

# THE OYA MELANAU

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MALAYSIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
(SARAWAK BRANCH)

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The Oya Melanau



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PUSAT DOKUMENTASI MELAYU  
DEWAN BAHASA DAN PUSTAKA

# THE OYA MELANAU

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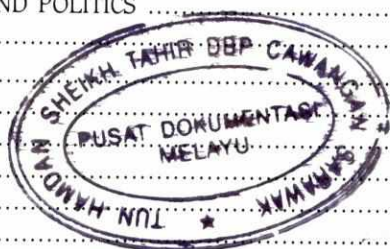
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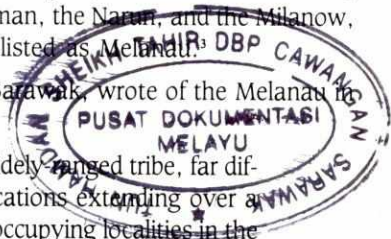
## THE MELANAU

The name *Melanau*, spelt in different ways, has been used for people living on the coasts of northern Borneo, southwest of Brunei, for a long time past. On a map published in Florence in 1595 the word *Malano* is written along the coast roughly where the rivers Oya, Mukah, and Balingian run.<sup>1</sup> The inhabitants of that area say they have never called themselves *Melanau* and that it is a Malay word from Brunei. The name is said also to occur in the Philippines, and it has been suggested that it may be a variation of the word *Mindano*, meaning coastal dweller in contrast with names such as *Dayak* or *Murut* for hill people or those living inland.<sup>2</sup> Exactly whom the name *Melanau* refers to was never quite certain. A Christian missionary visiting Brunei in 1837 was told that the Sultan's subjects belonged to twenty-one different groups, among whom were the Kayan, the Tatow, the Kanawit, the Siting, the Bukatan, the Dali, the Kajaman, the Naran, and the Milanow, most of whom at some time have been listed as *Melanau*.

Charles Brooke, the second Rajah of Sarawak, wrote of the *Melanau* in 1866:

This is the most numerous and widely ranged tribe, far different from the rest, with ramifications extending over a space of hundreds of miles, and occupying localities in the interior and centre of the island extending to the heads of the Kotei, Banja Massin, and Kapuas rivers in the interior, and beyond Brunei and Kapuas rivers in the interior, and beyond Brunei in a northward direction .... The branch divisions are severally called after the countries in which they reside, each possessing different customs and dialects; but the whole coast between Rajang and Brunei is no doubt inhabited by these people.<sup>4</sup>

Ten years later Mr. Crocker, one of the Rajah's officials stationed on the coast at Mukah among people whom outsiders have always agreed to call



Melanau, wrote:

I am inclined to agree with the theory of H.H. the Rajah that the Milanos are the most numerous and widely ranged tribes in Borneo; at all events from vocabularies in my possession and from a careful examination of similarity in manners and customs, I am convinced that the Kinniahs and Kyans in the Barram river; the Kanowits, Kajamangs, Bakatans, Lugats, Ukits, Tanjongs, and Punans of the upper Rejang; Tataus and Balineans, the Bakatans of Upper Oya and Mukah, and the Malows of Upper Kapuas, are distinctly of the same stock—but we have at present more particularly to deal with the Milanos, who inhabit the mouths of the Rejang, Blawi, Palo, Bruit, Egan, Mudan, Oya, Muka, and Bintulu, and who number in all about 30,000 souls.<sup>5</sup>

These quotations illustrate some of the difficulties met in classifying the people of Borneo. All the indigenous inhabitants of the island are physically rather alike; one group is not distinctly marked off from another by appearance. The languages of Borneo and the social and cultural forms served by them alter almost imperceptibly from village to village and river to river, until at some point it appears that the change is total. This fact is clearly linked to the geography of the island and the sparseness of its population. Borneo always has been, and still is, covered by thick tropical forests, and its soils, with a few exceptions, are poor. The population has never been dense anywhere, and most of it was thinly settled along the banks of the rivers, which, until the middle of the twentieth century, were the only practical routes of communication.<sup>6</sup> Consequently the inhabitants of a river, or of sections of it, tended to live in relative linguistic, cultural, and political isolation. In local use the words 'district' and 'river' are almost synonymous. A man who lives anywhere in the Oya district along that river says that he is an Oya man to distinguish himself from one whose home is on the River Mukah. And he does not speak of going to Kuching, but to Sarawak, for that town is on the Sarawak River.<sup>7</sup>

