

CHAPTER 6

TRADE AND SOURCES OF INCOME

Throughout the preceding chapters outlining Iban history and land use, as well as agricultural and demographic behavior, mention has been made of objects and services which were not locally produced and were obviously purchased: chain-saws and gasoline to run them, outboard motors, steel for the forging of axes, ready-made axes, truck transportation and imported rice when a harvest has failed. Many other frequently used market items can be found in households at Sungai Pelai, at Nanga Jela, in longhouses along the Kemena River, and in houses along the Baleh even in 1950: purchased cloth for skirts, trousers and loincloths, iron cooking pots, kerosene for lamps, matches, salt, porcelain bowls, brass gongs, ceramic jars, silver and gold jewelry, as well as numerous other items.

Despite the fact that during my period of research many upriver Iban expressed pride at their ability to be, if necessary, almost completely self-sufficient – a boast that was most recently tested during the Japanese occupation of Sarawak (1941-45) when market trade almost stopped – the desire of even far upriver Iban for many non-locally made products is undisputable and their dependence on at least two market items extends as far back into the past as does oral Iban history. Iban have always needed to trade for iron for the making of agricultural tools, hunting, fishing and war apparatus. Freeman states that: “our earliest historical accounts of the Iban describe a highly developed material culture based on the use of iron tools” and suggests that “it is probable that for many centuries the Iban have maintained economic relationships with Chinese and Malay traders, with metal objects, ceramics and beads as their principal purchases” (1970:175). In addition to iron, the other imported necessity for Iban was salt, the trade of which has figured importantly in the past history of the Iban and indeed of all of Sarawak; through the regulation and restriction of the sale of salt to upriver Iban both the pre-1841 Brunei government and the later Brooke regime at times attempted to bring to heel groups of warring or recalcitrant Iban (Pringle 1970:64, 231).

Apart from iron and salt which were and still are necessary items, gongs and other brassware and Chinese ceramic jars are trade goods which have long been found in most Iban households. Heavier legal fines, imposed by

both the Brooke government and indigenous arbitrators were often expressed in weights of brassware (Pringle 1970:170n) and paid in brass vessels or gongs, Chinese jars or other ceramic ware (see Howell and Bailey 1900:app. 24–26). Even the earliest known Iban migration leaders are said to have settled debts or paid fines with brassware and precious jars (Sandin 1967a:9, 20).

By all accounts Iban were probably never taxed effectively by the Brunei government prior to Brooke rule (Pringle 1970:43). However Brooke government taxes although quite light and often not successfully collected (Pringle 1970:162) presented the Iban with some need for cash; today taxes and firearm license fees are still quite small, but do require some cash outlay.

The involvement of Iban, even far upriver communities, in trade, is therefore of long standing and although often small in actual volume or cost of goods exchanged, trade has been and is considered essential by all Iban. The desire for market products among Bornean groups even far more remotely situated than Sarawak's Iban is pronounced. Some groups of Apo Kayan Kenyah living in a hardly accessible region in East Kalimantan must travel months to reach supplies of desired products. Their trips to and from market sometimes take years (Conley 1976:113–4).

The level of use of market products by groups of Iban varies greatly throughout Sarawak and is of course continually changing. The Iban communities that constitute my research populations were all on the lower end of a scale of users of market products to be found among Sarawak Iban, although they probably consumed more trade items than Iban living in the Kapuas drainage of West Kalimantan.

The Iban of the Engkari rely on trade goods for clothing, long-distance transportation, lighting, hunting and fishing equipment, bedding and many luxury goods. They do not buy foodstuffs other than salt for everyday consumption. Foods bought include sugar, coffee, tea, biscuits, "orange squash", and perhaps some vegetable oil for use only in times of celebration or to honor important guests. Rice is bought solely when the harvest fails; every year's fields are made big enough so that, with luck, there will be no need for purchased rice; vegetables, fish and other items normally eaten with rice are never bought.

This pattern of rather minimal market consumption is largely the same in the communities in the Ensebang, Kemena (Bintulu) and Baleh (in 1950) drainages, with the possibility that Kemena area Iban regularly bought a little more in the market. This pattern would not, however, be considered the norm in all or even most Iban areas, particularly among Iban settled in the lower reaches of major rivers and near market towns. Urban and some cash-cropping Iban in the lower Rejang basin (see Sutlive 1978), the Saribas, Undup and lower Batang Lupar areas of the Second Division, as well as

some downriver parts of the Fourth Division (especially the residents of government development schemes near Miri) rely substantially, if not totally, on the market for their daily rice as well as for all the animal and vegetable foods eaten with rice.

