
When Sudden Economic Change is not Traumatic: The Collapse of Meat Sharing in Central Borneo

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ABSTRACT

Sudden socio-economic change is often traumatic for small-scale societies. Here, I analyse a case where, contrary to my expectations, the abrupt disappearance of an obligatory system of large catches was not stressful. In 1972, it became possible to sell meat to Chinese traders and the traditional distribution of meat disappeared. However, this had no impact on other aspects of social life. While the Kayan were primarily engaged in a local, non-commodity economy, they had a long experience of commercial transactions; this provided a template for this new opportunity, without otherwise affecting the power structure, cooperation between villagers, or social values. This paper explores the factors that made this smooth transition possible.

We know only too well that sudden economic transformations can be traumatic for isolated small-scale societies. How well can we predict whether a specific change will have a major impact? Here I consider a situation where, contrary to my expectations, a sudden change was not traumatic. In 1972, towards the end of my first fieldwork in the Kayan village of Uma Bawang in the Baluy area of Sarawak, I observed the collapse of an obligatory system of large animal catches sharing.¹ I thought that its disappearance would produce a cascade of further transformations, but this did not happen.

When a large animal was killed, it was divided according to a formal system of distribution called *ngepiah*. Such a distribution was

obligatory; I observed no exception to it during my fieldwork until the practice collapsed. *Ngepiah* applied primarily to wild boar, but also to large fish (e.g., 20 kg or more). The hunter, or a neighbour whose help he sought, divided the catch in standardized portions that were then distributed to his nearest neighbours in the longhouse. Each standard portion was made of several chunks of meat rather than a single slab (this made it easier to make the portions equal). For instance, if a small pig yielded eight portions, these were given to the hunter's eight closest neighbours. (Proximity was unambiguous because the village consisted of a single longhouse divided into apartments, forming a linear settlement.)

In addition to its own share, which was of the same size as those distributed to neighbours, the hunter's family was allowed to set aside some meat for close relatives who lived further away in the longhouse; these portions were distributed in secret, in contrast to the public distribution that took place on the back porch.

If a catch was made with a borrowed net or gun, its owner received a share before the animal was divided into equal portions. The same was true when the successful hunter had borrowed a hunting dog. Men often hunted alone, but when two or three men collaborated in a hunt, they shared the catch, with the man who killed the boar taking a double share. In these cases, all participants in the hunt then divided their own shares independently of each other according to the principles of *ngepiah*; as a consequence, a domestic unit might receive portions from several hunters, if they lived nearby.

Ngepiah is a kind of generalized reciprocity, because no tally is kept of meat given and received, but this does not specify all its characteristics.

1. By establishing standard portions, it emphasizes both the need for equality in distribution and the necessity to distribute substantial portions: it is more important that each recipient obtain enough meat for a reasonable meal than it is to distribute to the whole village equally. Nonetheless, the equality of the portions is central, and *ngepiah* means 'to make equal'.²

2. *Ngepiah* takes place between domestic units, not between individuals; all the portions are equal, even though domestic units may have a varying number of people.

3. By requiring that portions be distributed publicly to the nearest neighbours, *ngepiah* emphasizes the predominance of good relations with all covillagers over a preference towards relatives. Proximity is relevant simply because the requirement to divide the catch in standard portions limits the number of recipients, and the obligation to give to immediate neighbours eliminates the possibility of preferential treatment to friends and relatives. The Kayan themselves say that it is natural to share first with neighbours: because of their proximity, they are aware of the result of the hunt, and it would be rude to bypass them to give meat to more distant villagers.

The fact that some portions are distributed in secret to close relatives may seem to weaken the principle of undifferentiated equality among villagers, but I would argue that the need for secrecy serves to emphasize it. The meat given to close relatives is not offered in standard portions, but as a single chunk of meat. Thus, while the official view is that neighbours are more important than siblings, in practice, everyone agrees that siblings also deserve a share of meat. As long as the official view is not flouted publicly, everyone is happy.

