

Reflections

from Sarawak's Rivers



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Kenyah boys frolicking in Batang Baram in Long Tungan, one of the last longhouses just before the Kalimantan border. Although this river can swell to over 20 feet high when the rain sets in the upper reaches, these children play in it without any supervision or scolding from adults.

"Today, in the modern age of speedy and efficient road haulage networks, water transport, especially inland water transport, has largely been forgotten. Reference to inland waterway traffic is merely flashbacks to the history of the coastal people of our country.

I believe this should not be the case. Inland water transport provides the country with an alternative avenue to move things and get around. This will be in keeping with creating a comprehensive national transport system."

– YAB Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi
The then Deputy Prime Minister Malaysia
Kuching, 4th November 1999



YAB Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (centre), YAB Pehin Sri Haji Abdul Taib bin Mahmud (right) and YB Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri (Dr) Alfred Jabu anak Numpang (left), Sungai Sarawak 2006.

"As we all know, rivers have been close to our hearts because our people have been using waterways for transportation and as a source of sustenance for centuries. To use the river as a form of transport is nothing new for us. Hence, we should never neglect the importance of rivers in our daily routines."

– YAB Pehin Sri Haji Abdul Taib bin Mahmud
Chief Minister of Sarawak
Mukah, 28th October 2007



Seminar & River Challenge, organised by the SRB and UNDP, Mukah, October 2007.

FOREWORD

Deputy Chief Minister of Sarawak

Minister of Infrastructure Development and Communication & Minister of Rural Development

YB Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri (Dr) Alfred Jabu anak Numpang

The river is life and this is never more so than in Sarawak. The State has 55 major rivers, measuring over 5,000 kilometres in length, along with thousands of kilometres of tributaries. The very size of Sarawak (124,450 square kilometres) and the vast expanse of its native jungle, coupled with the limited penetration of roadways, help emphasise the importance of the river for the people of Sarawak.

There is an estimated 600,000 people who use the rivers in Sarawak for transportation. These communities depend not just on the river as a mode of travel and communication, but also as a means of receiving education and healthcare as well as a source of livelihood, be it harvesting its fish as a cheap, natural source of protein or using it to transport goods or produce to eager markets. Even urbanites are not immune to the river's beneficence, if only to catch an express boat or *penambang* to work or to "*balik kampong*" for festivities.

The Sarawak Rivers Board was set up by the State Government in October 1993 under the Sarawak Rivers Ordinance 1993. Its primary tasks as set out in the Ordinance — and reflected in its mission, *Towards Safe, Clean and Natural Rivers* — include development and improvement of the riverine transport system, control and regulation of river traffic, provision and improvement of wharves, jetties and passenger landing terminals and navigational facilities, protection and restoration of riverbanks, implementation of safety measures and river environment management.



Emphasising "Your Own Safety First" at the Navigation Safety Event organised by SRB & UNDP, Kapit, April 2008.



Top: His Serene Highness Prince Albert II of Monaco restocking the rivers with fish fry, Mulu, April 2008; Middle: Some Sarawakian towns like Kapit are only accessible by river; Bottom: Keeping the rivers pristine for recreation, Sungai Melinau, Mulu.

Through its years of existence, the Board has compiled an extensive reservoir of knowledge that seeks to maintain the primacy of Sarawak's rivers – ensuring its health, so to speak, that would, in turn, preserve the wellbeing of the communities that depend on them. And, so as the river is ever-flowing and ever-changing, the Board will continuously seek to widen and deepen this knowledge in the fullest realisation that the bond that binds the river and the community is immutable.

The Sarawak Inland Waterway Transport (SIWT) System Study, launched in March 2007, is a collaboration between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Board. The project aims to prepare a Master Plan for the development of the Inland Waterway Transport System of Sarawak which will cover to Year 2020, particularly in reducing isolation and poverty in rural areas.

The study also seeks to assess the capacity of Sarawak's rivers in terms of transportation, for both passengers and cargo, and for tourism; determine the safety and security of inland water transportation; as well as strengthening the stakeholders, including the Sarawak Rivers Board, with the view of the successful implementation of the IWT Master Plan.

The Board would like to thank the Sarawak State Government, the UNDP, *The Borneo Post* and the people of Sarawak for their support in making this project a success. This book serves to highlight the importance of the river in Sarawak, the many ways it serves the community and the need to maintain its health, a task that the Board will continue to strive for.

