

**FURNESS**

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FOLK-LORE IN BORNEO

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## William Henry Furness

### Folk-lore in Borneo / A Sketch

In this short monograph I do not pretend to give anything more than a Sketch of the Folk-lore to be found among the Borneans. The island is large, and the people, scattered and isolated by constant inter-tribal warfare, differ one tribe from another, in language, customs and appearance almost more than do Germans, French, or English; to say that any tradition or custom is common to all the tribes, or even to all of one tribe, of Borneans, would be far too sweeping. A still greater drawback to any universality, in legend or custom, is that there is no written language, not even so much as picture-drawings on rocks to give us a clue to ancient myths or traditions. The natives of Borneo are in a certain sense savages, but yet they are savages of a high order, possessed of a civilization far above what is usually implied by the term; they live together in what almost might be called coöperative communities, they practise the art of weaving, they forge rough implements of iron, they cultivate rice and esculent plants, and in all their work, such as house-building, boat-building, manufacture of cloth and weapons of warfare, they show an ambitious desire, and a skilful ability, to ornament their work and add, to its usefulness, pleasure to the eye. One of their gravest faults, however, is their embarrassing tenacity to the *fad* of head-hunting, and a strict adherence to the principle of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. This keeps the different households, even of the same tribe, at constant war and makes inevitable an uncomfortable yet pleasing interchange of heads during the tedious months of the rainy season, when time hangs heavy on the warriors' hands, and disused swords might get rusty.

So little is known of the social and anthropological position of these people, to others than those who make Malaysia and the South Sea islands their study, that it may not be out of place to give a short description of the people themselves before entering on the subject of their Folk-lore.

The remote origin of the Borneans, as well as of the greater part of all of the inhabitants of the Polynesian islands, is an ethnological problem; they are not Malay, neither are they Mongolian nor Negrito; they bear resemblances here and there to all of these races, but not marked enough to claim any one as the parent stock. Furthermore, there is some evidence in favor of the theory that they are the result of successive migrations of tribes from northern India and from Anam.

The inland tribes of Borneo, by which I include all the natives except the Malays settled along the coast, are without any definite forms of religious worship; they make idols of wood, but I have never seen any offering made to them, nor do they regard them apparently as anything more than as scarecrows to frighten off evil spirits. They are the children of Dame Nature and as such have inherited their mother's disregard for life, and this feature of their temperament has kept them in a constant turmoil of warfare, which in turn compels them for mutual protection to band together in communities of several families and build for themselves a common house wherein to live, ever ready to turn out in force and resist the attacks of hostile tribes. In not a few instances these houses are as much as a quarter of a mile in length and shelter as many as four hundred people. Every household is presided over by a head-man known as the elder, or *Orang Tuah*, and he in turn is governed in a measure by the chief of the tribe, known as the *Penghulu*. The government of the household seems to be conducted in the quietest manner; I have lived on several occasions in these houses for three or four weeks at a time, and have never seen anything that could be called a violent quarrel between two members of the household, nor have I seen the *Orang Tuah* or the *Penghulu* submit any of the members to what might be considered harsh treatment. I have also been with them when they were out on the warpath, to use a North-American Indian term, when every nerve was at high tension on the look-out for enemies and every thought was turned to slaughter, but I have never seen the counsel of the Chief disregarded. Of course, some Chiefs are weak and fail to give commands because they

are afraid to act, but a command once given is carried out, or at least not disregarded, and I could never detect any means which were taken to enforce an authority thus implicitly obeyed.

As a people, they are not active-minded nor industrious, but yield to the influence of climate, and, following the example offered to them by the vast, dense jungle on every side, accept life as easily as it comes. They are no exception to the rule that all untutored minds, living in constant communion with any awful aspect of Nature, be it gigantic mountains, a waste of waters, or an illimitable jungle, are saturated with superstitions; every pool, every tree, every rock is the home of an evil spirit, and all mysterious noises in the forest are ghostly whisperings. Everywhere are signs and omens to warn man of danger or direct his course; theirs is a life where no schooling is so vital as the ability to read aright the "sermons in stones, books in the running brooks." For them the world is the patch of jungle covering the few square miles that they know, and bounded by the hills in the distance; seldom do they get an extended view of the surrounding country; trees hem them in on all sides and the mountains are so difficult of ascent, and furthermore so infested with demons or "antu," that the summits can be gained only at the risk of body, and, still worse, of soul.

Many natives of the interior live and die with never a glimpse of the sea, and the tales which the Malay and Chinese traders tell of lands beyond the horizon where white men live, are as incomprehensible to them as are to us the conjectural accounts which astronomers give of the canals on the planet Mars.

