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Title	Agents on the move : the living strategy of indigenous people in Sarawak, Malaysia
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Citation	北海道大学文学研究科紀要, 119, left 79-left 101
Issue Date	2006-07-20
Doc URL	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/2115/14496">https://hdl.handle.net/2115/14496</a>
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	119_l79-l101.pdf



**Agents on the move:  
the living strategy of indigenous people  
in Sarawak, Malaysia**

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**Introduction**

Studies on rural-to-urban migration have frequently been conducted from both rural and urban perspectives (Soda 2003), but the counter flow of people from urban to rural areas has attracted little academic attention (Skeldon 2005). However, as McHugh (2000) pointed out, the dominant conceptualization of migration and migrant adjustment as a one-way journey is inadequate. Recently, there has been a tendency to explain reciprocal migration patterns in terms of ‘migrant institutions’ or ‘networks.’ In addition, the primacy of a purely economic model of migration has been challenged through the exploration of issues of identity and social networks, which are not easily incorporated in such a model (Hampshire 2002). This paper reconsiders reciprocal migration between rural and urban areas from social, cultural and political perspectives, using the case of the Iban, an indigenous group in Sarawak, Malaysia. In analyzing the role of the Iban in articulating rural and urban societies, it is argued that understanding the mobility of the Iban requires a new perspective that differs from the conventional framework of migration studies. The first part of this paper deals with the dichotomous features

of previous studies of rural-urban migration, and introduces the concept of agency to understand human mobility between rural and urban areas. The latter half of the paper focuses on the case of the Iban within a framework of structure and agency.

## Mobility as a premise

Migration studies can be roughly classified into two approaches. The first is a neo-classical approach based on a dual-economy model, which includes the premise of the rational movement of laborers, and the second is a Marxist model that stresses structural factors rather than migrant agency (Mosse et al. 2002). Although the estrangement of these approaches has been cause for pessimism (e.g. Goss and Lindquist 1995), studies since the late 1990s seem to find common ground in that they admit substantial mobility of migrants and sometimes rightly criticize the ‘sedentary bias’ (e.g. de Haan 1999; Mosse et al. 2002; Leinbach 2004).

De Haan (1999) asserts that previous models of migration and migrants have often been based on an assumption of ‘sedentarism’. Mosse et al. (2002) also state that migration and rural livelihoods are falsely opposed, and that rural development is invariably taken to imply the reaffirmation of a disrupted sedentary agricultural community (Mosse et al. 2002). Another viewpoint is offered by Elmhirst’s (2001) case study of Indonesia’s transmigration policy, which notes that ‘place-based essentialism’ undermines the security of settlers, denies their rights to land, and erodes possibilities for fostering civil society.

Thus, recent studies, irrespective of differences in their approaches and viewpoints, reject the assumption of sedentarism and discuss migration presupposing the high mobility of rural populations. Englund (2002) also asserts that “the challenge of regarding mobility, rather than im-

mobility, as primary in social life confronts not only development policies but much conventional wisdom in the social sciences”.

When this feature of migration is examined in terms of family composition and household strategies, the diversification of family relations are emphasized. Firman (1994) further developed the argument of Caces et al. (1985), stating “theoretically, all members, irrespective of their physical location, continue to maintain important connections with those still living at home and with those living elsewhere”. He calls such families ‘bi- or multi-local families’ that largely reflect the deployment of the labor force. Families that straddle different agro-ecological and economic zones have been mentioned by many other scholars (e.g. de Haan et al. 2002; Kelly 1998; Agesa 2004) in relation to the allocation of labor within a household. For instance, Agesa (2004) presented the concept of ‘one family, two households,’ and examined the relations between members within households that are permanently separated and maintain two homes.

However, Agesa erred in asserting that if a wife followed her husband to the city, the migration of the family unit was complete. To understand households split between urban and rural areas in the framework of migration studies, we have to consider not only the question of marital separation, but also the relationship between parents in the village and their married children in the city. This issue has rarely been considered in previous migration studies. As will be discussed later, Iban people in the city apparently set up an economically independent household, and their rural-to-urban migration seems to be completed, but in social and cultural senses, they retain the potential to affiliate to the household of either the husband’s or wife’s parents in the village.

