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PELAJAU KAUL AND THE SAMBAS CONNECTION

Ann Appleton

INTRODUCTION

A connection between Sambas and Melanau communities on the Oya River has long been known. Hugh Low (1848) records a meeting with Pengiran Mahamat Ali, the ruler at Oya, who claimed descent from the Sultans of Brunei and Sambas and from a pagan aristocrat at Pelajau, a former upriver longhouse settlement. And Morris notes that in the 1960s, Melanau on the Oya River continued to differentiate between a Sarawak Malay and a Sambas Malay (Morris, 1991: 7). A connection between Pelajau and the Melanau aristocrats at Oya is also acknowledged by people in the village of Medong.

However, the details of those connections have remained relatively muted in the historic and ethnographic record. This article draws on oral history narratives and genealogies collected during collaborative research with individuals and communities on the Oya River over the past year, to tease out the story of these historic connections. Further, this article argues that these connections are collectively remanifested, reaffirmed and revitalised on the 29th of December each year when descendants of the former community at Pelajau return to the long abandoned site to celebrate *Pelajau Kaul*.

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The site at Pelajau

The former longhouse site at Pelajau is situated on the true left bank of the Oya River about 45 minutes' boat journey upriver from the village of Medong and about 40 miles upriver from the township of

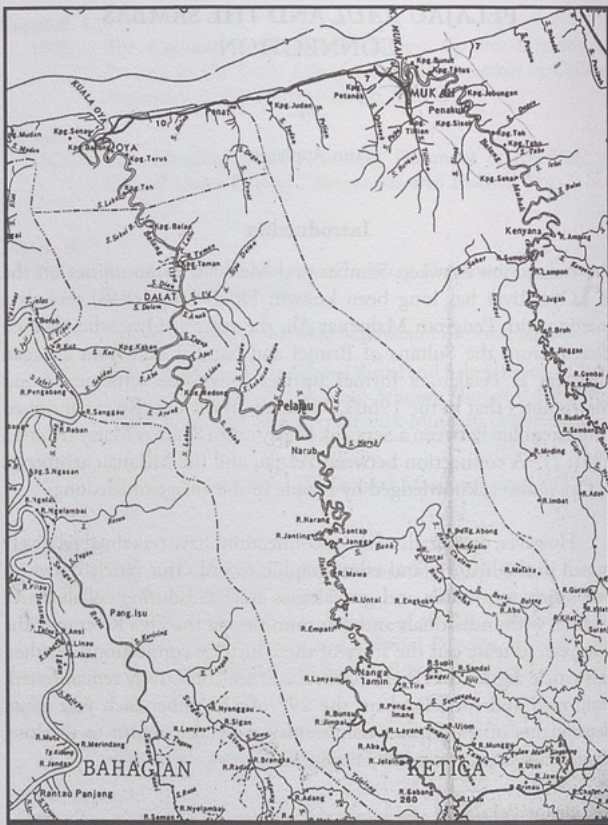


Fig. 1: Map showing the Oya River (centre), and locations of Oya, Medong and Pelajau, the latter on the opposite bank to Sungei Pelajau, upriver from Medong. (Partial reproduction of a larger map in Morris (1991)).

Oya, situated at the mouth of the Oya River. Slightly downstream on the opposite bank is a small settlement of about half a dozen relatively humble dwellings. These belong to Melanau from Medong who live part of the year at Pelajau to hunt, farm and tend their sago gardens.

Little remains today to mark the site of the former longhouse settlement, save for some old fruit trees, a single support post from the original longhouse and two old *kelideng* (ironwood burial poles) much deteriorated, located towards either end of the site.¹ The upriver *kelideng*, said to have been erected by Telamad, the female chief of the longhouse, is still standing though the top portion has been considerably worn away by the elements.

The second *kelideng*, at the downriver end of the site, collapsed some years ago and the stone cap that once rested on top of it has been re-erected on a wooden framework about a metre high. According to oral tradition, this *kelideng* was used as a punishment medium for misbehaviour.² The distance between the two *kelideng* is approximately 60 metres and since these poles were normally erected in front of the longhouse, it can be assumed the original longhouse at Pelajau was at least this length.

The frequent mention of Pelajau in myths and legends of the Oya River communities testifies to the considerable status and influence of the longhouse community there in former times. Even today, stories and traditions associated with the site continue to circulate and often include an element of mystery. For example, an account heard recently told how a local fisherman lifted his net in a nearby tributary stream and to his surprise found it full of ocean-going rather than freshwater fish as expected.³

The Connection between Pelajau and Medong

Medong is today the most sizeable upriver Melanau village on the Oya River, with a population of around 3,500 people. Stephen Morris, a British anthropologist who conducted extensive research