Chinese-Iban Economic Symbiosis

Richard C. Fidler
University Museum, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The prime requirement of any plural society is to establish and maintain stable co-residence among its constituent groups. The central Rejang River valley of Sarawak, Malaysia, is the home of several distinctly different ethnic groups, each occupying a different supportive and exploitive niche in the total physical and social environment of the valley. Little conflict currently exists between these differing ethnic communities because the conceptual and behavioral boundaries of these niches are currently in stable equilibrium within their total ecosystem. When the supportive and exploitive techniques of the differing ethnic communities are non-conflicting, they contribute to the stability of the boundaries of the niches and make relationships across ethnic niche lines possible. When these technologies are not only non-conflicting but complementary, relationships across ethnic niche lines become desirable and necessary. Some differing technologies sort into mutually convenient reciprocal pairs, such as those of the native Iban farmers and the Chinese shopkeepers in Kanowit District, and ties of economic symbiosis between them develop. The maintenance of these mutually desirable ties relies upon the stability of the conceptual and behavioral boundaries of the constituent ethnic group niches. Maintenance of stability requires that the occupants of these ethnic niches develop ideational concepts of ethnic identification of self and other (statuses) and phenomenological behavioral patterns (roles) for manifesting their ethnic identity to self and other. Examination of the constituent statuses and roles elicited by symbiotic relationships such as those of the Iban and Chinese contributes to our theoretical understanding of the formation and maintenance of stable ethnic niche boundaries. The prime requirement of any plural society is to establish and maintain stable co-residence among its constituent groups; the prime requirement of any theory of plural society is to explain how they do so.

The Batang Rejang is the longest river system on the northwest coast of the island of Borneo. From its headwaters in the Nieuwenhuis Mountains, where its watershed forms the political boundary between the Malaysian state of Sarawak and the Indonesian province of Kalimantan Timor, it flows 350 miles to its extensive delta mouth on the South China Sea. Along its banks and tributaries live twenty-five percent of the state's population, a cross section of the multitude of ethnic and linguistic groups that constitute the plural society of Sarawak.

More than 160 inches of rain fall each year on the Nieuwenhuis Range, feeding the myriad streams that form the Rejang's headwaters. Sarawak is in the path of the annual North-east monsoon, known in Malaysia as the landas, which drops...
from ten to twenty-five inches of rain per month on the central Rejang valley during the monsoon season from November to March. Eight to ten weeks of light rainfall follow, until the arrival of the less intense South-west monsoon of July, August, and September. For another ten-week period drier conditions prevail, before the advent of the next North-east monsoon.

Geologically, Borneo is an extension of the Sunda Shield of Paleozoic schists and volcanic deposits overlaid with Tertiary and Quaternary sedimentary deposits—hard sandstones, greywicks, siltstones, shales, and slates. The mountains in the headwaters of the Rejang reach elevations of 3,000 to 4,500 feet. For the first half of its flow—170 miles—the river twists through steep terrain, rockfalls, and rapids, navigable only by native longboats. Below the Pelagus Rapids, 180 miles from the delta mouth, post-Tertiary erosion periods, specifically the Peneplanation and Jerudong Cycles, have reduced the elevations of the hills to an average height of 200 to 300 feet. A series of rising and falling sea levels in the Pleistocene resulted in deeply incised river valleys with deposits of sand, sandy clay, and gravel, with some alluvial terracing, in the 100 mile long central Rejang basin. The river delta reaches eighty miles upstream from the South China Sea, and its banks are swampy and unstable, barely above sea level.

There are three kinds of soils in the central valley, from Pelagus to the delta (Dunsmore 1968: 314): in the hilly and mountainous areas there are skeletal soils, strongly weathered and leached acid yellow soils, and shallow red-yellow podsolic soils, generally thin and rarely exceeding two feet in depth. The podsols are derived from sandy material, are strongly acid, and have low agricultural potential. These podsolic soils, both red-yellow and grey-white, also dominate the moderately rolling terrains, along with some lateritic and silty clays. More fertile are the floodplain areas, with peat soils, gleys, and recent alluvial deposits. Three-quarters of Sarawak is still covered by primary forest. The number of indigenous tree species is estimated at over 2,500. The central Rejang valley has a cover of lowland dipterocarp forest dependent on hot, moist conditions, which promotes dense and luxuriant growth. Trees in the primary forests grow almost unbranched below the canopy, which is often 140 to 160 feet above the ground. Lianes and rattans predominate in the sparse undergrowth.

The culture history of central Sarawak from the first evidence of human occupation at Niah Cave (c. 40,000 B.C.) to European contact in the mid-Nineteenth century is conjectural. When James Brooke established his Raj over Sarawak Proper, one hundred miles to the south, in 1841, the delta of the Rejang was inhabited by coastal Malays and Melanaus (as it is in the 1970's). Upstream from the delta, into the present Kanowit District, there were scattered riverbank villages and longhouses of now-vanished cultural groups—labeled Tanjongs, Lugats, and Kanowits in early accounts—who probably spoke languages related to Melanau. The upper part of the valley was occupied by Kayan—Kajang peoples, with perhaps some nomadic Punan in the interior regions, as is currently found in the upper Rejang, above the Pelagus Rapids.

The Brooke Raj was founded upon the suppression of piracy. After James Brooke obtained control of the coastal waters by defeating an Illanun fleet at Marudu Bay in 1845, he turned his attentions toward securing the land base, the pre-