



**CHANGING BORDERS
AND
IDENTITIES
IN THE
KELABIT HIGHLANDS**

**Anthropological Reflections
on Growing Up in a
Kelabit Village
Near the International Border**

POLINE BALA

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The author is a Lecturer, Faculty of Social Sciences, in the International Studies Program, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak.

The central topic of this book is the international border between Indonesia and Malaysia and its changing and evolving significance to the peoples of the Kelabit Highlands.

Playing upon the multiple meanings inherent in the notions of "boundaries" and "borders," and of the role they play in creating and mediating identities, the author relates the account of the international border to her own odyssey from a Kelabit Highlands childhood to becoming an anthropologist and university lecturer.

**Changing Borders and Identities in the Kelabit Highlands:
Anthropological Reflections on Growing Up near an
International Border**

POLINE BALA



Dayak Studies Contemporary Society Series, No. 1
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Dedicated to *Tama'*, *Sina'* and to all the *Lun Ngered* in the Kelabit Highlands. Many of you have left to be with the Lord. *Pelaba Da'at ali ngih Bario* (It's very lonesome in Bario) without you all. May this work be the beginning of many more efforts to record the marks you all have left in our hearts. Your heads are like a library stored with rich information. As for me, I treasure those moments I spent listening and recording your life stories, your knowledge and wisdom. From the depth of my heart,
mula' mula' terima kasih

Foreword

Dayak Studies and the Contemporary Society Series

The Dayak Studies Program was inaugurated at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak in January 2001. Constituted within the Institute of East Asian Studies, and sustained by an endowment from the Dayak Cultural Foundation, the program was established for the purpose of promoting long-term research on issues confronting the Dayak communities of Sarawak and of the island of Borneo more generally.

In this connection, the Dayak Studies Program has initiated two publication series: 1) a Contemporary Society Series, and 2) an Oral Literature Series (the latter comprised of volumes devoted to folktales, stories, oral epics and historical narratives, published in both the original vernacular language and English translation).

About the Dayak Studies Contemporary Society Series

Dayak communities comprise a major component of the population of Sarawak. They also form a critical part of the population of the neighboring Kalimantan provinces of Indonesia and, indeed, of the entire island of Borneo. The term Dayak has been used in a variety of different ways. Here, we use the term, in a general sense, to refer to the diverse non-Malay, or non-Muslim, indigenous communities of Borneo. These communities, it must be stressed, are highly diverse and differ from one another, in some cases strikingly so, in language, culture, society, and religion.

Although various aspects of traditional Dayak society and culture have been investigated by anthropologists, linguists, historians and others, with extremely rich results, there are a number of issues facing contemporary Dayak communities that warrant close examination. The Dayak Cultural Foundation, in endowing the Dayak Studies Chair, highlighted a number of these concerns. Among them, the Foundation called for research and publication aimed at contributing to a better understanding of such diverse issues as, for example, employment, poverty, and income distribution; the role and continuing identity of Dayak communities; and relations between various Dayak peoples, and coastal and urban populations, making up the modern nation states of the region.

The Dayak Studies Contemporary Society Series was established for the specific purpose of addressing these and related concerns. Consisting of data papers, timely reports and monographs, the series is meant to report on the results of research or comparative analysis directly related to such issues as they affect the everyday life and well-being of the present-day Dayak peoples of Sarawak and beyond.

About Changing Borders and Identities

It is a special pleasure to inaugurate the Contemporary Society Series with Poline Bala's penetrating study of *Changing Borders and Identities in the Kelabit Highlands*.

Over twenty years ago, when I was teaching anthropology at the Universiti Sains Malaysia, I had the good fortune to have as a student a bright young Kelabit social science undergraduate named Yahya Talla. During his final year holidays, Yahya began an ethnographic study of his own Highlands community. He wrote up the results as a substantial 500-page "Provisional Research Report," which, despite its provisional nature, stood for a number of years as the most accurate and comprehensive account then available of the post-Independence Kelabit community of Sarawak.

