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Coffee growing in the Baiyer River Area of the Western Highlands
Province.

PEANDUI KOYATI

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NOTE:

This paper is an extract from a much longer one which describes in some detail the traditional organisation of the Keyaka people.

The longer paper also contains a brief but interesting outline of the problems encountered by the writer in undertaking research amongst his own people.

A copy of the paper is held in the History Department, UPNG.

Introduction:

The general aim of my research was to find out the role that coffee plays in the everyday lives of the Keyaka people of Baiyer River. More specifically my aims were to find out about the various ways the Baiyer people organise themselves for their survival politically, socially and economically, and the role which coffee plays in this. I sought to discover this by a study of the history of coffee growing in the region; of the ways in which coffee has changed the traditional life of the Keyaka people and of the people's opinions about the coffee plant and particularly about the abnormal price boom during the 1976-1977 season.

It is difficult to pinpoint the date on which coffee was first introduced into the Baiyer area, but from what I have learnt from some elderly men, it seems that coffee first came in the early or late 1950s. The man known by most people of Baiyer as the earliest introducer of coffee was Mr. Thompson, a New Zealander Baptist Missionary. He brought coffee seeds to many of the villages that he went to preach in, and distributed them among respected tribal leaders. He was also the first coffee buyer in the area.

People say that coffee prices were very low during those times, only 5-10 shillings for a rice bag of coffee and up to £5 or £6 for a copra bag full.

The next group to bring coffee were extension officers of the Department of Agriculture, explaining to the people the ways the coffee seedlings should be grown, cared for and pruned. They were told to dig holes about a metre deep in straight rows, fill the bottom of the hole with compost and the top with fertile black soil. The coffee seedlings had small grass huts constructed over them to protect them from the sun. The people were also told to prune the trees several times a year in order to get better yields from their crop. Once again it was the tribal leaders to whom the coffee seeds and plants were given, and to whom advice was directed on growing techniques. Such leaders were expected and encouraged to pass on this knowledge, as well as a desire to grow the crop, to the other villagers.

In the early years, many people thought the coffee was only a beautiful fruit tree, just like any other fruit tree growing in and around the villages. This belief lasted only until they saw coffee buyers pouring into their area; for the first time the ordinary villagers saw the importance of coffee and had ready access to the money with which they could buy the white man's secret goods. Hitherto almost all Keyaka people thought themselves incapable of possessing such things. Apart, perhaps, from a few labourers who had been temporarily employed by European planters, no one had realised the possibilities of growing coffee. Even though such individuals knew how to use

coffee to get money to buy the white man's goods, they were apparently reluctant to let such a message out of themselves. This was because of two conflicting ideas: Firstly they never really thought that such a thing could happen in their own areas; secondly, they were selfish. If such changes were to occur, then they wanted to benefit themselves first before other people knew about it.

However, as the years passed, more and more people became aware of the importance of coffee, so they began to plant trees, particularly on the flat fertile garden areas where food crops such as yams and bananas grew very well. Today, coffee is taking up more and more fertile food growing land. This practice is quite common in and around my own village since, immediately after they have harvested small crops such as beans, peanuts and yams, the people plant the seedlings in their place. These are so situated that the coffee can grow under the protection and cover of small young trees such as bananas and sugarcane. Now people seem to do much of their subsistence gardening on one piece of land all the time not seeming to bother much about the method of shifting cultivation that they used to practise before the introduction of coffee. In my observation this is because there is very little or no more fertile garden land left to which people can shift their gardens. There is already a big land shortage in the Baiyer area.

This is shown, not only in conflicts over land use and allocation, but in the encroachment of housing on land where houses have never been built before and where only gardens were made.

During my researches in the area I witnessed also, many land disputes within clans and tribes being brought to the village and local courts to be solved.

While most conflicts are still resolved after having a fight and then paying compensation, this often depends on the severity of the conflict. The use of the new courts is gradually being accepted as the means by which more and more people can have

their problems solved. This process of acceptance can largely be attributed to the many new difficulties which have been created with the development of a coffee based economy. These have often arisen over land allocations especially within small family groups, and over debts incurred as a result of the rapid spending of coffee profits; they have been especially serious as a result of the 1976-1977 coffee boom.

