

# CONTRIBUTIONS TO **SOUTHEAST ASIAN ETHNOGRAPHY**

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**LEADERSHIP, JUSTICE AND POLITICS  
AT THE GRASSROOTS**

## **LEADERSHIP AMONG THE PENAN OF BELAGA DISTRICT IN SARAWAK, MALAYSIAN BORNEO**

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### CONTENTS

1. Introduction
2. The Penan: Brief Ethnographic Background and Literature Survey
3. The Beginnings of Stratification among the Western Penan
4. Western Penan Headmanship
5. Conclusion

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In this paper I present a general description of leadership among the Western Penan of Belaga District in the State of Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo (Map 1, 2). I examine the position of headman in Penan society, considering such matters as eligibility for appointment, role and authority. My principal data come from personal observation and interviews with Penan in various parts of Belaga District, conducted over a period of some thirty years during the course of numerous official visits to Penan settlements in my role as government officer.

I was an administrative officer resident in Belaga District for four years from 1971 to 1974. During that period I visited each Penan settlement at least twice a year to discuss various matters affecting their communities. From 1991 to 2004 I was attached to the Sarawak government's Majlis Adat Istiadat or Council for Customs and Traditions, where I was involved, *inter alia*, in documenting Penan oral tradition and in compiling their customary laws for official use in "Native Courts".

During my many interviews with Penan, the matter of leadership was sometimes brought up and I was able to tape-record some of the discussions I had about it with my Penan informants.

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