Finally, an important element of the distribution escapes generalized reciprocity. The village chief receives a hind leg and half the neck of every boar and the head of every large fish. The portion given to the chief's family acknowledges its special position in the longhouse. The chief's family does not receive a standard portion, but a share that is set apart before the distribution; it is larger than a standard portion. These prestations of meat to the chief are not reciprocal: if the chief or a member of his family kills a large animal, they keep it all.³ The gift of meat to the chief is a part of the obligatory prestations of labour and goods owed to the chief by all community members (cf. Rousseau 1979, 1990). This exception to generalized reciprocity underlines the fact that the chief and his family are separate from, and above, the community of which they are the rulers.

THE BROADER CONTEXT

Ngepiah is one of several ways to express village unity. People occupy dispersed farmhouses only when rice agriculture requires it.

Otherwise, they live in the longhouse. Most rituals, including the rituals of the agricultural cycle and familial rituals (*dayong*), may only take place in the longhouse.⁴ Rice agriculture is carried out by multihousehold teams that rotate between the fields of their members on a basis of strictly balanced reciprocity. Work teams change their membership regularly so that every household has the opportunity over the years to cooperate with every other household in the village. Members of a cooperation team are not more likely to be related to each other than any two villagers selected at random (Rousseau 1974: 327–335). In the same way as for *ngepiah*, equal treatment of covillagers is given more importance than kinship links.

While *ngepiah* can be described as a form of a generalized reciprocity (except for the portion given to the chief's family), it has much in common with the formal organization of agricultural labour described above, which is unambiguously a form of balanced reciprocity. Among the Kayan, some minor exchanges correspond better to the anthropological notion of generalized reciprocity, for instance when people make gifts of fruit or small quantities of tobacco. On the other hand, while *ngepiah* is a form of *accountable* reciprocity, it is not *balanced* reciprocity because some men are better hunters than others, thus they are net givers of meat.

COLLAPSE OF NGEPIAH

In 1972, *ngepiah* collapsed when Chinese traders, in boats equipped with refrigerators, travelled upriver to buy meat and fish. Within a few months of the traders' arrival, *ngepiah* changed from an obligatory practice to an occasional, virtuous distribution on the part of a few generous hunters. This happened without drama and without any public discussion. Why did it collapse so rapidly and painlessly?

Some historical transformations facilitated the process. An indigenous religious reform replaced the old religion after World War II. *Ngepiah* was sanctioned by the old religion but became optional with the Bungan indigenous religious reform (Rousseau 1998). Nonetheless, *all* wild boars continued to be distributed according to *ngepiah*. While religion ceased to sanction *ngepiah*, social pressure maintained the practice.

Until 1972, practical considerations made it very difficult to sell meat to Chinese traders in Belaga bazaar: because of the distance, the meat would have spoiled before reaching its destination. In any case, the incentive for selling meat was not high because of the low price offered for it. On the other hand, there was an opportunity to sell meat on occasion. While wild boar and large fish were shared through *ngepiah*, this did not apply to sambhur deer. If a hunter managed to snare a deer without hurting it, he brought it for sale to the Malay village near Belaga. As the Belaga Malays had little access to *halal* red meat, they were willing to pay well for a live deer. Only two or three deer were sold in this way in my two years of fieldwork, so it had little practical impact on the village economy. People did not explain why live sambhur deer were exempt from *ngepiah*; I think this was a consequence of the deer's tabooed status before the Bungan reform. In the old religion, deer meat was taboo for most people, so it could not have been shared through *ngepiah*. Indeed, those who were allowed to eat it cooked it some distance away from the longhouse, so that its smell would not injure those who had to avoid it. In any case deer did not form an important part of the diet when I was there. When hunters killed deer, they did share it with others informally. Nonetheless, the rare occasions when a live deer was sold for profit served to remind villagers of a potential market for meat.

