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NOTES ON THE SIAN (SIHAN) OF BELAGA

Benedict Sandin

Why called Sian?*

Salik Gawit said:— In ancient time all human beings come from one race. It happened at Ulu Kadjang in those days many groups of people wished to cross the river. Unfortunately none of them were able to swim, therefore they made a huge bridge from rattans. After it had been made, each group began to walk across it. The Punan, the Kayan, the Kejaman, the Skapan, the Lannan and the Sian walked first. After them came many others who broke the bridge. In due course, these peoples such as the Iban, the Malays, the Chinese and the European flowed down the river. The European who flowed further down became white, their hair silvery and their eyes bluish due to the coldness of the water. The Sian and others who already reached the other side of the river before the bridge was broken, remained in the upper waters till this day.

I do not know why my race is called Sian. There is no river of that name that had been inhabited by our ancestors.

I can assure that my race are not foreigners. We are the people who are the origins of this place.

According to our ancestral saga, in ancient time we Sian lived at Nanga Tiau in the Mujong, one of the tributaries of Baleh River. It was in the Mujong that we Sian were separated. One party migrated eastward to live in the Pontianak River, while we moved nomadically to live in the Pilla River, a left tributary of the Rejang, now being occupied by the migratory Iban. As we lived nomadically, we depended upon the Pantu flour as essential food: from the Pilla we moved to the Bungan River. After exhausting the Pantu palms from there we moved to the upper Seggam. It was after we settled here

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* Editor's Note: These notes were collected by the late Mr. Benedict Sandin in 1961, when he was then the Museum's Research Assistant. As far as it can be ascertained, the notes have not been published elsewhere before. They are presented, with minor corrections, according to the title headings written in his note-books. Now that there are renewed interests on the ethnic groups in Belaga, the discovery of Benedict Sandin's notes have come to be timely — PMK

** The informant of this story is Salik Gawit, a Sian headman of the Menamang stream, aged 56 years on 27th February, 1961.

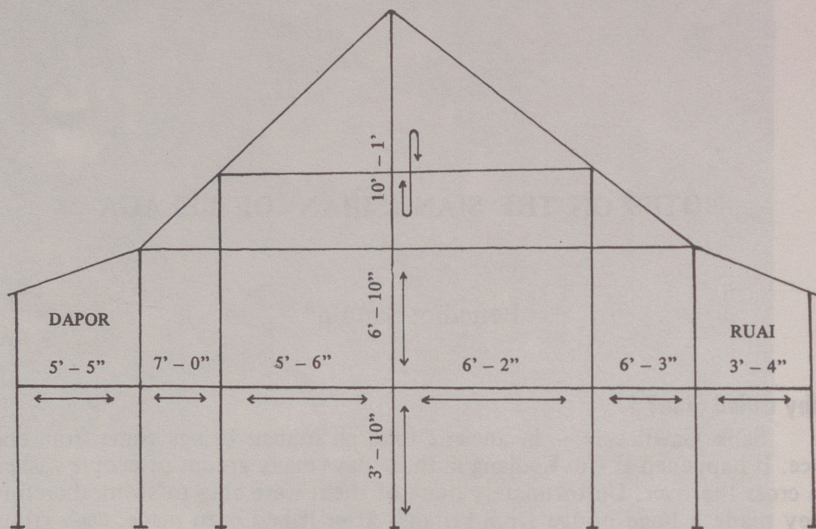


Diagram I: Structure and measurements of a Sian longhouse (not according to scale).

that we first started to plant padi. We did this because we were taught to do it by one Akek Laing alias Matu, who was the grandfather of ex-Penghulu Puso Abun, a Kejaman*.

Before we started cultivating rice, we usually lived exactly like the present Punan Tanah. Besides sago, we also ate wild animals such as snakes, frogs, birds and collected wild fruits.

From Seggam we moved to our present place in the upper Namang stream (See sketch Map I).

* Mr. Sujop said that he agreed the Sian were the old Punan Batu who once inhabited the part of the Ulu Mujong. While there, they were always at the mercy of the Iban, particularly by one Kerapoh Apai Luyoh in the Melinau.

In Ulu Mujong these Punan (Sian) lived in caves, in one of the hills there – probably at Bt. Batu, once the place in which the Iban fought the Government sometime in 1884–1886.

The present living Sian entirely knew nothing about this.

Today no more Punan called themselves, the Punan Batu, which was their name there.

(Ed. note: We cannot trace who the 'Mr. Sujop' referred to above).