

Understanding of Iban Women Political Participation through Analysing the Decision-Making Process in Iban Society

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ABSTRACT

An individual is said to have become involved in politics if he or she participated in activities such as voting, campaigning, soliciting for votes, giving political speeches to influence the actions or the decisions of the other persons, becoming a member of a political organisation, distributing party fliers, carrying banners, or supporting a political party. A person's involvement in politics may be classified as active involvement or passive involvement. The highest level of a political participation is when a person puts himself or herself up to be chosen as the people's representative in a competitive election. To date no Iban women have ever been elected to the country's House of Representatives. This is not to say that their involvement in 'low politics' is any better either. Niggling issues such as the customary practices, the longhouse systems, the political socialisation, the decision-making processes, and the notion of manliness may still be the decisive factors in how and why the Iban select or determine their leaders. This paper is an attempt to understand how and why the involvement of Iban women in politics is still at an infancy stage, as well as exploring the challenges that hinder its progress and development.

Keywords: *Decision making, community leader, longhouse tradition, participation, socialisation*

INTRODUCTION

There is no question that what the Iban do today, especially in relations to whom they pick and choose to assume the leadership at the grassroots level, is still influenced very much by what happened in the old days. The stories from the times of head hunting, territorial expansion, migration, and process of pioneering settlements (Sandin, 1994, p.10) continued to be shared over generations thereby giving higher social esteem, social status, prestige, and pedigree to the descendants of the persons that had led and directed those activities. "The taking of heads of enemies in battle undoubtedly raised the social status of an individual as a warrior and leader (Ooi, 2006, p. 191).

For our purpose, the grassroots leadership is defined here as the leadership at the local area level as longhouse headmen or local councillors at the District Council. The District Council or the Local Government deals with what is known as 'low politics' and performs such functions as cleaning services (such as cleaning the drain), rubbish and sewage collections, environmental sanitation, traffic lights, streetlights, parking space, maintenance of parks and recreational areas. The question is, how many Iban women have been appointed as local district or local government councillors over the years or decades. At any one time, there are roughly about 900 local councillors in Sarawak, though not all of them are Iban of course, but a substantial number of them are. Of all the Iban local councillors, how many of them are women. As there are about 5,000 longhouses in Sarawak, this also