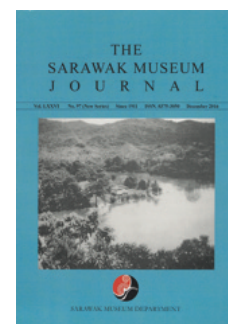




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THE BERAWAN COURTHOUSE PAINTINGS OF 1955

Dora Jok, Louise Macul and Peter Siman

INTRODUCTION

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Sarawak Annual Report 1955: 145

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Berawan paintings decorated the ceiling of the combined Supreme Court (High Court) and Council Negeri in Kuching for over fifty years. They made indelible memories hanging above the attorneys as they were sworn into the Bar and conducted legal matters and Council members made significant legislative decisions. Although created by men far from Kuching, they generated a connection to the people carrying out the legal matters of the State of Sarawak beneath them. The shared memories by resident Kuching attorneys, prompted the documentation and research of the paintings which were removed in 2002-2004 during restoration of the building. One retired attorney, Datuk Seri Stephen Wan Ullok remarked, “I remember looking up and seeing the beautiful paintings, so nice. It is very clear in my memory. Where are those paintings now?”

Those paintings, heavily damaged due to termites and other factors, were put into the storage of the Sarawak Museum. The original number of panels is not known; forty remain in the museum collection. Museums help make connections, often through objects to distant memories, thus reaffirming identities and creating a continuity of heritage. Sometimes objects remain in storage or dusty corners of exhibitions until one day one person makes a connection and shares the memories, emotions, or inspiration garnered from the encounter. Thus, the journey began to document the paintings and the process of discovering a host of connections along the way.

This paper is by no means exhaustive of the subject of the Berawan people or their painting tradition. It only focuses on these forty paintings and does not include the myriad of motifs beyond those found in painting, carving, and beadwork. However, this paper illustrates the importance of preserving the indigenous art of Sarawak whether it be from its original location and use or commissioned works for new purposes and locations. All such art is authentic and its evolution needs to be documented. In respecting this authenticity and

carrying out the documentation of the artists' voice as well as the artwork, the museum is *humanising* the objects. To do that, the following need to be considered (Sandals 2016):

- the original context in which the art was created
- recognition that the art most often had a function in the community
- appreciation of the complexity of the creation of the artwork from mind to hands
- an attempt to view the art without the constraints of a foreign set of values and labels

It is hoped that this paper will rework the stereotype of indigenous painted art of Sarawak beyond the outdated words of *primitive* and *naïve*; thus, reframing it and nurturing an appreciation.