FOREWORD

UNDP Resident Representative

for Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam (October 2003 – March 2008)

Richard Leete PhD

"Every river has its influence over the people who pass their lives within sight of its waters"

– H.S. Merriman

Rivers have played an integral part in human development. They have served as a mode of cheap and (relatively) safe transportation and a source of food. Great civilisations and cities have grown on riverbanks all over the world. History, in fact, would be so much poorer without the rise of, for example, Mesopotamia, the land between the two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates; Egypt, one of whose ancient names, Kemet, refers to the fertile black soils deposited by the flooding of the Nile River; or the Yellow River, often referred to as "the cradle of Chinese civilisation."

Away from the grand designs of history, rivers have just as great an impact on the present. The importance of the Mekong and Chao Phraya Rivers in Indochina to the communities that live on its banks cannot be overestimated. The same could be extended to the Batang Rajang, or any of the 55 major rivers of Sarawak.



Attending a ceremony in Julau, June 2006.

FOREWORD

Regional Chief Editor, The Borneo Post

Mr M. Rajah

Just as in Indochina, the rivers of Sarawak serve as an important means of transportation. For the rural communities of Sarawak, rivers are usually the only viable way of transport. They are often the only way these communities can stay in touch with the larger world and seek access to medical care, education, employment and trade.

Although provision has been made for the upgrading of rural villages in Sarawak, especially with the allocation of RM702 million for this purpose in the Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006–2010, rivers remain an especially viable alternative for transporting passengers and cargo. And while there is no doubting the Government's commitment to build connecting roads, the vastness of Sarawak and its native terrain make this an expensive, laborious and long-term undertaking.

In this joint collaboration between the United Nations Development Programme and the Sarawak Rivers Board, the Sarawak Inland Waterway Transport System Study aims to promote the development of community water transport, primarily for the benefit of the rural communities located in scattered settlements along the state's navigable rivers. The study also seeks to draw up an Inland Waterway Transportation Master Plan that can chart how this can be achieved.

A number of issues confront the success of developing a feasible community water transport system, not least pollution and safety. There is no doubt that the water quality of Sarawak's rivers is deteriorating. Development in its many forms has led to increasing river pollution that has impacted the health of plants, animals and human beings. Safety aspects that need to be studied include boat operations and infrastructure such as terminals, jetties and landing points. A further challenge is to create a system that is both commercially viable to operators and affordable enough for commuters.

This book presents the many voices that speak of the rivers that flow through their lives. It presents unique aspects of rivers and of life. It represents all those who we, the UNDP and Sarawak Rivers Board, believe would best benefit from the development of a community water transport system.

It's undeniable that, from the dawn of history till today, rivers are intrinsically linked with the lives of the people of Sarawak, being a major if not the only form of transportation in many parts of this vast State.

Rivers are still the lifeline for many people, especially those living in interior parts where roads are lacking and waterways are the only means for transportation of passengers and goods.

More lately, the rivers of Sarawak have taken on other major roles. Today, the rivers are increasingly becoming a means for attracting tourists who are often fascinated and thrilled by the numerous scenic river rides that take them into pristine jungle-clad country where roads cease to exist.

On a different scale, rivers in Sarawak are important sources for generating hydroelectricity. Malaysia's largest and tallest hydro electric project, the Bakun Hydro Electric Dam, for example, is located in the upper Batang Rajang.

Since the late 70s, the importance of river systems has been increasingly debated and highlighted. People have been progressively made more aware of the importance of sustaining the purity, quality and life of our network of rivers.

It cannot be denied that both the print and broadcasting media have been crucial in disseminating information and creating the necessary awareness on the importance of our rivers.

Newspapers for example, have been vital in supporting awareness programmes as well as highlighting news that are crucial and beneficial to river rehabilitation.

Through the media, the good and the bad are covered for the sake of making it a better place for us to live. As in reporting on the good things that have been done to promote our rivers, the media also report on matters that are deemed detrimental to the environment such as indiscriminate and uncontrolled polluting of these fragile waterways, as well as on other natural or man-made damages to this important ecosystem.

The coverage and highlights of the media in the form of reports, features and documentaries have all contributed to creating greater awareness of the public and authorities towards nature in general and rivers in particular.



A young M. Rajah on assignment, Upper Rajang.