In 1886 in another article on the Melanau of Mukah, Mr. Crocker wrote:

When residing on the northwest coast among the Milanows I made a vocabulary of some fourteen different tribes, and although in many instances before they came under the influence of a settled government, the people of one river could not converse with those of another, yet the similarity of language is so great that all these tribes are branches of one great family: and yet their manners and customs are in some instances so different that one is led to doubt whether this inference is a correct one.<sup>8</sup>

From this quotation it is clear that Mr. Crocker, like most other writers on the people of Borneo, is dividing them primarily on grounds of language, though he does try to fit the divisions of language and dialect to differences of custom. An historian, writing of this kind of ethnography, says with a note of impatience:

No wholly neat and consistent use of ethnic terminology for the varied people of Sarawak would be altogether satisfactory, because the underlying social realities are both imprecise and flexible. Since the significant social categories are cultural not biological, both individuals and communities may shift their self-professed identities in a number of ways ... Moreover, it frequently happens that communities which seem to belong in one ethnic category by virtue of one criterion, such as language, may be classified otherwise by virtue of another equally significant criterion, such as religion or economic behaviour.

This is not to say, of course, that such attempts to bring a multitude of small localized groups into larger classes are useless. Indeed, for purposes of government of the kind brought by Europeans they are essential and the process was already begun in Brunei, though, in the loose form of control that the Sultan exercised over his subjects, it was usually enough for him to know whether they were coastal dwellers or hill people. For the rest, it did not concern him how his subjects identified themselves or what use they chose to make of their own classifications. He did not wish to enumerate his subjects, nor was he usually concerned to regulate their behaviour or see that they obeyed their own codes of law. His main interest in them was to see that they paid tribute. By contrast, the classification of his subjects and the defence of a clearly defined territory was one of the main concerns of James Brooke when, in 1841, under a grant from the Sultan of Brunei, he became the first Rajah of Sarawak.

The conclusion that must be drawn from the discussion is that the population of Sarawak has been arbitrarily and rather loosely distributed under a number of labels, based largely on linguistic resemblances, and often called races. In 1941, just before the occupation of the country by Japanese troops, the third Rajah enacted a constitution in which the races considered to be indigenous were made into legal categories. These were the Malays, the Iban, the Land Dayaks, the Kayan, the Kenyah, the Klemantans, the Melanau, the Murut, and any admixture of them. The Chinese, the Europeans, and the Indians were not considered to be indigenous, even though there were records of some of the Chinese inhabitants of Sarawak and neighbouring areas in Indonesian Borneo and Sabah having lived in the island for several centuries.<sup>10</sup>

Exactly what people fell into the different categories is not always clear, and some discussion is needed to clarify what is meant by Melanau, Malay, Iban, and of the census categories Muslim and Pagan.

### THE MELANAU

In 1861 the Sultan of Brunei ceded to the Rajah of Sarawak about a hundred miles of coast that stretched from the mouth of the river Igan to Kidurong point, just north-east of Bintulu. The Rajah incorporated this newly acquired territory, together with the earlier annexed Rejang delta, into an administrative Third Division of Sarawak. He and his officials used the name *Melanau* to describe the people who lived on the Rejang delta and the coastal area as far as Bintulu. These people, especially those on the lower reaches of the Oya, Mukah, the Balingian rivers, were sometimes called the *Coastal Melanau*, to distinguish them from those on the Rejang delta and, more particularly, from other apparently related groups in the interior and to the north-east of Bintulu, for whom the name *Melanau* was also occasionally used.