Like Poline Bala, Yahya Talla, too, drew on the experiences of his father, aunts, uncles and others, to produce an intimate account of the changing life of his people in the Kelabit Highlands. In a brief way, he also pointed up the significance of the international border in creating a growing cleavage between the Sarawak Kelabit and their Berian kinsmen in East Kalimantan.

In this book, Poline Bala goes much further, and, fittingly, makes the border and its evolving significance to the peoples of the Highlands her central topic. In a fascinating way, the story of the border also becomes, as she tells it, her own story. Playing upon the multiple meanings inherent in the notion of "boundaries" and "borders," and of the role that they play in creating and mediating identities, she powerfully relates an account of the international border that now runs through central Borneo to her own personal odyssey, from a Highlands childhood to becoming an anthropologist and university lecturer, and to the experiences of her people, as the Kelabit themselves have similarly become increasingly diasporic and urban. Along the way, she introduces us to, and so weaves into her account, some age-old Kelabit song forms, now re-adapted to tell individual stories of an ever-changing present.

Professor Clifford Sather
Chair, Dayak Studies
Institute of East Asian Studies, UNIMAS

Postscript

Having given editorial assistance to Poline in the ongoing process of this book's development, I wanted to add a few words to the foreword.

Although this study clearly fits within the discipline of anthropology, it is unusual in that the stylistic medium through which much of the information is conveyed is the narrative—not only the stories of the informants, but also the author's own stories are given. Poline writes that in the longhouse where she grew up, knowledge was passed on through the art forms of songs and stories: she continues in this Kelabit story-telling tradition, then filters her reflections on this material—including matters highly colored by intense personal feelings—through an anthropological lens with the goal of objective, open-minded examination and clear reporting of her findings.

Louise Klemperer Sather

Acknowledgements

I can hardly believe that I have finally finished writing this book. It took me quite some time to complete it. As with many major undertakings, this would have been an impossible task without the inspiration and the support of many who have contributed in ways known and unknown to the writing of this book. This is my first book. There are so many people I want to thank, and I am indebted to many dear friends, colleagues and relatives in the birthing of this work. It has taken many years.

First, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to many academic advisors that have contributed towards developing my intellectual thinking about the Kelabit. Here, I would like to especially mention Professor Shaharil Talib of University Malaya, who in my early years at the university encouraged and challenged me to think of the Kelabit situation within the context of the whole island of Borneo. Later on, Professor Shamsul Amri of University Kebangsaan Malaysia provided valuable guidance as I continued to find my way in the academic world. The late Professor Thomas A. Kirsch and Professor Jennifer Krier were my thesis advisors at Cornell University, and both were tremendously helpful and approachable. Professor Michael Leigh and Professor Clifford Sather of the Institute of Southeast Asia UNIMAS, have provided tremendous encouragement to get my M.A. thesis to be published in the form of this book. Despite his busy schedule, Professor Sather read through the manuscript more than twice. With his wife Louise, he proofread the text and checked it for accuracy of facts. I very much appreciate the effort. My Dean, Associate Prof Dr. Dimbab Ngidang of the Faculty of Social Science, UNIMAS has been very understanding. He understood the demand on my time and energy to get this book published. Professor Wan Zawawi, also of the Faculty of Social Science, UNIMAS has provided constant encouragement as I felt my way through in the research world. Thank you all for believing in me and for wanting this book published.

A scholarship from the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) enabled me to complete the writing of my M.A. thesis at Cornell University in January 1999. And, prior to this, a grant from the Toyota Foundation in 1994 to conduct preliminary research on Kelabit Genealogy made this research possible. I want to thank my university, the University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), and particularly its Institute for East Asian Studies for publishing the book.