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Opposite: Villagers crossing a suspension bridge in Long Banga. This community is served by a small airstrip and is also accessible by both timber tracks and river. The main ethnic group here is the Saban, less than a thousand left. They are closely related to the larger Kelabit language group. The other group in Long Banga is the Kenyah apart from a few semi-nomadic Penans.



Lun Bawang couple in Ba' Kelalan, bordering Kalimantan, Indonesia, preparing their rice field for the new planting season. The fragrant highland rice known as "Bario Rice" is organically grown through an ingenious irrigation method. The fields are used as fish ponds after the annual harvest.

INTRODUCTION

Rivers of Life

By Bob Teob

There's an alluring charm about rivers in Borneo. Each carries an enthralling tale or two of its own. There are some 5,000 kilometres of waterways in Sarawak alone and they carry even more stories. Some are happy ones, others tragic. But many are simply yarns spun plainly for amusement. It is, however, in the telling of these *cerita sungai* or river tales that their collective memory is carried forward to the next generation. And the next. Some of these stories are intricately woven into a fine tapestry like the *pua kumbu* into one big story that is Sarawak.

Sarawak is one of the most culturally diversified states in Malaysia, with 27 distinct indigenous ethnic groups that speak 45 different languages and dialects.

I recently chanced upon some of these treasured *pua* or rugs hung out to impress visitors to the Rumah Gare longhouse along Sungai Kain, a tributary near the headwaters of the mighty Batang Rajang, at 576km, the longest river in Malaysia. There's a collective of 40 Iban women *pua* weavers that started here 10 years ago as part of a renewed effort to keep their stories alive. Stories about their iconic serpent or spirits. And much more.

The rivers of Sarawak are known as *batang*, *sungai*, or *pa'* and the confluences known as *nganga*, *long* or *kuala*, depending on which language one speaks. Baru Bian, a native of Long Semado on the Sungai Trusan, lets me into the Lun Bawang narrative of the Great Flood.

"Once upon a time, the whole world, including the Long Semado highlands, was under water because of *Ereb Rayeh* (a great flood). All the surrounding mountains were submerged, except for *Buduk Balud* (Pigeon Mountain)," said the Kuching-based lawyer.

"Therefore, it is up here that we call it our prayer mountain and named it Pigeon Mountain of Hope."

Travel tales along these rivers are mostly anecdotal. For instance, when you ask someone how much farther the next village is along the river, he may say "sana", meaning "just there". But if he says "saaa...na", he may mean "a little farther down" and if he says "saaaaa.....na", then be prepared for a long haul.

Alternatively, he may tell you it's just a cigarette's smoke away. The problem is that he may not finish his whole cigarette immediately but take only one or two puffs before snuffing it out until the next time he lights up. Therefore, the distance one has to travel would depend on how many times he snuffs out his

Opposite: Penan baby passing through Bario with her mother on the way home to Pa' Tik, on another confluence two days' walk away. Some of the semi-Nomadic Penans come to Bario on foot to look for seasonal jobs as well as to send their children to school there.

one precious stick of cigarette and re-lighting it again and again before arriving at his destination.

It was possibly these faraway tales of serpents, of head hunters, of pigeons, of the Great Flood, and of hope, that attracted young Jimmy to Borneo. He set sail from Devenport in his native England in the winter of 1838 and arrived over a year later at the mouth of Sungai Sarawak and ventured upstream into what is today's Kuching, the state capital.

He liked what he saw and quickly went on to establish a life-long romance with Sarawak. Jimmy is, of course, better known as Sir James Brooke, Knight Commander of the Bath, Rajah of Sarawak, Governor of Labuan, Commissioner and Consul-General in Borneo, among other things. There's even a butterfly named after him – the Rajah Brooke's Birdwing Butterfly (*Trogonoptera brookiana albescens*).

Pastor Edison John Erud, a Kelabit from Sungai Medihit in the larger Limbang river basin tells a story about Racha Umong, a famous Lun Bawang rhinoceros hunter. Well, not exactly. The fame belonged to Racha's father, Balang Baru, or New Tiger. The *Orang Ulu*, or People from the Headwaters, seem to have a penchant for taking names after animals like Balang, Labo (jungle rat) or more celestial ones like Bulan (moon) but girls' names take on a softer touch like Munga (flower).

