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EARTHEN CROCODILE EFFIGIES OF THE IBAN OF SARAWAK: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

Ipoi Datan, Stephen Chia and Nicholas Daby

ABSTRACT

In a slightly earlier article (Ipoi, 2011b), the main author has discussed the same subject, albeit, on effigies made by the Lun Bawang of Lawas District in Limbang Division, Sarawak. This latest article is thus useful for comparative and instigative purposes as this subject has not been fully studied by earlier and pioneering researchers on the Iban community, especially with regard to their hill paddy rituals and ceremonies. We hope that comments and reviews would be elicited from with in and outside Sarawak on this matter so that a more comprehensive scenario or picture can be attained.

In 2004, the Sarawak Museum initiated survey work on the earthen crocodile effigies (*buayeh tana'*) made by the Lun Bawang in north-eastern Sarawak. In 2006, it was noted and validated that the Iban community also made similar effigies in Saratok, Betong Division. When it was realised that the Iban traditionally built effigies (*baya tanah*) as part of their hill paddy rituals, especially *mali* or *ngemali umai*, the museum decided to extend the scope of study to Iban dominated areas as well. From 2008, the museum was aptly assisted by researchers from the Centre for Global Archaeological Research Malaysia, University of Science Malaysia, Penang in conducting the surveys. This article is a preliminary report of the joint-research conducted in Iban domains that practically span all over Sarawak, especially in the middle and upper courses of most major rivers. It will touch on the general distribution and features of the effigies, purposes for their construction and reasons for abandonment.



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INTRODUCTION

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In 2004, the Sarawak Museum initiated survey work on the earthen crocodile effigies (*buayeh tana'*) made by the Lun Bawang in north-eastern Sarawak. In 2006, it was noted and validated that the Iban community also made similar effigies in Saratok, Betong Division. When it was realised that the Iban traditionally built effigies (*baya tanab*) as part of their hill paddy rituals, especially *mali* or *ngemali umai*, the museum decided to extend the scope of study to Iban dominated areas as well. From 2008, the museum was aptly assisted by researchers from the Centre for Global Archaeological Research Malaysia, University of Science Malaysia, Penang in conducting the surveys. This article is a preliminary report of the joint-research conducted in Iban domains that practically span all over Sarawak, especially in the middle and upper courses of most major rivers. It will touch on the general distribution and features of the effigies, purposes for their construction and reasons for abandonment.

The Iban community

The Iban numbering about 730,000 people (Sarawak Government Official Diary, 2012) or representing 30% of the total population (2.5 million) is the largest ethnic group in Sarawak. Today, due to their



Fig. 1: Map of Sarawak showing the locations of earthen crocodile effigies.

adventurous and wandering aptitude (*bejalai*) they are virtually found in most parts of the state though their traditional bastions are Sri Aman (formerly Simanggang), Betong, Rajang (Sibu) and Kapit Divisions. They traditionally planted hill paddy (and still do today), lived off the resources from the forests and rivers and were animists. They observed and conducted various rituals and ceremonies which range from joyous and boisterous festivals, like *Gawai Dayak*, to solemn mortuary rituals or dirges, such as *Gawai Antu*.

General distribution of crocodile effigies

The initial/first Iban site brought to the museum's attention was at Nanga Emplaie Ili, Saratok, Betong Division in October 2007. The effigies consisted of a male and a female crocodiles, obviously of the *Crocodylus porosus* species. The effigies were fortunate not to have been destroyed during the construction of the Borneo Highway in the late 1990 to early 2000. In May 2008, the museum sponsored a *miring* ceremony and contributed towards the construction of a better shed while the dwellers from Nanga Emplaie and the nearby longhouses supplied the manpower. The site has since been maintained and promoted by the Saratok District Council as a heritage destination.

Between June 2009 and April 2010, four surveys were carried out in four zones, namely 1) Kuching, Samarahan, Sri Aman and Betong Divisions; 2) Sibu and Mukah Divisions; 3) Sarikei Division; and 4) Kanowit District respectively. A total of 35 sites were recorded as in Table 1.

About half of the above sites were no longer discernible, either due to natural deterioration or destroyed by farming or logging activities. Proper investigation is yet to be carried out in Bintulu and Kapit Divisions and Song District. However, the site of Nanga Putai, Ulu Baleh, Kapit was inspected in December 2011 as will be discussed later.

Table 1: Distribution of sites with confirmed effigies according to areas.

Areas	No. of sites
1) Kuching, Samarahan, Sri Aman and Betong Divisions	19
2) Sibu and Mukah Divisions	7
3) Sarikei Division	3
4) Kanowit District	6
Total	35

It can be surmised that crocodile effigies were normally found in settlement areas that have been inhabited by the Iban for at least a hundred years ago where hill paddy cultivation was practised. In other words, if the longhouse has been in the same location or vicinity for a comparatively long period the possibility of it having an effigy is more likely than a longhouse that has moved from another location within the last two or three decades. This is especially true when the determining factor for selecting a longhouse site now is no longer a navigable and small river but a metalled road. This situation was noted at Rumah Anyai, Entulang Entawa in Sri Aman where the effigy was located far from the present longhouse and at Rumah Babai, Kanowit where the effigy was located at their former longhouse site at Ulu Kaba. These two longhouses and most of the other longhouses that were visited but did not have effigy had been relocated to the road sides or separated from original ones, for administrative or personal reasons, within the last few decades.

Features of the crocodile effigies

Normally the Iban effigies are made in a pair, *i.e.* one male (often slightly larger than female) and one female with both either facing in the same direction or interposed. However, a few were made in trio where a smaller effigy, supposedly a baby crocodile, was built in between the adult ones in the 1950s such as the ones at the abandoned Rumah Manggoi, Sungai Mepai in Kanowit. Another unique site at Rumah Intai, Nanga Stras, Ulu Kaba (former longhouse site) had an effigy of a freshwater turtle made in front of the crocodiles.

Majority of the effigies faced a water source, either a river or a stream. A few faced inland while some sites, especially those located in Sri Aman Division, were said to face the paddy farms or the setting sun, *i.e.* the west. As such, most effigies were constructed on fairly flat ground or close to the river bank and occasionally built in a trench, as at Sri Aman. Essentially, the effigies were made from clayey soil located around the chosen site where soil was dug and moulded into the image of a crocodile with outstretched limbs, straight head and slightly curled tail. The dug soil would be occasionally wet and pummelled with wooden beaters to compact it so that it could last for a considerably long period. The average measurements of the images were between two and three metres in length and 0.4 to 0.8 metres in width.

Prior to the availability of porcelains, river pebbles were used as