Special thanks are due to many friends that have contributed in one way or another to the success of this project. Some of these friendships go back a long time, to the time when my interest in anthropology was beginning to bud. My thanks go to Mathew Amster, a friend who shares my interests in the Kelabit, and also with whom I have done some collaborative research in the Highlands in 1995, also my thanks go to Kelvin Egay, a relative and friend as well as a colleague who shares my dilemma engaging with anthropology as a discipline. I appreciate our ongoing conversation about what various concepts, ideas and theories to mean for interpretive discussions and explorations of social situation in the context of Sarawak. I am also indebted to my many friends while

at Cornell University: Carol Rubenstein, a person I could always count on while living in Ithaca, Allison, Edith, Mariko, Cattyann, Osman, Keithanne, Karen Fisher, Rachel and many others in the Cornell International Christian Fellowship (CICF) who have shown personal interest and support of my work at Cornell. My friends who happen to also be my colleagues at UNIMAS have been very understanding while I locked myself in my office to work on the manuscript. They have shown tremendous support by allowing me to experiment with the idea of looking at the international border from an anthropological perspective. Here, I thank Ahmad Nizar, Kelvin Egay, Mohd Faisal Syam, Suseela Devi Chandran, Noor'ain Aini, Wan Halizan, Ahi Sarok, Awang Ideris and Stanley Bye. You all are a wonderful bunch of colleagues. Thank you guys!

I am particularly grateful to Louise Klemperer Sather. She took valuable time to read and edit and suggest, refining my work with her unique kind of artistic skills. She deserves a special word of thanks. She has done a fantastic job editing the manuscript and clarifying my thoughts, and helped me to have confidence to present the material the way it is.

Another group of people that deserve a special word of thanks are the *lun merar* (Big People) or the *lun ngered* (Old folks) in the Kelabit Highlands. In fact, this book is dedicated to them for it is their stories that make the writing of this book possible. Many have spent hours talking and sharing with me their life stories, experiences and observations. There are too many to mention here, but each has left an inedible mark in my heart. Some are already gone to be with the Lord. I treasure every moment I have had listening to their stories. I often told many of these granduncles, grandaunts, uncles and aunts that they are my professors whenever I am in the Highlands. They impart to me wisdom and understanding, while my professors at the university impart to me knowledge and information.

I also record my thanks to UNICEF UK for kindly granting me permission to use images taken of me and my community for an education kit in 1981, "The rainforest child-Pauline of Malaysia," UNICEF Development Education Kit No.15. UNICEF, however, is not involved in the publication of this monograph.

I also wish to acknowledge Sydney Wee for allowing me to use his splendid photograph of the Highlands on the front cover of this book and for taking time to take photos of a few ex Border Scouts who now live as farmers in Bario. Thank you for your photographic records.

Finally, I especially want to acknowledge my father, Bala Palaba, also known as Pun Debpur, who from the beginning has shown great interest in my work. He has been a constant and affectionate support during my research and my writing. And my mother, Sinah Bala Pelaba, also known as Buren Mupun, has been steady in her prayers for my well-being. I also want to express special thanks to my late grandmother who faithfully waited for me to come back to Malaysia before she died in December 1997. My sisters and brother as well as their families have been tremendous blessings for me. I praise Him who grants me the grace and strength to complete this task.

Poline Bala
Faculty Social Science
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2002

Preface

This work began in the form of a M.A. thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Cornell University in January 1999. It has since been extensively revised after much reflection and further observation at the border. This study considers the ways in which the international political boundaries between Malaysia and Indonesia on the island of Borneo have affected the everyday interactions, kinship ties, group relations and other communal networks amongst the Kelabit and Lun Berian in the Highlands of Central Borneo. It deviates from the conventional manner of defining political boundaries as fixed points in international relations in order to discuss state sovereignty and nation-building processes, and to study disputes and conflicts between states. Instead, it highlights specific significances and meanings of the border to the people living in its immediate vicinity. This is an aspect that has been relatively neglected by researchers who examine borders. For some of these people who live near boundary lines, for example, the Kelabit in the Kelabit Highlands, the boundary is less an issue of state politics and nation-building processes than it is an aspect of everyday life experience, of class, kinship and group relations, as well as of issues of economic and political differences.

The central theme is that the international boundary lines on the island of Borneo currently act as a new variable in what had been a fluid and changing situation of non-bounded territorial group interactions in the region. Long before the construction of the political boundary lines, the peoples of Borneo had formed political, social and economic networks and links that were defined by their functions more than by territory. These links and networks were extended over large and varied geographical spaces despite the rough and rugged physical terrain of the area. However, the construction of the political boundary lines through the various treaties, beginning with the Convention of 1891, has slowly transformed the nature of these links and networks.

