

Research Note

**The Rural Communities of
the First Division, Sarawak**

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As we disembarked from the dusty Land Rover, the hot afternoon air and the rustic surroundings welcomed us after the bumpy and exhausting 3 1/2 hours journey from the capital town, Kuching. There was silence around us as if life was not in existence in this placid and remote little village. After a short while however, we saw little children scuffling amidst the trees nearby and their eyes glared curiously at us with faces emitting inherent questions of our arrival. I walked towards a shop, which I was informed later to be the village cooperative as well as the only provision store in the area. At this store, village male youths and elderly men usually gathered to pass their times by gambling or merely discussing with one another after their labourious work in the pepper field. My presence somehow halted their engrossment in their gambling. They looked up suspiciously at me while I held my composure and politely introduced ourselves. After informing them the intention of our arrival I inquired the residence of the headman or *Ketua Kaum* of the village (The term *Ketua Kaum* is now used in Sarawak to refer to *Ketua Kampung* or Village Headman of an indigenous community). Such a very brief introduction had amazingly broken the ice. In fact one of the youths left his cards and walked along with me to meet the *Ketua Kaum*. From the corner of my eyes, I could see few villagers gathering around those people at the shop to further investigate our presence. It did not take long for us to befriend the village folks. They are very warm and complacent in manner. In fact they assisted us in several ways which complement and smoothened our compilation of invaluable data.

This village, better known as Kg. Mujat, is one of the five villages covered for the study on the participation of the rural female labour force and their contribution to the household income. This study also attempts to analyse the changes in the structure of the labour forces; the factors and underlying forces to these changes and the implication on the female labour participation in the rural sector of the First Division of Sarawak as a whole. The essence of the study also tries to highlight the roles and functions that rural women are obligated to and finally the significant effects on these women. Five hundred female respondents of indigenous background, ranging between the ages of 12-65 were interviewed. The research scopes covered females from the five villages and also women involved in the petty

sales of the *pasar tamu* or market squares in Kuching town centre. It is of due importance to acquire information from the native women engaged in the *pasar tamu* sales because of their socio-economic background and their area of residence which are located in the rural and remote areas. A handful of these female petty sellers come from the five villages visited. A set of questionnaires was used to gather the required information.

The other four villages comprising of Kg. Stass (Bau District), Kg. Mayang, Kg. Engkeroh (Serian District) and Kg. Anah Rais (Pedawan District), are located in the South Eastern region of the First Division, towards the Sarawak-Kalimantan border. These villages in general, share similar ethnographic, ecological and socio-economic characteristics. However, the Bidayuh ethnic group predominantly occupies these villages. Though of the same stock, the Bidayuhs communicate with each other in various dialects according to their respective areas of residence. In other words, a person is able to identify each community based on the locations of its village. Nevertheless, the inherent cultural and social norms do not differ much. Although the majority are believers of Christianity, their affiliation to traditional customs and rites and their closeness to nature are unquestionable. Strong familial bondage, reciprocal ties and cooperation still persist. These are manifestations of social norms and values reputedly enduring in small traditional communities remotely isolated from the capital city.

Like any other traditional communities, most of these villages are undergoing transitions at differing stages due to their geographical location which inevitably has its bearing in slowing down development processes or otherwise. Vis-a-vis the transcendence of developmental programmes, each village has responded differently towards the State's endeavour to upgrade its socio-economic status. The comprehension of such response is clearly manifested in the community's level of empathy and aspiration to develop their lands inherited from their ancestors and through customary land rights. Such responsiveness also differs in each village. This could be attributed to the extent of links and communications between the State and village levels. Further empirical results relating to these factors are yet to be established.

