

The background of the cover is a photograph of a tropical forest floor. Large, gnarled tree roots are prominent, some covered in green moss. The lighting is dappled, creating a sense of depth and texture in the forest environment.

# Borneo Trilogy

Book One Volume 1

# Sabah

Land below the Wind

Frans Welman

# BORNEO TRILOGY VOLUME 1: SABAH

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## PROLOGUE

It is said the forest is dark, the unknown, the danger of wild animals, the feeling of being alone in a sea of sound and surrounded by tree trunks and foliage high up. No where to run. The rainforest is not known to be a place of comfort. Yet there are quite a few peoples it quite happily living in, or what is left of it. This book is about them; the people whose home is the forest itself. Those who live from growing food, raising cattle and hunting but also those who live by gathering food and hunting. Though this will sound to many that it is about surviving in a harsh environment the emphasis is rather the opposite for it is about living, culture and environment. The rich and diverse cultures who exist in the rainforests of Borneo for thousands of years are surprising, revealing and encompass a wealth of straightforward knowledge, above all, knowledge about their habitat. Borne is a land of extremes too. From the peat swamps near the coast to the higher elevated forests inland in the ecosphere sense, from the coastal peoples who adopted modern lifestyles to the authentic Penan who live solely of what the rainforest provides them and from the lifestyles in the jungle to the industrial city life in places like Kuching, Banjarmasin, Pontianak, Balikpapan, Kota Kinabalu and above all the sultanate of Brunei with capital Bandar Seri Begawan.

Heart of darkness is felt by those who enter the forests of Borneo without knowing too much about it. Yes it is dark for only approximately 1 to 2% of all light that comes from above and is withheld by the foliage will hit the forest floor. It is constantly damp too for the humidity day and night is practically the same at 80%. And, once the light has gone after sunset it is pitch black. Then only the eyes of the animals especially the predators are seen. But is it dangerous?

Ask any forest dweller and he/she will tell you that it is. Ask some more and it becomes evident that it is not the fear that a newcomer feels that makes it dangerous for him or her. The people

are not afraid of the animals, snakes, wild boar, forest cats, not that they are not. It is not the insects either the sound of the birds the apes that swirl in the trees that frightens them. What is it then? Very simple.

The greatest danger is to get lost and not being able to find the way again; especially when injured this can be deadly. One of the strong and serious advices of forest people to adventurers is consequently: Never go alone in a forest for when you fall over a root of a tree and break your leg there is no one who can help you return.

Crocodiles in the rivers?

Yes crocs can be dangerous, but then everybody known where they are and when they are there and they know how to avoid them. Live and let live is the idea.

Can you really get lost, I am often asked. Yes is the notorious answer. You can and you will if you do not prepare and listen. I will give an example about people who did not listen. Some tourists insisted on going into the forest by themselves, a group of three. They walked over a path from one village to the other thinking that they knew the way. Somewhere halfway they left the path for a few minutes because they were distracted when they saw a beautiful buttress tree with some orang Belanda in it, coastal monkeys with big belly and big nose. They never found the path again and were found dead just about 20 meters away from it after having walked in circles. The forest is large but where you are you cannot see further than perhaps 20 meters and what you see is tree trunks rising high, there is hardly undergrowth because there is not enough life for anything to grow. So what you see is leaves and wood and fallen debris from the trees and that includes excrements of animals and dead decomposing animals plus lots of seeds of course. Some plants, ferns, are capable to sustain themselves in the slightest of light, but what you see is a wall of trunks and when off the path it will be extremely difficult to find it again. And then of course when injured there must be someone with you who can go to a

longhouse to call on people to come to your rescue. Longhouse?