It is true that the household, which has been discussed within structuralist and functionalist approaches, is a problematic concept (Folbre 1986;

Goss and Lindquist 1995) because it is a somewhat vague and unsatisfactory analytical category that cannot function as a point of articulation between macro- and micro-levels of determination, or between structure and agency (Goss and Lindquist 1995). In addition, Bounthong et al. (2004) remark that even taking the household as a unit of analysis raises the important methodological question of whether certain actions should be conceptualized as part of a household's 'strategy' or as decisions that are best understood from the standpoint of the individual. The vagueness or ambiguity of the notion of the household has been a critical issue in examining the living strategy of the individual (e.g. Tacoli 1996; Booth 2004).

Another and more critical point for previous studies in considering migration and the household is that the split in the household, or the diversification of household types, has been discussed on the premise that actors or members of the household 'migrate' between rural and urban areas. However, there are often difficulties in understanding the movement of people in Southeast Asia within the framework of 'migration'. Rigg (1998) stated that it is almost impossible to assign discrete spatial addresses to people in Southeast Asia because they often shift their work places and sometimes establish multiple living bases in several places. It is therefore difficult to judge which place is their real base. Skeldon (2005) says, "...it had been assumed that most migration was made up of permanent moves from A to B whereas, in reality, migration is a complex system of various types of movement, perhaps better termed 'mobility', in which non-permanent forms are as important".

This paper suggests that the notion of 'migration' should be reconsidered in examining the movement of people in Southeast Asia. Population movement is constant in this area and may seem to constitute migration. However, those involved may regard their movement as

simply a journey or visit to another place, or they may try to establish multiple residences in different places to expand their living space. Their movement does not necessarily presuppose a 'shift' or 'change' in their principal place of residence. What is important here is the migrants' or movers' perspective, which has been overlooked in previous migration studies. We need to reevaluate the initiatives of people who move to understand the complexity of their movement, without being confined by the conventional framework of migration studies. It therefore seems that the concept of 'agency' may be useful for examining and reevaluating human mobility from the movers' perspective.

## **Structure and agency**

Many researchers have argued that both individualistic (or behavioral) models such as the Todaro model (e.g. Thadani and Todaro 1984; Lucas and Stark 1985; Katz and Stark 1986) and migration analyses in the Marxist (or structuralist) tradition (e.g. McGee 1982; Standing 1985; Rubenstein 1992) have taken a one-sided point of view. Economic models tend to isolate economic decision-making and do not analyze the political and social contexts. In contrast, Marxist analysis overemphasizes the political-economic contexts that influence migration decisions, and isolates the constraining nature of formal institutions on mobility. As a result, they tend to ignore migrant agency (de Haan 1999). As Hampshire (2002) remarks, an exploration of issues of migrants' identity and social networks should be incorporated into economic and/or quantitative investigations<sup>1</sup>.

Goss and Lindquist (1995) pointed out the theoretical impasse that had been created between functional and structural approaches to understanding labor migration. To overcome these polarities, recent theories

have emphasized that analyses need to incorporate both individual motives and the structural factors in which migrants operate in the form of Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (de Haan 2002). The attempt by Goss and Lindquist (1995) to develop a concept of 'migrant institutions' that could articulate various levels of analysis, was among the studies based on 'structuration theory'. In this approach, in which the notion of 'agency' was reinstated and developed (e.g. Chant and Radcliffe 1992), and the relationships between structure and agency were examined, researchers often discussed the collapse of the binaries of rural and urban, tradition and modernity, or push and pull, and allowed labor migration to be seen as part of local and diverse livelihood strategies.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) define agency as the "temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments — the temporal relational contexts of action — which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations". One of the important issues in the migration context is whether migrants have choices or are constrained to migrate (Halfacree 1995). In the argument on female migration, Smith (2004) pointed out that Halfacree's portrayal of intentional and unintentional agency being embedded within migration decision-making begs questions about whether family migration represents the 'choices' and/or 'constraints' of migrants. This issue needs further examination.

