



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XL No. 61

December 1989



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Saging, R. L. R & Bulan, L. (1989). Kelabit Ethnography: A Brief Report. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XL (61): 89-118

KELABIT ETHNOGRAPHY A BRIEF REPORT

Robert Lian R. Saging @ Balangalibun and Lucy Bulan @ Sina Raban Bala

INTRODUCTION

The Kelabits are an indigenous people who inhabit the high intermontane valleys, above the furthest reaches of the navigable rivers of the Baram and Limbang Districts in the most remote corner of the interior of Northern Sarawak. They have close cultural and linguistic ties with the Lun Bawang Muruts to their North in the Lawas and Limbang Districts and the Kenyah and Kayans to their South in the Ulu Baram, LHu Apoh and Ulu Tutoh areas of the Baram Districts.

The Kelabits, with a population of 3821 in 1980 and an estimated population of 5059 in 1987, are a progressive people, always ready to meet the challenges brought by change, accepting and adopting useful new ideas for their further progress. In this process of accepting changes and new ideas the Kelabits have discarded and are discarding many of the ways of the past, which are considered out of date and thus a hindrance to progress. The Kelabits have probably one of the highest literacy rates amongst the numerous indigenous ethnic groups of Sarawak, considering that the first school in the Kelabit Highlands was only opened in 1946. It is estimated that all Kelabits below the age of 45 have reached a good standard of literacy. Whereas the older Kelabit population remains in the longhouses, the majority of the younger Kelabits are to be found in the towns where they are engaged in all sorts of occupations, many having attained tertiary and college education.

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The advent of education and acceptance by the Kelabits of the Christian religion in the 1940's has brought about a drastic change for the better amongst the Kelabits. Whilst they have discarded many of their Pagan ways, they still maintain some customs and practices which are still useful and relevant to their society. Among others are their practice of name changing, the longhouse, wet padi cultivation, salt making and the age old custom of 'baya' cooperative labour (*gotong royong*).

The Highland Kelabits are largely padi planters, practising wet padi cultivation and, decreasingly, dry padi cultivation. They produce the famous

'Bario Rice' variety and also some salt from natural salt springs found locally. They also rear buffaloes and cattle which are sold in Lawas, Marudi and Brunei for cash.

Since the formation of Malaysia, the Kelabits have, in their small way, contributed towards nation building. They were actively involved in defending the country during the Second World War of the 1940's, the Malaysia and Indonesia Confrontation of the 1960's, and the communist emergency of the 1970's. A Kelabit, Killah was awarded the PGB, the highest award for bravery for his role in fighting the communists. In sports, Kuda Ditta was a member of the Malaysian Contingent at the Tokyo and Melbourne Olympics and also the SEAP/ASEAN Games. In the public sector many Kelabits are employed in the Civil Service, the Police and the Armed Forces. In the private sector, although no Kelabit has had the good fortune to become a millionaire yet, many are involved in small businesses, and a Kelabit presently holds the post of Director of personnel in a large Multinational Company in Miri.

The Kelabits are active members of the Orang Ulu National Association. They have also formed their own ethnic association, the Kelabit Association, and the Kelabit People's Association Fund (Tabung Persatuan Kaum Kelabit – TAPEKIT). Their involvement in these organisations has resulted in contributions by the Orang Ulu to cultural performances all over the State and the country.

This paper has been prepared largely from Kelabit sources, especially the writings of Kelabits themselves. There are, so far, only two fairly comprehensive works on the Kelabits. Each was written as an under-graduate paper by a Kelabit. In addition other Kelabit under-graduates and individuals have written on specific subjects. The writings by non-Kelabits on the Kelabits have also been used as reference. This paper is timely and would be an appropriate response to the writing of the Late Dato Tom Harrisson, a former Curator of the Sarawak Museum who wrote:

"It would be nice if they could write for themselves, but until early 1946, when we opened the first school, none of them could write In a few years, they, who are natural orators, singers, bards and moulders of words (as of iron, and ivory, hardwood and horn), may well be able to tell their own tale. Meanwhile, willy-nilly, it falls to me, the only white man so far to live among and get to know them". (Harrisson, 1949)

POPULATION

The Kelabits are probably one of the smallest ethnic groups in Sarawak, numbering only 1,734 in 1934, 1,612 in 1947, 2,040 in 1960, 2,541 in 1970, 3,821 in 1980 and an estimated 5,059 in 1987 (based on the 1970–1980 growth rate of 4.01%; (Ko, 1987). The Kelabits, once numerous, suffered a drastic reduction in their numbers during the late 19th and early 20th century, particularly through interaction with outside people. Introduced diseases like cholera, smallpox, influenza and plagues of various types were a major cause. Due to the Kelabits' relative isolation, these diseases were once unknown in their area. But at the onset of interaction with outsiders, they took a terrible toll of Kelabit lives, since the Kelabits had no natural resistance to them (Noakes, 1939). Loss of lives due to the infamous head-hunting was negligible compared to the toll due to diseases.