

THE DENTAL STATUS OF THE KAYANS OF LONG ATIP, BARAM, SARAWAK

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SUMMARY

A survey of Kayans of Long Atip, Baram, Sarawak, was conducted in 1986 as part of the pre-requisite to the development of a primary health care system for the people of the Baram. A total of 178 Kayans of all ages were surveyed for decayed, missing and filled teeth. Of the aggregate 39.3% did not have any decayed teeth, 37.6% had no missing teeth and 93.8% had not had any fillings. Compared with their neighbouring Penans, the Kayans of Long Atip had a relatively better dental status.

INTRODUCTION

In the Baram District of Sarawak live a number of indigenous tribes such as the Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit, and Penan, who are collectively known as Orang Ulu. The Kayan migrated some centuries ago from the Apoh Kayan in Kalimantan, Indonesia. As powerful well organized social groups, the Kayan swept over the ranges that separate Sarawak from Kalimantan and down the Baram River finally ending in the fertile valleys of the Lower Baram. Until recently, Kayan society was stratified into three social classes namely, the hereditary aristocratic class, who till today remain as the chiefly families, the commoners, and the descendants of slaves captured in the course of battles. With social changes these class distinctions have become blurred. Nonetheless, the basic social organization of the Kayans remain and have been responsible for the wealth of the Kayan society. Some of the largest longhouses in Sarawak are Kayan

longhouses. It is not uncommon for a Kayan longhouse to hold up to 1000 people.

Long Atip on the Apoh tributary of the Lower Baram is typical of the well organized large Kayan longhouse of the Baram.

However, it is a considerable distance from the *klinik desa* at Long Bemang. Consequently, it was one of several longhouses in the area where baseline studies were carried out in mid-1986 prior to the development of a primary health care project. As part of the baseline studies, a dental survey was carried out on 178 Kayans of varying ages to determine their dental health. In the paper that follows, the dental status of this sample of Kayans is reported and compared with that of a sample of neighbouring Penans studied previously.

METHOD

A total of 178 Kayans participated in the survey. The dental status was assessed after a medical survey team had examined each subject, and obtained a brief family history. Each subject was seated on a bench in the sunlight, and examined using a mirror and probe. The examiner was positioned behind the subject. The recording assistant stood next to the examiner, to ensure that all findings were accurately recorded. Decayed, missing and filled teeth were recorded, and the presence or absence of dentures was also recorded.

The following were the criteria used in the survey.¹ Caries or decay is present when any cavity has a detectably softened floor, undermined enamel or softened wall. On an interproximal surface the probe point must be felt to enter a lesion with certainty. A permanent tooth is deemed missing if the subject is past

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the average age for its eruption, or if there is space for its eruption with no visible signs as to its likely emergence. A tooth with a filling of metal, acrylic resin, silicate cement or composites on which there is no sign of caries is recorded as filled.

RESULTS

Out of the 178 Kayans included in the survey, 39.3% had no decayed teeth, 47.2% had between 1 and 5 decayed teeth, 11.2% had between 6 and 10 decayed teeth, 2.2% had between 11 and 15 decayed teeth while 0% had more than 15 decayed teeth (Table I).

TABLE I
NUMBER OF DECAYED TEETH BY AGE GROUP AMONG THE
KAYAN OF LONG ATIP

No. of decayed teeth	Number of people by age in years					Total	
	1-5	6-18	19-35	36-55	Above 55	No.	%
Nil	10	13	11	16	20	70	(39.3%)
1-5	11	17	17	10	29	84	(47.2%)
6-10	6	7	2	5	0	20	(11.2%)
11-15	2	0	1	0	1	4	(2.2%)
15	0	0	0	0	0	0	(0%)
Total:	29	37	31	31	50	178	(100%)

With regard to missing teeth, 37.6% had no missing teeth, 28.1% had between 1 and 5 missing teeth, 12.9% had between 6 and 10 missing teeth, 5.6% had between 11 and 15 missing teeth, 3.4% had between 16 and 20 missing teeth, 3.9% had between 21 and 25 missing teeth, 1.7% had between 26 and 31 missing teeth, and 6.7% had all 32 teeth missing (Table II).