From the writer's observation, except for Kg. Mujat, the majority of the younger cohorts of the population are leaving their villages to either seek employment in the capital city or pursue studies in nearby towns. This seems to be the conventional norm in most developing nations and such phenomenon is slowly creeping into these remote villages. Having such orientation in mind, I was indeed amazed with the contradictions found in Kg. Mujat. Referring to my first day in this village, I was quite surprised to see the presence of a large number of people within the younger age groups; this incidence does not occur in the other four villages. Most of the younger population of Kg. Mujat are engaged in husbandry and agri-

culture based on planting pepper, rubber and vegetable. During my visit, pepper and rubber fetched good prices in the market and the peasants received relatively high incomes, generally from \$750 to \$1000.00 or more per seasonal sale. It takes about three years for pepper crops to bear fruits. However, the peasants had spend a large sum of money initially to buy fertilizer and wooden posts for the pepper creepers. Daily, after the hard days' work in the farm, most of the villagers spend their times in the only river which runs in the middle of the village. In fact, the river plays a very significant function in terms of providing a 'recreation centre' where all the villagers meet to swim, wash and spend the leisure hours. In particular, the children use it as their main 'playground' after coming home from school. Despite the States's provision of water supply in the longhouses, most of the people here still prefer to bathe and wash in the river. In other words the river is the centre of social activities for villagers here, irrespective of age and sex. It was also at this river that I gathered a lot of information from the womenfolk while they performed their daily chores. Therefore, joining them in their social gathering in the river had broken the barrier between the women and myself, particularly with the older women. I was welcomed into their circle at last.

Such happy moments in Kg. Mujat could not be obtained in both Kg. Mayang Mawang and Kg. Engkeroh located within close range from each other. These two villages are included under the Mayang Tea Project, spear-headed by SALCRA (Sarawak Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority). This project was initiated by the State Government in February 1982 with the objective of alleviating poverty. Due to the unsuitable soil in the area, only pepper, rubber and hill paddy are grown uneconomically, but these too do not thrive well. Lowland tea has been identified by SALCRA as the viable crop for the surrounding elevated topography. Adding to that, it was transpired that the labour intensive nature of tea planting would be able to create employment amongst the villages' abundant labour forces. This also means the State government has introduced industrial development with the setting up of a tea processing factory within the villages' territory; thus enabling the recruitment of local labour forces. With this project, both villages which were previously quite isolated from the nearest town, i.e Serian, and regarded as the sleepy hollow of the Serian District, are set on the road to progress. Generally, the communities living in these villages are actually working on their lands grown with lowland tea under the smallholder schemes. Such kind of farming method is new to the peasant communities of these villages. The management body appointed by the State Government is assisted by few personnels to manage the plantations.

The undulating hills with the tea plantations give a beautiful panoramic view of the area. Climbing higher up on the steep hills, one is able to see the distant blue hills of the Sarawak-Kalimantan border. From here, I could also see the tiny villages located at the foot of the hills. Medium

size houses which are mostly made of bricks and concrete with asbestos roofing are scantily scattered. I was informed by the managing personnels of the plantation that the concrete houses indicate a change in the community's socio-economic status; they are better off now after six years of adopting the tea scheme. It seems the community are generally able to save their income to build concrete single storey houses. Such material well-being may not have similar implication to an outside observer, due to the fact that although the houses are concrete in form, accessibility to electrical supply, proper road linking the villages to the nearest Serian bazaar, schools, health facilities, and recreation centre are apparently lacking in the area.

What I found missing in these two villages which are located within a radius of 7 Km. from each other, is the sound of children's laughter and screams. Most folks there spend much of their time working in the tea farms and the later parts of the day are spend on their individual plot of lands planted with vegetables, cocoa and pepper. These plots are smaller in sizes and do not contribute much economic returns. I was informed that most of them do not grow their own rice as they used to, since they are now much involved in the tea scheme. They obtain their rice supply from the village only provision-cum cooperative centre. The monthly wages received from working in their tea farms provide sufficient cash to buy food. An indication of a transition from a subsistence peasant community to a full fledged wage-earning community is imminent here. The people do not waste time to grow their own rice or crops anymore. Furthermore, out-migration is obvious here. Most of the younger generations have left the villages to seek greener pasture elsewhere, particularly in the urban centres. Some of those who have completed their studies in the towns prefer to choose their own jobs there rather than toiling in the tea hills under the merciless hot sun and receiving little returns. This may be one reason why the presence of young age groups in these two villages are not as great as those found in Kg. Mujat.