The importance of these changes can be seen in the erosion of the stability within groups since although traditionally, fights have occurred and still do between different tribes for revenge purposes, within clans and families, peaceful and harmonious co-existence has been maintained at all times and conflicts if they arise, have been settled through compensation payments.

Yet, during my researches, I saw a land dispute occurring within a large family, where the sons of one man fought with their father and brothers for not giving them more land. Most young men know that with increased life expectancy their fathers will still be alive and looking after their coffee gardens for a long time. Rather than waiting to inherit these gardens, they put increasing pressure on their parents for their own coffee gardens immediately. The solution of such conflicts often means that more and more good food gardens are occupied by coffee, and relocated on areas further and further away from the fertile soil. In the next decade, these food gardens will probably end up mostly on the cliff and hillside where the topsoil is not so thick and rich, and from which production is generally low both in quantity and quality.

Some changes are occurring also in the organisation and ownership of gardens, and this in turn has had effects on social **organisation**.

Long before coffee became popular, more effective and sharper steel tools were bought and these allowed trees to be cut and houses, gardens and fences to be built more quickly. Where once it might have taken up to a week to chop down a mature tree, this

could now take only a matter of hours. Nor was there a need for a surplus of tools to be produced that would be required to cater for the constant breakages expected in land clearing. Traditionally this could take up to three or four months, but, in order to ease the problem, people often organised themselves according to family, clan or sometimes tribal groups to work together. But because of the time factor, each family could make only one or perhaps two gardens in a year, and they depended on these gardens for their livelihood.

Once the construction of houses fences and gardens could be completed in a few days, the people had surplus time left to spend in their coffee gardens, stores or piggeries. While some now spend much of their extra time in making additional gardens, others especially young men, spend their extra time playing cards or going to the local market twice a week, not to sell any food, but just to see young girls. This is already a basic pattern of life for young Keyaka people of Baiyer River.

Some of my informants told me that during the coffee seasons, young boys especially don't bother going to the gardens to help their parents, nor do they bother to go home to have their food. They just form themselves into drinking parties or card playing gangs, sit around and drink all night and play cards until all the money is gone. Then they return home to pick more coffee. During these coffee seasons, these young men depend on the trade stores for food and cigarettes. Whenever they feel hungry, they simply rush to the trade stores, and so often during coffee seasons that the trade stores are kept open 24 hours a day. Some of my informants told me that it is during the coffee season that they witness the highest number of small skirmishes and fist fights, even between members of families and clans. Although these fights are usually started by drunkards, in many cases non drinkers get involved if they see their friends and relatives in trouble. As noted earlier, the traditional mechanisms for solving such conflicts are less able to cope, and far more emphasis is placed on the role of the village and local courts.

In later years there have been changes both in the traditional division of labour in gardens, and in the initial organisation of coffee growing. Earlier, coffee trees were owned by the men, and the women and children weeded them, picked the ripe berries by hand, chewed the husks off with their teeth, and, after the seeds had been fermented and washed, they dried them in the sun. With the increasing size, however, of holdings, men often undertake some of these activities.

Most families too have their own coffee machines. Where once only the men took the coffee to the roadside to sell and kept the money themselves, these habits are now changing. Some make sure their wives and children receive their fair share, while others grow separate coffee trees for their children. Many Keyaka women have their own coffee trees; now a woman or a child who has the money can buy a pig and kill it and give it to a friend as he or she wishes because it is their own money.

This new emphasis on money and its availability has done much to modify the social status of big men among the Keyaka. Once the biggest and most prestigious man was one whose position depended partly on kinship status and partly on personal achievement. His position as elder son of a leader was important as was the prestige he could gain within his own and outside clans by his bravery and skill in warfare, by his skill in manipulating goods in exchange transactions and by his forcefulness and shrewdness in public debate. Wealth was displayed in the form of pearlshells and pigs especially during the Moku ceremonies and by a man's ability to arrange the largest feasts and kill the most pigs. Now this has been modified; the possession of pigs, shells and women, once playing a vital role in the Baiyer area does not seem so important now. Pearlshells are still used in Moku ceremonies in some areas but they are totally valueless now because they are used no more in paying compensation or bride prices. There is less prestige attached to the ownership of pigs than the possession of money.