An aspect which differentiates this monograph from many others is the use of my own personal experiences as part of the framework for this study. Although this procedure opens up a largely unexplored frontier, I sought to compare information I found in books with my own experiences growing up in the Highlands. I include stories, memories and just a few statistics in my personal data and combine or contrast this with information gathered in interviews, gleaned from books, observations and from other Kelabit stories and songs. I left the Highlands in 1985, and my longest stay since then was from January to May, 1995. However, I have visited the Highlands regularly, with my most recent visit being in May 2002.

Organization of the Chapters

In Chapter One, I describe my own personal experience in telling this story. I decided to put this at the beginning of the book to provide the reader with an idea of my personal stance as the researcher, writer and part of the subject of this writing. Bearing that in mind, I hope the reader will understand my position as I move back and forth between being the storyteller, recorder, observer and the subject, as I relate the story of the politically constructed international boundary between Malaysia and Indonesia.

Chapter Two offers a cultural and regional context for the Kelabit and their homeland in the northeastern part of Central Borneo. Within this context, a boundary line as a form of marker to delineate physical borders and to define a bounded place was formerly absent. But other social boundaries and connections have existed, undefined in terms of fixed geographical space. The neighboring peoples have formed networks and links that have extended over large and varied geographical spaces.

Chapter Three provides an overview of the Kelabit sense of social and geographical space in the Highlands, and how this has changed over the years due to various factors. These changes have produced new forms of cultural and social boundaries within and between communities.

Chapter Four describes the historical evolution of the permanent boundary line in Central Borneo, a process that can be viewed as a development from jurisdictional to territorial sovereignty. However, it was the Confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia in 1963-1966 that provided political significance of the boundary line to the local people.

Chapter Five looks at some day-to-day activities at the border and the development of my own awareness concerning the boundary. This chapter looks at the many and varied meanings different people attribute to the border line, and how the political boundary has transformed and differentiated the quality of life between the two neighboring frontier regions in the Highlands of Central Borneo.

In Chapter Six, I come to the conclusion that the political boundary line in the Highlands of Central Borneo acts as one of the newest variables in a long history of many variables that have affected the complex and changing patterns of peoples' movements in what is now the Border Area between Indonesia and Malaysia.

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CHAPTER ONE

Prologue

Telling this Story (*Mala sekunuh sinih*)

In telling the following story of the boundary line that runs through the Kelabit-Kerayan Highlands, I have learned that, “Boundaries are where one encounters others; they imply the recognition of others’ autonomy and specificity as well as the realisation of one’s own identity” (Oommen 1995:252). As I grapple with issues pertaining to the politically constructed international boundary between Malaysia and Indonesia in the Highlands of Central Borneo, I also grapple with notions of other boundaries as I tell this story. It is through this process of telling that I discovered, on both a physical and mental journey of realization, awareness and consciousness of “others’ ” identities as well as my own identity as the researcher, writer and part of the subject of this project.

At the outset, permit me to say that this story has been difficult for me to write for several reasons. First, not only has the context of the discipline of anthropology that I use to consider my own life and home in this writing shifted tremendously, but also, I have had to grapple with other notions of boundaries within the discipline while considering the subject of my anthropological study in this work. While the former presents me with questions such as where and how do I position myself in this turbulence of change in the discipline, my grappling with certain invisible boundaries within the discipline puts me in a difficult position to locate my own “bounded zone” from which to speak. This is particularly difficult since I am the observer, the storyteller, and, to a certain extent, part of the subject of my own study. I struggle with the problem of when to speak as an observer and when to speak as a subject.

Like almost everyone else, my first encounter with the field of anthropology was during my first year at university. It was taught in the Introduction to Anthropology and Sociology class, which was mainly to introduce new students to the subject. To my mind, then, anthropology was a neat and discrete discipline with a distinct and unequivocal way of observing and representing its subject of study with clear and intelligible categorizations and dichotomies. I was immediately drawn to the discipline since it has a connection to what is close to my heart – the desire to know and understand the social fabric and the dynamics within my own community – the Kelabit.

