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ANTHROPOLOGY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN SARAWAK

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INTRODUCTION

What I intend to do in this paper is to present a survey of, and make some observations on the contribution of anthropology to the study of rural development and the associated processes of socio-economic change in Sarawak from the late 1940s to 1984. I shall conclude with a few general remarks on what has happened in this field over the last 35 years or so, and what the prospects are for the future. Though I am concerned with anthropology, it is not easy to delimit purely anthropological studies in the context of development from certain other disciplinary approaches which have relationships with and relevance to both anthropology and rural development problems (cf. Appell, 1978: 66—9). I shall therefore include some research which it may be difficult to describe as specifically anthropological. Furthermore, I do not have access to all the important studies on development issues conducted by government departments in Sarawak, but I shall refer to some of these. In any case, this is a very personal survey; it is also broadly chronological, though I do group certain kinds of study together. In the main, I have selected materials which have been of interest to me in my own research, and which have impressed me as expressions of important moments in the progress of applied anthropological research in Sarawak. I must apologise in advance to those scholars who feel that they might have warranted inclusion in a survey of this kind, but who have been omitted.

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What I intend to do in this paper is to present a survey of, and make some observations on the contribution of anthropology to the study of rural development and the associated processes of socio-economic change in Sarawak from the late 1940s to 1984. I shall conclude with a few general remarks on what has happened in this field over the last 35 years or so, and what the prospects are for the future. Though I am concerned with anthropology, it is not easy to delimit purely anthropological studies in the context of development from certain other disciplinary approaches which have relationships with and relevance to both anthropology and rural development problems (cf. Appell, 1978: 66–9). I shall therefore include some research which it may be difficult to describe as specifically anthropological. Furthermore, I do not have access to all the important studies on development issues conducted by government departments in Sarawak, but I shall refer to some of these. In any case, this is a very personal survey; it is also broadly chronological, though I do group certain kinds of study together. In the main, I have selected materials which have been of interest to me in my own research, and which have impressed me as expressions of important moments in the progress of applied anthropological research in Sarawak. I must apologise in advance to those scholars who feel that they might have warranted inclusion in a survey of this kind, but who have been omitted.

In a review of the state of development studies in Sarawak (as of the early 1970s) in a symposium held by the Borneo Research Council in 1974, James Osborn bemoaned the 'paucity of development research' in Borneo in general, and in Malaysian Borneo in particular (1978: 104, 107; cf. Appell, 1976a: 4).¹ Perhaps this presents a too negative evaluation of past achievements, especially in Sarawak, but it may well partly depend on Osborn's conception of development studies. It seems that, on the surface at least, he adopts a rather technical view of development in relation to government policies and programmes. He refers to development studies as comprising 'research and monitoring of development – as defined by governments in terms of goals and forms – and development policy – as set out in planned expenditures and administration, and manifested in projects . . . [and] research on the impact of development activity by governments on the physical and human systems of the developing societies . . .' (p. 104). I agree that there has not been much research of that kind in Sarawak. But I would prefer to broaden the definition of development studies to include sociological inquiries into processes of social change and into the forms and content of socio-economic organisation, one aim of which is to suggest to government courses of action, or alternatively advise against actions perceived

as undesirable, in the planning and implementation of development projects. Furthermore, one should also include studies which may not even suggest procedures but merely provide information to government authorities to enable them hopefully to come to better decisions about the ways in which the social and economic life of their citizens can be ameliorated, and their physical and psychological well-being improved. In this sense, there have certainly been several attempts by social scientists to address themselves to development issues in Sarawak. Of course, one always wishes that more could have been done, but Sarawak does not have a bad record at all in this field, bearing in mind that 'development', as a defined subject of study, is essentially a post-Second World War phenomenon, and in Sarawak at least very much a post-colonial, post-1963 creation.

George Appell, for example, has noted the important fact that social anthropological research was initiated in Sarawak early on 'for the purposes of learning what significance its findings might have for the formation of policy and for the future of the country' (1977: 32). In particular, 'Sarawak has been the only Bornean state to date to make use of applied anthropology' (p. 32). Though I accept that Sarawak did sponsor anthropological field research in the late 1940s having regard to the interests of government in administration and social and economic planning, I am not sure that much attention was ultimately paid to the recommendations and findings of those early anthropologists. It is instructive that Stephen Morris, as one of those anthropologists involved, has soberly commented in retrospect, in his amusing and very readable reminiscences of field research among the coastal Melanau of colonial Sarawak, 'I certainly overestimated the influence that any findings I might make or reports that I might write could have in helping the Melanau people' (1977a: 75). He adds that, to his knowledge, officialdom did not make much use of the other anthropological studies undertaken at that time either, notably WR Geddes' report on the Bidayuh (Land Dayak) (1954) and JD (Derek) Freeman's reports on the Iban (1955a, 1955b) (see below). Tom Harrison has supported Morris' view; it was Harrison's opinion that the work of these anthropologists 'was ignored by colonial administrators, beyond faint lip-service. The neglect of Stephen Morris' thoroughly practical report on Melanau sago is a striking case in point' (1978: 204). He continued 'Such neglect was not due to bad intent. Rather it arose from a distrust of research jargons used'

The references to Morris' work lead me to a more detailed consideration of the substantial anthropological studies undertaken in early post-war, post-Brooke Sarawak. These were commissioned by the newly constituted colonial government, ostensibly so that it could formulate and implement development projects on the basis of sound ethnographic data on Sarawak's peoples (Morris, 1977a: 67). If nothing else, these studies deserve to give Sarawak a distinguished place in the field of applied anthropology. The context and content of these excellent pieces of research must be very familiar to scholars interested in Borneo, but they bear repeating, because some of the problems to which these early anthropologists addressed themselves, are still among those which face academics and government officials in present-day Sarawak. The studies also provide extraordinarily good insights into the attitudes of government-recruited anthropologists and their perception of their role vis-a-vis government. As Harrison has already indicated there was a tension between the appointed anthropologists and