As for the case of the Iban in the study area considered here, we first have to investigate whether their rural-to-urban flows have been caused by any structural factors, and whether urban Ibans have 'choices' in negotiating with other ethnic groups, urban administrations, and their family in the village. This paper regards them as moving actors and pays particular attention to their 'roles' in articulating rural and urban

areas. In other words, we will clarify their approaches and reactions to the structures or institutions that exist around them as they straddle rural and urban areas. This examination leads us to a holistic understanding of the living strategies of mobile Iban people, beyond the confines of a migration framework.

### **Migrant agency: the case of the Iban**

The Iban are well known as a people who live in the forests of Sarawak and practice slash-and-burn agriculture. In recent years, however, they have often been portrayed by the mass media and NGOs as people who were expelled from the primary forest because of logging and other development processes. Some stress the irony that people excluded from the forest are forced to work at logging sites, thus taking part in the degradation of their own living space. However, it has been established that the Iban have been largely dependent on secondary rather than primary forests (Freeman 1955). It is true that the areas where the Iban reside have experienced deforestation, but an overemphasis on the oppressed situation of the Iban could lead to a misunderstanding of their living strategy in the context of modernization in Sarawak.

The Iban in the middle reaches of the Rajang, for example, began to introduce new technologies and different ways of thinking through interaction with the white rulers and Chinese in the late 19th century. Innovations in agricultural techniques enabled them to plant wet paddies and the introduction of rubber trees brought them cash income, which consequently reduced their dependence on even secondary forests in the last 100 years. According to the Sarawak Gazette, the Iban in the mid-Rajang area were generally keen to adopt new paddy planting technologies. In the 1940s and 1950s, many of them took short courses to learn how to

plant wet paddies using buffaloes, and in some villages they worked in groups to construct small-scale irrigation systems for paddy fields under the instruction of the Agricultural Department. As for the introduction of rubber, they were also eager to plant young trees on the dry and hilly land. They often say, “By the 1960s not only primary forest but also secondary forest had almost disappeared because we planted rubber trees everywhere within the village territory”. Other factors during this period also had a significant influence on changes in the lifestyle of the Iban in the area. In the 1960s, the logging and oil industries in Sarawak were enjoying rapid growth, encouraging the Iban to leave their villages to engage in wage-earning jobs in these growing sectors. In other words, by the 1960s the Iban in the research area had begun to earn their living away from the forest to some extent.

This process could be regarded as the marginalization of the Iban by structural forces in that they were ‘excluded’ from the forest. However, ‘traditional livelihoods’ in the forest cannot be realized without complete ‘neglect’ or non-intervention by the government. From the wider socio-economic and political perspectives, such a hands-off policy, which is almost inconceivable, would also have led to the marginalization of the Iban. In fact, in the 1980s, some ethnic groups, including the Iban in the upper Rajang and Baram Rivers, displayed attitudes of open resistance against the government and logging companies and demanded the conservation of the forest as their living space. Their attitudes, however, resulted in more radical interference by the government and companies in their lives, which often ended in worsening their situation. This process may, in fact, be the culmination of the marginalization of indigenous peoples.

In contrast to those in the upper areas, the Iban in middle and lower areas chose another way; that is, they decided to ‘migrate’ out of their

villages in the relatively early stages of their modernization. In the 1960s in particular, rapid development in the logging and oil industries generated a big demand for labor and many young Iban males began to work away from home. In the 1980s, however, the diversification of job opportunities in the city accelerated their rural-to-urban migration in family units. Those who migrated to the city, however, began to recognize that this placed them in a marginalized situation in the urban, state and national contexts. In other words, their choice to migrate to the city was also part of the process of marginalization.