Now the most prestigious person is one who has more pigs, more trucks especially large ones, and who can put on the largest

display of money during Moku ceremonies. If he can speak sensibly and forcefully and has courage, and is not afraid to talk to policemen, patrol officers and didimen he can easily be elected as a leader. Most old traditional leaders are starting to lose more and more of their influence because most of them are given no chance in the modern political arena in Baiyer now. People are becoming more interested in leaders who can help them solve modern everyday problems.

Before the introduction of coffee, only bigmen controlled the wealth of the tribes, and as has been noted above, only husbands controlled the wealth of families. This has changed. Now it appears that anybody who can earn money and can use it wisely, will be better off in terms of material wealth. People say that now anybody can become rich depending on how many trees he has and how well he cultivates them, and on the way he uses his income.

However the money is not always used wisely. Some people invest in piggeries, raise poultry or cows, and start PMV or trucking businesses. But the bulk of the Keyaka people spend much of their income on trade store goods such as fish, rice, clothes, sewing machines and kitchen utensils.

The dependence on cash has not always weakened the position of older people. While many young women spend most of their income from coffee on purchasing beautiful clothes and ornaments, and young men on beer and cards, it is often the older people who invest their money in cows or pigs, who contribute to buy a car with a group or save, usually to send their children to school. Even though these activities, together with the giving away of large sums during Moku ceremonies are calculated for little purpose other than to gain prestige and to raise status in society, there is often another result. Many older people, in saving their money to meet current expenses and to pay debts as they fall due, are also able to lend some of it to others who just spend their income so quickly that they having nothing left and simply have to wait for the next season to come. When it does, these borrowers have to pay off debts to those from

whom they have already borrowed and so end up with very little or nothing. Such people (usually young) can be seen hanging around court houses most of the time because many of their creditors don't hesitate to take them to court. Creditors know that if they don't do that, they will most certainly never get their money back from most of those to whom they have lent.

The dependence on cash and the coffee bean has also done much to change the nutrition habits of the Keyaka people. The rapid increase of roads and of trade stores has contributed to this pattern of change.

Many people have left their hillside residences and are now living in the valley along the main highway that links Baiyer River and Lumusa with Mt Hagen, the other highlands provinces and the Morobe province. Others who still live up on the hills where their parents and grandparents lived have felt an urgent need for alterations in the infrastructure, so they have organised themselves to built small branch roads (especially on a self reliant basis) to their villages. The finest example of these roads is that which now goes from Rokine up to Ardumusa Keyausa which the Kimbunis, Ramuis, Maep Kumbuwas and Kumiankas have built under the leadership of Councillor Wate Pekowa; a smaller one built by the people themselves is called the Simbi road.

Such roads have meant that coffee buyers can drive all the way to the villages to buy the crop; they have also encouraged the construction of more trade stores because owners can transport cargo on PMVs all the way from Mt Hagen to the small villages. Previously the Kimbinst Ramuis had only 3 trade stores but since the road has been built, these two tribes have opened 18 stores along the road. They have also constructed and stocked two cow yards and a piggery.

Once, the variety of goods in these stores was small; there were only such commodities as rice, fish, meat and cigarettes owing to low demand by the local residents. Now there is a

constantly increasing demand for goods, the variety has diversified and the quantity of goods very much increased. To cope with the demand, store keepers open for half a day and sometimes for the whole day and usually every day of the week. This situation is especially so during the height of the coffee season and was common during the 1976-1977 boom. During these times it was not surprising to find a Baiyer family's traditional diet being totally or partially replaced by trade store food. Even in less busy times on the traditional special occasion such as when a visitor comes, foods like sugarcane and bananas are likely to be superseded by an offering of white rice and tinned fish.

It is difficult however to decide whether this change has occurred primarily because people don't grow so many food crops as they did before the introduction of coffee. Such a claim needs further investigation. However some informants say that during the 1976-77 coffee season most men, both young and old, spent much of their money and time on beer drinking, with very little time being spent on food gardens. Most work was put into the coffee. Trade stores were operating fulltime, and people were visiting Hagen town more regularly.