Kg. Anah Rais which lies in the Pedawan district, has a lot to offer in terms of touristic spots. The 3 hours rough and winding journey on the hilly road to this village from Kuching centre was not at all appeasing. However, the end of the journey led to a spectacular view of thick tropical foliage. A 15 minutes drive from the village leads to a waterfall where its crystal clear water runs into the village. Hot water springs jutted from the rocky hills into the streams. It took us quite sometime to look for these bubbling steamy springs in the streams. The poignant smell of the sulphuric air was able to help us detect these springs. Further downstream, few rows of longhouses are located beside the river. The longhouses are mostly made of bamboos, conducive as a cooling agent inside the longhouses and the surroundings. We stayed in the *bilik* or a room of the Ketua Kaum in the longhouse. The peasants here are engaged in pepper and paddy growing. Most of their farms are located far from the village and it takes about one

to three hours of walking. Usually they left for their farms at six in the morning and returned at six or seven o'clock in the evening. They need to bring along their food, normally rice with little vegetable, salted fish or sometimes meat packed together in leaves. These are prepared in the early dawn. In the mid afternoon when its very hot, they have their siesta or afternoon nap in little huts or *dangau*, built in their respective farms and resume work again in the later part of the afternoon when it is less hot. This remains as a daily routine to the people of Kg. Anah Rais. The community here nevertheless, is self-sufficient and grows their own food crop. Majority of the women are involved in petty trading, selling jungle produces and food crops in the market squares or the *pasar tamu* of Kuching town during the week-ends. Few older women are also involved in weaving bamboo and rattan baskets either for their own use or to sell to enthusiastic tourists or visitors to the longhouse. Out-migration is obvious too; many younger people have moved out to work in Kuching and returned for short visits during week-ends or public holidays. The sending of remittances to their families in the village help to provide relatively better socio-economic securities. These also help to enhance strong familial ties between the migrants in the urban centres with their families in the village.

My stay and observations in the five villages somehow struck me to deduce a common characteristic. Inevitably, participation of the villages' females in both the domestic and non-domestic sectors are prevalent. The womenfolk form part of the major labour forces in these remote villages. They are involved in most of the daily tasks, ranging from domestic chores, including the bringing up of their children and performing agricultural works. I was also informed that in the Bidayuh community, the women are mostly involved in collecting firewoods (for those homes which still use such mode in preparing food). I was filled with awe seeing females ranging from a child of 5 years old to a very elderly lady carrying loads of firewoods in their native-woven basket or *ambok* on their backs.

The above case, for instance allows a brief theoretical interpretation. Integration of household units into the market economy has created significant implication on the social and economic roles of the rural women. In other words women's participation in the market economy provides important contribution towards the national development. However these participation also means that their roles are intensified; they are involved actively in the domestic and also the non-domestic activities. Such changes in the household labour forces of the rural area should not be studied in isolation. The interplay of external forces of the wider social and economic system, particularly in the process of production which penetrates the rural sector, has to an extent result in structural changes of the peripheral communities. Female labour forces in this matter, should not be observed merely as assisting their husbands or family in agricultural works. Their active presence in the social and economic activities connotes significant

contribution which has been neglected or not even recognised in terms of statistical collection or policy implementation.

The pleasant encounter with the communities of the villages has further enhanced me to grasp the utmost information that I could gather regarding the simplicity yet hard working people of the remote hills. Endurance and determination are important factors for one to embark on a field research in Sarawak. Considering the problems of accessibility to reach remote villages in this State, which are also sparsely located from each other, it is of due importance for a researcher to familiarize with the topography of the area and inland maps, and of course, knowing the appropriate contacts for transportations. Besides these physical tips, one needs to understand and be informed of the multi social and cultural norms of the heterogeneous ethnic compositions, the varying dialectical differences according to locations; hence, less cultural barriers will be faced.

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