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THE MELANAU VIEW OF THEIR ENVIRONMENT

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The Melanau are a diverse set of peoples who speak related dialects, not all of which are mutually comprehensible. In 1960 just over 44,000 people were counted as Melanau, of whom about 10,000 were still pagan. The rest were muslim, except for a small number of Roman Catholic Christians.

The Melanau population inhabits the coastal area stretching from the delta districts of the Rejang river north-eastwards to Bintulu. These people have cultural, linguistic, and social links with the Kajang groups living in the middle Rejang and Balui river areas, as well as with other groups along the coast to the Baram river and in the hilly districts. Although it is probably legitimate to speak of a Melanau culture and type of social structure, it is doubtful how far any one group can thereby be distinguished from related peoples in the interior, whether of the Kajang groups, who claim close historical connexions with the coastal Melanau, or of other groups who make no such claims. One group almost imperceptibly merges into the next until it ultimately becomes very difficult to decide what connexion the last has with the first. Ethnographers and the people themselves do, however, agree, in spite of difficult borderline cases, that the Kayan and Kenyah peoples differ significantly from the Kajang and Melanau groups in language and culture, though all belong to similar stratified societies which stretch from the coastal Melanau in a broad band across the centre of Borneo. These stratified societies differ markedly from the more egalitarian groups, such as the Iban and Land Dayak, in south and south-western Borneo, and from those in the north, such as the Murut and Dusun.

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The area inhabited by the Melanau is a low-lying swampy plain, often below sea-level, made up of poor, peaty soil covered by dense tropical forest. In places the swamp extends inland as far as twenty miles before the land rises to undulating hills, and the swampy soil does not easily allow the inhabitants to grow hill rice by swidden cultivation, the characteristic mode of farming of people in the interior districts. The area is traversed by meandering rivers, all flowing roughly northwest into the South China Sea. These rivers are tidal for considerable distances upstream, and during the northeast monsoon, from November to March, they are likely to overflow their banks and flood the surrounding land.

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The district lies between one and two degrees north of the equator, and the climate is one of high rainfall (about 150" a year) and high temperature, ranging from 70°F at night to 90°F in the day, with great humidity. The fall in temperature at night makes the evening and the early morning feel cool and sometimes cold. Rain falls throughout the year, and even in the short periods of relatively dry weather after the northeast monsoon winds have dropped, showers are an almost daily occurrence. From October to March the northeast monsoon blows in from the South China Sea and has a marked effect on the climate. Every week brings rain and wind storms that are sudden and short; but from January onwards violent storms are increasingly common, although a whole day of rain is unusual. After the new year, too, fishing at sea is often dangerous, and in February is usually abandoned. The rivers flowing through the flat swamp forests are sluggish and overflow their banks every year. All the Melanau settlements on the Oya and the neighbouring rivers are within the tidal zone; and in the wet northeast monsoon period (*lian suluh*; Malay, *landas*) the tides combine with flood water from the hills and produce almost unpredictable fluctuations of high and low water and of flooding. Streams and creeks in the jungle overflow, and the soft peaty soil takes on a saturated, bog-like quality. Eels and several kinds of fish spread into shallow pools on the forest floor and are easily trapped; so that in spite of dangers and discomforts villagers spend much time and effort in the forest laying up supplies of fish for smoking and salting.

At the end of this season, when the monsoon begins to change to the southwest for the next six months, the rain storms gradually become fewer and lighter; people, who have grown rice reap their harvest; on the coast sea fishing re-commences; many of the fruit trees are in full flower; and in the forest for a short time caterpillars swarm by the million on certain trees, and whole villages make expeditions to collect them for smoking and storing. In the old days the sago trading season now opened.

Traditionally, some said, the new year used to begin with the March moon, and the *kaul*, the annual ceremony for cleansing the village, was performed.

From the air the view of the coastal district is one of mile upon mile of unbroken forest canopy that stretches between the rivers. At intervals enormous trees stand out like huge domes in the even carpet of green. This dense tropical swamp forest is made up of many different species of broad-leaved tall evergreen trees. Those that are fully grown rise from bases, flanged by huge buttress-roots, often thirty to forty feet in circumference, to a height of one hundred to one hundred and twenty feet. Below the canopy formed by the largest trees there is a flourishing undergrowth on the ground and on the trunks of the trees themselves. There may be many hundreds of different kinds of plants in one small area. In places the forest is virtually impassable through thickets and hanging lianas; the floor is covered with rotting vegetation, and to the inexperienced walking is treacherous and dangerous.

These wet tropical forests shelter a large animal population. There are many species of fresh water fish; more than a hundred species of reptiles and amphibians, including large lizards, cobras, pythons, frogs, and turtles. In the tree canopy are several score of bird species, as well as monkeys, squirrels, and other small mammals. In the fruit season large bats fly slowly across the sky at