Naturally enough, of course, creation began on the island of Borneo, or Kalamantan, as they call it, and the first people were Borneans and spoke the language of the tribe that tells the story. Every tribe has a different account of creation, and claims that its people sprang from the first created mortals. The following account is the story of Genesis according to the Kayans of Northwestern Borneo: —

In the old, old days, when there was nothing but water and sky, there fell from the heavens an enormous rock; that part of it which protruded from the water was hard, slippery, and quite bare, with no soil nor plants upon it of any kind. After a long time, however, the rains produced slime upon the rock, and little worms, called *halang*, were bred in this slime, and they bored into the rock and left fine sand outside of their burrows; this sand eventually became soil and covered the rock. Again years passed and the rock remained barren of all other life until suddenly there dropped from the Sun a huge wooden handle of a *Parang* (or sword) known as *Haup Malat*. This parang-handle sank deep into the rock and taking root in the soil it sprouted and grew into a great tree, named *Batang Utar Tatei*, whose branches stretched out over the new land in every direction. When this tree was fully grown, there dropped from the Moon a long rope-like vine known as the *Jikwan Tali*. This vine quickly clung to the tree and took root in the rock. Now the vine, *Jikwan Tali*, from the Moon became the husband of the tree, *Batang Utar Tatei*, from the Sun, and *Batang Utar Tatei* gave birth to twins, a male and a female, not of the nature of a tree, but more or less like human beings. The male child was called *Klobeh Angei*, and the female was called *Klubangei*. These two children married and then gave birth to two more children, who were named *Pengok N'gai*, and *Katirah Murai*. *Katirah Murai* was married to old man *Ajai Avai*, who comes without pedigree into the narration. From *Katirah Murai* and *Ajai Avai* are descended many of the chiefs who were founders of the various tribes inhabiting the land of Kalamantan; their names are *Sejau Laho*, *Oding Lahang*, from whom the Kayans spring, *Tabalan*, *Pliban*, and, finally, *Tokong*, the father of head-hunting.

As time went on, that which formerly had been merely slime on the rock, became moss, and little by little small plants were produced. The twigs and leaf-like appendages of the tree, evidently the female principle in nature, as they fell to the ground, became birds, beasts, and fishes. (Let me mention here that the endowment of leaves with life and locomotion is no more than natural; while in the jungle I have repeatedly seen what, in every respect, appeared to be a leaf fall to the ground and then miraculously put out legs and walk away; it was one of those remarkable insects of the *Mantis* family, or "walking leaves.") The inhabitants of the rock had no need of fire in those days, for the sun

beat down on them strongly, and there was no night; it was not until many, many years had elapsed that an old man named *Laki Oi* invented a method of obtaining fire by means of friction produced by pulling a strip of rattan rapidly back and forth beneath a piece of dry wood. This process of making fire he called *Musa*, and it is still the only method used in obtaining fire for ceremonials, such as the naming of a child, or when communicating with the omen-birds. Laki Oi also taught them the use of the fire-drill, which he called the *Nalika*.

On the main trunk of Batang Utar Tatei was a large excrescence, from which exuded a resinous gum called *Lutong*, which, as it dropped to the ground beneath, was immediately transformed into chickens and swine; and it is because they were thus formed out of the very heart and substance of the tree that they are always used in the reading of auguries. From this same cause, there was innate in them an insight into the innermost workings of Nature and a knowledge of the future.

The first beings with any resemblance to man had neither legs, nor breasts, and consisted merely of a head, chest, arms, and a fragment of a body which hung down in shreds and rags, having the appearance of twisted snakes. When they moved they dragged themselves along the ground by their arms. (From this description and from native carvings, I am inclined to believe that a large cuttle-fish or octopus must have suggested this idea to the original narrator of this tradition.) Little by little, the body was brought into more compact form, and, in a later generation, legs appeared, but it was a long time before they became accustomed to legs and able to use them in moving about. A survival of this awkwardness, so say the Kayans, is still noticeable in the way in which children crawl about the floor, and in their clumsy walk when first they learn to stand upright. The heads of these first people were, furthermore, much larger than the heads of the present generation, and, since it was the first part formed, it is the oldest part of the body, and on this account the most important member, and valued accordingly whether dead or alive.

This account is, as far as I know, purely Bornean, inasmuch as had there been any admixture from a foreign source (as we shall see further on was probably the case with the Dyaks) there would have been possibly some reference to a Supreme Creator rather than to this union of a vine and a tree as the original source of life. The Kayans from whom I obtained this account have had exceedingly little communication with the outside world, except through occasional Malay or Chinese traders. There is just a possibility that the idea of the wooden sword-handle being the ultimate *fons et origo*

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