

## **People of the Place: The Lun Bawang of Central Highland Borneo**

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### **Introduction**

This paper examines the central highland Borneo community of Lun Bawang, historically called Murut, and their responses to the state, trade and transnationalism. The approach taken is in seeing the highlands as part of a zone, a contiguous whole linking the highlands to the rest of the island, in this case to the lowlands and coast. Scott (2009) in his thought provoking book writes about people in Zomia occupying wide stretches of the uplands in mainland Southeast Asia who escape from or evade the control and tyranny of lowland state centers, to establish their own non-state space. This paper is inspired by Scott and examines whether highland Borneo which shares similar attributes of altitude with Zomia, show the same kind of characteristics of fleeing from the lowlands to the uplands and exhibiting features of separateness.

### **People of the Place**

Known as the Lun Bawang (people of the place) or Lun Dayeh (people of the interior or up-river), these groups living in the Kelabit-Kerayan highlands of central northeast Borneo speak related languages and share common cultural characteristics such as *lati ba* (irrigated wet rice cultivation) (Eghenter and Langub 2008). They are also found in the coastal districts of Trusan and Lawas in Sarawak, and in Long Pasia, Sabah and Brunei. The term Lun Bawang is a self-labeled phrase (Langub 1987). In the past in Sarawak, Murut was the label applied, a name no longer in use and is regarded as derogatory. Where appropriate, I have followed the archival usage of the term Murut as it was then used, but it refers to the same people known today as Lun Bawang or Lun Dayeh (a term in use in Kalimantan Timur). The terms Lun Bawang, Lun Dayeh and Murut are used interchangeably depending on the context.

Borneo is a land of rivers with its headwaters originating from the central plateaus and highlands and radiating out to the coast. The rivers taper through undulating country to the lowlands. In general, Borneo can be conceived of as three physical zones, the mountainous interior, the intermediate undulating country and the coastal zone. The rivers which flow through the landscape shape settlement and communications, with watersheds defining sovereign borders. In terms of geo-politics, there is a strategic relationship between the coast and the hinterland. Muslim coastal principalities in west, southeast and northeast Borneo have always sought to dominate the non-muslim "Dayak" hinterland with varying degrees of success. Due to isolation and difficulties in communications, the central highlands remained outside the effective control of Brunei which claimed suzerain rights over this part of Borneo.