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The Sarawak Museum and Usun Apau, with a list of mammals collected by the Oxford University Exploration Club expedition of 1955-56

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ABSTRACT

Tales of Usun Apau attracted Tom Harrisson in 1932, when he led an Oxford University Exploration Club expedition. In 1951 Harrisson (Curator of Sarawak Museums 1947-1966) with the Director of Lands and Surveys and Museum staff, crossed Usun Apau from the Tinjar river to the Plieran and Murum tributaries of the Belaga river. In 1955 Harrisson encouraged a further Oxford University Exploration Club expedition to revisit Usun Apau. Mammals were collected by Tom C. Chavassee and Gaun ak Sureng. After being sorted at the Sarawak Museum, the collection was donated to the Chicago Natural History Museum (now Field Museum). Table 1 combines the list made at the Sarawak Museum and the Field Museum digital catalogue. It also charts the collectors' progress from Long Luar, on the Plieran river, across Usun Apau to the upper Selio, a tributary of the Baram, ending at Long Akah on 2nd February 1956. Diurnal tree squirrels form the largest ecological group, most numerous being endemic subspecies of Prevost's squirrel *Callosciurus prevostii*, together with seven Bornean endemic species in the genera *Sundasciurus*, *Dremomys* and *Rheithrosciurus*. Also in the collection are six endemic tree shrews (Scandentia) and three endemic primates. Ten carnivore species include the endemic Hose's civet *Hemigalus hosei*; ungulates include the endemic Bornean yellow muntjac *Muntiacus atherodes*. The Usun Apau National Park has already attracted new scientific investigations. This mammal collection of 1955-56 offers a historic baseline. New technologies, including live trapping (and releasing) and photography, will add to the list of mammals.

Keywords: Sarawak Museum, Harrisson, Usun Apau, Mammals

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INTRODUCTION

In their account of the interior people of Borneo, Hose and McDougall (1912: 179) referred to a watershed in which three great rivers originate (Sarawak's Baram and Rejang, and Indonesia's Batang Kayan) as 'a mountainous highland, geographically the very centre of the island, known as Usun Apo'. More recently, with updated spelling, Hazebrook and Morshidi (2001) wrote: 'Owing to its steep elevation and challenging terrain, much of the interior of Usun Apau had still hardly been touched by the outside world.' By then, the name was applied to an upland area wholly within Sarawak bounds, draining northwest by tributaries of the Tinjar river (notably Sg. Dapoi), north and east by tributaries of the Baram (Julan, Muja and Selio-Silat), and south and west to the Belaga (principally by rivers Murum and Seping). Usun Apau is now described as: 'One of the great plateaus of Borneo which, together with the rivers and valleys that cleave the tableland, form the ancestral home of the Orang Ulu, Kayan, Kenyah and Penan....clear running streams, canopied rivers, and majestic waterfalls pouring over steep cliffs' (www.miricitysharing.com, accessed 25th January 2021).

Previously, Tom Harrison (1911-1976), while participating as a member of the Oxford University Exploration Club (OUEC) expedition in 1932 to Mt Dulit (Harrison, 1933; Cranbrook, 2021), heard references to Usun Apau as a highland area of interior Sarawak that the people of the Kenyah longhouses of the Baram, as well as Berawan and Sebop of the Tinjar, claimed as their ancestral homeland: ‘high and far, above the navigable river-lines which these people now, without exception, inhabit.’ Principal among incentives to leave this remote but cool, healthy, fertile area, rich in wild sago and game, good timber and jungle produce, was the desire for ‘more settled conditions on the coast, with stable European governments replacing previously anarchical phases of Sultanates then in decline, made trade attractive and lowland conditions in general more acceptable’ (Harrison, 1959: 303). The area (notably the Plieran valley) was also the recognised homeland of the Penan Apo [=Apau], a subgroup of Penan Gang. At the time of the general exodus of settled longhouse people, in 1934 District Officer Haddon encouraged the Penan also to leave. They refused, citing the abundance of wild animals and sago as their reason to stay (Langub, 1975).