The deeply devout Protestant leader, Datuk Racha Umong (Humble King), went on to become an elected member of both the Sarawak Legislative Assembly and the lower house of the Federal Parliament.



He came from the Pa' Adang river basin but his village has long since been abandoned. His father, the famous rhino hunter, was married to Takung Lalung, from another river in Long Beluyu. She was the daughter of Lalung Rangib, who in turn came from the line of the legendary Dawat Tubu, the most revered of Lun Bawang warriors of the old head hunting days.

In another river basin is told a story of a famous Kenyah Long Tikan, the aristocratic Senator Dato' Sri Temenggong Oyong Lawai Jau, the paramount chief of the Kenyahs, even of Borneo. He was bestowed an award by the Paramount Ruler of Malaysia and installed into the Order of the British Empire as well.

It was Oyong who persuaded the proud and parochial Kenyah to throw in their lot and become part of a new and enlarged nation in 1963 and to defend their ancestral homeland against Soekarno's *Konfrontasi* to crush the formation of the Federation of Malaysia then.

One of the famous sons of Bued Main Beruh village in the Kelabit Highlands is Idris Jala, who preached his first sermon in his village church as a teenager. Shortly after, he walked downriver to further his education in Marudi, an old trading post. He was recently roped in by the Government to save the national carrier, Malaysia Airlines, from insolvency.

There are also ordinary stories of ordinary folks along Sarawak's rivers. It is in the ordinariness of such lives, however, that makes them extraordinarily interesting, like the ones I know in Ba' Kelalan, a stone's throw away from the Kalimantan Indonesia border.

The settlement takes its name after *Ba'* meaning rice or wet fields and *Kelalan*, the source of Sungai Trusan. I first met Mika Sigar, a farmer and one of the *Sidang Injil Borneo* or Borneo Evangelical Church



Opposite: This lady is one of the four Iban living treasures left along Sungai Kain who are skilful at rendering traditional poetry-songs, a variation of the *pantun* that are composed and sung spontaneously. They are known by the honorific *Indu ka nemu bepantun* – Singer of the *Pantun* Songs. Here she represents her longhouse in welcoming and making their petition known in song to a visiting government delegation.

leaders, there 20 years ago. On my recent trip back up there, I was eager to meet him again only to find out that he had been gored by one of his *kerabau*, or water buffalos. He had bled to death because the nearest hospital was at least five hours' drive away.

Most of the young Lun Bawang and Orang Ulu leave their riverine communities for greener pastures elsewhere. Quite a number marry outside their race. They are concerned that future generations would lose their mother tongues. Dr Francis Muga, who is from Long Semado but now settled in Kuala Lumpur with his Chinese wife, says his children can hardly speak Lun Bawang. They stay connected to the language only through reading the Lun Bawang Bible. On other rivers, some languages are fast languishing. In fact, Seru, one of the 47 languages in Sarawak, which used to be spoken in Kabong, is now extinct as their young have been absorbed into other larger Ibanic groups. Another known as Punan Batu 1 in the Belaga river basin west of Long Geng is nearly extinct. While in Kanowit in the middle Batang Rajang region, the Kanowit heart language is used only at home and not with people from other rivers. Even then, few or none of their children speak the language anymore.

When a language dies, their speakers' stories begin to end too. Soon too their songs and dances, and, ultimately, their culture; their very essence of life. Along the upper reaches of the Rajang in Nganga Kain,

there are only four *Indu ka nemu bepantun* — Singers of the Pantun Songs — left. These Iban living treasures are skillful at rendering their traditional poetry-songs, a variation of the pantun that are composed and sung spontaneously. I witnessed one rendering her *pantun* to welcome a visiting delegation of high government officials. She started by exalting them in endearing *pantuns*. Then she promptly belted out another stanza which wondered when development is coming to her longhouse. The government people got the message. Development aid is presumed to be forthcoming. Otherwise, the lady may just sing another song.

An Iban *pua kumbu* weaver spinning kapok yarn, the material for weaving the *pua* which is considered a highly valued cultural textile that can also be used as a rug or blanket.



Rivers like this, apart from being transport routes, also serve to provide water to riverine communities for household uses as well as for laundry and washing. This was a scene along downstream Sungai Lawas, close to the Trusan delta, taken in 1989. Today, this river, like many others, are polluted.



