

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES ON THE CULTURE OF THE KELABITS OF NORTH CENTRAL BORNEO

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THIS paper attempts to examine one particular and topographically clear-cut fragment in the jigsaw of culture contacts and influences operating through Southeast Asia and via Indonesia to (and from) the Pacific Islands.

Since March, 1945, the writer has spent more than two years among the hill peoples living in the highest inhabited area of the world's third largest island, Borneo. This plateau, which forms a great bowl encircled by mountains rising to 8,000 ft., lies in the northeast corner of Sarawak and the northwest corner of Dutch Borneo. It is inaccessible to river travel, whereas nearly all the normal commerce of Borneo inland is by canoe. Great gorges and falls make the major rivers, several of which rise in this vicinity, impassable. Travel is by foot, and it takes at least a month for a journey to and from the coast—often much more. Until this century, access to the coast was obstructed by the intricate pattern of head-hunting, not merely between one "tribe" and another, but often between adjacent long-houses (villages).

These uplands of north central Borneo are inhabited by a fairly homogeneous, dark-skinned, long-haired people, variously called Kelabit, Murut, Potok, Milau and Saban, living in long-houses; with a rice, cattle and hunting economy; usually wearing loin-cloth (man) or close-fitting skirt (woman); cheerful, industrious, vigorous, well-built hill folk, with a marked enthusiasm for jokes, rice-beer, competitive games, grandiloquent names, premarital promiscuity, and good craftsmanship in whatever they may make or modify. Salt springs and a rich soil give them independence in all the necessities except iron, which they obtain from adjacent peoples in return for salt and tobacco. In late years cloth has become a social necessity as badge of all but the poorest or laziest. It is obtained from the coast, either directly or indirectly, in exchange for dammar, rottan, pig fat, and in the past, wild rubber.

This study is focussed on the Kelabit section, living in the least accessible area at the headwaters of the Baram River which flows mainly south and then, with many convolutions, out to the west coast. These Kelabits are very broadly related to the surrounding riverine Kayans and Kenyahs, and the sub-coastal "Dayaks" (see Harrison, 1949 b.), general types which have been grouped as "pagan tribes" by Rutter (1929), Hose and McDougall (1912), in contrast to the coastal and mainly Mohammedan Malays, Melanaus, Kedayans, etc.

Against this background, we may examine the remotest of the upland groups, the Kelabits. In the space available, it would be out of the question to examine their whole culture complex. Certain aspects have therefore been selected as most likely to illuminate, from widely different angles, the source, system, intensity and persistence of the spreads of peoples and culture up into or through the heart of Borneo. Therefore, relevant data concern:

I.—Agriculture; II.—Megaliths; III.—Pottery; IV.—Beads; V.—Designs; VI.—Belief; VII.—Legend.

These seven items appear to the writer, from his experience in the area, to provide data for a reasonably adequate picture of the situation from the present point of view.

Three conspicuous omissions from discussion here are language, physique, and kinship and descent systems. But we still know so little about these subjects among the other peoples of Borneo, that any generalisations are, at this stage, bound to be unsafe, since they must be based on detailed data for the Kelabits only.

I.—AGRICULTURE.

A feature of Kelabit life is the presence both of irrigated wet padi (*sawah*) cultivation and of the shifting, jungle-clearing (*ladang*) dry method. None of the surrounding lowland and riverine peoples practises the *sawah* method, although over their vast area there are many suitable places. On the coastal plain a wet system, less elaborate than that of the Kelabits, is practised. Kelabits irrigate from small streams over long distances, and by the use of a large number of subdivisions within the *sawah*—up to 500 in an acre—have good control over basic

drainage, surplus spilling and close irrigation in case of drought. They claim to have made such *sawahs* since "time immemorial;" there are at least half a dozen valleys not inhabited within Kelabit memory which show clear evidences of previous extensive irrigation.

In this and other ways (*e.g.*, catch-crops, fruit planting, tobacco growing) the Kelabits are quite advanced agriculturists by any local standards, and also breeders of buffalo and cattle. They use neither beast nor plough in cultivation. At the same time, they are keen hunters, both with blowpipe and with dogs, including—until its extinction—the rhinoceros for its alleged aphrodisiac value to the Chinese. They are good trackers, and parties of men like to make long and arduous journeys into uninhabited mountain areas.

As if to confuse further the usual "logic" of man's economic development, a Kelabit may at one and the same time make both *sawah* and *ladang*. This would seem to be out of line with the generally accepted theories of evolution in Asian agricultural method—for instance, as lately put forward by such an authority as Carl Pelzer (1945, p. 6):

"Can there be a greater contrast than that between the shifting cultivators' small, irregular, temporary clearings with their chaotic jumble of fallen and half-fallen tree trunks and stumps on the one hand, and on the other, an irrigated plain, subdivided into small fields, each surrounded by a dyke—or a steep slope where a succession of beautifully built terraces lead up for several hundreds or even thousands of feet? These kinds of landscape are physical expressions of totally different economies, or modes of life, with different cultural patterns, concepts of land tenure, attitudes towards the soil, and material equipment. Historically, shifting cultivation without doubt pre-dates sedentary cultivation."

Dr. Pelzer could hardly be so confident about this indubitable succession if he knew the Kelabit set-up. Here, in the middle of Borneo, a people cultivate in ways both "advanced" and "primitive," and with certain features somewhat peculiar to them, such as the multiple cross-bund arrangement. Bearing in mind the complex impacts and survivals this may (or may not) suggest, let us examine a second and superficially contrasting aspect.

II.—MEGALITHS.

If the Kelabits are notable in Borneo for their upland agriculture and in some respects its "advanced" character