

Social Anthropological Research in Borneo

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RÉSUMÉ

Il y a un besoin urgent d'études d'anthropologie sociale à Bornéo. Les travaux en cours démontrent de plus en plus la nécessité de reviser certaines notions de lignée et de parenté.

Not enough hard data yet exist to attempt a synthesis of the anthropology of Borneo¹. Consequently, I shall take as my task here a brief review of those investigations that have been undertaken in the modern period (since 1945), drawing attention to how these have contributed to anthropological theory. As far as we now know, all societies in Borneo are essentially cognatic, and in our development of understanding of how such societies function, it is perhaps on Borneo that we should focus our attention since the variability of cognatic types there is unique.

In addition, I shall attempt to point out other problems that may be profitably tested there, organizing my discussion in terms of the political divisions of the island: the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, the British Protected State of Brunei, and finally Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo). But before doing this, I shall briefly outline the ethnic structure of Borneo and indicate its complexity.

Synopsis of the Structural Complexity

The social types range from hunting and gathering societies in the interior and nomadic fishing groups along the coast to the

¹ I am deeply indebted for critical comments and helpful suggestions to: W. Geddes, R. Harrison, T. Harrison, Alfred and Judith Hudson, M. A. Jaspan, R. M. Koentjaraningrat, H. S. Morris, R. Needham, R. Peranio, D. J. Tugby, C. Sather. However, I alone am responsible for the contents of this article.

remains of the state-like sultanates that were fragmented and restructured by the arrival of the colonial powers. Intermediate in complexity are the well developed irrigation societies that are found on certain of the coastal plains as well as those of the interior uplands. Elsewhere, the economy of the indigenous peoples depends on the swidden cultivation of rice, maize, and manioc. Chinese influence began early in the Christian era and has continued on up to the present so that a number of Chinese communities are also found. The coast has always been ethnically a particularly fluid area, and today a number of coastal Muslim groups from the neighboring islands surrounding Borneo have settled there. Islam spread among the coastal peoples about the middle of the second millennium, making converts among the unstable, expanding and contracting sultanates that were based around various river mouths and estuaries in order to control the trade of products from the interior for those from overseas. Spreading from these centers, Islam has continued to find converts among the indigenous peoples, both those along the strand and others further inland. The latter, on taking up Islam, frequently move towards the coast and assume a marine-based cultural ecology.

The Classification of Bornean Peoples

The ethnic classification of Bornean peoples and the delineation of the major cultural watersheds have yet to be done. Attempts at classification have been made in the past, and these have been critically reviewed by Leach (1950) with reference to Sarawak,² by Hudson (1967) for Kalimantan, and by Appell (1968) for Sabah. In every case these past classifications have proved to be grossly inadequate when put to the test of new techniques, such as the use of lexicostatistics by Sather in evaluating the "Tidong," or when reevaluated in the light of modern anthropological concepts and field work as in Leach's survey of Sarawak, Harrison's investigation among the "Murut" and other groups, Hudson's among the "Ot Danum" and "Ngadju," Appell's among the "Dusun," and Needham's among the "Punan."

² Leach proposes a new classification based on factors of social organization.

One of the major faults of these past classifications is that they are uncritically based on the local folk categories of peoples foreign to the populations being classified and do not recognize the indigenous distinctions (Appell 1968). Harrison (1950) has also frequently pointed out the difficulties with classifications when the local frames of reference are not considered or when ongoing processes are ignored, inasmuch as Borneo is not an ethnically stable area.

Thus, one of the problems in understanding the ethnic structure of Borneo has been the failure of anthropological models, particularly the tribal model of ethnic identification which assumes a relatively static social situation and the homogeneity of culture within any unit. As it has been used, this model also fails to consider ethnic identification in relational terms; that is, how it structures interethnic relations, with the result that the social conditions which give rise to the "tribe" are ignored and not analyzed. Murphy (1964), for example, has suggested that tribal identification only becomes operative under certain conditions of intersocietal transactions, and my research in Sabah tends to bear this out (but cf. "Sarawak" below).

