and possibly an increase in poverty among the elderly.

Although there is a lack of adequate disaggregated data on poverty by gender, there is concern that poverty rates may be much higher among female headed females of Iban origin. The feminization of poverty among these families is primarily due to the fact that many single mothers face legal, structural and attitudinal barriers that prevent them from having equal access or control over various resources. These resources include access to training, credit, equal property rights, and free mobility. Legislative barriers in labour and property laws are of significance, however, women's poor literacy in the female headed families and lack of awareness of their legal rights are also crucial challenges for women's economic empowerment. At the same time, the high fertility rate and limited availability of facilities such as for child-care, prevent single mothers from taking advantage of economic opportunities in this country.

Though conventional representation of the family often argued that a married couple with children is a single decision-making agent with unitary preferences, yet non-unitary models have maintained otherwise arguing that possible gender inequality exist. Besides as pointed out above, contributions that men and women formulate in a joint family determine to a high degree the material and wellbeing of adults and children in that family. This joint family decision-making is none existent in most female headed house of *new* Iban's *bilek*-families. What is the ability of men and women to enter into binding inter-temporal agreement or even negotiation is not present? Therefore, the element of gendered division of labour in this new *bilek*-family has to some extent

collapsed thereby enforcing communal members to either label such family's heads as dysfunctional or social deviant.

Yet, in the absence of marital contracts, single mothers face incentives to act strategically that may impair efficiency and affect distributional outcomes. Although, some of this strategic incentives or survival strategies may impair wellbeing of its members but it appears that materialization of this group as permanent entity within the Iban's *bilek*-family has transformed the social norms [especially] regarding the appropriate gender roles and institutional constraints.

6.0 The composition of *New bilek*-family

As Motomistu (2003) argued in his publication in *the Journal of Asia and African studies*, the Iban family is structurally an exemplar of a 'stem family'. He maintained that this means, at the complete stage of its 'development cycle' it consists of members of successive generation. Motomistu noted that; its (that is the Iban's *bilek-family*) continuation as a unit rests upon guaranteed existence of a successor-pair at the most junior level. Indeed, by all academic standard, Motomistu argument or presentation in this article is hard to dispute, however, he failed (probably oblivious or unconsciously) that Iban *bilek*-family structure is undergoing a unique transformation as a result of various factors pointed out in this study. Paramount as the traditional *bilek*-family as depicted in Cramb in his 2010 unpublished article argued that; as a life trajectory intersects with another everyday life ideology...its nucleus is a heterosexual married couple who will bear and raise children of their own. Yet the changing nature of the Iban's *bilek* -family is far from the illustration of Cramb's graphic explanation of Utot's

household in his work. In his account, household had grown and divided. For example, one son had married into another longhouse, downstream within the same district. Two sons and a daughter had married partners from elsewhere in the region and established separate households..., the remaining four children had moved permanently to urban locations in Sarawak. But Cramb (2010) maintained that they children are still formally part of Utot's household. Hence, (Cramb: 2010) the original household comprised by Utot's and four separate non-resident families. And most of the grandchildren in these families were not born in the Longhouse, but were still formally members of Utot's *bilek*.

A common reference to both authors here is the 'heterosexual married couple' as the key to the so-called stem-family or the traditional *bilek*-family. What is more, the subject that families consisting of a father, mother, and child/children is almost a myth. Nowadays, and more than ever, a generation of single-parents (mothers to be precise) households are a common phenomenon and in deed, impacting on how Iban's family is defined. This new generation of *bilek*-families consists or encompasses of the mother (as the head of the family and most decision making are taken by these women) child or children and in many instances elderly parents and siblings that partially or totally depended on the economic prowess of these single mothers. Moreover, the *new bilek*-families do not compass with the strict old *bilek*-family's socialization forms and norms. Although, some of the respondents we spoke in the field acknowledged that their parents live with them, but socialization of younger members of this *bilek*-family bears more of the universal outlook rather than then the old Iban's *bilek*-family stance. In addition to that, our data established, contrary to separate sleeping quarters for male

and female, members of the *new bilek*-families share common living arrangement. This fact is equally applicable to those families that are residing in or migrated to the urban areas.

What is more defining, with the *new Iban bilek*-families, many of those that moved out of the longhouse and set up their *bilek*-families hardly return to their old environ. They either reconstruct or redesign their home based on their new residential areas or construct homes that has little or no relation to the long-house design and structure. Most members of the *new bilek*-family especially single mothers have revolutionized its structure, design, rules and regulation in many ways dissimilar to the old *bilek*-family.

7.0 Conclusion

Although, the Iban as people and society is acclaimed to be egalitarian, but the gender roles are clearly defined in the family structure and organization, from production of goods to distribution of goods, from reorganization of a woman as a 'perfect woman' to that symbolization of a male as 'a perfect man'. This dichotomy runs all the length of decision-making, gender roles and socialization process in the *bilek*-family and beyond the boundaries of it. The *new bilek*-family on the other hand, from empirical observation and data gathered from members of this *new bilek*-family, has in many ways altered from the traditional originality of its fundamentality. Here, women head the family, decision-making is no longer the prerogative of male's power or control. In fact, although, most respondents still maintained their gender roles but have added the part that men play. Inevitably, this *new bilek*-family has come to stay

There is little doubt that changing in the *bilek*-families among the Iban will sturdily impact on its structure, organization and roles. For instance, unlike the former or traditional *bilek*-family, the *new bilek*-family will in many ways impact on children socialization and educational process. In fact, we noted during the fieldwork, that children were formerly supervised by co-resident adult kin in the traditional but many in the *new bilek* are supervised and organized by the single parents-being the sole decision-maker and financial provider.

What is more, the household as the center of production affected childhood experience of many of the respondents' offspring. This is even more obvious as their primary caretakers differed in the configuration of the household. Historically, family composition of the Iban's *bilek*-family affected children's lives in important ways as they learn to work, live and associate in a complex and yet, socio-cultural network. The *new bilek*-family headed by single mothers does not offer the same socio-cultural network. What is very interesting here is that the size and structure of this *new bilek*-family and its capacity to sustain itself has shaped how children are raised, their level of formal education, labor force, perception and their world outlook in general. It is therefore vital here to point out that the Iban *bilek*-family or household is no longer autonomous but part of a wider network of relations with the community. Thus, as the Malaysia society and community undergoes economic and demographic transformation the impact(s) is felt both within and across of its geographic sphere. Even so, we discover diversity in the form and structures underlying and in many ways controlling the family. Some of this diversity is the outcome of financial and socio-political diversion within the larger society

of Sarawak. Beside the fact that the family is a multiple concept, it will therefore be a misrepresentation on our side (especially at this juncture) to conclude that the old *bilek*-family is now a history.

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