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PRIDE AND PROGRESS: KAJANG RESPONSE TO ECONOMIC CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the many ethnic groups of the Belaga District in the present 7th Division of Sarawak were brought into more regular contact with the industrial world, through the establishment of Brooke Rule in 1863, their reactions to change have intrigued government officers. Former Brooke and British administrators found that especially the so-called Kajang peoples responded unfavorably to incentives to alter their economic behaviour. Hugh Low noted already in 1882 that: "it is a question if anything can ever be done to develop these people... they have had opportunities in abundance to improve their condition by trade, work, & c. There is not sufficient warmth in their nature and no spur or reasoning seems to move their sluggish system", (Low: 1882a). Although few civil servants express themselves as bluntly today, their reactions are generally quite similar. They find the outlook of these people tradition-bound, their behaviour and reactions incomprehensible. These views are exemplified on the basis of experiences from the work, which brings the officers into contact with the groups. Agricultural officers claim that the Kajang farm less well than the Kayan, Kenyah and Iban of the Division; that agricultural schemes offered to these people are either not implemented because initial requirements fail to be met, or if they are, then the majority later turn out failures due to neglect. A capable agricultural officer, with experience from earlier work among the Bidayuh and Iban, declared in despair that he had to give up with the Kajang groups. Though as an A.O. he had faced many difficulties and had many disappointments, at least minor progress had been achieved among other groups he had worked with. But after several years of intense effort, he could see no improvements whatsoever in the agricultural performance of the Kajang. They were just a lazy lot in his opinion. Civil development officers paint as discouraging a picture. They find the Kajang less oriented towards minor rural projects, and having difficulties with the implementation. Not to mention that material provided often turns out to be missing when needed. Officers from other departments join the chorus. Several concluded that: "the Kajang are just spoiled by the Government". Such allegations, which I have heard repeated over and over again during the last ten years by various officers in Belaga, cannot be dismissed.

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The Kajang peoples I have studied express similar confusion and despair on their part. Far from being satisfied with their present state of life, they feel utterly deprived. They find themselves in a whirlpool of constantly changing conditions and conflicting demands, and experience an overall loss of meaning with and grasp of their lives. This is revealed in endless discussions, in everyday conversation, and behaviour. Like government officers the Kajang compare their present situation to that of neighbouring groups, and stress their failure to match the material and educational achievements of these. They state that they grow less rice and fewer secondary crops than the Kenyah and Iban. They do not find themselves able to become cunning entrepreneurs like the Kayan, or to conduct business like the Chinese. They realize that they dispose of wealth and make economic priorities in ways which diverge from those of other ethnic groups. What worries and distresses them however, is their experience of cultural defeat in the wake of the changes taking place around them. What is at stake for these people is their self-respect, their sense of identity, the very maintenance of a meaningful life. It is in this light we shall interpret their reactions to change.

A series of socio-economic problems is thus found to exist by administrative officers and the Kajang alike. These are moreover described in apparently similar terms by the two parties. A closer investigation nevertheless reveals differences in perception of the reality and understanding of the reasons for the deplorable state of affairs. The use of different codes often obscures this, preventing the parties from grasping the true meaning or content in an exchange of view-points. The Kajang, for instance, may express their opinion in economic idioms, like those used by the administration, referring for example to a relative poverty in material items or problems of day-to-day provisions, while actually implying and being concerned about a sensed loss of renown. Communication is further restrained by rules of etiquette preventing the Kajang from expressing themselves freely in front of persons of higher social standing.

Many external and internal factors shape a course of development. On the one side are the general economic conditions of the country, government policies, the design of development projects, and the ways in which these are implemented. On the other are local ecological constraints, socio-cultural characteristics, and the motivation of the population. While taking the former aspects into consideration, this article concentrates on the latter among these. More specifically the analysis sets focus on the dynamic relationship between resource utilization and agricultural production, cultural patterns of distribution of material items and labour, and the structure of authority. It demonstrates how these elements constitute a cultural web, a specific way of living expressing Kajang attempts to create a meaningful existence. It argues that development planning and strategies must take these conditions as their point of departure. To ignore cultural values which form the very rationale of a way of living, and give it its special quality, not only raises ethical problems. It may deprive people of meaning with their undertakings, undermine their motivation, and hence impede the achievement of the very goals of the development efforts: There are only too many examples proving this to be the result, the Kajang groups are one.

WHO ARE THE KAJANG?

The term Kajang was introduced in the sociological literature by Edmund Leach to designate six minor ethnic groups of central Sarawak.