Borneo and Sulawesi
Indigenous Peoples, Empires and Area Studies

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5 Revisiting the question of rank and egalitarianism in Borneo

The ways in which hierarchy is expressed, maintained, and lost amongst the Bhuket of Sarawak

Shanthi Thambiah

In this chapter, I shall explore the complex interrelations of rank and egalitarian principles among the Bhuket of Sarawak. In Borneo, discussions of both rank and egalitarianism have been contextualized by Leach’s early survey of Sarawak societies in which he made a broad distinction between the egalitarian and stratified societies.¹ We have often had the tendency to reduce the two concepts or principles of organizations, egalitarianism, and hierarchy or rank to a convenient rhetorical contrast. I will explain Bhuket egalitarianism and also show Bhuket claims to rank. Although the egalitarian and rank principles are quite explicit, the maintenance of both is not a conscious product of community consensus. Using two points from Sahlins’ definition of egalitarianism that: (1) the qualification for higher status may lie in personal characteristics, and (2) that every individual has an equal chance to succeed to whatever statuses may be open,² I shall show that Bhuket claims to rank can be understood in terms of the internal dynamics of their egalitarianism. A complex interplay of processes both internal and external has led to the co-existence of both the egalitarian and rank principles among the Bhuket of Sarawak.

The question of rank and egalitarianism in Borneo

In Borneo, discussions of both rank and egalitarianism have been contextualized by Leach’s early survey of Sarawak societies in which he made a broad distinction between the egalitarian and stratified societies.³ We have often had the tendency to reduce the two concepts or principles of organization, egalitarianism, and hierarchy or rank to a convenient rhetorical contrast. The Kayan and Kenyah are labelled as stratified because leadership is hereditary and social statuses are inherited.⁴ The Iban, on the other hand, are egalitarian because of their “aggressive individualism” and an absence of ascribed rank and hereditary chiefship.⁵ Nevertheless, Freeman has shown how egalitarianism can still continue under conditions of inequality.⁶ King has also pointed to a decline in the significance of rank among the stratified societies due to the abolition of slavery and headhunting, the spread of the Bungun cult,⁷ Christianity, education, and a cash economy.⁸ Nicolai sen, on the other hand, argued that, in some respects, colonial does not complete ab between a had simi evid man adec

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Revisiting the question of rank in Borneo.\(^9\) We can see in other research that egalitarianism does not entail the absence of inequality, and hierarchy does not mean a complete absence of egalitarian principles. Some have argued that the contrast between such societies have been overemphasized.\(^10\) Rousseau has stated that:

"a historical approach to Iban society indicates that they were much more similar to other groups of Borneo shifting cultivators than is superficially evident and while it is clear that the Iban demonstrate less inequality than many others, their characterization as an egalitarian society is not adequate."\(^11\)

He then added that, "such a contrast between egalitarian ideology and unequal social structure should not surprise us: it is to be found in a more extreme form in our own society."\(^12\)

Moreover, there has even been some attention given to hierarchy among egalitarian hunter-gatherer groups of Borneo.\(^13\) According to Needham, the hunter-gatherer Penan people speak of rank:

"There are no social classes, though certain groups speak in terms (copied apparently from longhouse tribes) of aristocrats, maren, and commoner, panyin, in describing the difference between elders and others. There are not, and never have been, any slaves (ultum) among the Penan."\(^14\)

It is interesting to note Needham’s observation that the Penan speak of rank but that there are no social classes, and that they apparently copied rank from settled stratified peoples. What then are the processes involved in this copying? Do they imitate individually or as a community? How long has it taken them to copy and why then, even after copying, are there no social classes? These are some of the questions that I wish to examine. Rousseau gives many more examples of emerging hierarchy among forest nomads (hunter-gatherers) in the context of processes of sedentarization:

Sedentarization brings about stable communities with a greater need for political co-ordination, hence stronger leadership. This need can bring about the development of social inequality, as the leader seeks a higher status to become an effective representative of his group vis-à-vis his aristocratic counterparts. The community may welcome this differentiation if it recognizes its collective advantage. [...] These emerging chiefs enter into marital alliances with agriculturalist chiefly families and they enslave captives. We see here the kernel of hereditary chiefship, stratification, and exploitation (Sellato 1986a: 534–5). The Seputan now recognize the opposition between nobility and commoners (ibid: 206), as do the Punan Ratah; among the latter, this has not developed into a real stratification system (ibid: 273). The Baketan have four strata: marin (noble), panyin (middle), satengah linou (low), and areh (slaves), and a preference for stratum endogamy (Sandin