Purchases of almost all non-local items are made from Chinese shopowners in market towns, or occasionally from traders who travel the rivers, stopping at upriver longhouses. In a very few areas, Malay and Iban run the shops where necessities and luxuries can be purchased. Inter-longhouse trade however is very rare and intra-longhouse rarer still. Occasionally Iban will sell rice to each other, when one household has a definite surplus and another a deficit (see Freeman 1970:272). However, in the Engkari and the Ensebang while I was there, surpluses of rice were not obtained. Occasionally, though again rarely, Iban in areas like the lower Engkari where old forest is scarce will buy products made of forest materials from their upriver neighbors who are richer in forest. I witnessed several sales of large rotan mats and of dugout canoes. These items are usually bought with cash, although in one observed case shotgun shells were the preferred medium of payment.

It is the variations in the methods by which the cash or other valuables exchanged for consumer goods and services are acquired, and the broader implications of those variations which will be the subject of the rest of this chapter.

The very earliest resident of the Batang Lupar above the town of Lubok Antu, Patih Ambau (who may also have led a migration into the Engkari, see Chapter 2) is mentioned by Benedict Sandin (1967a:7) as having relations with Malay traders. No mention is made, however, of the goods exchanged. Pringle suggests that the principal commodities traded by Malay and the early Iban residents of the territory of Sarawak were salted fish for Iban rice (1970:63). Whether the upriver areas of the Second Division, such as the Engkari River, ever produced significant surpluses of rice is uncertain, but if the Baleh country in favorable years produces considerable stores of rice above the normal Iban consumption (see Freeman 1970:254–55) there is no reason why in the early decades of settlement the topographically and pedologically similar Engkari area did not. Many “pioneering” Iban areas still quite regularly produce surplus rice harvests; among these, according to informants’ reports, are parts of the Kemena basin and the settlement at Sungai Pelai.

At what point in the history of the occupation of the Engkari valley the production of surpluses of rice ended – if indeed any were ever produced and marketed – is unknown; but it is safe to say that income for the purchase of trade items has not come from the sales of Engkari rice since Brooke officers have reported from the Lubok Antu area, or for at least a century.

As it is uncertain when the sales of surplus rice may have ended in the Engkari region, so also it is impossible to say when the collection and sale of wild "jungle produce" became important. Trade in some of the items subsumed under the term is believed to have occurred between Borneo and China and India as early as the 10th and 11th centuries (Harrison and O'Connor 1970:161–62). At what time Iban became active collectors, tappers and sellers of camphor, resin, wild rubber and gum and rattan is unknown. However, through all of the period of Brooke rule, jungle collecting was an Iban activity (Low 1848:42–47) and up to 1910 "jungle produce" made up a full third of Sarawak's exports (Pringle 1970:267n).

I have discussed journeying or *bejalai* as a factor strongly affecting Engkari demographic structure in Chapter 5 and have mentioned that prior to the Japanese occupation of Sarawak the productive activity most often engaged in by men on *bejalai* was jungle produce collecting. Post-World War II *bejalai* destinations have tended to include military and police work in West Malaysia and more recently 4th Division or Brunei oilfields, timber camps in Sabah or in the Indonesian province of East Kalimantan. In the period since about 1930 wage labor has almost completely replaced independent collecting as an activity of men on journeys. The change is due principally to a decline in the market for the "jungle produce" items; they have been replaced by cultivated products such as plantation rubber as well as by synthetic materials such as plastics. Rattan and damar are still sold to upriver shops but the volume of trade in these commodities now is quite small.

It was mentioned in Chapter 5 that "jungle produce" is found and collected in old forest, and therefore pioneering Iban can obtain these products close to their homes, while those in older settlements must travel to other districts. When the demand for minor forest products declined and men of the Second Division turned to wage labor as a *bejalai* activity, it might have been predicted that their pioneering counterparts, also deprived of a source of cash, would have joined them in large numbers in traveling to timber camps and other areas where wage labor was available. In fact, as the data given in Chapter 5, Table 6 indicate, at least in the pioneering area of the Kemena (Bintulu) basin, Iban men do not travel for periods as long as, nor in numbers as great as, the men of the Engkari River.

