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LONG TERM DEVELOPMENT OF KEJAMAN SUBSISTENCE: AN ECOLOGICAL STUDY

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1. INTRODUCTION

After spending over one year in Sarawak, A.R. Wallace visited other parts of the Southeast Asian archipelago and his observations on the island of Ceram include an account of the exploitation of the sago palm *Metroxylon* sp. He states:

It is truly an extraordinary sight to witness of whole tree-trunk, perhaps twenty feet long and four or five in circumference, converted into food with so little labour and preparation. A good-sized tree will produce thirty toman or bundles of thirty pounds each, and each toman will make sixty cakes of three to the pound. Two of these cakes are as much as a man can eat at one meal, and five are considered a full day's allowance; so that, reckoning a tree to produce 1,800 cakes, weighing 600 pounds, it will supply a man with food for the whole year. The labour to produce this is very moderate. Two men will finish a tree in five days, and two women will bake the whole into cakes in five days more; but the raw sago will keep very well, and can be baked as wanted, so that we may estimate that in ten days a man may produce food for the whole year. This is on the supposition that he possesses sago trees of his own, for they are now all private property. If he does not, he has to pay about seven and sixpence for one; and as labour here is fivepence a day, the total cost of a year's food for one man is about twelve shillings. The effect of this cheapness of food is decidedly prejudicial, for the inhabitants of the sago countries are never so well off as those where rice is cultivated. Many of the people here have neither vegetables nor fruit, but live almost entirely on sago and a little fish. Having few occupations at home, they wander about on petty trading or fishing expeditions to the neighbouring islands; and as far as the comforts of life are concerned, are much inferior to the wild hill-Dyaks of Borneo, or to many of the more barbarous tribes of the Archipelago. (1869/1890: 291—92)

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In observing that, because of the low cost of their livelihood the sago producers were in material terms less well off than rice producers elsewhere, Wallace poses the problem of the relation between these subsistence patterns in an area in which there has arguably been a transition between the two.

Thus Spencer has suggested that the whole of Southeast Asia and the Archipelago were once characterized by a yam-taro-sago horticultural system, of which the Northwestern margin has been slowly retreating over the past three or more millennia (1963: 88; cf. Pelzer 1945: 7). Harrison believed rice to be a "relatively recent introduction in Borneo . . . , certainly in the interior" (1964: 189). Hill has argued in support of the view that rice was probably brought to Sarawak together with iron-working by so-called "Bau-Malay" peoples from S.E. China around AD 500. These moved on to Southern Malaya at some point not before AD 1,000, and further north between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries (1977: 11).¹ While Bellwood, pointing out that there is no substantial archaeological evidence for the proposition that, because rice is absent from Oceania, it was domesticated in Southeast Asia later than the fruits and tubers, nonetheless suggests that the "Bau-Malay" tradition of ceramics may have an inspiration local to Borneo; and that rice may not have been a major crop in the Eastern Islands of the Archipelago until at least AD 1,500, around the time of European contact (1978: 141, 148, 217 & fn. 28).²

The problem thus posed presents an opportunity to discuss some possible ecological and other explanations. For Wallace's generalization about the hill Dyaks need not apply uniformly: coastal Melanau have been largely dependent on sago (though much commercialized) and nomadic jungle Punan and Penan exploit various kinds of sago for subsistence.³ There is also a grouping of minority tribes in central Sarawak who are reported to have had a preference for sago or for mixed sago with rice. Thus Low's account of 1882:

If anything the hills are steeper and higher the further we penetrate into the interior; but there are no mountains and no landscape. The hills hem us in. They are either cleared, being cleared, or have been cleared formerly; hardly anywhere is there any real old jungle near to the river side; the branches of the wild sago curve downwards, and the leaves droop downwards, reminding one of the foliage of the young nibong [*Oncosperma*]; the cultivated palm throws up its branches boldly, and the tips only droop downwards; the leaves point upwards. The one is thorny and thrives on the hills; the other smooth and flourishes on boggy ground. . . . The Punans and the Kajamans who prefer sago to rice, farm meagrely, but then they grow the palm. (1882: 63-5)

Probably because sago was and is widely regarded in Sarawak as a necessary but unpleasant food in times of famine, and other crops such as taro thought fit only for pig feed, this mixed farming complex led some observers to adopt a critical tone in reports of Kejaman and related groups: "merely" subsisting on wild sago and bananas (*Sarawak Gazette* [SG] 1/x/1946: 26; 10/iii/1951: 44); reaping harvests of rice "even worse than usual" (SG 12/vi/1951: 120); already preparing wild sago so soon after rice harvest as the end of March (SG 31/v/1955: 116); having "as usual very little padi to harvest" and being "miserable padi farmers" who "every year . . . never have good harvest" (SG 31/iii/1958: 43). In 1961 it was commented:

Below the Bakun rapids the Sekapan, Kejaman and Lahanan people were reported to be very short of food. This was not