I was, and still am, curious about the cultural and social changes that have taken and continue to take place in my village and community. The village where I grew up has changed rapidly in its demography, social, economic and political structures. I wanted to understand the dynamics behind these changes. I was also fascinated by

many stories about the Highlands in the past—legends, myths and life stories that contain stories of exploration and expeditions into new terrain and territories. These include stories of headhunting, trade relations, marriage relations, connections and linkages. But most important, I was curious to know the origins of the Kelabit in the Highlands, mostly in order to gain some insight into the Kelabit's identity as a people. I figured that the only way I could delve deeper into these issues was to study anthropology.

I was particularly drawn to the concepts and practices of fieldwork produced by this discipline, which I assumed would provide me with space and legitimacy to explore my personal interest and eagerness to understand these issues and dynamics. Hence began my engagement with anthropology as an academic discipline, which subsequently started me on this task of telling my story of the emergence of the physical boundary between Indonesia and Malaysia in the Kelabit-Kerayan Highlands on the island of Borneo. It is a task that involved an arduous journey, both in the literal sense as well as sending my thoughts traveling back across the years. Besides having to travel long distances physically (for the initial stage, between Ithaca, New York and Bario in Sarawak, and for the final stage, between Kuching and Bario), I had to walk down memory lane across the years to remember some of the experiences I have put on these pages.

Moreover, the journey did not stop there. I also have had to understand anthropology as a discipline — grappling to understand its history and traditions as well as its recent development. Why do I need to do this? First, I feel the need to position myself within the discipline in order to be intellectually safe, sound, contemporary and understandable, and, most important, to sound academic. Like many other students of anthropology, I combed books in the library in an attempt to understand and make sense of the discipline. Through these books and also through my formal classes at the university, I traced the history of recent generations of anthropology to the time when Malinowski was living amongst the natives in the Trobriand Islands during World War I. From this experience, Malinowski produced his (in)famous ethnographic account of *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. His work, and especially the method/approach he employed, widely known in anthropology as doing fieldwork through participant observation, gave Malinowski the title, “The Father of Anthropology.”

Malinowski's method subsequently created a research and representation model in anthropology that emphasizes an empirical agenda to construct whole or total cultures by making observations in a village or cluster of villages. It is accepted that by utilizing this authentic field method that emphasizes a systematic noting down of observations, a person can reconstruct the total culture of a community or people, and thus will be able to represent reality as a form of ethnographic realism (Stoller 1999:698). This method, and the writing up of ethnographic accounts subsequent to fieldwork, are widely accepted as valid practices by schools of anthropology, especially in America and Europe.

Like many others, I was initially fascinated by Malinowski's systematic observation model and was oblivious to its discriminatory strategy of “othering.” It is a strategy that revolves around the idea of positing a basic difference between

anthropologists and those they study. Boundaries are erected during fieldwork and in the writing of ethnographies to demarcate clear differences between the observer and observed. As such, the distances, both cultural and geographic, that separate the observers from the observed group have defined anthropology as a discipline for a long time (Peirano 1998). Within this context, although the discipline had never been defined as the study of primitive cultures in absolute terms, it is obvious from myriads of ethnographic accounts that the “non-European other” excites the anthropological imagination. In an attempt to represent the “other” or “them,” a boundary between “at home” or “in our culture” and “foreign,” “overseas,” “exotic” or even “primitive” or “non-literate” is created in these accounts. Obviously, these texts do not merely produce “native otherness” that is disassociated from the West, but implicitly reproduce a relationship between the Third World and the West by presenting the state of the former as a measure of inferiority. Therefore, anthropology is often criticized as a form of Western colonial discourse by scholars like Edward Said (1978), Spivak (1987, 1989), Trinh (1989), and Mani (1987). In his well-known account, *Orientalism*, Said (1978) criticizes anthropology and/or ethnography’s “othering” strategy as a construction to serve colonial discourse in its attempt to culturally differentiate the colonizer from the colonized. This discourse of cultural domination, he posits, is used effectively as a form of control over the Third World.