This period, probably an abnormal one, was certainly spectacular for the Keyaka people for it was then that they witnessed the highest rise in coffee prices in the entire history of coffee growing in Baiyer River. Sellers were receiving up to 180-200 toea per kilogram for their coffee; the total amount made per family varied from K500 - K2000. Many new coffee gardens were planted not only by people who had none before, but also by those who had had one or two previously.

However although one would expect that the more trees one had the more money there was to be made during the coffee season, this was not always so. Some smaller planters made more than some larger growers because they had made sure that their coffee garden was weeded and their trees pruned to ensure that production was high. Larger growers were not always able to maintain their gardens properly themselves.

High prices have depended also on the quality of the coffee bean and its initial processing; in spite of efforts by DPI extension officers, this quality has not always been high.

Prices paid for coffee are contingent also on how honest and truthful the buyers are. Sometimes they pay 3% less, when the poorer sellers say nothing because they have to sell their coffee immediately to pay off debts; other growers who demand a higher price will receive it from the same buyer.

It is however the main controller of coffee prices, the international marketing system, which most confuses the Keyaka people. Although they have been affected by price fluctuations for ten years, most, although anxious about their dependence on coffee, are still not really sure why prices rise. Some uneducated people say that prices rise because the sympathetic white men (who are coffee consumers) feel sorry for the poor black man who labours so much in getting the brown coffee seeds for the white men to roast and drink; these white men raise the coffee prices. Others say they rise when the store houses of the coffee buyers are empty, but fall when they are full, because then there is no need to buy any more. And still others have no ideas at all why coffee prices change all the time.

People are aware of the central part coffee plays in their lives; some have very high expectations for the future; some are afraid; others see only the benefits that coffee has brought and will continue to bring.

A region wide saying which seems to come from the lips of almost every Baiyer River resident "Kope rdo amna doko, bauke aki rdo misirdiui" really means, "It is coffee. What else is there?" All of the people I interviewed told me that coffee had brought only good things to their lives. They feel that they now enjoy a better standard of living. Better houses are built and they now live separated from animals. They can purchase soap with which they can wash themselves and their clothes when they become dirty.

It has helped the Keyaka people to destroy the barrier that has confined white men's goods to white men only. And where once the Keyaka thought that in order to get these goods they must work as labourers for the white men - now all this is changed. They realise they can work in their own coffee gardens and from the fruits they harvest, buy a wide variety of these goods. Now they feel that they can buy just about anything that white men have; they can now pay for their children's education so that they can learn about things they and their ancestors never knew or heard of. Any Keyaka person who has the capital can now travel anywhere in Papua New Guinea and see different people and places. They are also optimistic that in the near future some people will be able to buy planes. They say it is not hard. Any person who has a big business of his own and saves money will be able to buy one.

Baiyer people say coffee has placed itself in the Baiyer area as the founding rock on which they are climbing and quickly experiencing the glitter and glamour of prosperity.

Yet people also say they are becoming dependent on coffee and on trade store goods for their livelihood. Most people express concern that if their buyers stop purchasing coffee completely then their present changed way of life will revert to the older traditional one.

Suggestions and Conclusions

Most Keyaka people still do not know why coffee prices fluctuate and especially, they lack understanding of the reasons for the 1976-77 coffee boom. This ignorance of vital information and its implications is probably common to many people in Papua New Guinea who grow some kind of cash crop.

Many people do not realise that coffee is taking up too much fertile land at the expense of food gardens. I suggest that the Department of Primary Industry set up a scheme to educate the villages on how to grow more and better food even if their good garden land is allocated to coffee.

Through this scheme, DPI should also advise the people on proper and useful budgeting methods. At present, most people are concerned only with spending money on consumer goods or to accumulate prestige before they die. But many have become entirely dependent on cash and incur debts when they spend their income quickly.

Coffee in the Baiyer River area has created an economic and social problem of dependence on a single crop and the outside world, and has reduced the people's independence and self reliance.