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BENEDICT SANDIN, 1918-1982: A BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR**Clifford Sather**

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INTRODUCTION

After more than a year of seriously declining health, Benedict Sandin died peacefully, surrounded by family and friends, on the 7th of August, 1982. He was buried in the ancient Iban cemetery at Batu Anchau, just below his longhouse on the Baku tributary of the Saribas River, on the 12th of August, following a five-night vigil (*rabat*). His funeral was conducted according to a complex custom of ceremonial honour previously accorded only once before in the history of the Baku, more than a century earlier, to his great grandfather, the famous 19th-century war chief, linggir "Mali Lebu". Of all the honours he received during his lifetime, none would have given Benedict Sandin greater pleasure than this, for Linggir symbolized to Benedict, more than any other historical figure, the heritage he devoted the greater part of his life to preserve in writing.

In life, Benedict Sandin was, as Robert Bringle (1970: xiii) has described him, "the foremost authority on the history and culture of his people". His knowledge of the Iban was encyclopedic. His prolific writings, which touch on virtually every facet of Iban life, constitute a unique, and increasingly irretrievable record of a traditional culture and its formative history far richer and more detailed than we possess for any other Bornean people.

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A BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR

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The present memoir is based primarily on personal conversations with Benedict Sandin recorded in Sarawak between 1977 and 1979. Its principal purpose is to record the main facts of Benedict Sandin’s life and place on record his personal reflections on the experiences of his career. Except to point up connections between these experiences and the conception of Iban society conveyed by his writings, I have tried, as far as possible, to let Benedict speak for himself¹.

¹ The purpose of this paper is primarily biographical. For a critical assessment of Benedict Sandin’s writings, the interested reader is referred to Derek Freeman’s excellent essay, *Some Reflections on the Nature of Iban Society* (1981: 10–15). Freeman’s comments refer principally to interpretations of traditional political leadership and stratification. Brief biographical appreciations can be found in Harrison (1967: ix–x), Pringle (1970: xiii–xv), and Sather (1980a: xiv–xv). An editorial (“A sad loss”, August 11, 1982; p. 2) and a relatively full obituary (August 9, 1982; p. 13) were published in the *Sarawak Tribune* following Benedict Sandin’s death.

Inevitably personal conversations reveal momentary lapses of memory, and it has been necessary to make a number of minor factual corrections to the present record. In this connection, I am grateful to Lucas Chin, Peter Kedit, and Robert Nicholl for their comments on sections of an earlier draft of this paper. Valuable information was also contributed by Philip Jones, Melvin Thatcher, and Stanley Jugol Sandin. To each of these persons I express my sincere thanks.

With two exceptions, the accompanying plates are from the photograph archives of the Sarawak Museum; I wish to thank the Museum Curator, Lucas Chin, for kindly allowing me to make use of them here. Plates 1 and 2 are from Benedict Sandin's personal collection and are reproduced with the permission of his family.

I

Benedict Sandin was born at Kerangan Pinggai on the middle reaches of the Paku river, in the Spaoh sub-District of the Second Division of Sarawak, on the 18th of October, 1918. His birthplace takes its name from a strikingly handsome stretch of river beach formed of smooth, water-rounded pebbles (*kerangan*), just above the *pala pasang*, or maximum limits of tidal influence. Upriver from Kerangan Pinggai to its headwaters, the Paku is a clear, swift-flowing stream.

Benedict Sandin was born the first child of Attat anak Penghulu Garran and his wife Indu anak Nyanggau. His father Attat was the youngest son of Penghulu Garran, who, until his death in 1900, was Native Chief of the lower Paku Iban². His mother was the only child of Nyanggau anak Uja, a well-known traditional curer, or *dukun*. Indu was the family heiress of her parents, and following their marriage, Attat joined his wife's longhouse at Kerangan Pinggai, immediately upstream from his own natal house at Tanjong. Here Benedict Sandin was born at the beginning of the *landas* season in 1918. At the time of his birth, his parents were living with his mother's family in a temporary settlement, as the modern Kerangan Pinggai longhouse was then under construction.

The Paku area into which Benedict was born is today a progressive rubber- and pepper-growing district with an Iban population of 4,000 persons. The Paku people and other Iban of the lower Saribas took up the cultivation of cash crops, and welcomed modern education, long before most other Iban groups in Sarawak, and Benedict's early childhood coincided, as we shall see later on, with a period of rapid change and unprecedented economic prosperity. It also coincided with an important transitional period in the district's history. Many of the older generation still living during his youth were born before the coming of the Brookes. His early years thus bridged a crucial era. The exploits of past war chiefs, warriors, and migrational leaders were still remembered and retold during his childhood in longhouse stories. These stories often took the form of reminiscences told by those who had known the participants or been personally involved in the events they described. By his own account, Benedict was strongly affected by these stories. Later on, after he learned to write a Romanized form of Iban, he developed a habit, which was to remain for the rest of his life, of writing down what he heard verbatim in notebooks. These notebooks, and his own memory, provided the basis of much of his later writings, and their accuracy and detail attest to the remarkable facility he developed early in life as a recorder of oral narrative.

² Prior to 1886, when the river was divided into two Penghulu districts, Penghulu Garran was Native Chief of the whole Paku (cf. Pringle 1970: 190; Sandin 1970a: 100).