Yes longhouses in Borneo are the way of life. Longhouses used to be rather like villages under one roof, communal villages on high stilts that could extend to as much as 200 meters. Longhouses are precisely that, long houses. They are wide too for approximately half of the house is literally communal. A wide open space divided in three parts that all have purpose runs from one end to the other. The other half are homes of families and accessible via a door. The rooms, *bilek*, behind the door are private and run to the back of the house where the kitchens are situated. Cattle are kept under the house and are usually cows, pigs and poultry. Apart from a few things that are traded and I will go into that when in a longhouse visiting a tribe, the forest peoples are completely self sufficient. They do grow some cash crops though for trade: pepper (yes the same pepper that is used in your kitchen) and rubber. Rice is grown in many different varieties, black rice too, along with an array of vegetables and of course fruits. The diet is enhanced with the result of forest gathering of food and the forest is the reservoir for medicine too, herbs and extracts of roots. Then hunting will supply the villagers with extra food while the gathering of roots and legumes fresh from the forest adds to the variety. This in short is the economics of life in the forests. Longhouses are designed and built by the people themselves and all help in the effort, which is not a small one. The Penan, forest nomads, do not grow food or keep animals but dwell in the forest and move from place to place to follow the animals who like the Penan themselves know very well which trees bear fruit. Some trees only fruit every five or ten years. Both the Penan and the wildlife are then to be found there. The Penan set up a camp for a few weeks and built it from materials that are around them in abundance. For their hunt they use blowpipes expertly made from hardwoods by burning a hole straight through the middle. The blowpipes in turn are fired with darts of lightwood and which have a deadly poison on them. This poison is won from a specific tree only the Penan know how to

find and work on. The forest then is dynamic, interaction between man and forest is such that when man does not tamper with the forest it will provide what man needs. But then man outside the forests of Borneo came to claim that the need for trees and thus wood was great and the felling of the forest began with the selling of large tracts and cut in a ways that the forest cannot recuperate. The indigenous people cut the trees but only small portions are used. And, then after one or two harvest let the forest return in secondary growth leaving land that is used every twenty years for agriculture and the forest land beyond that is then left in tact. The people of the forest know that when their forest is taken away that then the lifeblood is gone too and floods taking the valuable but thin topsoil away to let it be carried to the sea but murky yellow rivers full of earth. This in a nutshell is the habitat of Borneo of man and animal. This backdrop with a bit of history and with the forest untouched but used as a place to live by man, paint a rough picture of what the adventurer, tourist, outsider like myself might expect. For now, let's meet the people.

## CHAPTER 1: PREPARATIONS FOR SABAH IN MANILA

Ending up in Borneo was unplanned and unexpected. I had returned from Papua New Guinea which experienced strong anxiety of imminent independence from Australia. I had been traveling for over seven months now and was in the Philippines, Manila when a friend I made at the Asian Social institute asked me to accompany him to Kota Kinabalu, the capital of the Malaysian State on Borneo. The first time I was in the Philippines I had made friends among active members of the Dutch Volunteer Service, one of which was working at the Asian Social institute as a teacher. Through her I had met my friend Augy, and Indian originally from Malaysia too but who had studied among the Kadazan people of Tambunan a valley in Sabah. He was the director of the communication center. The Asian Social institute had been founded by a Dutch priest, Father Senden, but was now run by a small lady called Mina. Though at least half of them came from the Philippines itself the other half of the students were from allover Asia so from as far as India, Korea, Sri Lanka, Burma and yes also Sabah. I met Linseng Bopin there through Augy and since while I traveled into the countryside to, among other things portray, indigenous peoples, we came to talk about doing some sound slide productions together, Augy and I. So, when we sat down to work out a plan and from that a scenario, Linseng got interested as he could see something similar could be done with his people in Sabah and on Sabah.

“Man, I would love to,” I trusted telling him, “but I know nothing about Sabah and from the Philippines I think I can only return home. I would run out of money, if I would stay on to be in Sabah too.”

“Do not worry about your stay there; I can arrange that Linseng said, “look we will stay with friends or family in Tambunan and other places. If you are interested we can do it.”

It was not too difficult for him to convince me, especially when he told me about the different peoples of Sabah and that we would take the opportunity to be among them.

“Okay, I said, let me check with the airline and then see what can be done?”

“Right,” he said, “there is no hurry, only in 6 weeks I will finish my studies here and will return to Kota Kinabalu.” he said.

“An we will keep you occupied meanwhile,” Augy added with a smile. And he did indeed for we came up with the idea of highlighting the Manggyans of the island of Mindoro, the people that still had their own scriptures written on bamboo they used to communicate with and though dying as a language, it was still alive. Manggyans Linseng said, like other indigenous peoples could very well be related to the Bornean Peoples:

“The Bajau Frans are in the southern Philippines but live on the coast of Sabah to. Quite a few peoples of Mindanao relate directly to us.

