

A NARRATIVE OF THE HISTORY OF THE FORT AT LIO MATU (Article & photographs by Datin Valerie Mashman)



According to the Sarawak Gazette, the request to build the fort at Lio Matu was received (Douglas 1908:156) "from the Kalabit chiefs Tingang , Tuai Iwan and Galih Ballang in the head of the Bram , and the chiefs of the Leppu Asing and Saban tribes who live on the border line." It goes on to say that the building of the fort was a condition given for the Kelabit to move down. They "have promised to move downriver if the fort is built to within a day's walk from it and the Kenyahs in the Upper Baram have arranged to move out of the tributaries." The construction of the fort began the same year.

From the Kelabit perspective, Malian Tepun, Headman of Long Peluan, tells the story of the origins of the fort in a historical narrative about the ancestral Kelabit leader Tai Iwan, who was instrumental in establishing the fort at Lio Matu.

"When he (Tai Iwan) arrived in Marudi, he was credited for playing an instrumental role in making peace. However, he was told that every household on the Baram was required to pay tax, in the form of gutta percha (*para*) as a means of finding out the number of households on the Baram who were the loyal subjects of the government.

Tai Iwan agreed but asked "How are we going to send the tax to Marudi? Why not build forts in Long Lama, Long Akah and Lio Matu, so it is convenient for us to send our tax?" The government agreed and requested him on his return, to mobilize the Kelabit to cut the timbers for the posts, beams and rafters and the Kenyah to make the planks and the roofing shingles.

So, Tai Iwan went to inform people from as far as Pa Terap, Pa Orang, Long Popong and Long Budong in Kerayan. They came together with the Kelabit to build the fort at Lio Matu until it was completed. "

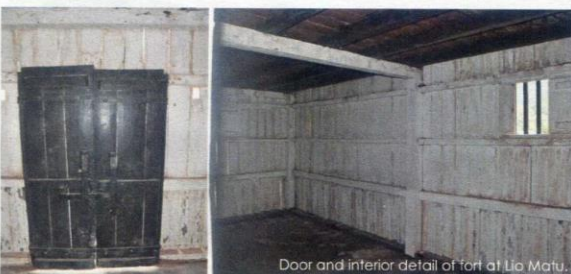


The Sarawak Gazette confirms that construction proceeded apace. By September 1908 the walls and the roof were finished (Douglas 1909: 158). The official date for the completion of the fort is gazetted as 1911 .

Today, the fort at Lio Matu stands on its original site with a commanding view of the school playing field *padang* and the school and the river. Not far downriver are islands where small crocodiles can be seen sunning themselves, and beyond are Kenyah longhouses where visitors can be entertained with music and singing. Upriver the road takes you on to Bario , via Long Peluan the Kelabit settlement that moved down to be closer to the fort.

It retains some of the original adze hewn planks used for the walls of the first storey. One of the local elders reminisced that the fort was used as a school in the 1950's and he had been taught there by a Mrs Cunningham. After a period of disuse it has now been renovated – ceilings and a new roof have been constructed, electrical wiring put in place and the whole building has been given a fresh coat of paint.

It is now the site of the district agriculture office. The ground floor houses the lock-up and the store, while the first floor is given over to office space and the area used for the market *tamu*. It is heartening to see this place put into use again, 100 years after it was built to benefit the remote rural communities of the upper Baram, with rubber planting and fruit nursery projects.



Door and interior detail of fort at Lio Matu.

Note by SHS :

The forts at Long Akah and Lio Matu and most likely Long Lama share an architectural and administrative heritage. All three are mini versions of the Kapit type (of which there were four - Kapit, Sibul, Bintulu and Mukah), with two storeys and the corner tower at 45 degrees.

Forts at Lio Matu, Long Akah and Kapit still stand though sadly the others have been lost. Neither of the forts at Long Akah or Lio Matu are currently on the heritage list.