Migration is often explained through narratives in which rural inhabitants, mostly men, migrate in response to negative factors such as environmental change, population growth or increasing economic pressure (de Haan et al. 2002). In addition, views about migration and migrants are often based on an assumption of sedentarism; that is, populations that used to be immobile and have been uprooted by economic environmental forces (de Haan 1999). In this sense, the migration of rural populations into urban areas has often been regarded as a consequence of institutional and structural disadvantages. In the case of the Iban, however, they ‘chose’ to migrate to urban areas, even if their range of choices was limited. Those who failed to find work or reached retirement age without taking up stable residence in the city returned to the village to spend their free time. In other words, the Iban village community provided ‘insurance’ for urban sojourners. Paradoxically, it is safe to say that although the village community has been decaying, it still provides assurance of the Iban’s aggressive urban life (Soda 2001).

From the perspective of urban administration, however, the inflow of rural people into the city has been considered undesirable and regarded as a source of various social problems such as ‘overpopulation’, increased unemployment, and housing shortages in urban centers. Much migration

literature has been silent about the kinds of policies that try to alleviate these problems. De Haan and Rogaly (2002) explain that this is because migration tends to be an uncomfortable area for policy makers. Studies and policies tend to assume immobile populations, which can be said to be a 'sedentary bias' (de Haan 2002). Koczberski's statement that the uncertain economic future for the majority of rural and urban populations, and rising inequalities in income opportunities and access to resources, has coincided with greater intolerance of migrant groups and attempts by governments at all levels to restrict internal migration (Koczberski et al. 2001; Koczberski and Curry 2004) can be applied to many regions of Southeast Asia. Migration is seen as a disjuncture and as undesirable. It can be said that such a spatial cognition is socially constructed, sometimes restricting migrants' movements and sometimes guiding their behavior. In this sense, the rural/urban divide is itself structural in nature<sup>2</sup>. In effect, the Sarawak government has regarded rural-to-urban migration as problematic and tried to reduce it because increases in illegal land occupation and urban unemployment might disturb urban administrations. The government planned to set up 'Rural Growth Centers' to reduce rural-to-urban migration and its incidental urban problems. However, this project has not been very effective. The Iban in the research area not only migrated from rural to urban areas but also undertook reciprocal, frequent and complicated moves between and around the two areas. This pattern of movement has been difficult for administrative systems to grasp. Government and policy makers have failed to understand the migration patterns of Iban people because they have tried to understand their movement in the framework of rural-to-urban migration. However, their urban sojourn should be recognized as a temporary one in a process of continuous flow, rather than the accumulation of rural poverty in the city.

## Are the Iban embedded in structure?

Iban who have moved to urban areas have become more acutely aware of their marginality through their interaction with other ethnic groups and macro-societies. Although the Iban are the largest ethnic group in Sarawak, accounting for around 30% of the state's population, they are still a minority in urban areas. The major ethnic group in urban areas is the Chinese (42.4%) while the Iban make up only 17.2% (the 2000 Census).

The most important regional center in the Rajang Basin is the town of Sibul, which is located in the lower Rajang River and has prospered as a timber export center. In Sibul, the Iban experience an urban economy dominated by Chinese society and also become aware that Malaysia is a Muslim country. Many Iban people complain, "Chinese have their own business know-how and never disclose it, so we Iban are only employed by Chinese at low wages". Another typical complaint relates to the government's preference for Malays or Muslims: "A Malay always takes precedence over an Iban in getting a scholarship, a good job, or a promotion even when they both have the same educational background. This is because the Malay are Muslim. We Iban are neglected by the government as we are non-Muslim". These social, economic and ethnic disparities seem real to Iban who enter the urban labor market. In other words, for the Iban, Sibul has different institutions from those of rural Iban communities.

The differences in society and culture between Sibul and rural villages often disadvantage the Iban, who come from rural areas, but they have not chosen to adopt an attitude of open resistance. Instead, they sometimes show a shrewd attitude of currying favor with the government and

sometimes devise ways of cooperating and associating with other ethnic groups to negotiate with the government.