“I have discovered things while studying here I was not aware of at all,” he said to me while we were looking at a map of south East Asia. “You see that string of islands south of Zamboanga? One of them is Sulu, then a sultanate, small in size but in the past quite important. Together with Brunei, which is now an independent small country between Sabah and Sarawak and Ternate and Tidore, also sultanates, during the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries it controlled the trade in the region. The Islam religion came to the region from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards through trade from Indonesia, North Sumatra, spread along the coasts, but hardly touched the interiors. This is why the Philippines through Sulu still claim Sabah to be part of the Philippines. That claim is still pending. Of course the indigenous peoples like us Kadazan or the Murut, the Dusun, the Runggus and others have nothing to do with that. They have always lived their own way, quite undisturbed and of course completely self sufficient. I want you to come and see the peoples of the interior of Sabah with me. We will do it together, all right? I know you are curious and with your expertise we can easily make something that will show our indigenous peoples as they are. We have been underrated for too long.”

We were looking at the map and I saw that Sabah was approached by the Philippines on two sides. The long island of Palawan, with Balabac at its southern tip extended almost to Labuan before the coast of Sabah and near Brunei, it jugged down like a sword threatening the big island. On the other side was the Sulu archipelago, the string of islands with Tawi Tawi almost extended as far as Sandakan and Tawau so near to Kalimantan, Indonesia. Linseng told me about the piracy between the islands and Sabah.

“That Sulu sea is notorious for that, even now he said. If we have a chance to get to Labuan together you will see the Philippine fishing boats moored there, many of them have cargoes they do not like to be checked, so they off load at sea.”

“Even now? I have read about the raids by sea Dayaks of the past, the Iban of Sarawak. I did not know that the Sulu sea was infested with them. Would it not be simple to get rid of them?”

“One would think so, Linseng laughed. “But the relationship between the Philippines and Malaysia is not that close. The history lays a role here too, The Bajau and Tausugs and others rule the seas. They do not like anyone to tell them what to do.”

“Are you suggesting we are going to work with them, without me knowing about it?”

Again Linseng laughed:

“Of course not man. We will be visiting the tribes from north to south and if possible will meet the Bajau too, but the ones who are living on mainland Borneo. They ride horses you know!”

“Land below the wind I read in some of the brochures Sabah is called. What does that mean Linseng?”

“Oh, that is a simple one,” he said. “You know about the typhoons in the Philippines right? They strike every year, some of them are bad and they usually strike beginning in Samar, the most eastern island.”

“Yes,” I replied, “I have been in one last time I was here.”

“Sometimes they approach even a little more south but they never hit as south as Sabah. This is why Sabah is considered to be

below the wind. And, the tourist board made it into the slogan to typicalize Sabah. I rather see Sabah known as the land of nature, of freshness of purity where people live that are one with nature and I mean of course the indigenous peoples and I am one of them.”

“That is a good idea,” I agreed, “now for creativity I will probably follow you around with questions that you know all answers too but would not have thought about that they could be important to outsiders. So we will try and merge inside views and perceptions with outside views and perception and see what beautiful plans we can come up with, is that to your liking, agreed?”

“Two good ideas already,” laughed, one of yours and one of mine. Let’s spend some time to work things out. You on the other hand will have some experience with the Manggyans. I wish I had the time to come along with you. I am sure the people in the mountains there have things in common, things I would like to pursue too. Only then like you I am an outsider too.”

“Yes a pity it will be, but you will see the results and you can then do the post production work with us, you may be able to give some valuable ideas on how to do text and visuals, doing justice to the people while reaching out to people who have no idea about their existence, all right?”

“Okay that is good. I will be looking forward doing that!”

“I am off to a meeting with Augy now, so let’s see each other regularly in the evenings or so, we will both have time then!”

“Right he said, see you!”

As I was soon to leave Augy and I prepared for my departure to Mindoro. John and Neds who were part of the Communication Center were with us to talk about the details. They would have loved to come along but because of the day to day their duties at the office that was not possible. They were to be involved with the post production however and were suggesting taping some of the sounds of work, dance and song of the Manggyans in their mountains and perhaps a tale of their heritage. Equipped with all that was needed, or at least we thought I did, a few days later I took a bus