The coastal groups north-east of Bintulu as far as the river Baram were, however, not usually regarded as Melanau. All the same it was recognized that many of them were related linguistically and culturally to the Coastal Melanau as well as to other groups in the interior on the upper Rejang, the Baluy, the Balingian, the Tatau, and the Tinjar rivers. Unlike the coastal settlements, these latter groups were shifting cultivators growing hill rice, and were not sedentary farmers.

The extension by the Rajah and his officials of the name Melanau to these interior shifting cultivators was not unreasonable, for most of them do indeed appear to have close cultural and linguistic similarities with the Coastal Melanau. Recent studies, mainly using linguistic criteria, find a close relationship between the Sekapan, the Lahanan, the Kejaman, and the Punan Bah groups on the river Baluy and the Coastal Melanau and groups living on the rivers Tatau and Tinjar.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the people in the interior themselves tell myths and legends of their ancestors who came from Indonesian Borneo, and who, together with those who continued their migration to the delta and the coast, constituted in former times the great Kajang nation which was, they say, broken up by the intrusion of later Kayan and Kenyah invaders.<sup>12</sup> The Kayan and Kenyah groups were not only culturally and linguistically distinct from one another but also from the earlier Kajang or Melanau settlers.

In the constitution of 1941 the name 'Klemantan' was used, much as 'Melanau' had been used earlier, to cover groups that were neither Kayan, Kenyah, Iban, Land Dayak, Murut, nor Malay. The Rejang delta and coastal groups were still called Melanau, but were described as a subgroup of the Klemantan. This use of the word 'Klemantan' was first given currency by Charles Hose, one of the Rajah's officials.<sup>13</sup>

Whether there is one Melanau language or a number of cognate languages is an open question, and the speech of the different Melanau, Kajang, or Klemantan groups has been variously classified.<sup>14</sup>

Among the coastal Melanau the dialects fall into three main groups.<sup>15</sup> From Balingian, south-westwards to the mouth of the Igan, all dialects are more or less mutually comprehensible; but to the north-east at Bintulu phonetic changes occur which make speakers from Oya or Mukah feel that the speech is another language, even though it is closely related to their own. In many respects the Bintulu dialect is closer to the speech of groups living upriver from Balingian and on the River Balux.

From the River Igan round the Rejang delta and up the Dam river to Kanowit gradual changes so alter the language that a speaker from Oya cannot be readily understood at Manu or Sibul.

In 1947 the author of the official census, speaking of the coastal districts and the delta region of the Rejang, concluded that "it would have been a mistake not to recognise the individuality of the Melanaus as a cultural group; among the people it is freely recognized: language, customs, physical characteristics and occupations place these people in a loose but definite group of their own".<sup>16</sup> But this statement can be accepted only with qualifications. In each local district the Melanau are proud of the fact that their language and customs (*adet*) differentiate them from other people, although, as already noted, there is no one Melanau language comprehensible over the whole area and no one set of Melanau customs. Even in the coastal district there is no single characteristic type of occupation or mode of subsistence: some people cultivate and manufacture sago; among others the principal occupation is fishing or the cultivation of rubber or rice. Nor is the Melanau district the only area in Sarawak in which the inhabitants live in a similar environment and engage in these occupations. Thus, though it may be legitimate to speak of a Melanau culture and social structure typical of the coastal areas, it is doubtful, even there, how far any one group can be so distinguished from another or from other less closely similar groups in the interior.

The term 'Melanau' is sometimes used in this book in the older, rather imprecise way; but more usually it refers only to the speakers of related dialects in the Rejang area and on the coast. No validity for the details of ethnography is claimed beyond the Melanau speaking villages of the Oya river, though it is more than probable that the general principles of organisation discussed do in fact apply in greater or lesser degree to the whole of the Melanau coastal district. How far other groups of people speaking the different types of Melanau language, whether on the coast or in the interior, have or have not common structural or cultural forms is not considered in this book.

At the official census of 1960 the total number of people listed as Melanau in Sarawak was 44,661. These were almost entirely people whose homes were in the Rejang delta and the coastal district. In the Oya River out of



UNTUK MAKLUMAT LANJUT SILA BERKUNJUNG KE:

KOLEKSI BORNEO

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