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HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE IBAN

Empiang Jabu

This paper is limited to 3 basic areas of the Iban historical perspectives:

1. *The Iban migratory expansion*, a process outstanding in its scope and success. This is instrumental for all Iban to know for the basic reason that one has to understand why we are here today. Knowing this history then as an Iban we will find life not only meaningful to live for, but struggle over and even die for if need be.
2. Issue of '*piratical*' activities of the Iban during the Brookes' era vis-a-vis the practice of Headhunting and *bejalai* (journey).
3. Change and continuity of the Iban longhouse world- a brief perspective of the Iban historical world.

These three areas have been chosen because it is felt that basic information will enable all Iban to reminisce our glorious past together especially at this opportune moment. Remembering and understanding some aspects of our past we hope to throw some luminous objects to enable us to see better tomorrow as a meaningful 'force' in our Sarawak and Malaysian society. It is the modest hope of this paper that recollection of this nature will enable us to ponder if not act as a simple beginning for our salvation of materials which may be lost to us forever.

The materials collected are mainly from secondary sources available. However, interpretations have been made after careful analysis of the assembled facts. Against this background the Iban side of the story is therefore projected,

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THE IBAN MIGRATORY EXPANSION

The Iban migratory expansion had been discussed in a large number of works though no one know exactly when the first Iban settled in Sarawak. Writers like Sandin, Pringle, Freeman and others pointed to the Kapuas Basin of Kalimantan (Indonesia Borneo) as the homeland of the Iban people prior to their entrance to Sarawak. It is unknown where the Iban came from before reaching Kalimantan. Ritual chants and songs (Penggap, renong, etc) seemed to suggest that the Iban pioneers could have been blown by the

wind across the sea and landed in Indonesia Kalimantan. It was stated thus in those songs and chants that – '*kena pangka gigi gelombang*' (struck by the waves) passing through the "*Ribai*" world. Ribai was believed to be far in the high seas somewhere.

One point that is quite safe to say based on reliable genealogies is that the Iban came from the Kapuas basin. Semi historical sources say that the Iban being the descendant of Singalang Burong (War God) and his brothers Pulang Gana (Farm God), Selempandai (God of Creation) and their sister the great Shaman. Ini Inda Rabong Menao all stayed at Kapuas basin some 30 generations ago. Sandin even said that Singalang Burong died in one of the hills between the Merakai and Undup. Sera Gunting, his grandson died at Mt. Tiang Laju near Marup and Undup.¹ For the absence of a proper genealogy to substantiate this it is thus not taken as our starting point, though all Iban at one time believe in Singalang Burong, Pulang Gana and Selempandai as great Gods of the past.

A proper genealogy states that the first Iban migration to Sarawak began some seventeen generations ago from Ketungau (a tributary of the Kapuas) to the Undup river basin (a tributary of Batang Lupar river) led by a famous Iban leader named Jelian who then stayed at Wong Empangu (near Simanggang to-day). A 16th generation leader named after Jelian was Penghulu Ganja who in 1979 was 54 years old and a retired penghulu of the Rimbas area.² This is indeed a proper record of our first known migration from the Kapuas to the 2nd Division, Sarawak.

Based on the Iban social world, one generation equals roughly 25 years – (Iban in the past married roughly at this age). Therefore the earliest proper account of our migration to Sarawak – (2nd Division) began somewhere in the middle of the 16th century (1540's). Significant enough though, when the *Silsilah Raja-Raja Berani* was written in the 18th Century, it was stated that at about this time the Islamization of the 1st Sultan of Brunei by the Johore ruler, it was accompanied by the bestowal upon him of "negeri lima buah, iaitu negeri Kalaka dan negeri Saribas dan negeri Samarahan, negeri Sarawak (Kuching) dan negeri Mukah,"³ (Ketua Pasukan) the non-Malays were already occupying some of these negeri. Thus the Iban were definitely there in the Saribas and the Kalaka area.

From the Batang Lupar drainage – namely the Undup, Kumpang, Batang Ai, Skrang rivers, others simultaneously moved on to the north - to the Saribas and Layan basins then after to the Krian area. Ethnic groups like the Ukit, Seru, Beketan encountered normally were absorbed into the Iban population and in some cases forced to retreat from the 2nd Division. This was so because they were the first ones to attack the Iban.

Thus the 1st phase of Iban migratory expansion which lasted for about 250 years (1540's–1800) were mainly to the present 2nd Division river basins. The process being not orderly and organised both in space and in time accounted for why the so called 1st phase expansion and migration to the 2nd Division river basins took such a long time.

The 2nd phase – 19th century migration, started as early as 1800 into the southern tributaries of the Rejang River. It must be noted here that it was not the Iban of the flat and swampy lower reaches of Batang Lupar, Samarahan or Saribas rivers who migrated here. That is not the Balau,