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THE IBAN IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

A major contribution of 19th century scholarship was to demonstrate the futility of searches for origins. While this may scarcely seem major today, it was a giant step in the history of science generally and anthropology particularly. "Science", wrote Wilhelm von Humboldt, "is the substitution of one error for another". The same thought was put another way by Charles Darwin who wrote, "... to kill an error is as good a service as, and sometimes even better than, the establishment of a new truth or fact".

Any attempt to consider the Iban in historical perspective must, then, begin with records from the 19th century. Even then, there is much we do not know nor shall we ever know it. Literate chroniclers did not provide records, and the oral traditions of the preliterate Iban did not survive them.

Historiography by its nature, and the availability of its data, must be selective. Therefore, this treatment is by no means exhaustive. It draws upon records early and late, upon well-known histories of the Iban such as the late Benedict Sandin's *The Sea Dayaks of Borneo* and Robert Pringle's *Rajahs and Rebels*. But the intent and spirit in which it is offered is to celebrate the altogether remarkable people called Iban.

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IBAN MIGRATIONS

Apart from the arrival and establishment of the Brooke Raj, the Iban migrations of the 19th century were the most important events of that century. While the migrations doubtlessly would have occurred without the Brookes, historians are agreed that the migrations were influenced in many respects by the Brooke Government and were influential in the development of state policies.

Iban migrations in the early to mid-nineteenth century tend to be confusing, because of the lack of historical data, the length of time involved, and the widely ramifying settlements of Iban migrants. At the opening of the 19th century, the Iban were living largely in the upriver areas of the Batang Lupar and Batang Saribas, and the tributaries of these rivers of the Second Division. They had migrated from the Kapuas headwaters in Kalimantan

across the watershed into what is now Sarawak some time earlier. In the first decades of the 19th century, groups of Iban families had begun to penetrate the headwaters of the Katibas (Freeman 1955: 11–20) and the Sarikei (Cooper 1966: 23), and by 1850, they had reached the vicinity of the Rejang.

By the early 1830s, other families from the Lemanak, Skrang, and Layar had migrated to the Entabai and Julau valleys, and the headwaters of the Kanowit River. Commenting on the presence of Iban in the Kanowit, Charles Brooke wrote early in 1859:

This stream is inhabited by Sea Dayaks, who have for the last fifteen or twenty years been migrating from the Saribas and Skrang districts for the purpose of obtaining new farming grounds. These exoduses took place over-land between one river and another. Such parties would do their four or five days' march, then build their houses, and proceed to farm for one or two years, after which they would recommence their march, and so on, until they arrived at their final destination.

While Freeman is basically correct in his recognition of a two-pronged movement from the Second Division into the Rejang via the Katibas and Kanowit rivers, these were only two of the major avenues through which Iban moved. The migrations were not highly organized ventures involving hundreds of people, but rather the gradual, continuous movements of people farming, hunting and gathering, then pressing on to new lands.

Iban from Saribas and the Krian moved to Sarikei and Binatang, and from there spread to other areas of the lower Rejang, to Sibuan and even to Song. Saribas Iban also settled in parts of the Kanowit and its tributaries, particularly the Julau. Skrang and Lemanak Iban moved into the Kanowit, the former from there to Durin, the latter, to the Poi and Ngemah, and from the Poi to the Batang Igan below Sibuan. Upon reaching the Rejang, the Iban began the gradual ascent of the uninhabited tributaries, until they had established themselves to the north as well as to the south of the Rejang.

The arrival of the Iban in the lower Rejang predated the Brooke Raj. Cooper writes that Sherip Masahor (1810–1890) removed his headquarters to Sarikei, a small town on the River Rejang, and became very friendly with the Iban people living nearby (1966: 23). Sometime prior to the arrival of James Brooke in 1841, Masahor took over the administration of the Rejang district for the Sultan of Brunei (*Ibid*).

Some chronological fixes on Iban migrations can be inferred from records of the 19th century. For example, at the time of the publication of *Ten Years in Sarawak* by the Second Rajah in 1866, the Iban had not migrated to the areas north or east of the Rejang. Within a decade or so of that work, they had invaded the northern tributaries of the Rejang and were on their way to other territories of northern Sarawak.

In his analysis of Iban migrations, Pringle writes:

The development of Iban piracy may be regarded as one symptom of a remarkable outburst of human energy which also led to the simultaneous commencement of Iban migration to the Third Division at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This expansion, both 'piratical' and territorial, could not have