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RUBBER AND THE MODERNISATION OF THE PAKU IBAN IN BETONG DIVISION, SARAWAK

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ABSTRACT

Rubber is the tree of modernisation for the Paku Iban in Betong Division¹ in Sarawak. The changes in the way of life of the Paku Iban in the first half of the 1900s were brought about by the wealth they obtained from planting rubber. Towards the end of the 1920s, for example, Baku Iban men were already wearing coats and ties during *Gawai* festivals. In the 1950s, according to Michael Hardin² (Bato, 2003), when the price of rubber was about \$2 per katie, "some families in Baku who had vast rubber gardens with hired rubber tappers were earning as high as \$200 daily". "That made a number of natives from Betong wealthy"³, he said. With the money they had, they bought shop houses in Betong, Spaoh; along the Kuching Main Bazaar and in front of the General Post Office⁴. During this time, "some of the prime land in Kuching ... also belonged to Betong natives."⁵

In his study of attitudes towards modernisation in the three areas in Sarawak (Baku, Lubok Antu and Kuching), Beter Mulok Kedit (1980) said that Baku Iban are more 'future-oriented' than the Iban from the other two areas when 74% of them put "disagree" as response to the statement 'to live for the present', compared to Lubok Antu Iban (40 per cent) and Kuching Iban (68 per cent).

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by

Stanley Bye Kadam-Kiai

INTRODUCTION

Rubber is the tree of modernisation for the Paku Iban in Betong Division¹ in Sarawak. The changes in the way of life of the Paku Iban in the first half of the 1900s were brought about by the wealth they obtained from planting rubber. Towards the end of the 1920s, for example, Paku Iban men were already wearing coats and ties during *Gawai* festivals. In the 1950s, according to Michael Hardin² (Bato, 2003), when the price of rubber was about \$2 per katie, "some families in Paku who had vast rubber gardens with hired rubber tappers were earning as high as \$200 daily". "That made a number of natives from Betong wealthy"³, he said. With the money they had, they bought shop houses in Betong, Spaoh; along the Kuching Main Bazaar and in front of the General Post Office⁴. During this time, "some of the prime land in Kuching ... also belonged to Betong natives."⁵

In his study of attitudes towards modernisation in the three areas in Sarawak (Paku, Lubok Antu and Kuching), Peter Mulok Kedit (1980) said that Paku Iban are more 'future-oriented' than the Iban from the other two areas when 74% of them put "disagree" as response to the statement 'to live for the present', compared to Lubok Antu Iban (40 per cent) and Kuching Iban (68 per cent).

This, according to Kedit, could only be "ponder within the whole context of modernization" (*ibid.*, p. 144). In his study, Kedit classifies the Iban into three categories: the traditionalist, the intermediary, and the modernist. The Paku Iban, he said, are of the intermediary and modernist types. In comparison, the Lubok Antu Iban are of

the traditionalist type. Kedit believes that the determining factor in this is not education, neither occupation nor religion (Christianity vs Iban traditional religion), but the environment.

The processes of change that took place among the Paku Iban, especially in the 1950s, could be attributed to the planting of rubber in Paku in the early decades of 1900s. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to show how rubber has influenced entrepreneurial development of the Paku Iban and how this has led to the adoption of a new culture.

STUDY AREA

The study area is in Paku Ulu, Betong. Paku is made of up of two main *Pengbulu* jurisdictional areas: Paku Ili (Lower Paku) and Paku Ulu (Upper Paku). Paku Ili consists of tidal areas and is swampy, while Paku Ulu is the fresh-water areas and is hilly. The soil in Paku Ulu is suitable for rubber planting.

Paku River is a tributary of the Saribas River. Within the Iban community in Sarawak, Paku is considered to be an old country (*menoa lama*). It is one of the areas first occupied by the Iban in Sarawak. According to Clifford Sather (1990), the Iban have settled in the Paku region more than fourteen generations ago.

Normally, when people talk about the Paku region, they usually refer to the Paku Ulu area due to its wealth in natural resources compared to Paku Ili. Paku Ulu is more developed and richer than Paku Ili. For example, Paku Ulu is accessible by road since 1967 while Paku Ili was in the late 1990s. Paku Ulu already has amenities such as electricity supply and telephone services, while Paku Ili still does not have these facilities even though it is much closer to Betong and Spaoh towns. The study involves all fourteen longhouses in the Paku Ulu area⁶.

Compared to the Iban longhouses in other parts of Sarawak, the Paku Iban longhouses are relatively short. For example, of the fourteen longhouses in the area, only three are longer than twenty 'doors' (*pintu/bilik*)⁷. Five of the longhouses have less than ten 'doors'. The total number of 'doors' in Paku is less than 210.