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THE ORANG ULU: AN OVERVIEW

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The formation of the Orang Ulu Nation Association (OUNA) is important to Orang Ulu in that it provides a sense of belonging to the group. In this paper, we will look into the history of OUNA and examine its roles and functions with respect to the overall Orang Ulu community.

We will also look into the implications of OUNA on cultural identity and cultural unity of these indigenous minorities who consider themselves collectively as Orang Ulu. But who are the Orang Ulu, and why the term Orang Ulu?

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INTRODUCTION

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ORIGIN OF THE TERM ORANG ULU

Orang Ulu are Malay words which mean "people" (*orang*) of "the upriver" (*ulu*); hence, "people of the upriver" or "people of the interior". The term *orang ulu* is sometimes used as a common expression to simply mean "rural folks" or "country bumpkins".

However, for the indigenous minorities of the interior, the term *Orang Ulu* is used to indicate where they reside in relation to the district headquarters as well as to the coastal population. Orang Ulu groups live mainly above the district headquarters and also upriver to other groups such as the Iban, Malay, Chinese and Melanau.

These interior indigenous minorities have their own words to indicate their being "upriver people" or "interior people". For instance, the Lun Bawang and the Kelabit use the term *lun dayeh* and some Kenyah subgroups use

the term *lepo' kedaya*. If these interior groups have their own words to describe their being "upriver people" or "interior people", why then use the Malay words *orang ulu*? One reason is the position of the Malay language as the *lingua franca* of this country. It is the language of communication between district administrators and rural people as well as the language of communication between different groups of Orang Ulu.

Oral tradition has it that the term *Orang Ulu* first came into use as an ethnic term of reference for the interior minority groups during the Brooke administration. When the interior people came down to the Forts to meet the Brooke officials they identified themselves as "*kami orang ulu*" or "we the upriver people", meaning they who lived above the Forts. In the passage of time, the term *Orang Ulu* became a collective term of reference for these upriver people.

The most important person who constantly used the term *Orang Ulu* was the late Datuk Temenggong Oyong Lawai Jau, the Paramount Chief of the Orang Ulu. During his life time he identified himself to government officials and the public as an Orang Ulu, rather than his own ethnic origin, Kenyah. Whenever he got the chance to speak on behalf of the interior people, he spoke as an Orang Ulu for the Orang Ulu. So deep was his commitment to the term *Orang Ulu* that he became the founding father of the Orang Ulu National Association.

Despite the regular use of the term *Orang Ulu* by District Officers and the interior population, such term has never been used in population census exercises. In population census reports, these interior minority groups have always been lumped under the category "Other Indigenous Groups" (Koh. 1988).

The earliest appearance of the term *Orang Ulu* in official documents was in the late 1950s, in the Native Customary Laws Ordinance (Cap. 51). In the subsidiary Legislations: The Orang Ulu Customary Code of Fines (Belaga Subdistrict) Order and The Orang Ulu Customary Code of Fines (Fourth Division) Order, the term *Orang Ulu* is used to refer to Sarawak indigenous people who are not Iban, Kelabit, Malay, Penan and Saban residing in Baram, Bintulu and Belaga districts. The coverage of the term *Orang Ulu* here is rather restrictive in that it only includes the Kayan and Kenyah.

The term *Orang Ulu* appears again for the second time in another official document, the OUNA Constitution. In the second appearance, the term *Orang Ulu* covers a larger number of indigenous groups. Rule 3 (11) of the OUNA Constitution mentions the term *Orang Ulu* thus: "The Orang Ulu shall mean Bukitan, Bisaya, Kayan, Kajang (including Sekapan, Kejaman, Lahanan, Punan, Tanjong and Kanowit), Kelabit, Kenyah (including Sebop, Seping, Kiput, Badang and Berawan), Lugat, Lisum, Murut (Lun Bawang), Penan, Sian, Tabun, Ukit, Saban".

THE ORANG ULU: A BRIEF ETHNOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION

One way to define Orang Ulu is that they are non-Muslim indigenous groups who are not Iban, Bidayuh or Melanau. Another way is to define them by geographical, socio-cultural and linguistic factors.