

**The Sarawak Museum Journal****Vol. XXXVII No. 58****December 1987****ISSN: 0375-3050****E-ISSN: 3036-0188**

Citation: Maxwell, A. R. (1987). Balui Reconnaissances: Introduction to The Research. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XXXVII (58): 1-14

BALUI RECONNAISSANCES: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH**Allen R. Maxwell**

The University of Alabama

INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1986, with the assistance of Anyie Wan of the Sarawak Museum, I carried out an ethnolinguistic and ethnohistorical reconnaissance of a number of ethnic groups living in the Balui Valley. This article presents the background to the research, and an outline of the plan of work as well as the schedule of villages visited. Additional articles will focus on the individual groups in this study and related topics (see Maxwell 1987).

BALUI RECONNAISSANCES: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

by

Allen R. Maxwell
The University of Alabama

During the summer of 1986, with the assistance of Anyie Wan of the Sarawak Museum, I carried out an ethnolinguistic and ethnohistorical reconnaissance of a number of ethnic groups living in the Balui Valley. This article presents the background to the research, and an outline of the plan of work as well as the schedule of villages visited. Additional articles will focus on the individual groups in this study and related topics (see Maxwell 1987).

ORIGINS OF THE STUDY

In the summer of 1985, while holding a Fulbright Southeast Asia Regional Research Grant, I was attached to the Sarawak Museum to prepare an annotated romanized edition of the jawi Malay *Cetera Syekh 'Uthman*. This biography of the Sarawak *alim*, Syekh 'Uthman bin Abdul Wahab, was published originally in Singapore, by the Al-Ahmadiyah Press in 1921 (Zainuddin 1921). During the course of my stay in Sarawak, the Director of the Sarawak Museum, Mr. Lucas Chin, indicated that the Museum was seeking to sponsor a number of research projects on the various ethnic groups of the Balui River valley located in Sarawak's Seventh Division. Some of these projects had already begun while others were still in the planning stage. These activities had been initiated as a result of plans for a number of hydro-electric installations in the upper Rejang Valley, but principally by the one slated for construction at the Bakun Rapid in the Balui River, approximately 40 km (25 mi.) upstream from the district seat of Belaga.

Among the projects in which the Museum had particular interest was a study of the oral traditions of the Balui Valley peoples. Because of my long-standing interest in ethnohistory a study of oral historical traditions (*tradisi lisan, sejarah lisan*) in the Balui area appealed to me. The question that soon arose in our discussions was, which of the numerous groups and subgroups in the Belaga District (e.g. Badang, Bahmali or Mamali, Baketan, Buket, Kajaman, Lahanan, Lisum, Penan, Punan Bah, Punan Busang, Sekapan, Seping, Sihan, Tanjong, as well as numerous other Kayan and Kenyah subgroups) had the most extensive and elaborated oral ethnohistorical traditions. After discussions with the Director and other Museum staff, it became clear that it was not currently possible to answer this question.

Partly because of the remoteness of the Balui Valley, located far in the interior away from the coast and major population centers, very little has been recorded and published about most of the groups in this area, with some of them having received almost no attention at all. The situation of these Orang Ulu groups is then quite different than that of others, such as the Iban, about which there exists a very considerable amount of ethnological and historical scholarship, as well as a substantial body of traditional literature. While a number of these publications date from earlier decades, the majority of them has appeared in the pages of the Sarawak Museum Journal (see, e.g., Loh 1980: 96–102), as well as the publications of the earlier Borneo Literature Bureau and its continuation as the Sarawak Branch of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, and the publications of the Sarawak Literary Society. Happily this situation with regard to the Orang Ulu groups is changing. There are currently a number of projects in progress, dealing with the ethnography, material culture, and economy of several of these groups. These results will no doubt continue to be reported in the pages of this journal for a number of years to come. In the summer of 1985, however, there was too little information available to allow the determination of which of these groups could be most profitably studied from the perspectives of ethnohistory and oral historical traditions.

After further thinking on this situation, I met again with the Director, Mr. Chin, and what emerged from these discussions was that the need was for a method by which to determine which group were the best candidates for an ethnohistorical study and at the same time record and preserve a body of the oral traditions of this area. We concluded that a preliminary study designed specifically to collect a range of ethnolinguistic and ethnohistorical information about a number of different groups could be very useful in trying to identify which group or groups would be the most appropriate. This effort could be designed to be carried out in the summers, which would fit in well with my teaching duties during the academic year (August-May) in the Department of Anthropology at The University of Alabama. In addition I would have the time between summers to prepare the results of the previous summer's work for publication. Following a number of other discussions with the Director, the Government Ethnologist, Mr. Peter Kedit, Museum staff, and officials of other departments of the Sarawak government, it was agreed that I should propose a project which would assess the ethnohistorical traditions of the Balui Valley. I received a Fulbright Southeast Asia Regional Research Grant to begin this work during the summer of 1986.

THE FIELD INVESTIGATION

The original plan, which we developed in the discussions at the Museum in the summer of 1985, was to divide up the work into a five-day schedule for each group to be studied. In the first day a standard list of basic vocabulary (Swadesh List) would be collected, transcribed in broad phonetic notation. The purpose was to elicit a comparable set of vocabulary data from each group in order to establish an objective basis by which published and other anecdotal judgments about degrees of linguistic relationship among the various groups might be assessed. Subjective statements about such matters, drawn both from informants as well as others knowledgeable in the languages concerned, can sometimes be very useful and informative but these have often proved contradictory in the past. Consequently there could be no substitute for having comparable data on a number of different languages