Male residents of the Bintulu region can stay home in part because of their households' lesser need for cash to buy rice in times of crop failure; as was discussed in Chapter 4, Bintulu harvests fail far less frequently than do harvests on the Engkari. Rice yields in the Bintulu area, especially in communities with considerable acreage of swamp land, are quite often abundant enough to allow the sale of considerable amounts of *padi*. Some income to buy market necessities and luxuries is obtained in this way.

Perhaps more important in most years as a cash source, however, is the collection and sale of one jungle product, the demand for which has

expanded, rather than declined. This marketable product is wood and wood products, particularly roof shingles and posts of Borneo ironwood or *belian* (Iban: *tebelian*; *Eusideroxylon zwageri*). While the bulk of Sarawak's export timber trade is in swamp species, *belian*, a dry land tree and one of the strongest, most durable and densest timbers known, is important in internal trade and is always in considerable demand. Especially valuable for its ability to withstand both climatic deterioration and insect attack, *belian* is the preferred building material and is particularly desired for the posts used to support black pepper vines. As the pepper growing industry has expanded in recent years, the demand for posts which can be cut from even small trees has been great and prices paid for it quite high. The cutting of *belian* and manufacture of small, easily transported items such as shingles and posts is a source of cash for other Bornean groups situated at the edge of unexploited forest, among these are some Ngadju Dayak communities of Central Kalimantan (Miles 1977).

At the longhouse at Nanga Engkasu, on the Kemena River upriver from the town of Bintulu, 17 of the 27 component households derived most of their cash income from the working of *belian* found in the longhouses' territory or *menoa*. Houses lower on the Kemena, with more swamp land, may in many years count *padi* sales more important than *belian*; but rice surpluses are less predictable than *belian* cutting and sale.

Men at Nanga Engkasu reported that a full day's work at *belian* cutting usually earned them M\$10, and many of them had sold M\$300 worth of *belian* in the year prior to my interviews; all stated that if it were necessary they could have cut more wood and earned more money (up to ten times as much, one man alleged).

Timber cutting also provides an income for some Iban men around Nanga Enkasu in the form of wages in a local sawmill. The M\$8 daily wage at the mill compares unfavorably with working *belian* oneself, but some young men do choose to work there.

It is evident that in large measure the cutting of hardwoods found only in old forest, whether independently or for a sawmill, has replaced the collection of resins, gums, rubbers and rattan as an income source. Trade in *belian*, like trade in jungle produce, has allowed the men of pioneering communities to obtain the cash income they require for the purchase of imported necessities and luxuries without traveling far from their homes. Men of long settled areas where old forest, the source of both "jungle produce" and valuable hardwoods has long vanished, must, on the other hand, still travel far to timber camps as they once did to sources of minor forest products.

The preceding discussion, concerning the former importance of minor jungle produce collecting and its replacement as an income-producing activity with hardwood cutting would be misleading if it suggested that

bejalai and *belian* working and the occasional selling of surplus *padi* were the only income sources of upriver Iban. The production of crops specifically planted for sale has yet to be discussed.

Earlier in this chapter it was mentioned that some Iban produce little or none of the rice they consume, relying on a cash income to buy market food. Many of such Iban longhouses are engaged in the cultivation of plantation rubber (*Hevea brasiliensis*) or of black pepper (*Piper nigrum*). Among the earliest and most successful of Iban cash croppers were residents of the Saribas basin in the Second Division. Planting extensive rubber gardens soon after the turn of the century, Saribas Iban commonly used local Malay and Iban from the Lubok Antu area as wage laborers or share-tappers (Pringle 1970:205, *Sarawak Gazette* 67, 1 Feb. 1937, p. 42). Today some Iban continue to earn substantial income from the sale of rubber sheets as well as through pepper cultivation and sale (Sutlive 1978). One Iban informant living not far from the market at Batu Lintang along the upper Undup River, stated in 1975 that he had not planted any *padi* for the previous five years; he found pepper farming far more profitable.

The communities in the several research areas, as well as in many other upriver districts, have not become as completely tied to cash cropping as the groups mentioned above, although almost every longhouse in the studied households, except the new immigrants at Sungai Pelai, possessed some acreage under a cash crop. Along the lower Engkari, virtually every household has at least a small grove of mature rubber trees: only a few have planted pepper vines and fewer still, only five households at Nanga Jela, have actually marketed the fruit. Along the Kemena, the situation is somewhat the same, although Iban-planted rubber is probably less abundant than it is along the Engkari and pepper is in most places just being planted. In Freeman's time almost all residents of Rumah Nyala in the Baleh basin had planted rubber, but pepper had made no inroads. At the settlement in the Balai Ringin Protected Forest, the older residents had planted and some had sold pepper; the new immigrants were planting pepper gardens; no one had any rubber.

