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ASPECTS OF MUSICAL STYLE AMONG THE KAJANG, KAYAN AND KENYAH-BADANG OF THE UPPER REJANG RIVER: A PRELIMINARY SURVEY

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INTRODUCTION

In September, 1984 the level of the upper Rejang River was low which made travel by boat fairly easy up the Rejang River to the interior areas of Sarawak's Seventh Division. However, upon reaching our various destinations the low level of the river made the trek from the boat itself to the longhouse tricky and even treacherous. The path from the boat consisted of narrow tree trunks laid in deep mud from the river's edge up rather steep slopes to the first signs of solid earth and green grass near the top of the river bank. Precariously balancing audio and video recorders and cameras as well as supplies of tapes, batteries and notebooks, the climb to the top of the river bank was always difficult and risky in the best of times. Upon reaching the top of the river bank, however, we were invariably greeted by warm smiles, hand shakes, a sip of rice wine and the inimitable thunder of musical sound performed by a gong orchestra awaiting our entrance into the longhouse.

In the month of September, 1984 a small group of researchers¹ carried out a preliminary survey of the traditional musical instruments and musical forms to be found among specific ethnic groups in the upper Rejang River Area from Rumah Kupa at Long Bah (above the Pelagus Rapids) to Uma Nyaveng at Kaki Menjawah (just below the Bakun Rapids) in the Belaga District of Sarawak's Seventh Division. The specific longhouses at which research was carried out include the following:

- 1) Rumah Kupa (Punan Bah) at Long Bah,
- 2) Rumah Sekapan Panjang at Long Dungan,
- 3) Uma (or Rumah) Lahanan at Long Semuang,
- 4) Uma Kejaman Lasah at Long Segaham, and
- 5) Uma Apan and Uma Nyaveng at Kaki Menjawah.

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These longhouses represent essentially three major groups along the upper Rejang River according to Edmund Leach's classification of the ethnic groups in this area.² These groups are the Kajang, Kayan and Kenyah peoples. The Kajang groups represented here include the Punan Bah, Sekapan, Lahanan and Kejaman Lasah peoples, and it is said that these are the traditional

* This research was supported by a grant from the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, and by additional aid from the Sarawak Museum in Kuching.

inhabitants of the area between the Bah River and the town of Belaga. On the other hand, the Kenyah and Kayan peoples settled in the area making their way northward from East Kalimantan at least 200 years ago. By the mid-19th century these two groups had firmly established settlements along the upper Rejang River where interaction with the Kajang groups is evident today in terms of agriculture and trade as well as artistic and aesthetic practices. Most of the Kajang, Kayan and Kenyah groups live in longhouses situated along the river banks, and they sustain themselves by shifting cultivation (hill rice), as well as some cash crops (rubber, pepper, cocoa), fishing, hunting and gathering jungle produce. Each longhouse has its own headman (*tuai rumah*) who is usually a member of an aristocratic family. The social structure of all groups is stratified basically reflecting a division between aristocrat and commoner (although other sub-levels are possible, such as lower aristocrats, upper and lower commoners and including, at one time, the category of slave). The headmen of the longhouses are, in turn, directed by various government appointees who are called *penghulu*, *pemancar*, and *temenggong* depending upon their rank and responsibilities. Although these positions are made by appointment, the choice of personnel to fill the positions is usually from the aristocratic levels of society. These appointees serve as the link between the local and state government levels in terms of services to the communities concerned.

The Punan Bah peoples of the Kajang group, situated at the junction of the Rejang and Bah Rivers, have undergone some basic changes in their modes of sustenance and life-style. The *tuai rumah* of this large group of some 367 people³ no longer lives (full time) at the settlement itself, for he has married a Sekapan woman and presently resides at her longhouse where he holds the rank of *Pemancar* for the local area. At the time of the current music research project, the Punan Bah had demolished their longhouse and were in the process of building separate houses for individual families (their intention to rebuild the longhouse was uncertain). Although some people of the settlement are minimally involved in traditional forms of agriculture, many others earn income working as wage laborers or trade in fish and game.⁴ Many of the Punan Bah still practise their traditional animist beliefs while others have adopted the Bungan religion. A government primary school has been built at the present Punan Bah settlement with local teachers as well as those from distant towns.

In terms of the arts, we were informed that only a few people from the old generation were able to sing or play musical instruments. A player of the *keluri* (mouth organ) had died some time ago and today knowledge of that instrument has vanished in the Punan Bah settlement. However, a *sapeh* player is still active (but was stationed at a distant farm site during our stay at Rumah Kupa), and several older women still sang long, narrative songs which are deeply rooted in the Punan Bah tradition. Because of these circumstances, the amount of research carried out at the Rumah Kupa (Punan Bah) was minimal and limited to the documentation of only five pieces of vocal music and one folktale. Therefore, the comments on musical style of the Punan Bah on the following pages reflect only some basic characteristics of the vocal style among the Punan Bah at Rumah Kupa.

The Sekapan Panjang settlement at Long Dungan (a very large longhouse community of over 400 people), the Lahanan longhouse at Long Semuang (a small settlement of 75 people), and the Kejaman Lasah longhouse at Long