Lun Bawang families on their way to an Easter Irau convention in Buduk (mountain) Nur in 1989, high up in the headwaters of Sungai Trusan. Their kinsfolk from Long Bawang in Kalimantan, a half day walk away, join them for such revival meetings. Most pastors from Sarawak are from this ethnic group as there is an established Bible school nearby in Buduk Aru.



A Kelabit senior citizen preparing lunch at his hearth in the Bario Asal longhouse in the Kelabit Highlands which is the headwaters of the Batang Baram, Sarawak's second longest river after the Rajang. Although this longhouse has been rebuilt several times, the timber for the main frames and flooring is said to be 13 generations old.

Kelabit women from Bario waiting at the Buduk Nur rural airport after visiting their Lun Bawang relatives. The heavy brass earrings are also worn by men but their young do not wear them anymore. The beaded headwear is distinctively Kelabit, one of the *Orang Ulu* – People from the Headwaters groups.



I came across another fascinating story from the Long Tungan longhouse, deep in the blue mountains of the Baram headwaters sharing the border with Kalimantan Indonesia told by Diana. She's part Kenyah Jamok and part Chinese, but speaks both languages as well as English and Malay with ease. There were stories of river dragons, of lovely maidens, of war gods. Stories that Diana used to hear the elders telling along the *u-se'* communal area that runs through the entire 126 *pintu* (household) longhouse, one of Sarawak's largest. But it is now almost desolate as the young have ventured downstream in search of life beyond their river. These are stories that she can recall only in fragments, not enough to re-tell to her children.

Diana had stopped hearing these stories when she went down river to Long Akah, an old Chinese trading post, where her Chinese father and his father were traders on the Baram river. There she later met Yong Chiong Khiong, a third generation Hokkien Methodist. They got married and moved to Miri, to seek their fortunes in the booming oil town.

She took on a Chinese first name — Liw Luan — followed by her husband's surname just as her Kenyah mother had taken her Chinese husband's surname of Yiap. She has since cut off her elongated earlobes and stopped wearing her *maa'* or heavy brass earrings that weighed 250 grams. When she was baptised in a 33-gallon oil drum, she was renamed Diana.

Adat Petakau is a Kenyah tradition of renaming their people at important junctures of their lives. For instance, when Lawai Jau had his firstborn, Kalang, he was renamed in an elaborate ceremony in the longhouse as, *Tama Kalang Lawai*, the father of Kalang. If he becomes a grandfather, he will once again be renamed.

"Mum, did the longhouse people give me a *Kenyah* name?" her daughter Emily asked.

"No! They don't know you," Diana whispered.

Emily is only one quarter Kenyah and does not speak the language. Her cousins who are half Kenyah, half Bidayuh do not speak Kenyah either, although their father Mathew Ngau Jau, is the famous "Keeper of The Nogrek Kenyah Songs." They speak Bidayuh, Malay and English in that order.

Like Diana, Mathew is from Ulu Baram but from another longhouse in Long Semiang. Whenever he returns to his birthplace once or twice a year, each night Mathew joins the other musicians, bringing out their four-stringed *sape'* to sing of the stories that their fathers, grandfathers and *oko-oko cema'* ancestors told them. Diana can still sing some of these, although only the choruses.

An estimated 600,000 people, or one quarter of Sarawak's population — many in isolated riverine communities in the interior — still depend on these rivers in Sarawak to go to school, to the clinic, to their farms, to the shops, to their neighbours, or to town. Like these Rivers of Life, their stories continue to ebb and flow in their hearts. From one generation to the next.

Right: Mathew Ngau Jau, known as Keeper of the Kenyah Nogrek Songs, from Long Semiang in Ulu Baram, is one of Sarawak's foremost exponent of the four-stringed *Sape'*.



Mathew takes up his *sape'* and plays Diana and Emily one of his most nostalgic compositions:

Lan E Tuyang – true friend

Lan e tuyang pemung ilu jae

Lan alem ini

Alem ini edang bulan

Lan e tuyng bio ilu pesung

lan layan silung

layan silung alai layan

Tonight, true friend, we are happy

To meet each other in the beautiful moonlight

We welcome you to our longhouse

Don't be shy to come in and join us.

Lan e tuyng nyain ekem sao

Lan sungai

Sao sungai lemon kanan

True friend, be careful

When you go down the river to your boat

Nelan nelan

Sayang pakua lan e tuyang

Goodbye, goodbye

Remember our love, true friends.