



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XXXIII No. 54

December 1984



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Chin, S. C. (1984). Kenyan Tops and Top Playing, An Integral Part of the Agricultural Cycle. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XXXIII (54): 33-54

KENYAN TOPS AND TOP PLAYING, AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE AGRICULTURAL CYCLE

S.C. Chin,
(Botany Department, University of Malaya)

INTRODUCTION

The largest population of Kenyahs in Sarawak is in the Baram valley (Metcalf, 1974). They are, like a vast majority of rural Sarawakians, subsistence farmers growing rice by shifting cultivation methods.

By the end of 1978, I was fortunate enough to have made three visits to the Baram (map A); the first was from November 1976 until August 1977, the second from March to April 1978 and the third from August to September 1978. On all three occasions I stayed at Long Selatong (Lepo Ga') continuously, except for two short visits upriver and another downriver during my first stay. I have visited all the *kamin** (doors) and move in and out freely in most, however not until the third visit did I see a topor saw that tops were played by the people. I then discovered that top playing (pasing) is very closely associated with and is part of the agricultural cycle. It is carried out for a short period immediately after the beginning of the planting season (usually August). This was the period of the agricultural cycle I missed during my first two visits. During the first visit, I left just at the beginning of the planting and was probably too distracted to have noticed the possible appearance of the 'early' tops, or my departure could have just preceded their appearance.

KENYAH TOPS AND TOP PLAYING, AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE AGRICULTURAL CYCLE

by

S.C. Chin,
(Botany Department, University of Malaya)

Introduction

The largest population of Kenyahs in Sarawak is in the Baram valley (Metcalf, 1974). They are, like a vast majority of rural Sarawakians, subsistence farmers growing rice by shifting cultivation methods.

By the end of 1978, I was fortunate enough to have made three visits to the Baram (map A); the first was from November 1976 until August 1977, the second from March to April 1978 and the third from August to September 1978. On all three occasions I stayed at Long Selatong (Lepo Ga') continuously, except for two short visits upriver and another downriver during my first stay. I have visited all the *kamin** (doors) and move in and out freely in most, however not until the third visit did I see a top or saw that tops were played by the people. I then discovered that top playing (*pasing*) is very closely associated with and is part of the agricultural cycle. It is carried out for a short period immediately after the beginning of the planting season (usually August). This was the period of the agricultural cycle I missed during my first two visits. During the first visit, I left just at the beginning of the planting and was probably too distracted to have noticed the possible appearance of the 'early' tops, or my departure could have just preceded their appearance.

THE TOPS

In 1978 at Long Selatong, the planting of hill rice began on the 14th of August (Monday). Three or four days later tops appeared on the longhouse scene, and children were the first to play. Theirs were small tops quickly made. Adults did not begin to play until Sunday (20th August); in any case they could not have played earlier as planting activities would have taken up all their daylight hours. They also played on two subsequent Sundays (the

* The orthography used here is greatly simplified. The important sounds concerned in the Kenyah words mentioned are as follows:

a	as in <i>art</i> ;	e	as in <i>earn</i> ;	é	as in <i>May</i> ;
ê	as in <i>air</i> ;	o	as in <i>November</i> ;		the

glottal stop is either medial or final, e.g. *a'en* (forfeit), *ala'* (to take).