At the present stage, in my opinion, the most useful and productive approach to the classification of the indigenous peoples is through the use of linguistic evidence (cf. Hudson 1967). This will require extensive field work. Cense and Uhlenbeck, after exhaustively reviewing the linguistic literature, conclude that there are not yet enough data to attempt any adequate linguistic classification.

The Social Anthropology of Sabah

I have recently reviewed the social and medical anthropology of Sabah, and, consequently, I will be brief here. A number of Dusun-speaking groups have been investigated: the Ranau by R. Harrison; the Rungus by myself; the Penampang Dusun by Glyn-Jones, a geographer; and certain interior Dusun-speaking groups by Williams.³

³ Williams' conclusions have not been accepted generally by his colleagues. The issues are reviewed by Appell (1968) and in a forthcoming issue of the *Sarawak Museum Journal*.

Both the Ranau and the Rungus have cognatic social systems based upon the social entities of village and nuclear domestic family, with the latter being the most important. Neither the kindred nor any descent groups are found. The Ranau have an economy based on wet rice with individual ownership of fields, while the Rungus form a long-house dwelling, swidden-based society in which use rights to land are contingent on membership in a village.⁴

In comparison, the Chinese, the coastal Muslim, and the Murut group of peoples in the interior have been neglected. Fortier has studied a Hakka Chinese community. Sather has investigated a Sama Laut (Sea Bajau) fishing community and has found that the major functioning social units are the nuclear family, the extended family, and the village. The Murut populations have only been briefly surveyed by Landgraf. Without doubt the culturally diverse Murut peoples of the interior are in most urgent need of research, as they are undergoing rapid culture change, and yet we have knowledge of not one of their social systems much less an inventory of the various self-conscious Murut tribes or groups and the general outlines of the cultural contours between such groups.

Sather has also pointed out the need for investigations into the indigenous political systems of the coastal Muslim before these data are lost (Sather 1967). The Banggi Islanders should also be mentioned as in urgent need of research (Appell 1968).

The Social Anthropology of Brunei

Social anthropological research in Brunei is nonexistent. Harrison has provided us with some of the major cultural outlines (1958), and he has drawn attention to the needs for anthropological work especially among the Kedayans (1959b).

The Social Anthropology of Sarawak

Sarawak is fortunate in the number of investigations that have been carried out there, but it is exceedingly complex ethnically, and

⁴ As a result of investigations of the Rungus, I have reevaluated the concepts of residence, kindred, and corporate social groupings.

many interesting and crucial problems remain to be solved. T. Harrisson, Government Ethnologist and Curator of the Sarawak Museum (1947-1966), has built an extraordinarily fine museum, and it is now a repository for much important ethnological material. He has, in addition, carried on research among various groups, the Kelabit (cf. 1959a) and the Sarawak Malay in particular. A full statement of the latter is in preparation, and he plans (now that he is no longer burdened with administrative duties) to prepare a full description of the Kelabit as well.

Leach in 1947 made a brief but most penetrating anthropological survey and prepared an extremely useful summary statement of the ethnic situation (with map). His recommendations resulted in studies of the Iban, Land Dayak, Melanau, as well as a study of the Chinese by T'ien.⁵

As a result of his research among the Iban, Freeman has produced one of the best studies of swidden agriculture to date. Similar studies for other groups need to be done. His research has also resulted in a reexamination of the concept of the kindred and an analysis of the Iban family, which presents a system as yet unique to the study of cognatic societies. The Iban domestic family forms a corporate entity owning rights over land and other goods and exists in perpetuity by recruiting to it one child and his spouse in each generation, with the other children either marrying out or, after marriage, splitting off from the natal group to form a new domestic family.⁶

Geddes has not only presented his analysis of Land Dayak society in monographic form, he has also produced an exceedingly fine and sensitive ethnographic film of them and has translated the legend that describes and validates their ritual treatment of heads. Land Dayak economy is based on mixed swidden and irrigation agriculture, and rights to use land are devolved bilaterally on all descendants of the individual who originally cleared the land, establishing a descent collectivity (Appell 1967, n.d.).

