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# LONGHOUSE AND JUNGLE

*An Expedition to Sarawak*

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CHATTO AND WINDUS  
LONDON

of them how old they were. Several could not say at all, while those who knew could give no exact date of birth, and assumed that the first day of the new year was their birthday. Both Madang and Lian were Christians, Lian an Evangelical, as were all the Kelabits, Madang a Roman Catholic. Lian said that after the war the Evangelical missionaries had come to the Kelabit Plateau and taught that if the Kelabits accepted Christianity there would no longer be any need to follow their old superstitions and customs. In the past they had lost many working days a year because of bad omens: if, for instance, an evil bird flew across their path as they were on their way from their villages to the rice fields they had to return and spend the day in the village. If a man died or a child was born his relatives would stop working for as much as a week while they celebrated, a way of propitiating the spirits, slaughtering many of their pigs and fowls in order to feast and entertain their friends. The larger the family the bigger the feast, so the big families had to sacrifice a great deal of their wealth for them. Thus the coming of Christianity conveniently allowed the Kelabits to drop frustrating old customs. But Lian had little idea of the positive side of the Christian faith.

Madang said that a few years after the war the Catholic priests had come up the Tinjar and tried to convert some of the Sebop people. Missionaries had been in the Baram seventy years before but at that time no one had been willing to give up their old customs and laws. In 1948 the old men in the longhouses opposed any change, but those who had fought the Japanese with the British at the end of the war told how the white men ignored the evil omens without coming to any harm, and when the Sebops did the same they found it made no difference. So they decided to give up their old ways and become Christians.

He went on to tell me a few of these omens which until then had governed their lives. If an eagle or certain other proscribed birds flew across their path from left to right,

any child travelling with them was bound to come to harm. They would have to put off their journey until another day. If the same bird flew across the path from right to left an adult would come to harm, or if, despite the omen, they continued till they reached their destination and no harm befell them, then someone in the house they entered would come to grief instead. All this inconvenience had now disappeared. Provided they did not steal or kill they would be acceptable to God when they died. Neither could add very much more though they said that some of the young men from their villages were being taught by missionaries so that they could teach the others.

In return for their stories I would tell them about England. Their knowledge of anything outside Borneo was limited to tales about the war, or gathered from the few up-country people, generally Penghulus, who had been on a visit to Singapore. They were intensely curious about England, and about which country had the most people, snow and cold, deserts and so on. They would tell me of their own people; Lian about the Kelabit country on its high and secluded plateau, Madang about the past wars of the Kenyahs, and how eventually they came to settle and live peacefully.

The time was approaching for us to leave the base camp, go up to the head of the Luar and then strike across the plateau for the northern side of the Usun Apau. This journey to establish a new base camp and clearing for the airdrop in December would be through completely unknown and uninhabited country, which, according to Mandang and the Kayans, was a likely habitat of the Borneo rhinoceros. This is an extremely rare species of stunted rhinoceros which is now protected by the Government, for it is nearing extinction largely owing to the high prices the Chinese will pay, especially for the horn which they use as an aphrodisiac. I had repeatedly told everyone that under no circumstances were they to kill a rhinoceros, but I hoped

we shouldn't meet one, because the delight of the chase and magnificent excitement of so great a kill would certainly have outweighed any Government prohibition. Madang and Lian asked what was to happen if they met a rhinoceros: could they kill it? I said 'no' firmly, but they both laughed and said of course they would. They thought up a story to tell the court if they were brought to trial. Self-defence! Madang related how both his father and grandfather from the Dapoi had hunted rhinoceros on the Usun Apau. If he met one he would have to maintain the family tradition. Finally they asked me if, when I next went down to Belaga before the second airdrop, I would write to Tom Harrisson and get his permission to kill one for the Museum. I did this when the time came: the answer over the radio was a categorical 'no', with the threat of prison to follow—not a very serious threat, because what few specimens remain are probably to be found only in the most remote parts of Indonesian Borneo, in the very centre of the island.

