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HISTORY AND RELATIONSHIP OF MELANAU TO OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS**Charles Tenggoi Aseng**

Historically, Melanau like any other ethnic groups in Sarawak had no ethnic conscious of belonging to a certain ethnic group. A Melanau in historical time did not identify himself as a Melanau but in terms of his settlement (leboh or kapong) and the river system along which the settlement is found. In the words of Babcock, prior to pre-usage of colonial term, "Ethnicity is personalised as your neighbours were who you said they were; if friendly, you intermarried and lived with them, and if not, you fought with them and sometime took their heads." (Babcock, 1974: 191). Modern day Melanau and other ethnic groups are conscious of their ethnic identity through colonial conceptualization.

My intention is to trace the historical relationship of Melanau with other ethnic communities. It is confined to some salient cultural traits which shall show Melanau close cultural affinities and historical ties.

Generally, indigenous communities in Sarawak share similar characteristics; their languages are Malayo-Polynesian, there are similarities in material culture (agricultural and domestic implements and longhouse domicile); and in their animistic belief system (omens and spirit-world).

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by

Charles Tenggoi Aseng

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Pre-Islamic Melanau cultural heritage lies very much with the Orang Ulu, especially the Kajang group which comprises of Kejaman, Sekapan, Lahanan, Punan Ba and perhaps Sian and Buketan. A number of cultural traits indicates the original close cultural affinities with Kajang are found in oral history, social organisation, customary practices, material culture and linguistic similarities.

Common legend of coastal Melanau (Oya/Igan/Mukah) with sub-groups of Kajang tells of a legendary Kajang Kingdom in the Ulu Linau along Sungai Kajang. The escape epic of Tugau from Kayan told by Sekapan traced the common ancestry of Kejaman, Sekapan, Lahanan, Melanau and possibly Sian and Buketan (Clayre, 1972: 24)

According to Sekapan version, Tugau was the chief of Sekapan and Melanau, leading the Kajang people downriver, fleeing from some supernatural enemies. They made to Igan river. Tugau settled at Sungai Pasai, Retus where