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by

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Many different ethnic groups in the Balui Valley are intricately enmeshed in a web of cultural, social, and historical relationships (see, e.g., Rousseau 1974). While the history of this area before the mid nineteenth century is presently only dimly known, this complex of interconnectedness and interdependence has probably existed for a number of centuries (cf. Burns 1849; Low 1882a-e, 1884a-e; Hiller 1897; Harrisson 1951; Maxwell 1987a-b, 1988, 1990, 1992; Katz 1988, 1989; see also the experiences of a former District Officer in Belaga – Langub 1986, and the reminiscences of a former Sarawak State Secretary – Yusuf 1984). For more than a hundred years, the Malays of Belaga have played a central role in the social life of the Balui Valley. Any understanding of how this complex system of relationships has developed and functioned over the last century must take into account the important position Malays have held in this, the longest river valley of Sarawak.

The modern town of Belaga, which lies approximately three fifths of the distance upstream between the sea and the source of the Balui, or Rajang River, contains the last government offices to be encountered when ascending the river. It is probably the most remote administrative center in Sarawak. The town contains 30 shophouses (Sarawak 1986: 2). The Malays of Belaga have played an important role in the Balui since before the settlement of Belaga was founded in late 1883. The primary focus of this investigation is on the genealogical history of leadership and the original sources of the Malay population which initially settled in the area sometime in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Evidence indicates that the Malay community of Belaga, predates the founding of the town of Belaga by some years. The modern day settlement at Belaga, which later became the seat of Belaga District in Sarawak's Seventh Division, was first established in November 1883 by Hugh Brooke Low, who was then Resident of the Third Division in the government of Raja Charles Brooke (see Maxwell 1987b:44ff. [Low 1884a-c]). The Malays who later became the nucleus of the modern Malay community in Belaga had arrived in the area a number of years earlier, primarily from Kampung Burung Pingai dan Kampung Tamui, located in the main water settlement in the capital of Brunei. The purpose here is to develop a sketch of Malay history in Belaga, based on evidence derived from oral interviews and the scanty written literature on this little studied subject.¹

THE MALAYS OF BELAGA

The Belaga District annual report for 1985 gives the Malay population as 279, or 1.9% of the population of the whole district (Sarawak 1986:4). Most live in the Malay community which has always been located just downstream of the town Belaga itself. While this settlement, on the west bank of the Balui or Rajang River is commonly known as Kampung Melayu Belaga, the more specific name is Kampung Tengah. A newer offshoot settlement, known as Kampung Ilir, is located just a short walking distance downstream from Kampung Tengah. Both settlements are under the jurisdiction of a single headman (currently [summer, 1988], Awang Osman bin Awang Raman). Awang Osman estimated the size of the settlement as over 300 persons, living in 42 different households, and to be approximately the same size as the Malay community of Song. He then compared Belaga to the Malay communities in Kapit² and Kanowit. The Belaga Malay community was previously comparatively larger, but in recent years numbers of people have moved into Kapit and Song from other areas, particularly, from Kuching and Sibui in the case of Kapit, so that the Belaga community is now the smaller of the three.

In addition to being native speakers of the Malay language, people of Kampung Tengah commonly also speak the Kayan, Sekapan, and Kajaman languages (Sekapan and Kajaman are actually dialects of a single language – Simon Strickland, personal communication). In addition the Kenyah language is known by a number of people, and some are also able to speak the Seping and Punan Bah languages. The form of Malay spoken by members of this community in Belaga is highly distinctive.³

While the original impetus for the movement of Malays into this upriver region of Sarawak seems to have been trade (of which more later), individuals also carried out a number of other important economic activities. Households routinely engaged in the swidden cultivation of rice (*padi bukit*), but not in permanent field rice cultivation (*padi paya*). The hilly topography of the country surrounding Belaga would seem to rule out the likelihood that the latter form of cultivation could be practiced on any systematic scale, except, perhaps, in a few isolated locations. Households usually had vegetable gardens in their yards. In addition a bit of sago (*rumbia*) was planted here and there, primarily for each family's own use. Fishing in the Balui River and hunting in the surrounding forests, especially for *payaw* (the sambar, *Cervus unicolor*) which used to be very plentiful around Belaga, *karuhay* (probably the great agus pheasant, *Argusianus argus*), and *punay tanah* (probably the emerald dove, *Chalcophaps indica*) also contributed food to the family larder. Wild fruits and vegetables collected in the forest provided additional variety in the diet.