Crops other than rubber and pepper have at times been planted by Iban, among them coffee (*Sarawak Gazette* 314, 1 Mar. 1892, p. 51) and cacao (*Sarawak Gazette* 362, 2 Mar. 1896, p. 41). But rubber and pepper are by far the most important at present. The reasons that these two very different crops are so widely grown are several. Rubber demands little cultivation, can be tapped whenever convenient, is easily stored and transported and has at times commanded a high price. The advantages of pepper, which requires considerable labor, are its usual high price for rather small weight and bulk, an important quality particularly in areas where transportation is very difficult. Peppercorns, once dried, can also be stored.

A third cash crop which is at times very important to upriver Iban is the

illipe nut (*engkabang*). The fruit of *Shorea spp.*, it contains an oil which has long been used as a food by Iban and was being shipped from Sarawak before 1850 to England for use as a lubricant for machinery and to Manila for candlemaking (Low 1848:46–47). The oil is still exported for many uses and when the *engkabang* trees fruit heavily, Iban households can each earn several hundred dollars by their sale. The harvests, however, occur very erratically; six years is considered the usual interval between fruiting seasons. Occasionally *engkabang* harvest times conflict with the *padi* harvest and if the trees are located far from the rice fields, the illipe nut crop is sacrificed. *Engkabang*, when it fruits, is an important cash source in each of the research areas. However in the more recently settled regions, most of the available trees are spontaneously occurring ones, while in the older areas most have been planted. Neither type is cultivated or tended in any way. Other fruit trees are also planted, but the fruits are rarely, if ever, marketed by residents of the longhouse communities studied. Perishability of other fruits and the difficulty of reaching markets are probably the principal reasons for their not being offered for sale.

The comment made above concerning the difficulties some households experience when the harvests of *padi* and *engkabang* coincide and the crops are far away from each other, points to a problem which has doubtless contributed to the relatively small size of land and time investments by the groups studied, in cash crop production. The shifting cultivation of hill rice requires, if great inconvenience and time loss in travel are to be avoided, occasional changes in residence, whether the actual moving of a longhouse or the building of subsidiary houses (*dampa*) to last for two or three years. Shifting from one part of the longhouse's territory to another often precludes the regular tapping of rubber trees during any busy agricultural season (Sutlive 1978:128). In fact from October 1974 to June 1975 almost half of the households at Nanga Jela – 18 of 38 – did not tap any rubber trees, although all had some available. All of those who did not tap cited the distance from the temporary farm house to the rubber garden and the unavailability of the members to tap, as the reasons for their inactivity. The other reason for a frequent lack of interest among Iban in tapping rubber is its fluctuating market price; from February to November 1974, the price of rubber fell by two-thirds. The depressed rubber value in early 1975 made it very difficult to earn M\$5 a day even if the weather was favorable for tapping. Had the price of rubber been higher, more rubber tapping would probably have occurred. Freeman records the effects of the great rise in rubber prices following the Japanese withdrawal; *bejalai* journeys were forgone in the Baleh and in some areas rice planting was temporarily abandoned in favor of the more lucrative activity of rubber tapping (1970:270).

Since rubber trees, even if only occasionally cared for and rarely tapped

will continue to be productive, upriver Iban have often treated their rubber gardens as a cash store or “bank”, to be tapped only when there is a pressing need or when they receive information that the price is exceptionally high. Such a pattern of only occasional tapping was also noted among communities of Land Dayak or Bidayuh by Geddes (1954:95) and has been decried by developers.

Pepper, which demands hoeing and weeding and occasional fertilizing, cannot be ignored for years as rubber can. It also fruits at particular times and although the dried berries can be stored, pepper vines cannot be treated as a passive store of cash. In the areas intensively studied its cultivation was only beginning. The effects of this crop on residence and cropping-fallow patterns in rice cultivation in areas like the Engkari are yet to be determined. Some of the environmental effects of the intensive cropping of pepper were already seen around Nanga Jela. The hoeing and clean weeding which the crop demands, combined with its planting on steep, inadequately terraced slopes, has caused extreme soil erosion and gulying in some areas. The sheet erosion observed is in places far more severe than any produced by the shifting-cultivation practices long condemned by agricultural experts.