## THE NOMADIC PENANS

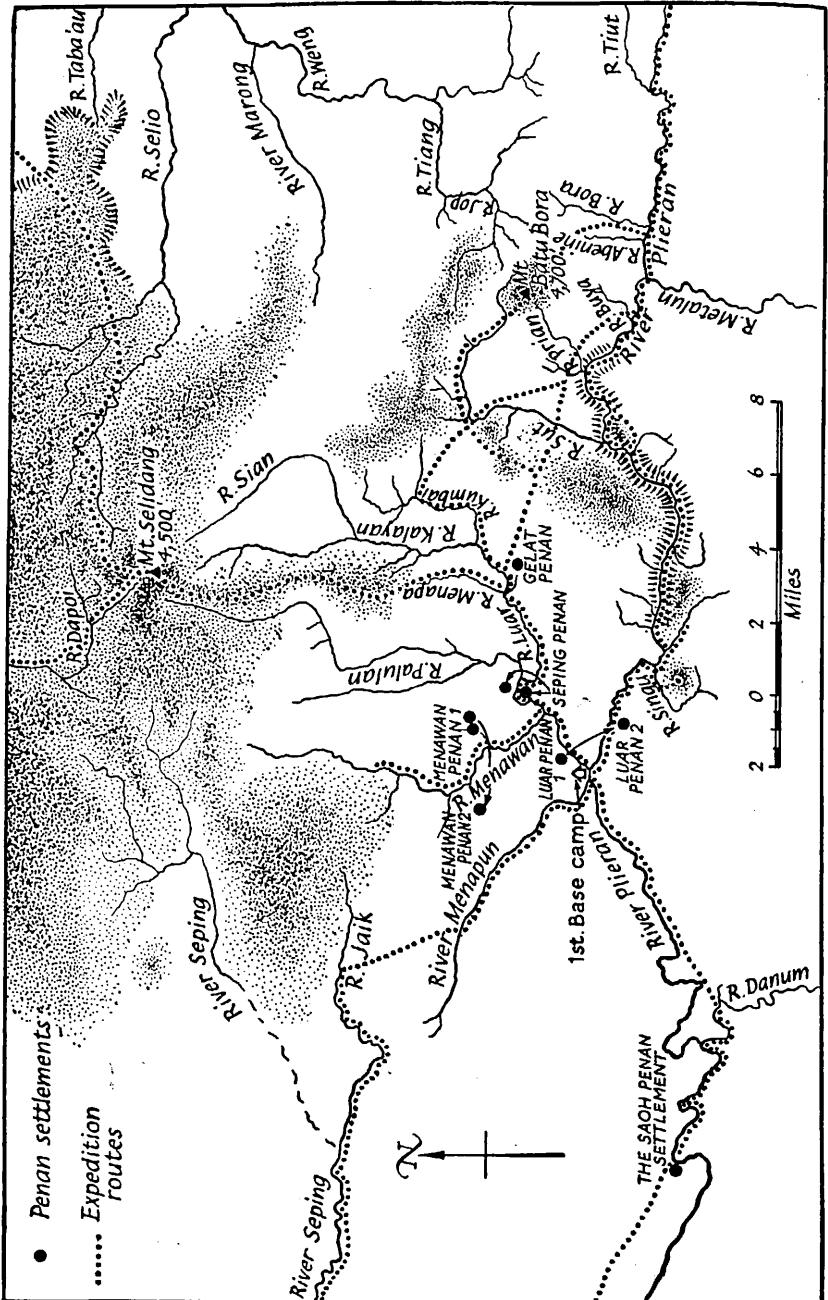
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THERE WERE FIVE Penan settlements near Long Luar, so it was a good centre for making a study of how they lived and collecting some of their handicrafts for the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford. Less is known about the Penans than any other Borneo people and these isolated groups in the headwaters of the Rejang are among the wildest and most remote in Sarawak.

They are a nomadic people who live entirely by food-gathering and hunting; they will stay in one place for three months or a year until they have exhausted the wild sago and fruit supplies of the area and driven all the game away. I took a census of the five groups—each of about fifty people—and the total number was three hundred and twenty-two. They are powerfully built and, unlike the Kayans, of variable height, from nearly six feet to short and stocky. Their skin is lighter in colour than that of any other Borneo people. The women are good-looking but, like most primitive peoples, age quickly after twenty.

Their settlements are made in small clearings which allow no more light or open space than is necessary for the cluster of huts, each housing seven or eight people. A good hut is raised three feet off the ground and the walls are made of saplings with the uprights, cross-bars and roof-trees tied together by rotan. The steeply pitched roofs are thatched with bark or leaves.

With such a shy and unforthcoming people it is hard to be definite about their beliefs and customs, which are vague and unorganized, many borrowed and adapted from those of the Kayans and Kenyans. Certain birds—hawks and



3. The Plieran River: Penan settlements

### THE NOMADIC PENANS

others—are the omen birds. If the bird is heard on the left the journey must be abandoned; on the right it is a good omen. If they ignore the omen, then harm—accident or disease—will be the consequence. However, the whole time I was with them I cannot remember them saying that omens were bad for any journey. Like the Kayans and Kenyahs they have omens of convenience: on one occasion when I asked two men to take a message down-river and found the next day that they had not gone, they said they had set off but had to return because an evil bird flew across their path.

They believe in various spirits, of the water, of mountains and trees, and of the dead. The spirits of those killed in head-hunting are supposed to be particularly vicious. They are confused as to what happens after death; some claim that there is no life after death, but most of them believe the reverse. They do not know where the spirits of the dead go, except that it is a long way and that they travel down a river to get there. They bury with the dead their earthly possessions, parangs and blow-pipes, mats and sago-hammers, for without these they could not manage in the land of the spirits. The only death that occurred while I was in the area—that of the small son of Tama' Tingang, the headman of the Luar Penans—happened while I was away in the Upper Plieran, so I missed the funeral. There is little ritual attached to burial, though much wailing of the women. The body was buried about two miles upstream from their settlement and the place marked by a flag—an old piece of sarong—tied to a pole and stuck thirty feet up in a tree. Afterwards the whole settlement immediately moved from the Luar into the Plieran, about three miles away. They said they would be able to return after a few months had passed.

Marriage and divorce seem to be by mutual consent, though sometimes the man must ask the parents first. They may have a trial period of living together before they