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SUBSISTENCE AND ENVIRONMENT OF A HIGHLAND KENYAH COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is an a bridged version of the research report produced by the Edinburgh University Kalimantan Expedition (1988).

The objective of this project was to describe the subsistence strategies, principally the provision of food, of a Kenyah community in a highland, rainforest, region of Kalimantan and to consider the place of that community in the forest ecosystem.

The style and structure of the research was strongly influenced by Dr Chin's (1985) monograph Agriculture and Resource Utilization in a Lowland Rainforest Kenyah Community. Chin's work suggests that the Kenyah resource utilization strategies are stable, adaptive and compatible with the rainforest ecosystem. While he points out that population pressure, increased expectations and a rapid entry into a market economy could destabilise this equilibrium, his research in a lowland community in Sarawak suggests that the Kenyah may be able to adapt traditional systems to effectively meet new needs and aspirations, thereby retaining many traditional activities, values and, hopefully, sustainable interaction with the rainforest environment.

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by

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The research described in this paper further considered these issues for a community of the same ethnic group but in different environmental and socio-political circumstances, the highlands of Kalimantan as opposed to the lowlands of Sarawak with the intention of providing comparative information for their assessment.

†The authors acknowledge the participation of the other expedition members: Alessio Viola and Michele McKenzie who made the documentary film and Sulaiman Ab, who assisted with questionnaires.

The research three methods to collect information: (1) participant observation of Kenyah activities; (2) formal interviews or questionnaires and (3) daily records kept by Kenyah informants.

The field study was conducted over a six week period in August and September of 1988. The project undoubtedly suffers from a brief observational period; however, the data collected is original and of good quality.

A film has been made to accompany the text. Within the constraints of time and money this film complements the paper well in providing visual details of all the major sections of the paper and gives a subliminal glimpse into the life of Long Payau.

We hope that this research will contribute in disseminating the view that the Kenyah people and other similar Dayak tribes are not 'backward', economically, culturally or intellectually. They live a rich, healthy and stimulating full life in a closely knit community that enjoys a heightened level of collective consciousness that is absent in modern culture.

We thank all the people and organizations who helped in giving shape to and in realising the project. Financial sponsorship was provided by Forrest and Grinsell Foundation, Harlem Third World Institute, British Association Fund, The James Rennie Bequest, Tropag Consultants Ltd, Ove Arup Partnership, Christian Salvessen Plc, Student Travel Fund and The Frederick Soddy Trust. Our academic sponsor in Indonesia was the Forestry Faculty of Mulawarman University through the Indonesian Institute of Sciences. The whole venture would have been a complete failure had it not been for the patient cooperation of Long Payau.

THE STUDY SITE: LONG PAYAU

INTRODUCTION

The Apo Kayan is the highland region between the Kayan River to the north and the Mahakam River to the south (Map 1). The area has been the cultural centre for a number of Kenyah tribes for the last 150 years. Migrations were common owing to local overpopulation or intergroup warfare (Whittier, 1978). The Apo Kayan village we chose to base our study on was Long Payau, located on the Tepayan River (Map 1). Its small size (only one relatively small longhouse) made it a more easily manageable unit for study, not least because we were able to have daily personal contact with all members of the village. Partly because it is away from the main tract of larger villages, but also because there has been a conscious effort to maintain traditional values, Long Payau has been less influenced by city culture. Perhaps the major outside influence has been the conversion to Christianity.