In spite of the availability for a long time of rubber and more recently of pepper, cash cropping has failed to replace wage labor and forest product exploitation as a source of cash. In the case of *bejalai*, many observers of Iban would surely suggest that the continued interest in wage labor migration is due to the fact that journeying is primarily not an economically motivated pattern but rather an adventure, a replacement for headhunting forays, a manifestation of the “wandering instinct” (Lee 1970:87) of young Iban males. A Brooke resident of the Second Division complained in 1929 that “the Dyaks somehow will not take up the cultivation of rubber and depend on obtaining coolie work in Johore or Miri. They are a most restless tribe” (*Sarawak Gazette* 59, 1 June 1929, p. 100), and a missionary, describing the motivations for *bejalai*, apparently found them to be much the same as those spurring modern tourism:

The Dyak is fond of travel, and, like other people loves to visit foreign countries and to return and relate his adventures to his stay-at-home friends (Gomes 1911:233).

That many Iban men like to travel is undeniable, as is the fact that in areas like the Engkari a *bejalai* trip is considered a mark of manhood. However, as the data in Chapter 5, Table 14 show, *bejalai* is not an activity necessarily undertaken by all Iban men, and the length and number of journeys made by Iban vary very widely. The economic function of *bejalai* is made clear not only by the Bintulu situation, where an alternate source of income – *belian*-cutting – makes *bejalai* unnecessary and only rarely undertaken, but also by data from the Baleh region. When rubber prices rose very high, *bejalai* plans were abandoned for tapping rubber (Freeman 1970:270).

The money that can be and occasionally is earned on *bejalai* is considerable: particularly lucrative is some work in timber camps. Wages are paid according to the number of trees cut or hauled, and if the weather is good and the equipment functions well, tree cutters and drivers of loghauling equipment can earn over M\$1,000 in a month; inexperienced workers employed at the relatively easy jobs of lopping off branches and debarking logs can earn M\$400 a month.

The wages earned on *bejalai* as well as those earned in cutting *belian* were considered by the Iban interviewed to be better than the very variable and in 1975 quite low income to be derived from tapping one's own rubber trees. Compounding this factor were the facts that rubber, pepper and other cash crops take up *padi* land, are incompatible with the occasional moves necessitated by *padi* farming techniques, and that the adventure of travel and/or the manly task of cutting trees are preferred particularly by the young men. All the above reasons make cash cropping relatively undesirable and still little developed in the upriver areas where the research was done.

While traveling to timber camps or wandering through virgin forests in search of jungle produce may be desirable to Iban youths and men in search of cash, these Iban temporary migrations have long been condemned by Brooke, British and Malaysian officials (see *Sarawak Gazette* 67, 1 Feb. 1937, p. 42; *Sarawak Gazette* 76, 11 Dec. 1950, p. 310; Lee 1970:87). It was feared that labor migrants, particularly in early post-headhunting days, might engage in some illegal activities, but more often the objection to *bejalai* was that upriver areas were left short of manpower, a situation which was thought to negatively affect agricultural production. In areas where primary forest is being cut, a shortage of adult men might indeed be a problem, as the cutting of giant hardwoods cannot be done by women or adolescents, but in the older settled areas, which are actually the source of most Iban labor migrants, an extra strong arm is usually not necessary. The fact that wage labor migration temporarily removes an additional consumer of local rice grown on the local scarce land may be a far more important and beneficial effect of the practice. Because of *bejalai*, the effective consumer population of areas such as the Engkari is often about 10% lower than the census indicates. And while not consuming the fruits of the land, many of the absent men send or bring home cash earned far beyond the longhouse territory. These inputs from outside also help maintain the longhouse population, particularly during hard times, at levels higher than might otherwise be supportable in the old areas.

In summary, the age old need or desire of upriver Iban to trade for a few market products, as well as for rice in bad harvest years, has in the past and present been financed by several different types of activities. In pioneering zones the sale of rice surpluses as well as of spontaneously occurring jungle products have been common income producers. Each of these activities

presents little need to travel long distances or leave the longhouse for extended periods. Longer settlement and increasing agricultural use of land lead to both a drop in farm productivity and exhaustion of nearby forest product sources, and make traveling to areas of abundant old forest and/or wage labor opportunities more profitable. Cash cropping, for several reasons discussed above, has not successfully substituted for forest exploitation and wage labor migration in hilly upriver areas. The demographic concomitants and effects of differing rates of wage labor migration which may have been of great importance in determining emigration rates in certain areas were discussed more fully in Chapter 5.