Morris' study of the Islamized Melanau provides us with a description of another type of cognatic system which is based on

⁵ Also see Leigh (1964) for a discussion of the Sarawak Chinese.

⁶ Japan has recently reinvestigated Iban residence choice.

sago production with individual ownership of land and a highly formalized, preferentially endogamous, system of ranking based on birth and validated by graded bride prices. As both the Land Dayak and Melanau groups are culturally quite heterogeneous, further research among these groups could be profitably undertaken.

In addition to these studies, Peranio has investigated the Bisaya who have a "ranked ambilineal social system", and this research has resulted in reevaluation of descent concepts in the light of the developing knowledge of cognatic societies. Needham has worked with the nomadic Penan, a non-Punan group of hunters and gatherers, and has provided a description of them in a number of articles, including a comparison of their organization with the Siriono and a study of teknonymy and mourning terms. He plans to finish a monographic treatment of these peoples in the near future. He has also recommended (1960) that if the nomadic Punan, found in Kalimantan as well, are to be studied at all, field work should be initiated immediately.

Sarawak is indeed intriguing in terms of its ethnic complexity and variations in social organizations, and a number of groups need study at once before their indigenous social systems are disrupted irretrievably. For example, the Kenyah-Kayan-Kajang group of peoples all share a rather rigid class system involving aristocrats, commoners, and descendants of slaves. These classes are endogamous, and because of the small number of aristocrats in most groups, an aristocrat is more likely to find a marriagable spouse, according to Leach, in other ethnic groups than his own. Such marriages thus form the base of political alliances and integrate a number of diverse ethnic groups in one region. How this functions on a base of swidden agriculture certainly demands investigation, all the more so because most of these groups have a highly developed system of art and set of funerary practices as well. Such an investigation would in addition contribute to a much needed revision of anthropological concepts dealing with ethnic identification.

The Kajang section of these peoples is a very heterogeneous category consisting of remnant groups that were fragmented by

the expansion of the Iban and Kenyah-Kayan peoples.⁷ Harrisson (1964a) refers to them as inland Melanau, and the 1960 census also includes in this category those remnant groups from the Baleh region that were dispersed by the Iban and which Leach refers to under his Bukitan class. All these groups are small and are being assimilated by the Kenyah-Kayan groups as well as the Iban. Their cultures and social systems cry out for recording, as not only would they contribute to our knowledge of cognatic systems, but they would also add immeasurably to the ethno-history of the country. They demand study for a further reason. By studying the assimilation of one indigenous group by another, perhaps some of the conceptual problems that exist in the study of acculturation (which has usually focused on the impact of Western culture on indigenous peoples) can be resolved, and studies of culture change be rejuvenated. Of these groups Needham (1960) has drawn particular attention to the Punan Ba as urgently needing research.

The Social Anthropology of Kalimantan

Relatively little work has been undertaken in Indonesian Borneo. Ave, of the University of Indonesia, has worked among the "Ot Danum" and other groups along the interior borders of West and Central Kalimantan. Nikulina, of the Institute of Ethnography (Leningrad) spent 17 months doing linguistic research along the southeast coast from Bandjarmasin to Balikpapan. Van Nasseran, of the University of Sydney, is reported to have worked in the Kapuas River region (West Kalimantan). Miles has studied the Kahayan, Katingan, and Dohoi of the Upper Mentaya region of Central Kalimantan. He has produced a number of interesting articles including one (1965a) reexamining Hertz's explanation for a secondary burial, and he concludes that Hertz unfortunately ignored its socioeconomic aspects. He has also provided a description of a type of long-house structure found sporadically now in the south of Borneo which diverges markedly from those found in the center and in the north.

