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THE IBAN OF THE ENKARI: A HISTORY OF MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Iban migratory expansion, a process remarkable in its scope, rapidity and its frequent accompaniment by warfare and headhunting, has been described and discussed in a large number of works. A general account of Iban movements, from the time of their entrance into the Batang Lupar drainage until the coming of the Brookes, has been given by San din (1967a, b), and their movements since the establishment of the Brooke Raj have been recounted by Pringle (1970). Descriptions of the settlement of specific rivers are found in works by Freeman (Baleh River, 1955, 1970), Sandin (Niah, 1957), King (Leboyen and Embaloh, 1976), and Brooke (Katibas, 1866), as well as in numerous Brooke officers' reports.

In this article I shall present a brief history of the first entrance of the Iban into the valley of the Engkari River, a tributary of the Batang Ai (Sarawak, Second Division), and go on to describe population movements in the area since its original settlement. In recounting this history, I shall point out those aspects that may be of more general application, as well as mention the events and conditions peculiar to the settlement history of the Engkari which limit the generalizations that can be made.

Many chroniclers of the processes of Iban expansion have echoed Pringle's statement that "the story of the Iban migrations... is not a simple one" (1970:247). Indeed, although this article represents an attempt to order, summarize and simplify some confusing and at times contradictory oral and written information, the considerable complexity of Iban migration history remains evident. If there is any generalization that the data to be presented point to, it is that the rates and modes of Iban expansion have varied greatly in particular times and particular areas, and that resource use and other Iban behavioral patterns can be expected to have varied also.

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by

Christine A. Padoch

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The history of a long settled region such as the Engkari valley shows that initially rapid rates of expansion were followed by alternating periods of lesser and greater population movements. As will be discussed in the conclusion of this article, these variations in migration rates, together with the histories of continuous settlement of such areas, testify to the inadequacy of many commonly accepted generalizations concerning migratory expansion of upriver Iban and the forces driving these movements.

The materials upon which the following discussion is based were collected in the course of field research (1973-5) into Iban patterns of

resource use along the lower Engkari River, particularly near the confluence of the Engkari and its tributary, the Jela, and along the Jela. Much information is also taken from previously published sources.

The narrative of the migrations into the Engkari basin will be prefaced by a very brief summary of the main directions, events, and dates in the general history of Iban migratory expansion. This short overview will provide some understanding of the broader context of the particular migration history which I will go on to discuss in detail.

I

Iban oral histories and genealogies point to the Kapuas basin of Kalimantan Barat (more specifically, the Ketungau tributary) as the homeland of the Iban prior to their entrance into the territory of modern Sarawak. Using these oral sources, Benedict Sandin (1967a, b) has written the history of the early Iban migrations from the Kapuas into the western areas of Sarawak. Beginning with what were probably the first major movements, about sixteen generations before the present, in approximately the middle of the sixteenth century, ancestors of the Sarawak Iban population are believed to have crossed the watershed from the Kapuas drainage into the Batang Lupar drainage, first settling along the Undup River (see Figure 1). Within a period of about five generations, the pioneers migrated from the Undup to the north, east and west, occupying all the major rivers (but the Krian) in what is now Sarawak's Second Division, as well as some of the downriver areas of the First Division. In the course of these migrations, and in most of their subsequent movements, the Iban pioneers occupied land primarily inhabited by hunting and gathering populations, although some cultivators were also encountered (See Sandin, 1967a:20; Freeman, 1955:25n; and Boyle, 1865:94). These groups were in some cases absorbed into the invading Iban populations, in others, largely destroyed or forced to retreat from the Second Division eastward. By the early 1800s large groups of Iban were moving into the basin of the Rejang River, an area now divided into the Third, Sixth, and Seventh Divisions of Sarawak. These migrants crossed mostly from the headwaters of the northern tributaries of the Batang Lupar and Saribas Rivers, into the southern tributaries of the Rejang. Others, from the upper Lupar (Batang Ai), crossed the border into what is now Indonesia (Kalimantan Barat) following the Leboyan and Kanyau (Embaloh) Rivers, and eventually reached the Katibas, a tributary of the Rejang. These migrations into the Rejang drainage area, as well as the later movements during the period of Brooke rule (1841-1941), are described and discussed at length by Pringle (1970); I shall summarize them very briefly. By 1870 Iban in large numbers were settling on the Oya and Mukah Rivers in Sarawak's Fourth Division, and moving on to the Balingian, Tatau and Kemena (Bintulu) Rivers before the turn of the century. Around the same time, groups of Iban settled areas of the lower Baram River and its tributaries. Forbidden by the Brooke government to occupy the next rivers to the northeast — the Suai, Niah and Sibuti, Iban pressed northward, and by 1901 were settled along the Limbang River in Sarawak's northeasternmost division, the Fifth. Other major Iban migrations included the final occupation of the Baleh tributary of the Rejang in 1922 (for a history of the Baleh region, see Freeman, 1955, 1970), the settling of the Suai, Niah and Sibuti in 1927, a government sponsored move to Lundu in 1955, and more recent