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THE IBAN: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND DILEMMAS

Michael Leigh

PREFACE

I was both delighted and humbled to receive your invitation to address this most important seminar.

Delighted, because it was 25 years ago last January that the Sin Kapit-1 brought me here from Sibuan one misty dawn. The first task upon arrival was to report to Tuan D.O., Datuk Peter Tinggom. He so spontaneously demonstrated to me, a naive young student¹ the generosity of the Iban spirit.

Humbled, as it is an awesome assignment for me, a foreign academic, to address this gathering of real experts on the Iban today. Thus I shall raise what I see as key issues and place them in a comparative perspective — as an opener for a discussion in which I shall again be the student.

Before proceeding further, I should like to thank Datuk Amar Linggi, Dr. Peter Kedit and each of the organizers of this seminar, who have worked tirelessly to make it a success.

The Iban today are in a crucial position in society as the community that occupies vast areas of land. It is that land and its products — be it timber or crops — which is the source of most locally available wealth generated in the state.

Ibans were given special recognition in that regard by the Brookes and the Colonial Administration. The Cobbold Commission in 1962 saw Iban views towards entering Malaysia as pivotal to the founding of the new nation and made clear that the very formation of Malaysia was dependent upon the support of the 'Dayak' peoples.

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For the first seven years of independence the Government was led by Iban Chief Minister: Datuk Kalong Ningkan and Datuk Tawi Sli. The late Tun Jugah, then Temenggong, was the Minister for Sarawak Affairs and there had been expectations that he would be the first Governor. Since 1970, a number of Ibans have played a most important role as Deputy Chief Ministers, as Federal and State Cabinet Ministers and as the State Secretary. However, with the benefit of hindsight it is clear that in the subsequent 18 years Iban have not been as obviously powerful in Government as was foreshadowed during the first seven years of independence.