

Subject: Monthly Activity Report for AGREEN

Date: October, 2020

Site: Long Semadoh, Sarawak, Malaysia

Title: Self-sufficiency of necessities

The highland Lun Bawang communities have lived in relative physical isolation from the nearest towns for generations until logging roads rapidly improved access to the mountainous villages in the 1980s.

The community used to make annual expeditions to town (which takes more than a week by foot) in entourages of more than 20 people, bringing livestock and forest produce like rattan and tree resin to be traded for some basic supplies. For most part of the year, however, they had to be self-sufficient relying on their environment and forests to provide for the most basic of essentials such as oil, sugar and salt.

Lard



In the absence of vegetable oil, most cooking is done with wild boar lard. There are also special dishes of rice cooked in visceral fat of the boar and then shaped into balls for easy storage and serving, called nuba rinagas, made using don likad (mentioned in July's report). Lard can get so abundant that families were known to keep barrels of lard, especially during the wild boar season.

Sugar



Clockwise from top left: less juicy but higher sugar content sugar cane introduced by the department of agriculture; sugar cane juice cooked on wood fire; boiled sugar cane juice removed from fire are stirred continuously to prevent large sugar crystals from forming; when cooled, this traditional pure cane sugar has a texture similar to wet sand

In the 1950s, the agriculture department of the Sarawak colonial government introduced a variety of sugar cane that contained higher sugar content compared to the juicier variety that were already available in the village. Prior to using a sugar cane juicing machine, juicing of the sugar cane was done manually using a wooden contraption and a whole lot of elbow grease.

Salt



Clockwise from top left: Brine from salt spring is cooked over continuous wood-fire for 3 – 4 days before salt crystals are harvested (pictured here is the old facility); a concrete well is built on top of the salt spring for ease of brine extraction; newly built salt-making facility sponsored by the state government; concrete stove tops in the new facility, but still fuelled by firewood

There are known salt licks where hunters are accustomed to stake out for prey, but there are also salt springs dotted around the Lun Bawang highlands. In the village of Ba'Kelalan, next to Long Semadoh, there are a few salt springs close to the village and there's a folklore about the discovery of salt here.

The story goes that hunters found that the meat of animals that fell into the salt springs tasted better. The people then started to use these 'tasty' water to cook before learning about salt making. It is much later after that they learnt to boil the 'tasty' water to obtain the salt that makes food tasty.

Highland salt from here are touted to contain more than 70 types of minerals, including calcium, magnesium and zinc. It is also rich in iodine, and has therefore prevented the community from succumbing to any iodine deficiency. The concentration of salt in these natural springs, however, is comparatively low, hence the brine has to be boiled for between 3 to 4 days continuously over wood fire before the salt crystals can form.



The Lun Bawang community of Long Semadoh has been self-sufficient relying on their surrounding environment for resources. Beyond these direct benefits, the villages are fully surrounded by virgin rainforests and its rich biodiversity provide maintains a balanced ecosystem that nurtures any crops cultivated by the community.

Interestingly, insects that are conventionally known as 'pests' also exists here, but they have never caused any crop failure that conventional farms are so afraid of. There's also no translation for 'pests' in the Lun Bawang language because every organism plays their own part in the larger system. In this particular instance, it can be argued that the Lun Bawang worldview is one that's very progressive and sustainable, formed through their observation of the natural cycles of the environment that they live in.