Out of the 178 Kayans surveyed, 93.8% had no filled teeth, while 6.2% had between 1 and 4 filled teeth (Table III), although 111 people (67.4%) had one or more missing teeth, and therefore required dentures. However, only 23 people (12.9%) had dentures at the time of the survey.

DISCUSSION

As only 13.4% of the subjects included in the survey had 6 or more decayed teeth, it can be

concluded that the prevalence of decayed teeth in Long Atip was not too high. The fact that 39.3% of the subjects did not have any decayed teeth gives added weight to this. In contrast, among the Penan neighbours of the Kayans, 34.1% had 6 or more decayed teeth and only 17.7% did not have any decayed teeth.²

From the Kayan sample, 37.6% of the subjects did not have any missing teeth, 28.1% had only between 1 and 5 missing teeth and none of the subjects between the ages of 1 and 18 had more than 5 missing teeth. Similarly, 37.6% of the Penan subjects did not have any missing teeth.²

The better dental status of the Kayans may be related to their better wealth and education. Unlike the Penans, many of the Kayans included in the survey had had at least a primary school education. At the time of the survey, many of the Kayans between the ages of 12 and 18 were away at boarding schools. The exposure to educa-

TABLE II
NUMBER OF MISSING TEETH BY AGE GROUP AMONG THE
KAYANS OF LONG ATIP

No. of missing teeth	Number of people by age in years					Total	
	1-5	6-18	19-35	36-55	Above 55	No.	%
Nil	25	28	3	6	5	67	(37.6%)
1-5	4	9	17	14	6	50	(28.1%)
6-10	0	0	7	6	10	23	(12.9%)
11-15	0	0	3	2	5	10	(5.6%)
16-20	0	0	1	0	5	6	(3.4%)
21-25	0	0	0	1	6	7	(3.9%)
26-31	0	0	0	0	3	3	(1.7%)
32	0	0	0	2	10	12	(6.7%)
Total:	29	37	31	31	50	178	(100%)

TABLE III
NUMBER OF FILLED TEETH BY AGE GROUP AMONG THE
KAYANS OF LONG ATIP

No. of filled teeth	Number of people by age in years					Total	
	1-5	6-18	19-35	36-55	Above 55	No.	%
Nil	29	36	25	27	50	167	(93.8%)
1-4	0	1	6	4	0	11	(6.2%)
Total:	29	37	31	31	50	178	(100%)

tion, especially dental health education in schools, may have resulted in an increased awareness of the importance of maintaining good oral hygiene. Furthermore, the availability of radios and televisions in Long Atip may have contributed to the better level of awareness of dental health.

The Kayans of Long Atip are self-sufficient in rice, which is their staple food. They also consume vegetables, fruits, meat and fish regularly. This well-balanced diet may have contributed to the formation of more decay-resistant teeth. Also, refined sugars in the form of sweets, toffees and cakes are not widely consumed in Long Atip. This may also be a contributory factor to the lower prevalence of decayed teeth.

Only 6.2% of the subjects surveyed had filled teeth, while only 12.9% had dentures. This may be due to the relative non-availability of dental treatment in the area. Dental extractions are carried out by a medical assistant in Long Bemang, about 4 hours away by long boat from Long Atip. Fillings and dentures can only be done in Maruci, which is the nearest town. Marudi is about 8 hours

away by motorised long boat. Similarly it was noted in the study on Penans that only 9.9% of Penan subjects had dentures.² Perhaps, if dental treatment were more accessible to the Kayans and the Penans, the prevalence of filled teeth and dentures would have been higher, and the prevalence of decayed teeth would have been lower.

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