⁷ B. de Martinoir has studied one of these groups in the Belaga region but as yet has not published on his research.

Some of the most interesting work that has been done is that by Hudson and his wife in Central Kalimantan. Hudson has produced (1967) a very thorough linguistic classification of the languages spoken in this region as a result of the data he collected, and he has broken new and useful ground in this. Hudson also studied the Padju Epat ethnic subunit of the Ma'anjan peoples. He has produced a very interesting ethnographic description of these people and a detailed description of their secondary burial rites. In his analysis of Padju Epat social structure he describes three types of cognatic (contrary to Murdock) descent groups that control access to land, to richly carved ash repositories, and to residence in large, multiple family dwellings. I am rather hesitant to call groupings such as the latter two "descent groups" since actual membership in them is dependent on choice of residence and includes affines as well. One might better term these types of social units "cognatic-structured kin groups" in which potential rights are converted to actual rights by choice of residence, and rights for those holding none through birth may be established by marriage with a potential right holder. The crucial area, it seems to me, in the study of these cognatic-structured kin groupings is that of the rights of the affines: just how and on what basis is one's spouse included or excluded, and, furthermore, on what basis are her cognates in her generation or above excluded or included?

One of the more interesting aspects of the Ma'anjan cognatic descent groupings controlling rights to land is the structure it takes in response to changes in the availability of land. Families from crowded Ma'anjan villages frequently emigrate to form new villages in pioneer regions, and there is some indication that in these regions when land becomes scarce the nature of the kin groupings shifts to a more unilateral bias; but when there is ample land (i.e. people are scarce), bilateral affiliation is more prominent. Research on this aspect of the Ma'anjan kin groupings is crucial, for it would cast much light on our understanding of the nature of cognatic kin groups and the processes which lead to their formation.

Finally, mention should be made of Harrison's interesting account of the Maloh which is based on material from three

informants who visited Kuching. The Maloh are a group of people who stem from villages in the Kapuas River region of West Kalimantan and who travel widely as itinerant silversmiths and metal workers. Harrisson also includes a most useful inventory of peoples living in the region of the Kapuas River and its tributaries.

CONCLUSION

The inescapable conclusion from any review of the social anthropology of Borneo is the urgent need for more field work. This is particularly true for the interior groups such as the Murut peoples who will change rapidly in the next 5 to 10 years as well as those remnant groups in Sarawak. Among many of the indigenous groups there exists a rich, beautiful, oral literature in the form of chants and hymns which is rapidly disappearing and needs immediate collecting. Other opportunities exist for research in the field of religion as in revitalization movements such as the Bungan cult (cf. Prattis). There is also urgent need for ethno-historical research of the kind done by Pringle among the Iban, particularly for the coastal sultanates, as we need to know much more of how they operated before a coherent picture of Bornean anthropology can be drawn. Since 1945 a good beginning has been made towards this goal, but unless more students go into the field in the near future, we will be left with only a motley assortment of unrelated bits and fragments.⁸

⁸ I am currently compiling a list of problems, ethnic groups, and languages in Borneo that need immediate investigation before the opportunity is permanently lost. I would welcome any recommendations, and forms for such recommendations will be forwarded on request.

REFERENCES

Because of the necessity for brevity, I have been unable to include all references. A full bibliography will appear in my forthcoming article "The Social Anthropology of Borneo: Problems and Prospects." Also see Cotter (1965) and Appell (1968).

The following abbreviations are used here: BICUAER — Bulletin of the International Committee on Urgent Anthropological and Ethnological Research; HMSO — Her Majesty's Stationery Office; JRAI — Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute; JMBRAS — Journal of the Malay (Malaysian) Branch, Royal Asiatic Society; Oc — Oceania; SMJ — Sarawak Museum Journal; SWJA — Southwestern Journal of Anthropology.

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