There are numerous examples of such strategies. In the 1980s, Sibu had at least seven squatter settlements on the outskirts of the town. The largest squatter settlement, located around 5 km south of the town center, consisted of more than 1,400 households containing not only the Iban but also Malay, Melanau, and Chinese groups. In the early 1990s, the residents of the squatter settlement formed a committee and began negotiations with the local administration and political leaders for residential land. They subsequently obtained legal residential lots in a resettlement area (Soda 2000). The committee was dominated by Malay/Melanau members but included Iban and Chinese members. One of the then Iban committee members said to me: “If the committee was formed mainly of Iban, our claim might have been neglected. Without cooperation with the Muslim, it is difficult for us to extract benefits from the government”.

We can see another example of their pro-government attitude in their voting strategy. Many urban Iban return to their villages to vote during elections and are keen to take part in discussions about rural development because most of them plan to return to their home village after retirement. Their focus is mainly on the Minor Rural Project (MRP), which is designed to improve living standards in villages. However, MRP funds for the construction of feeder roads, supply of water and electricity, and development of other infrastructure are distributed to each constituency in accordance with the number of votes cast for the government. Inevitably, village communities must vote for government parties if they really want to obtain rural development projects. This is why many urban dwellers return to the village to cast their votes during elections.

Thus, Iban in urban areas have developed ways of receiving a tiny share of the benefits available, based on their thorough knowledge of

Sarawak's political and socio-economic systems.

## Agency of the Iban in the city

Malaysia is noted for its so-called Bumiputera Policy<sup>3</sup>, which is an affirmative action plan to propel poorer indigenous peoples into the economic mainstream. It is true that the Iban have received benefits from the policy as indigenous people in Malaysia. However, as this policy has a Muslim preferential feature, the Iban, who are mostly non-Muslim, have 'second-class Bumiputera status' (Chin 1996) and have obtained only a tiny proportion of the benefits available.

In observing the strategies described in the previous section, it could be considered that the Iban passively enjoy a lower but relatively stable standard of living as second-class Bumiputera. However, they have not necessarily been 'domesticated' or structurally embedded in the urban economy and national policy. From a political point of view, they actually have variations in their voting strategy. As described above, many urban Iban register their votes at polling places in their home villages, reflecting their interest in rural development projects. However, more detailed observation reveals that many Iban households in Sibü split their registered voting places between parents and children or between husband and wife, enabling them to cast votes in both rural and urban areas. This is because they are interested not only in rural development but also in improving their present living conditions in the city. In other words, people in Sibü seek opportunities to negotiate with political leaders in both rural and urban areas. For politicians, it is important to know how they can involve these urban sojourners in their own constituency. The strategies that the Iban use to improve their living conditions in both rural and urban areas show that it is impossible

to understand their lives from a viewpoint based on the conventional rural/urban dichotomy. Therefore, the government has been forced to negotiate with both rural and urban dwellers even to promote its rural development policy.

In some cases, they show apparently straightforward resistance against the government by supporting the opposition candidate. This was demonstrated during the 1996 election in my study village in the Kanowit District, along the middle reaches of the Rajang River. The village fought against the government in the election and supported a powerful independent candidate. As more than 90% of the seats in the state assembly have been occupied by the parties in power since the late 1980s, their fight against this power seemed reckless. However, their stance was not illogical. Rather, many supporters took part in the political campaign in the hope of making future inroads into the power structure of Sarawak's politics. Some informants commented to me: "Even if our candidate loses the election, we will be treated coldly by the government only for a few years until the next election period. If he wins this election, on the other hand, he will be invited by the government party to be its member, in which case our 'return' will be bigger".

Although the Iban have been politically marginalized, their manifestation of dissatisfaction with the unfair distribution of benefits has shaken political stability in Sarawak several times in the past. Most of the Iban still remember these earlier political forays. As each of these attempts has ended in failure in the last few decades, they often narrate such political events in tones of self-mockery. However, they also consider that these events forced the government to be more conscious of the importance of rural development, especially in the Iban area. It can be said that behind the political activities of the Iban in the Rajang area there was a faint expectation of such changes in the politics of Sarawak.

