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THE SA'BANS OF SARAWAK

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INTRODUCTION

The Sa'bans are a small and isolated group of Orang Ulu, who until recently (at the time of the Second World War) settled at various places along the Puak and Balong Rivers within the Punang Kelapang Region. To many Sarawakians their presence as a distinct group by itself is still unknown. It is therefore, the intention of this paper to introduce them, to document their migration into Sarawak and their existence thereafter. The general information herein is derived from my own association with the Sa'bans and also from oral history and songs related to me by the Sa'bans and the neighbouring Kelabits of Long Peluan.

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THE SA'BANS — THEIR ETHNIC IDENTITY

In October 1945 and January 1946, Harrison "found a small group of Sa'bans on the Bahau (Dutch-Borneo) who spoke a Sarawak Murut-Kelabit type dialect" (Bolang 1949:117). Indeed, Harrison referred to them as partly related to the Kelabits (1959:18). Clayre, however, reported that the Sa'bans claimed the Murik dialect was the origin of their language as opposed to Murut¹ or Kelabit (Clayre 1970: 319). Even today, they still insist that Murik is their next-of-kin tribe and cite Long Banio, a Murik settlement below Long Lama, as a point of reference.²

Who actually are the Sa'bans? Clayre highlighted their identity crisis. They called themselves Kelabits or Kenyahs depending on context. When probed further they regard themselves as related to the Muriks (Clayre 1972: 146). Clayre's comparative study of their language and those of the Lun Bawang, Kelabit and the Murik showed conclusive evidence that the Sa'bans are more closely related to the Lun Bawangs and Kelabits rather than the Murik Kenyah. Lexically, Clayre (1970:212) found that 75% of the Sa'ban language is similar to that of the Lun Bawang and 73% to that of Kelabit. From my own association with them, I could only re-affirm Clayre's findings.

In earlier times, the Sa'ban were referred to by various names such as Lun Pa' Nar, Ulun Berau and Bahau. The Kelabits referred to them as the people of Pa' Nar (Robert Lian 1977:26) simply because they lived along the Nar River, a tributary of the Bahau in East Kalimantan. Their reference as the Ulun Berau³ must have its origin to them as people living along the Berau, (Schneeberger, 1979), another tributary of the Bahau. On the same note, it is thus understood why they are also referred to as the Bahaus⁴. But I do suspect that these references (the Ulu Berau and the Bahau people) are a collective term combining them with the Kenyahs and the Penans who are also living along the Bahau River, as inferred by Lumholtz (1920:432) and Harrisson (1947: 42).

ORIGIN OF THE NAME SA'BAN AND THEIR LANGUAGE

The earliest mention of the Sa'ban in the literature was by Hose and McDougall (1912:35).

The term Sa'ban had an interesting origin dating back to the period of tribal wars with the Wang Bo' Kenyah down-river Bahau.

According to a story,⁵ when the Wang Bo' attacked the people living along the Nar River, the latter would stay put in their longhouses. They kept vigil through openings in the walls to ensure that the Wang Bo' dared not get any closer to getting into the longhouse. Every now and then able-bodied men, dressed in different tiger-skin war attire, walked in and out of the longhouse on to the open field outside. Upon seeing this the Wang Bo' were intimidated — it gave the desired impression that there were a lot of men hiding in the longhouse waiting for attack.

Realizing that they were outnumbered, the Wang Bo' retreated. Henceforth, the Wang Bo' referred to the people living along the Nar River as the Sa'ban, meaning the enduring group of people who will not surrender to their enemies. Metaphorically, even if the new loft of the longhouse turns dark with soot, they would not surrender. This could mean months or years.

Another version to this story was that when the people of the Nar River returned from a war, they would still be dressed in their blood-stained bark clothes. To their traditional Wang Po' enemies this signified their strength and bravery,⁶ and hence referred to as the Sa'ban.

Although the word Sa'ban does not appear in the Kenyah language, it could have originated from the Kenyah words *ngaban* or *ngaraban* and became adulterated over time. *Ngaban* in Kenyah means invulnerable in war by any weapons whatsoever, could not be wounded or penetrated by the *parang ilang* sword knife, by bullets and could repel the powers of the black magic. *Ngaraban* means to stay put. Thus, the Sabans are those enduring (stay put?), strong and brave (invulnerable?) people. Harrisson (1947:18) described them as "noted killers with the blowpipe".

Additional to the Sa'ban's claim to Murik as the origin of their language, a Kelabit legend attempted to explain the differences in the Sa'ban and Kelabit languages (Robert Lian 1977: 26). The story goes that a long time ago a female creature which terrorized the Kelabits was killed. Its meat was divided among all the Kelabits and their neighbours. As the people of Pa'Nar came late, they were left only with the genitals. Since then, the people of Pa'Nar spoke the Kelabit-Lun Bawang language with a different accent.