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LIMBANG BISAYA: SOCIETY AND LANGUAGE

Hussain bin Jami & John Newman

INTRODUCTION

A recent field trip to the Limbang area of northern Sarawak (16th—24th December 1984) has yielded substantial information on the society and language of the Limbang Bisaya which we report on here. This field trip was conducted as part of a larger project being undertaken by the Sarawak branch of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) involving, among other things, the compilations of a Bahasa Bisaya — Bahasa Malaysia word list. The data was gathered by Asiah Haji Ahmad, assisted by Henry Gana (both from the Sarawak branch of DBP).

The number of Bisaya in Sarawak would appear to have been under-estimated in the past. Asmah (1983), for example, gives an approximate figure of 4,000 for all of Sarawak. According to Penghulu Fuji of Kampung Runggu, on the other hand, there are about 6,800 registered Bisayas in Limbang alone. It is further believed that there are many more unregistered and others who have moved to Brunei to work as labourers or have become permanent residents of Brunei.

In discussing the language of the Limbang Bisayas (LB), we will make comparisons with the description of the Beaufort Bisaya (BB) variety of Bisaya to be found in Asmah (1983). Peranio (1977), Sandin (1971, 1972) and Sonza (1972) also provide interesting cultural background on the Bisayas. Throughout, we will use the spelling *Bisaya* (rather than *Bisayah* or *Bisayak*), since this is the spelling preferred by the speakers themselves. The Limbang Bisayas, incidentally, refer to the Bisayas of Brunei as *orang Koloyo* (*Koloyo* = 'people, tribe').

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The two main informants for linguistic aspects of LB were: Wilfred Yussin, in his forties, an Information Officer from Kampung Rangu, and Councillor Enjan ak. Yassau, in his sixties, from Kampung Ukong. (See the accompanying map for the location of the 'informants' homes.) The socio-cultural information below pertains to the Limbang River communities.

SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Legendary origins

According to the Limbang Bisaya's legend, as told by the informant at Tanjung Riman (and which can be found in our recorded material at the house of Penghulu Sindang anak Yarat) the first Sultan of Brunei was Alak Betatar and he was a Bisaya. They have their own myths and tales about their ancestors, which can be found in the story-songs Bitiap and Siram. There are also stories about how the brothers of a Bisaya royal family go up to the Kanangan (skyworld) and smuggle padi seed back to earth. Padi is supposed to have been unknown to the Bisayas before this episode happened. The Bisayas were supposed to eat burnt logs before the advent of rice.

Subsistence Economy

It is interesting to note that in Asmah's description of the Bisayas, they are said to eat sago (*natuk*) as their staple food. The Limbang Bisaya eat rice and corn. Most of the time they work in their gardens which are either in the vicinity of their houses, or several miles away in the interior. By occupation, all of them are farmers (peasant) and plant (wet) padi and maize. Along the river bank it is interesting to note the clustered little huts every now and then. These huts are called *kepek*, which are used for keeping padi. Each of the four posts of the hut are wrapped with zinc to keep rats out of the padi store.

Limbang Bisayas rear pigs, chickens, dogs, buffalos, and goats around their houses without specially designated places for every species. They engage in fishing in the rivers, with the catch being for their own consumption. They have big plantations (*dusun*) for rambutan, durian, mata kucing etc.

Religious beliefs and customs

There is little trace of Islam amongst the Limbang Bisaya community, except for those who were converted, or by inter-marriage. They are either Christian or still practise animistic beliefs. (Asmah mentions that all the Bisaya in Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei are Muslim.) Though they treasure their cultural traditions of medicine, marriages, death etc., they don't actually practise it now, possibly due to the influence of their religion. Even though they would call the traditional medicine men or women to perform rites in times of illness, many now would go to the clinics available around their places for treatment.

They do still believe in bad omens and spirits associated with the sounds of animals.

Music, Arts and Crafts

Limbang Bisayas are great music lovers: The gongs can be found in every house, (cf. Asmah's claim that the Bisaya are supposed to be the best gong musicians in Sarawak). It is as if somebody just beats the gong and everyone — men, women, young and old — just starts to dance. Their musical instruments consist of gongs, drums, and violins of fine quality. The drum usually is made from a hollow lûg and covered from one end to another with the skin of monitor lizard (*biawak*). The drum is beaten with a wooden