A number of economic resources of the forest were exploited for trading purposes, including a kind of tree sap known as *getah licak*,⁴ camphor or *kapur*, and a kind of dammar known as *dammar daging*.⁵ Large and small boats for river travel were also built in the Malay community (but evidently not the small canoes, *gubang* 'dugout canoe' and *bidar* 'straked canoe', which are so common in Malay communities downriver nearer the coast).⁶

The general function of trade in the nineteenth century was to bring the goods of the outside world up into the interior of the Balui Valley and to send back the economic products of the interior for use in the commerce and industry of that time. Even before Brooke rule in Sarawak trade had taken the overland route between the upper Rajang/Balui via Tubau (Rousseau 1990:288). Nicolaisen reports that all trade between Brunei and the region followed this route (1976: 85). It is for the purposes of trade that the bulk of the early Malay population seems to have come to Belaga. These settlers came especially from Kampung Burung Pingai and Kampung Tamui in the old traditional water settlement in the Brunei River at the capital, Bandar Seri Begawan. There is reportedly still a fair amount of travel back and forth between Kampung Tengah and Brunei, by relatives who wish to visit each

other. Curiously it was reported that marriages do not now occur between Belaga and Brunei, nor did they occur in the past. In recent years the postmarital residence practice in Belaga has been primarily virilocal, with the wife joining her husband. In earlier days Belaga Malays followed the old practice (*adat lama*) of uxorilocality in which a husband joined his new wife's household.

Reportedly in earlier times the proportion of households in Kampung Tengah which were engaged in trading activities was about half (*kurang lebih separuh*) of the total. Prominent among the goods imported into Belaga both for consumption, and for use in further trade with outlying and upriver communities, were traditional products of Brunei. These including cloth (especially the famous and very decorative *kain sungkit* woven with gold and silver threads), brass oil lamps (*lampu tembaga*), brass cooking pots (*periuk tembaga*), brass boxes to hold betel fixings and tobacco (*celapa sirih*), brass cannons (*bedil, meriam*), and powder (*ubat bedil*). Among the goods received in trade by the Malay traders were mats (*tikar*) and the distinctive woven rattan baskets (*ajat*) for which the Penan are still well-known. (For a more general discussion of trade between Malays and interior Borneo peoples, see Rousseau 1990: 284-293.)

Trading activities were wide-ranging, up and down the Balui River. Sometimes Orang Ulu⁷ would bring their goods down to Belaga. On other occasions the Malay traders would venture far upriver to transact their business. While some trade occurred with Orang Ulu communities located downriver from Belaga, the bulk of this activity was focused on the communities upstream. Reportedly the trading exchanges in the upriver areas were usually by barter (*tukar barang*) rather than goods being purchased by the traders for money. Malay traders travelled to such communities as the Uma Juman Kayan, Long Beho, and even to Long Nawang in the Apo Kayan valley of Kalimantan on a regular basis.⁸ The bulk of the trading activities apparently occurred in the valley of Balui River itself. For example, it was explained that, traders avoided venturing into the Murum Valley, because the river is so full of rocks that it was impossible to travel by boat. The Murum Valley, which joins the Balui just above the Bakun Rapids, contained a number of Kenyah communities in the nineteenth century (see Maxwell 1988). There were also, in earlier times, Uma Lesong Kayan living in the Linau Valley, another interior valley which debouches into the Balui less than 10 km further upstream. Among the different communities with which Belaga Malay traders plied their activities with were the Kenyah, the Kayan, the Ukit (Buket), the Sihan, the Lahanan, the Kajaman, the Sekapan, the Punan Bah, the Seping, and the Ba Mali of the Balui drainage; and the Sambup, Uma Pawa, and Long Bangan Kenyah of the Belaga Valley.

MALAY LEADERSHIP IN BELAGA

As is common among many communities in Borneo, Malay people very often remember the names and pieces of information about certain individuals whose lives have in some sense stood out and become inscribed in collective memory. The names of earlier leaders are perhaps the most enduring of earlier ancestors throughout western Borneo. Figures 1 and 2 are accounts of the history of leadership in the Belaga Malay community drawn from two different informants. While the two accounts differ in some details, they are typical in the sense that informants usually agree with each other in general outline but tend to remember different details.⁹

