

Pelajau Kaul and the Sambas Connection

Ann Appleton
Institute of East Asian Studies
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
appleton@ieas.unimas.my

ABSTRACT

A link between Sambas and the Melanau communities on the Oya River has been recognized for many years. However, the details of the connection have remained relatively muted in the historic and ethnographic record. Drawing on recent ethnographic fieldwork with Melanau communities on the Oya River - including the collection of oral history narratives and family genealogies, this paper traces the history of the Sambas-Oya River connection and explores its relevance to Melanau identity and social organization on the Oya River in the present day. Further, it argues that this connection is collectively reaffirmed and revitalized on the 29th of December each year when descendants of a former longhouse community at Pelajau, forty miles upriver from the Sarawak coast, return to the long abandoned site to celebrate Pelajau Kaul.

Introduction

A connection between Sambas and Melanau communities on the Oya River has long been known. Hugh Low (1848) records a meeting with Pengiran Mahamat Ali, the ruler at Oya, who claimed descent from the Sultans of Brunei and Sambas and from a pagan aristocrat at Pelajau, a former upriver longhouse settlement. And Morris notes that in the 1960's, Melanau on the Oya River continued to differentiate between a Sarawak Malay and a Sambas Malay (Morris 1991:7). A connection between Pelajau and the Melanau aristocrats at Oya is also acknowledged by people in the village of Medong.

However, the details of those connections have remained relatively muted in the historic and ethnographic record. This paper draws on oral history narratives and genealogies collected during collaborative research with individuals and communities on the Oya River over the past year, to tease out the story of these historic connections. Further, this paper argues that these connections are collectively remanifested, reaffirmed and revitalized on the 29th of December each year when descendants of the former community at Pelajau return to the long abandoned site to celebrate Pelajau Kaul.

The site at Pelajau

The former longhouse site at Pelajau is situated on the true left bank of the Oya River about 45 minutes' boat journey upriver from the village of Medong and about 40 miles upriver from the township of Oya, situated at the mouth of the Oya River. Slightly downstream on the opposite bank is a small settlement of about half a dozen relatively humble dwellings. These belong to Melanau from Medong who live part of the year at Pelajau to hunt, farm and tend their sago gardens.