One might be tempted to explain the abrupt transition from *ngepiah* to selling meat as a shift from a domestic economy to a cash economy, but this is not a satisfactory explanation.⁵ In insular Southeast Asia, people have been involved in commercial transactions for centuries (see, *e.g.*, Sellato 2001); the Kayan, like other groups, were always part of broader economic exchanges. They sought trade goods such as Chinese jars, Malay brass boxes, gongs, cannons, Venetian beads, and cloth. These were exchanged for a variety of forest produce that the Kayan collected or obtained from the nomadic Penan. Locally, rice, tobacco, and other products were also traded between domestic units in the same village and beyond. Furthermore, while I witnessed an abrupt transition with regards to boar meat and large fish, this was not accompanied by other social changes. For instance, the cultivation of rice continued on the basis of cooperation between domestic units; corvées were still performed

for the chief. Therefore, there was no change to the economy as a whole.

While it is true that the Kayan adapted to new circumstances, it would be insufficient to explain the collapse of *ngepiah* in these terms. For instance, some men went downriver to work for timber companies in order to make money. When they returned to their village, their domestic unit as a whole, or more precisely its adult members, decided how to use the money. For instance, upon his return from cutting timber in the Baleh area, one man told me with some enthusiasm that he planned to buy an outboard motor. A few days later, I heard that, after discussions with his wife and mother-in-law, they decided to buy a rice mill instead, on the grounds that it would free the women from the arduous task of pounding rice; it would also be a business opportunity, because women from other domestic units would be willing to give some rice in return for using the mill. This example is instructive because it shows a willingness to adopt innovations within the framework of existing social relations. In this case, the innovations were: a) wage work on the part of the man and b) bringing a new technology that would change women's workload and create a new commodity, that is people would pay in cash or rice in order to use the rice mill. By contrast, there was no innovation in terms of decision-making within the domestic unit: the man did not control his wages; they remained part of the household assets. Therefore, it would be naive to say that the appearance of traders who could buy meat was a sufficient explanation for the disappearance of *ngepiah*.

The ready acquiescence to the disappearance of *ngepiah*, even from older community members, suggests that there was no fundamental change in values. It also indicates that *ngepiah* had previously been the norm solely because of social expectations, not because of political sanctions, because the chief, who remained powerful, did not get involved in the issue at all. If he had chosen to ban the sale of meat to Chinese traders, he would have prevailed, but he did not intervene, despite the fact that he would no longer receive his share of meat. His lack of involvement was not due to weakness. At the time, the Kayan chiefs wielded real power. For instance, the following year he authorized a timber company to cut trees on

the village territory without consulting the population; he also pocketed the payments from the timber company. *Ngepiah* collapsed because of an opportunity. People acted on goals and values they already had.

At the same time, we need to understand that the near disappearance of *ngepiah* was not trivial. For instance, the people and the chief of the Lahanan village at Long Panggai opposed the sale of meat (Guerreiro 1988: 29).⁶ Therefore, it was not a foregone conclusion that the Kayan of Uma Bawang would abandon this system of meat distribution.⁷

WHY DID I FIND IT SURPRISING?

I should explain why I was surprised at the sudden disappearance of *ngepiah*. Kayan society was fairly rigid and rule-bound. Not only did chiefs have authority over their followers, but a variety of rules and practices served as a scaffold for conformity. Religious rituals clearly marked the boundaries of domestic units and communities (Rousseau 1998). It seemed to me that *ngepiah* fit in this framework, because its recipients were domestic units, not individuals, and they were selected on the basis of their position in the longhouse. *Ngepiah* echoed other obligatory practices, such as the requirement that every domestic unit in the village contributes to the bridewealth that was paid out when the wife of the chief's designated successor moved in with her inlaws.

The Kayan are literal about rules. For instance, bridewealth calls for specific payments linked to stratum ascription; the specified amounts are actually paid, unlike some societies where an amount is specified, but a lesser amount may be given (*e.g.*, the Melanau, see Morris 1953). In the same way, except for very small quantities, rice must be sold to other domestic units; it may never be given, and it must be sold at market value. This rule is applied strictly; thus, when my next door neighbour lost most of his rice harvest in a barn fire, he borrowed rice from his sister, whose domestic unit had benefited from a bumper harvest. Although brother and sister were fond of each other and their respective domestic units maintained excellent relations, he had to provide security (in the form of old jars) to match the market value of the rice.⁸ I could give many

other examples. On that basis, I expected that *ngepiah* should continue, given that it is an obligatory distribution.

