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ETHNOGRAPHIC REVIEW OF THE DAYAK BIDAYUH COMMUNITY

Any ethnographic review of the Dayak Bidayuh community is fraught with difficulties. In the first place very little has been written on the community. That which has been done (Geddes, 1954a, 1954b, 1957; Grijpstra 1972, 1976) is only on small sections of a dialectical group within the community. And there are four such groups that make the community. Secondly, although the various groups are structurally and culturally the same, the absence of comprehensive study restricts the availability of written materials for an empirical analysis. The writer has also drawn from interviews, personal observation and experience in arriving at this analysis.

IDENTITY, DISTRIBUTION AND ENVIRONMENT

The Dayak Bidayuh are a people believed to be among the earliest inhabitants of Borneo. Their history, some of which is orally recorded is not written. Little is reliably known about their earliest history. It was probable that the earliest human occupants reached Borneo from Asia during the latter stages of the Pleistocene when the sea level was low enough to form a land bridge. But when the sea level rose to near its present level, these early settlers were effectively isolated from the rest of Asia. (Fisher, 1966). Through isolation and time, those that settled in a region at the western tip of Borneo evolved into a unique cultural and linguistic type. However, geography and recent history have separated these culturally and linguistically similar people into two sovereign territories. In Sarawak, where a smaller percentage lives, their homeland is to be found mainly in hinterland of the Kuching and Samarahan Divisions which is adjacent to Kalimantan Barat where the majority of them reside. Here, the community consist of four linguistically heterogenous subgroups, speaking different but very closely related dialects (Asmah 1983) – now becoming mutually intelligible,

which are identifiable by regions viz., Bukar-Sadong of Serian District, Biatah of Kuching District, Bau-Jagoi of Bau and part of Kuching District, and Selako-Lara of Lundu District.

Historically, unlike the numerous Iban who have a wandering life-style, (Freeman 1955; Kedit, unpub. 1987), the Dayak Bidayuh have been considered by some as a more settled, peace-loving and law-abiding people. (St. John, 1862; Wallace, 1872; Beccari, 1904; Brooke, 1866;). 'Natural democrats', their society have no hierarchical differentiation (Geddes, 1954ab, 1957), each of the dialectic groups lived democratically in comparative harmony in their respective regions, reflecting and developing in the course of time strong 'regional sentiments'. One can hypothesise that they had minimal conflict initially under the time-honoured social contract prior to the time of Datuk Merpati and the first Mohammedan rulers of Brunei, when the people were essentially of the same stock and similar beliefs, and where the ruled were protected and allowed to go on their own ways in return for tributes. The image of the relationship that existed between a ruler and his subject people was described by three Dayak Bidayuh elders (who saw James Brooke) as that between an elder and younger brother (Keppel 1846). This probably explains the reason why Sarawak's aristocratic family title being prefixed by the name Abang, which is a Malay word meaning elder brother.

It is this peaceful concern to live a settled and ordered life that brought them untold misery from other groups that were more aggressive, particularly in time of misgovernment. James Brooke, appointing himself Rajah of a territory comprising mainly of Malay coastland and Dayak Bidayuh hinterland, wrote of these people in 1841, that:

— "it is of the hill Dayaks, however, I would particularly write, for a more wretchedly oppressed race is not to be found, or one more deserving the commiseration of the humane. Though industrious, they never reap what they sow; though their country is rich in produce, they are obliged to yield it all to their oppressors." (Templar, 1953).

Despite this prolonged period of severe hardship, they were able to hold their own. Through centuries of harassment by the Malays, marauding and headhunting by the Ibans, they have not been displaced from their territories nor wiped out, a fate that befell the mighty and ferocious Seru Dayaks of the Second Division (Bailey, 1901) and some others as well.

Although not aggressive, the Dayak Bidayuh in defending and maintaining their society, have a courage which is a quieter, unobjectionable kind. It is purely defensive, compatible with their peaceful nature (Geddes, 1954a, 1954b). This docility, in reality, conceals a latent side of their nature, something which has unfortunately been misinterpreted by others (Elam, 1937; Jackson, 1968). The quintessence of this observation was expressed by a member of the Natural Resources Board in the Colonial period who wrote:

"They have often been the victims of the various invasions, and of persecution, and thus have become a timid and retiring people, suspicious of change and progress, and asking little but to be left alone." (Roe, 1952: 2-3).