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"LIKE EARLY MIST...": FIVE SONGS OF THE PENAN URUN**Carol Rubenstein**

During 1985-86 I completed eight months of research in Sarawak, one month among semi-settled Penan near the Long Urun Primary School on the Belaga river above Belaga. At that time it was only the second school in Sarawak mostly for Penan children, many of whom were older than as normally scheduled. My aim was to collect and translate songs and to consider the place of song in their lives. The title derives from one of the Penan songs, the line: "Like white early morning mist lifting away/all the herds of wild boar have vanished."

On 31 August 1985, following the three-day festivities of the Belaga regatta, I left Belaga. The longboat, carrying myself, Hawing Yah, Headmaster of the Long Urm Primary School, three Kayan porters and boat crew and much school equipment, proceeded in early morning rain up the Belaga river. Two teachers had gone on ahead. About 45 minutes later we arrived at the large rocks and rapids of Giam Pasang. From there we followed a trail near the river for about two hours to Pasang Pading, the porters under huge loads. Then we met with another longboat and some crew, continuing by river for an hour, occasionally pulling the boat and walking. At Kaki Urik we disembarked and climbed the steep incline to reach the road cut by KTS (Kastima Timber Sdn.). This took between 10 to 20 minutes, depending upon load and experience.

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by

Carol Rubenstein

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It was noon and hot. We waited for two hours under a small *atap* shelter for the arrival of a KTS vehicle to transport us to the company site near Long Bangau. Raising much dust, the landcruiser careened along the raw road, a reddish cut in the scraped landscape. It was a hair-raising and not funny experience to be driven so fast and without regard to possible oncoming traffic in unprotected conditions of road and vehicle. After an hour of dangerous riding, we arrived at the timber company. The canteen was a welcome sight, offering a fan, cold beer and noodles. The group stayed overnight with Hawing's wife's cousin in a barracks.

Next day at 7.30 a.m. we left by landcruiser for Tubau, near the Karling Timber Camp on the Kemana river. (An express boat takes four hours from Bintulu, three boats plying the route daily.) Once there, a long wait ensued to go from Tubau to the Belaga Project timber company, one hour away. Therefore

we stayed overnight at the local provisions store and house, rejoining the two young schoolteachers, Dan and Asim. Unlike our group, they had made excellent connections, with almost no waiting, until then. The trip from Belaga to the school at Long Urun or back can take between two and four days, depending on weather and availability of vehicles. I bought provisions – tins of food, packets of noodles, batteries and, as gifts most favoured by the Penan, biscuits, sugar, sweets, coffee, cigarettes and tobacco.

By midmorning, after several delays, we left in a landcruiser, arriving in one hour at the Urun river. The small river, shaded with trees, seemed peaceful after the timber company atmosphere – buzz saw, grinding of gears, caterpillar tractors dragging and dumping logs, the wide broken areas of the camp, the grim-looking employee barracks and employees, the smell of burned timber, that not of first quality and destroyed. At the riverside hidden among branches was a long red-painted boat, the boat shaped and smoothed from a tree trunk; no nails had been used except for those in the seat planks. Asim and Dan paddled. These shallow shells of boats typically seem at any moment about to tip over. Nevertheless they conveyed by turns part of the group and much *barang* (baggage and anything inanimate) through twists of river and small rapids. A few semi-settlements of the Penan, up the mouths of streams where I was later to visit, were pointed out.

At a wide bend of the Urun river, near where it joins the Belaga, there was a large clearing. A sign high on the bank announced the Sekolah Rendah Kawasan Long Urun (Long Urun Primary School). The three-year-old school was set back from the high bank amid pathways and rows of flowers. The complex comprised three main buildings – two-story schoolhouse and children's quarters; one-story building with four apartments and verandah for teachers and caretaker; and open-air dining-assembly room area. All the school staff was Kayan except for one teacher, Dan, who was Kenyah.

I was given a room at the end of the teachers' quarters building near Hawing Yah's family. With my mosquito net, plastic groundsheet and a Penan woven mat I began settling in. Almost immediately some cigarettes and biscuits went to visiting Penan who had seen me arrive carrying boxes of provisions. Sitting in ragged dignity on the verandah bench was the Headman of Uma Penan Gang, along with others. The struggle concerning provisions – how to safeguard enough both for myself and for gifts and payment – was to prove ongoing, ending only after I left.

Seeing the Penan children and visitors reminded me of my initial experiences with the Penan of Long Beku near Long San on the Upper Baram and the Penan of Long Jekitan on the Silat river, where I had visited for several weeks during 1971-74. It was good to see that Penan gaze again: Alert and dreamlike, direct and accepting, seeming to inquire unselfconsciously into someone and creating a matching stillness in return. This quality, experienced to some degree also in other Dayak groups, particularly those removed from townships, but still markedly present in the Penan expression, perhaps relates to the quiet watchfulness of their hunting, their identification with their prey, and the lack of mirrors and competitive artifice in their lives.

The first order of business for myself was a good scrub: Clothes, backpack, bags and self, following the dusty, muddy trip. For this I used the rainwater