WHY I SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN SURPRISED

On the other hand, I could have considered other features of the Kayan social organization that made *ngepiah* potentially more fragile. The Kayan give great importance to balanced, accountable reciprocity, so any form of generalized reciprocity is in a sense an exception. They share with the Badang (and many other Borneo groups) the 'disinclination to give without return' (Armstrong 1998: 527). I have mentioned that rice is not given away, but sold. Similarly, cooperation groups require a rigidly equal exchange of labour.⁹ The Kayan are stricter than their neighbours the Iban in emphasizing balanced reciprocity. When I visited an Iban longhouse towards the end of my fieldwork, I was offered a generous meal, although I was a complete stranger. By contrast, outsiders who visit Kayan longhouses note with dismay that nobody will feed them unless they pay for meals. This disinclination to give without return certainly explains the sudden transition: as soon as one person chose to sell meat rather than distribute it, everyone followed suit, because the previous expectation of reciprocity has disappeared. But I think it goes beyond that. Because *ngepiah* clearly was an unequal exchange, given that successful hunters were net givers over the long run, it was an exception to the preference for balanced reciprocity. Successful hunters received the esteem of their covillagers because of their skills, but this ceased to be a satisfactory return when the emergence of a market for meat provided a more tangible reward.

The sudden collapse of obligatory meat sharing happened without fanfare for several reasons. First of all, it reflected the predominance of accountable reciprocity over generalized reciprocity; even if families without a good hunter were losers because they had less access to meat, they accepted their reduced circumstances as legitimate. In the same way, the chief did not object when he no longer received prestations of meat. This follows from the fact that accountable reciprocity produces winners and losers. Secondly, while the Kayan were significantly rule-bound in managing their social life, they were open to innovation, in part because of their enthusiastic

acceptance of the Bungan religious reform. If they were willing to rethink their religion, they could also adjust other practices.

The sudden and troublefree disappearance of *ngepiah* shows that it can be difficult to predict the impact of social change. This is due to the fact that social systems are not seamless structures, but an assemblage of partially autonomous, but overlapping elements.

NOTES

¹ I carried out two years of fieldwork in the upper reaches of the Rejang river in Sarawak, Malaysia from 1970 to 1972, and returned to the same site in 1974 for three months.

² *Ngepiah* is a verb, but I hope my Kayan readers will forgive me if I also use it as a noun in this text. It would be possible to construct a nominal form (**kepiah*), but I have never heard it.

³ Thus, while the Kayan use 'ngepiah' to refer to all public aspects of the distribution of large game, one might say that this prestation to the chief is not strictly *ngepiah*, because they do not receive a standard portion, but *mahep*, a corvée.

⁴ For instance, if a curing *dayong* is required for someone who falls ill at a farmhouse, the patient and his/her whole family must return to the long-house for the ritual.

⁵ I have argued elsewhere (Rousseau 2006: 216–217) that the notion of domestic mode of production is seriously flawed. Li (2010: 19) describes a similar situation in Sulawesi where an established practice of sharing corn collapsed without a fuss when people moved to cash crops.

⁶ The Lahanan are upriver from Uma Bawang; they have the same social organization as their Kayan neighbours. Unfortunately, I do not know the circumstances of the Lahanan's decision not to sell meat to outsiders.

⁷ In order to explain why two villages made opposite choices, it is not necessary to assume the existence of different circumstances. Given an initial situation, alternatives may be available, and it may be impossible to explain why one or the other alternative was chosen, because they were both likely (cf. Rousseau 2006: 23–25).

⁸ The following year he retrieved his deposit after he accumulated enough cash to pay for the rice. The need to sell rice is linked to a supernatural sanction. The rice spirit would be offended if rice were given away and would make the next harvest unsuccessful. The only circumstance in which rice can be given is when a small amount is offered to a friend leaving for a long trip. When the village chief hosts major festivities, all domestic units may be required to provide rice without payment. However, this is not a gift, but an obligatory contribution.

⁹ If a cooperation group member is unable to attend on a given day, he or she can send another member of his/her domestic unit or provide equivalent work later.

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