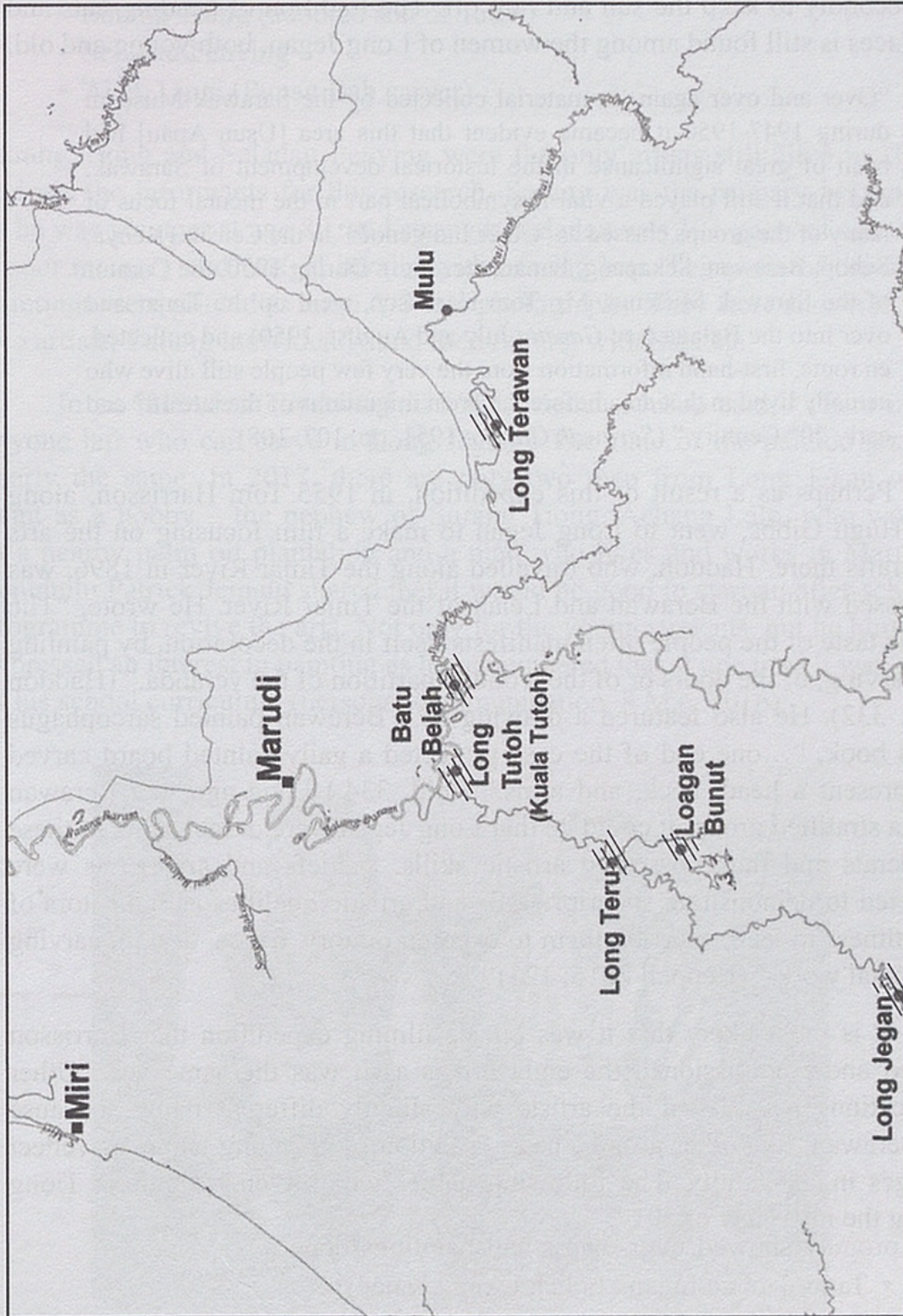
BERAWAN OF LONG JEGAN

“They are prosperous, well-fed people from a society based on a kind of aristocracy. They had more leisure time and could devote themselves to crafts...It is a very fine sort of civilisation that is found in this work. It is a vanishing way of life and thinking.”

Tom Harrisson 1956

The Berawan moved to Sarawak from the Usun Apau, Baram and Kayan headwaters of East Kalimantan before the mid nineteenth century. They are therefore often labelled under the Kenyah or Kayan, but are not linguistically related. The Berawan settled on the Tinjar River (see map) and gradually absorbed another group called the Lelak of Long Teru and Long Jegan. The Lelak are also known for their creative abilities and “painted graceful designs of black paint on a white background” (Furness 1902: 100).

Long Jegan is the largest of the Berawan settlements on the Tinjar River. The longhouse of 1955, which had 100 doors, was burnt down. It had been replaced with three separate longhouses, all built in the same vicinity. The older generation of Long Jegan know of the group of eight men who went to Kuching in 1955. When interviews were conducted, some of the men proudly showed their own small paintings done on wood or pieces of paper carefully stored and preserved. Outside of a few square posts at one of the longhouses, which were stencilled in a simple pattern, there were no painted wall decorations to be found. However, there were painted souvenir-size shields and decorated household items. The women's equivalent of



Map 1: Map showing Berawan villages.

carving and painting is the beading of sunhats. According to Tom Harrisson (1956), the hats had two functions: to stop evil spirits from entering the skull and secondly to keep the sun and rain off. The tradition of beading hats and necklaces is still found among the women of Long Jegan, both young and old.

“Over and over again, in material collected by the Sarawak Museum during 1947-1950 it became evident that this area [Usun Apau] had been of great significance in the historical development of Sarawak, and that it still played a vital if symbolical part in the mental focus of many of the groups classed as ‘Other Indigenous’ in the Census (Kenya, Sebop, Berawan, Sekapang, Punan, etc., etc.). During 1950, the Curator of the Sarawak Museum, Mr. Tom Harrisson, went up the Tinjar and over into the Belaga (see *Gazette* July and August, 1950) and collected, en route, first-hand information from the very few people still alive who actually lived in that area before the great migrations of the late 19th and early 20th Century.” (*Sarawak Gazette* 1951, pp. 107–108)

Perhaps as a result of this expedition, in 1955 Tom Harrisson, along with Hugh Gibbs, went to Long Jegan to make a film focusing on the arts and crafts there. Haddon, who travelled along the Tinjar River in 1896, was impressed with the Berawan and Lelak of the Tinjar River. He wrote, “The artistic taste of the people often manifests itself in the decoration, by painting and carving, of the doors or of the wooden partition of the veranda.” (Haddon 1905: 332). He also featured a drawing of a Berawan painted sarcophagus in his book, “...one end of the case projected a gaily-painted board carved to represent a head, neck, and arms.” (ibid. 334.) Long ago, the Berawan were a stratified group, it could be that Long Jegan were descendents of these aristocrats and thus possessed artistic skills. “Chiefs and aristocrats were expected to demonstrate superior skills and artistic qualities as indicators of their fitness to lead, spurring them to excel in oratory, dance, design, carving and metal work.” (Heppell 2015: 123)

It is most likely that it was on his filming expedition that Harrisson invited and commissioned the eight artists as it was the same year. Other publications have listed the artists with slightly different names because the Berawan, like other groups, had a tradition of changing names to reflect changes in the family. The following names were given by Surang Tiong during the interview of 2017.

- Tama Janeng Ingang (a.k.a. Ukung Kajan)
- Tama Belasap Moyan (uncle of Madau Musup)
- Madau Musup (a.k.a. Tama Ajang, nephew of Tama Belasap Moyan)