In other words, there saw some potential to transform the current political structure. Under this expectation, they sometimes show naïve and unsophisticated attitudes, and sometimes enact complicated and rather shrewd strategies.

## The household and village community as institutions

We have to discuss the agency of the Iban in the research area in relation to the household and village community because these can be considered to have institutionalized aspects. For instance, de Haan et al. (2002) state, “Household and kinship networks structure the movement of individuals, by providing them with some independence while at the same time retaining them within these networks”. Migration or human mobility out of the village does not directly result in the disunity of the rural household. However, movers and migrants sometimes act against the interest of the household: for example, they may cheat family members for their own convenience and prepare to break away from the original household (de Haan et al. 2002). Human mobility may therefore destabilize the institution of the household.

The rapid growth of the timber and oil industries in the 1960s accelerated male out-migration. Iban males, in particular, were in demand as laborers in these industries. Among Iban society, adult males often leave the village for a considerable period — from a few months to a few years — which is called ‘*bejalai*’<sup>4</sup> in Iban language. While the custom of *bejalai* had diverse purposes in the past, since the 1960s it has become almost synonymous with working outside the village.

Kedit (1993) emphasized the prescriptive effect of the *bejalai* custom in terms of Iban mobility in the modern context. He stated that out-flow to work away from home has become a kind of cultural institution. In

other words, since the 1960s, the expectation has developed that Iban males will earn money outside the village and this male role has become institutionalized in Iban culture. However, this cultural institution has been gradually transformed by the increase in family migration and subsequent expansion of their living spaces. The 1980s saw a major change in these labor migration trends: single men continued to leave, but a growing number began taking their families; that is, men started taking their wives and children with them (Soda 2001). As for family migration, although Agesa (2004) considered that the migration of the family unit was complete when the wife and children moved from the village to follow the husband to the city, the Iban case is different and more complicated.

In the Sibuhayuan study area, it is apparent that each household makes an economically independent living. However, many Iban families in Sibuhayuan are still regarded as part of the parental household in the village (Soda 2005). In other words, economic independence does not necessarily correspond to independence in the social and cultural senses. According to Iban traditional custom, a household is supposed to be composed of a stem-family. In some cases, however, multiple households set up by children in the city retain membership of the parental household in the village, which is obviously based on their broad interpretation of traditional customs. This could be called a 'spatial expansion' of the rural household.

Adult children in Sibuhayuan have attempted to reinterpret their customs with the intention of securing the potential to inherit the parental household and land in the village, resulting in changes in family relations among the Iban population in the research area. On the other hand, parents living in the village are to a greater or lesser degree dependent on economic support from their adult children in the city, and also anxious

## Agents on the move

about who will be a successor and take care of them when they are aged. This is why parents in the village tend to acknowledge their children in the city as retaining membership of the rural household, which also allows a broader interpretation of traditional customs.

Those who retain their membership of rural households are recognized as members of the village community. In effect, there are many opportunities for urban dwellers to return to their villages to attend various events such as annual festivals, funerals, engagement ceremonies, wedding receptions, and exorcism ceremonies. Some people go back to the village on the weekend or may take leave to join in large-scale group work, attend important meetings, or help their family during the busy farming season. Thus, circulatory movement is very common.

Spatially extensive connections between rural residents and urban sojourners not only affect family relations within each household, but also have a potential to transform the structure of the village community. General opinions and consensus - especially those concerning rural development - among rural residents are often formed under the influence of urban sojourners. In addition, rural communities that attach importance to the ability to access and negotiate with macro-societies tend to choose their leaders from among urban sojourners. The growing presence of urban sojourners among rural residents is closely related to structural changes in the Iban community.