Tom Harrison was later appointed Government Ethnologist and Curator of Sarawak Museum (1947-1967). In 1951, he was responsible for mounting the first official exploration of this fabled place. Tom Harrison, together with the Director of Lands and Surveys, selected Museum staff and a team of locally employed carriers, successfully crossed the ‘west tableland’ of Usun Apau from the upper Tinjar to the Plieran and Murum tributaries of the Belaga river, in the Upper Rajang catchment (Harrison and Leach, 1954).

Following this achievement, in 1954 the geologists G. Whittle (Colonial Geological Surveys) and H. J. C. Kirk (Sarawak Geological Survey) approached Usun Apau from the opposite direction, via the Murum to the valley of the Plieran river. Here they received an airdrop of supplies at a prepared site at Long Luar, the junction of Plieran and Luar rivers (Roe, 1954; Arnold, 1957; Kirk, 1958).

By 1954, Harrison (in Harrison and Leach, 1954: 65) had already encouraged Guy Arnold (1932-2020) to raise another Oxford University Exploration Club expedition in 1955-56, to undertake further investigations of Usun Apau. The participating young graduates were assigned different objectives. The collection of mammals was undertaken by Arnold’s Oxford college friend, Tom C. Chavasse, who was supported by Sarawak Museum’s most experienced collector, Gaun ak Sureng.

After the OUEC expedition closed and Tom Chavasse had returned to U.K., his collection was temporarily stored at the Sarawak Museum. It became my task, as Technical Assistant to the Curator, to sort and identify the mammals. My list was placed in the Museum files where it was found in 2020 and transcribed by Malaysian zooarchaeologist Lim Tze Tshen MPhil (Cantab.), a participant in the Sarawak Museum campus bursary scheme.

It was intended, in the original plan, that the OUEC mammal collection should be deposited at the Sarawak Museum, with a selection of catalogued specimens presented to the Oxford University Museum for teaching and demonstration purposes (Oxford Expedn, 1958: 13). At that time, however, the Sarawak Museum began a working collaboration with the Chicago Natural History Museum (now Field Museum). Chicago's mammalogist, Dr D. D. Davis received and reported on Tom Harrison's collection of mammals from another upland area, the Kelabit 'plateau' (Davis, 1958). For comparative purposes it was appropriate that the Usun Apau skins should also be sent to him. No reserved skins from Chavasse's collection were found in the Sarawak Museum by Kool and Nawi (1995), but the Field Museum's digital catalogue lists 241 skins, mostly with skulls, collected by him during the Usun Apau expedition (Dr L. Heaney, *pers. comm.*), effectively his entire collection. These Chavasse/Usun Apau specimens at Chicago were later noted, under species entries, by Medway (1965), but the full collection list remained unpublished.

Table 1 provides a resumé of this collection, from the combination of my original list and the Field Museum digital catalogue. Published here for the first time, it shows not only the diversity of mammals present in 1955-56, but also, from the labels, the collector's field number, location and date of collection in each case. The headline of Table 1 thereby charts Chavasse's progress as he made his way along the Plieran valley, then up to the Usun Apau table-land, briefly visited the outstanding peak, Mt Selidang, collected for a period in the Selio headwaters, a tributary of the Baram, before descending to that great river and, still collecting, returned with stops at Baram longhouses, where Arnold (1959) also enjoyed exemplary hospitality.

THE 1951 CROSSING BY HARRISSON AND LEACH

On 10th April 1951, a combined party of 28 men, led by TH (Curator of Sarawak Museum) and D. L. Leach (Director of Lands and Surveys, Sarawak), disembarked at Long Buroi on the upper Tinjar river, and headed southwards in trackless forest. On 18th April, at 2800 ft elevation, they reached a 'plateau formation, running south and east', which, by 20th April, they had crossed and began to descend a river known as Pek, which joined the Manawan at 2° 49' 29.8" N, 114° 31' 25.8" E (Harrison, 1959). When the river became large enough to be navigable, they built a boat, and descended to the Plieran river, at that time an unexplored tributary of the Belaga, and thereby ultimately reached the Rajang (Harrison and Leach, 1954). In particular, their findings included abandoned longhouse sites worth future investigation, and places of promising geological interest.