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THE DOCUMENTED HISTORY OF THE KELABITS OF NORTHERN SARAWAK¹

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ABSTRACT

The Kelabit tribe of northern Sarawak are a small ethnic group whose published history is, to date, limited. This paper seeks to redress this to some extent by reviewing documentary accounts of historic contacts with the Kelabit. The period covered is roughly 1850 to 1950, a time when British administration and exploration first came into direct contact with the Kelabit. This is also a period of population movements, resolution of traditional conflicts, and enormous changes to belief systems, all of which and more, are illuminated by the documents of the time.

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Abstract

The Kelabit tribe of northern Sarawak are a small ethnic group whose published history is, to date, limited. This paper seeks to redress this to some extent by reviewing documentary accounts of historic contacts with the Kelabit. The period covered is roughly 1850 to 1950, a time when British administration and exploration first came into direct contact with the Kelabit. This is also a period of population movements, resolution of traditional conflicts, and enormous changes to belief systems, all of which and more, are illuminated by the documents of the time.

INTRODUCTION

Being a relatively small ethnic group, the history of the Kelabit has not been given the same degree of attention as other larger and more famous Bornean groups. Literature dealing with historic contacts in Borneo is heavily biased towards the coastal regions and contrasts markedly with the dearth of information relating to the interior. For a place such as the Kelabit highlands, early published information is sparse, lacking detail and sometimes contradictory. In gathering together these disparate and fragmentary sources, I hope this paper will add to the ethnography of the Kelabit in providing a reasonably comprehensive summary of their early historic contacts with the incoming European explorers and administrators. This is a paper written from an outsider's perspective: as a British anthropology student my knowledge of the Kelabit is less than intimate, but more than passing³. The information and attitudes gleaned from documentary sources are explicitly those of my archaic compatriots and so do not represent a Kelabit viewpoint. For that, may I direct readers to the excellent thesis by Robert Lian Saging (1976/7), which to date sadly goes unpublished⁴.

The Kelabit heartland is a highland plateau, roughly bounded by the Apad Uat mountain range to the east (also marking the international border with Kalimantan), and the Tama Abu (sometimes Pamabo) range to the north and west (see Fig. 1 below). The extent of historic Kelabit settlements fluctuated in ways that will be discussed below, but stretched out to the north and west in the river valleys of the Madihit and Seridan, and over the (then poorly defined) international border with Indonesia to the east (Amster, 2006; Janowski, 1988: 8, 2003: 10-11; Lian-Saging and Bulan, 1989: 89). During the 'Confrontation' with Indonesia in the 1960s, substantial parts of the rural population were re-located, sparking a wider movement of Kelabit people away from their rural homeland. Present day distributions therefore go far beyond the highland plateau to include towns, especially Miri and Kuching, where younger Kelabit have set up home and entered the wage economy, so that the urban Kelabit now outnumber their rural counterparts (Amster, 1999: 184; Lian-Saging and Bulan, 1989: 92).

In the period covered by this paper, roughly 1850 to 1950, the Kelabit people were still almost exclusively a rural and traditional Bornean society, and at the risk of oversimplifying a complex culture, but by way of introduction, certain distinctive Kelabit cultural traits are worth noting⁵. In common with most traditional societies in Borneo, the Kelabit are long-house dwellers, albeit with uniquely open-plan architecture. Commenting on this, Harrisson writes that "to the Kelabit, privacy is unknown and unwanted" (1946: 21). The Kelabit are renowned today for their skills in rice agriculture, especially wet padi cultivation. The well-developed systems of irrigation in the northern Kelabit wetlands (noted at an early date, e.g. Hose, 1892: 131), and consequent potential to provide excess, guarantee a generous and hospitable welcome, something frequently commented upon by historic sources (e.g. Chong, 1960: 117).

As a population richly engaged with their environment, the Kelabit were able to procure a variety of forest products for trade and exchange. Notably, the Kelabit Highlands is one of the rare natural inland sources of salt, something which they exploited until relatively recently. In return they sought prestige objects, particularly large Chinese dragon jars, as well as brassware and glass beads. The jars were used in primary burial rites, to contain a decomposing body before the remains were interred in a forest cemetery.



Fig. 1: Northern Borneo, showing Brunei, northern Sarawak and western Kalimantan. Places of interest mentioned in the text are located.

As part of the system of funerary rites, the Kelabit held a tradition of erecting large stone monuments, and cutting clearings on ridgetops (*kawang*) and ditches by river channels (*nabang*). The megalithic monuments form the most prominent testament to their past, a practice which died out in the 1950s, but intrigued many early visitors and remains a compelling attraction.

Regional Context

Although any substantial contact between the Kelabit and Europeans is relatively recent, there is a far longer history of external governance,