## Agents on the move

As shown above, while the Iban in the research area are embedded at various levels of structural social relations and often act as if being guided by these social constructs, they reiterate negotiations at each level, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. Their various activities —

regardless of whether they are intentionally or unintentionally performed — that have the potential to transform current structures can be seen as ‘agency.’ These activities comprise the living strategy of the Iban.

When we consider Sarawak politics from a macro-perspective, or consider the ‘federal factor’ at the national level, the power structure seems to be absolute. A pessimist might think that there is no room for the Iban to transform such a structure. However, close observation at a more micro-level shows that the Iban sometimes passively adapt to existing power relations and sometimes counteract the influence of structures at various levels by adopting both regular and irregular methods. From the perspective of Iban movers, family and village structures are related to the political trend of the state because land development in rural areas and the improvement of both rural and urban lives can be achieved through coordination between family and village members and also negotiation with macro-societies. The increased contact between rural residents and macro-societies may accelerate change in a social structure that was previously regarded as spatially divided into rural and urban areas. Thus, the social actions of Iban movers in Sibuhadu and its hinterland have articulated different levels of societies and at the same time, showed the possibilities of boring a ‘wind hole’ in structures at various levels.

The Iban in the Rajang Basin move back and forth between rural and urban areas to secure multiple residences, which acts to integrate both areas as a renewed and expanded living space in the modern context. Between and around the two areas, the Iban have not only restructured the composition of the family, village community, and ethnic relations, but also developed tactics for bargaining with political leaders. In relation to rural development processes, they have played important roles in integrating rural politics and state policies. In this sense, Iban on the

move are actors who articulate micro- and macro-societies.

This study observed the social actions of Iban movers with an emphasis on the spatial expansion of their living base. If space is considered a social relation that is involved in the production and reproduction of social structures, social action, and power and resistance relations (Gotham 2003), then the Iban in the research area are social actors who have constructed a new living space straddling Sibuluan and its hinterland villages, blurring the rural/urban distinction and articulating micro- and macro-societies. In the process of changing their mobility patterns, they have tended to break down rather than evoke the urban/rural binary, which makes it difficult for policy makers and social scientists to maintain a structural understanding of the rural/urban dichotomy. In this sense, the Iban in the research area are agents on the move.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Smith (2004) also points out that previous quantitative-based studies have over-privileged economic-related outcomes, and masked the underlying social and cultural decision-making processes of family migrants. In emphasizing the perceived merits of qualitative frameworks to tease out the 'non-economic' dimensions of family migration, Smith asserts that more sophisticated analysis is needed for the study of migration.
- <sup>2</sup> As for the relation between space and structure, Gotham (2003) conceptualized space as a social construction that shapes social action and guides behavior.
- <sup>3</sup> The 'Bumiputera Policy' is officially called the 'New Economic Policy'. The major purposes of the New Economic Policy were two-fold. The first was to eradicate poverty, and the second was to reorganize Malaysian society so that the Bumiputera could participate more equally in the Malaysian economy. Under this policy, the Bumiputera were given various kinds of preferential treatment. The New Economic Policy ended in 1990 and was succeeded by the National Development Policy in 1991. Although this policy does not include numeric targets, unlike the New Economic Policy (e.g. the New Economic Policy specified a target of raising the capital holding rate of the Bumiputera to 30%), the basic

line of the Bumiputera-preferred policy has continued. Therefore, as long as the 'Bumiputera Policy' is understood as a set of general measures adopted to raise the Bumiputera's economic status following on from the New Economic Policy, government policy since 1991 also can be considered as a type of Bumiputera Policy.

- <sup>4</sup> In the old days, *bejalai* meant male 'headhunting' expeditions or journeys to search new frontiers. An Iban male was recognized as an adult after completing such journeys. Even after the colonial government officially prohibited headhunting, Iban males were still expected to leave the longhouse to obtain money or material goods, and ritual preparations for this journey were conducted until recently with some changes in procedures. In this sense, *bejalai* was a very important cultural system among the Iban (Kedit 1993).

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