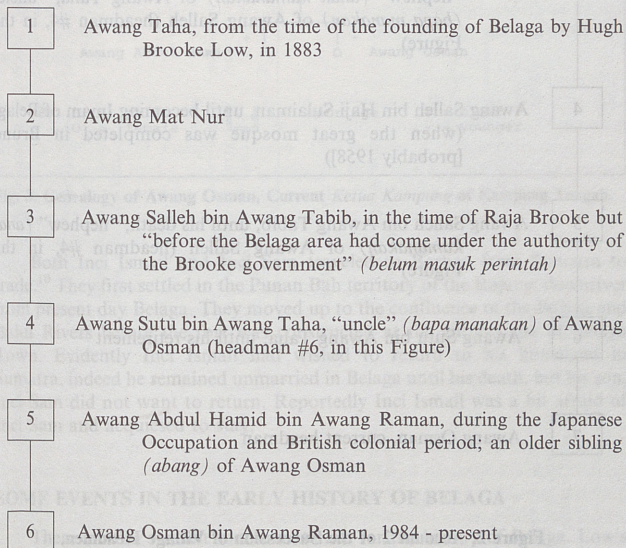


Figure 1: Account 1 of the Succession of Village Headmen, Kampung Tengah, Belaga.

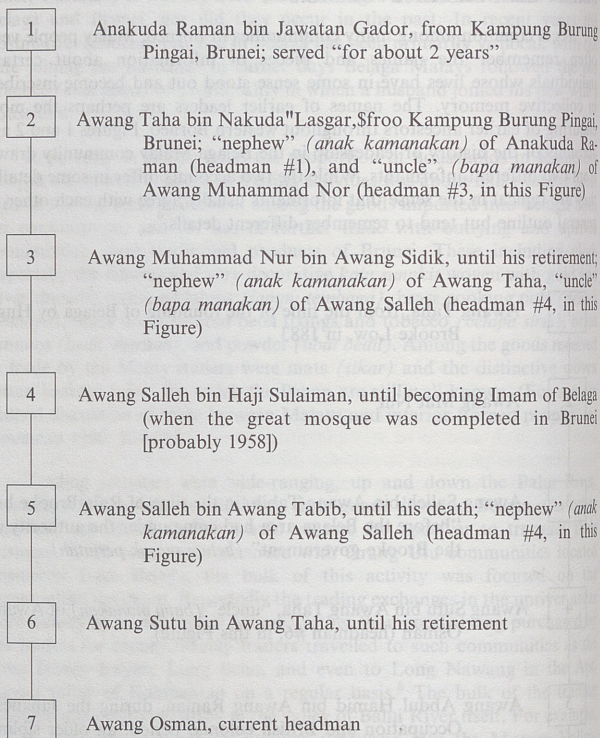


Figure 2: Account 2 of the Succession of Village Headmen, Kampung Tengah, Belaga.

The current headman, Awang Osman, recalls his recent ancestors as follows.

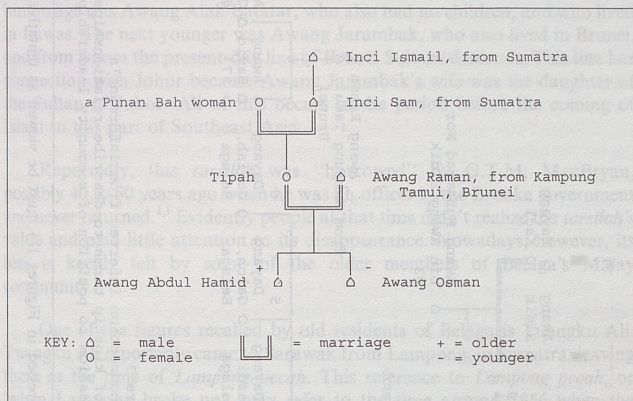


Fig. 3: Genealogy of Awang Osman, Current *Ketua Kampung* of Kampung Tengah.

Both Inci Ismail and Inci Sam traveled to Borneo from Sumatra to trade.¹⁰ They first settled in the Punan Bah territory of the Rajang, downriver from present day Belaga. They moved up to the confluence of the Belaga and Balui Rivers before the fort was constructed at the current site of Belaga Town. Evidently Inci Ismail had wished to return to his homeland in Sumatra, indeed he remained unmarried in Belaga until his death, but his son, Inci Sam did not want to return. Reportedly Inci Ismail was a bit afraid of Inci Sam and acquiesced to stay.

SOME EVENTS IN THE EARLY HISTORY OF BELAGA

There are few written source materials for the history of Belaga. Low's account has already been mentioned. There was, reportedly, once a *tarsilah* 'genealogical history'¹¹ which was the heirloom property (*waris*) of all the Awang-Awang of Kampung Tengah. It was reportedly quite a big book and contained much information that has now been forgotten. It told, for instance, of the early differentiation between descent on the Indonesian side of Raja Payt and of the descent on the Brunei side of Awang Simawn. One