

# **MIGRATION AND IDENTITY: THE IBAN IN SABAH, MALAYSIA.**

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## **Introduction**

Iban is one of the Dayak sub-ethnic groups in Sarawak. They reportedly migrated to Sarawak from the Kapuas Valley in Kalimantan, Indonesia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Their “migration journey” to the neighbouring state of Sabah started about a decade before the British North Borneo Chartered Company established its first government station era in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sandin 1994 : 22). There were so many young Iban travelled to Sabah that at one point Charles Brooke ordered the withdrawal of all Sarawak Iban from Company’s territories (Black, 1971: 140). Today two settlements in Sabah that have substantial number of Iban population are Merotai and Kuala Nansang. This paper is based on a study on Iban Diaspora in Borneo carried out by Institute of East Asian Study, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. The project started in 2009. It examines the history of Iban migration from Sarawak to Sabah in the 1940s. The objectives of the study were to determine the status of the Iban migrants in Tawau and their motives for migration, to determine when and how the migrants ended up in the present locations, to determine how the migrants culturally and economically adapt themselves to the present locations?, to determine the role the migrants played in local politics (i.e. in Sabah) and how the host state’s policies accommodated the “new comers”.

This paper is based on series of fieldworks conducted in the district of Tawau in Sabah from August 2009 until September 2011. On our first trip to Tawau we met the headmen for both settlements, KK Lulot anak Junggal (Merotai) and KK John anak Sulutan (Kuala Nansang). During our second trip we managed to compile the village

profile of the two settlements. Interviews were conducted and observations were made during our later visits. We interviewed the community leaders (Ketua Kampung) and some individuals. Secondary data for this paper were gathered from sources such as newspapers, books and the internet. Other than conducting interviews and observations a total of 89 sets of questionnaires were distributed in both settlements. This was to gather more information which were not captured by our interviews and observations.

### **History of Iban migration**

Migration among the Iban community is not a new phenomenon and has been a cultural and traditional practice since the olden days. In the past they had been moving from one place to another to occupy and open up new land for the purpose of practicing of shifting cultivation. The other reason of their migration was to escape from being attacked by hostile enemies who wanted to take their heads or robbed their properties (Sutlive, 1992). The travels and territorial expansion among the Iban have brought them into contact with other ethnic groups such as Malays, Chinese, Melanau, Kayan, Penan, Bukitan, Europeans and other ethnic groups (Sutlive, 1992: 2).

Kedit (1993) noted that mobility has been a dominant symbol of Iban society and culture. In Iban socialization, most of mobility was, and still is a custom practiced predominantly by men. Iban men migrated to seek job opportunities everywhere. In the past only women of low repute will migrate; a self-respecting woman does not leave her home to seek adventure outside the longhouse territory (Kedit, 1993: 37). Lately, both men and mostly single women migrate from the longhouse to town to seek for job opportunities or further studies. The world of the Iban has undergone changes not only because of contacts with people from abroad, but also due to internal movements into new settings. This transforms the social and cultural mobility of the Iban.

*Bejalai* is a traditional practice among the Iban community. *Bejalai* is regarded as journeying with several purposes and activities within the Iban society. Internally, Kedit (1993: 4) clearly described *bejalai* as