Although I do not wish to echo Said’s critique in this work, his criticism of the “othering” strategy has altered my subsequent readings of not only Malinowski’s ethnographic studies, but also of many other ethnographic accounts, especially ethnographies of non-European “primitive natives” of the colonized world or today’s Third World countries.¹ Nevertheless, my first encounter with the notion of the “other” did not become salient through my readings of these texts, but came about when I first attempted to do anthropological research in my homeland in 1994. An anthropologist from the West told me then that anthropology is the study of the culture of “others,” which is primarily based on the ideal of a long period of fieldwork and overseas research. As such, I was considered unqualified to perform any form of anthropological research on the Kelabit, a small ethnic group in Sarawak, East Malaysia, since I am, myself, a Kelabit.

The anthropologist’s comments upset and confused me: I was upset to hear that my research was not considered feasible and was confused that the discipline excluded me because of my being a “native.” Desperate for guidance and encouragement, I poured out my disappointment and confusion to one of my academic advisors. Fortunately, he encouraged me by suggesting that I am a different sort of Kelabit from those remaining in my homeland. His idea was that a Kelabit who resides in the city is different from a Kelabit in the village. Since I live in the city, he suggested, it seemed fitting for me to do the research as an “anthropology at home” project. How valid this suggestion was, I had no idea. However, all that mattered was that it provided an acceptable rationale for me to

¹ But this is not to say that I detest anthropology as a discipline or the work of anthropologists among the non-European natives. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, anthropology has provided me a venue to engage with an issue that has been very close to my heart – the Kelabit situation and culture. And I do agree with Herbert Lewis (1998) that anthropology has been unduly condemned to the point that the field becomes “untrustworthy,” irrelevant, and, worse still, obsolete.

pursue my interest.² In late 1994, the Toyota Foundation awarded me a grant to conduct research on the Kelabit's cultural construction and use of genealogies for a Masters of Philosophy at one of the local universities in Malaysia. (I did not complete this degree since I opted to join UNIMAS with a scholarship to pursue a Master of Arts in Asian Studies at Cornell University). Hence, at the end of 1994 and early 1995, I went home to the Kelabit Highlands to conduct a four month preliminary study in Bario.

Interestingly, it was during this period that I first encountered a crisis commonly described as a "crisis of representation" in the field of anthropology. To my mind, as a member of the concerned community, it invoked feelings of disappointment, pain, and even being in danger, resulting from an erroneous cross-cultural representation. This happened when I read a few ethnographic accounts of the Kelabit, including a Ph.D thesis entitled *Rice, Work and Community Among the Kelabit of Sarawak, East Malaysia*. I was particularly alarmed to find out that the ethnographer (from the Kelabit point of view) had misinterpreted and misunderstood certain unspoken sensitivities surrounding a particular cultural greeting amongst the Kelabit — *me apeh iko?* or "Where are you going?"

Based on Kelabit custom, the standard answer to this question-like greeting is, *me raut ngih* (destination) (just to play at a certain destination). For example, if someone is on the way to fish, that person most likely will answer the greeting with: *me raut ngih ebpa dih* (just to play at the river). It is an indirect or vague answer to "make light of serious tasks" by using the term *raut* (play), as a cover-up—lest one be regarded as proud. Unfortunately, the ethnographer took the literal meaning of the expression *raut* (play), which is the same word used to describe "the play of children," and as such is considered fun, leisurely and easy. The ethnographer then decided that certain tasks like fishing and hunting are *raut* (play) as opposed to other tasks like farming, which is classified as *lama'ud* (work). In this reasoning, while tasks like fishing and hunting would be considered easy and fun, tasks such as farming would be described as onerous, admirable and difficult. Building upon this simple dichotomy, the ethnographer concludes that the Kelabit consider any person or group involved in hunting to be *anak* (children), whereas those involved in rice cultivation are considered *lun merar* (big people). With this framework in mind, the ethnographer then suggests that the Kelabit consider the Penan as *anak* (children), since the latter do not cultivate rice, but are involved in hunting and gathering.³ Obviously, as a Kelabit myself, I was saddened by the ethnographer's simplistic and

² Although I was grateful that the concept of "anthropology at home" allowed me to pursue my interest, I was clueless as to what and how various developments in the discipline of anthropology had made it possible for me to engage with this task of researching and writing in the 1990s of the emergence of the boundary line in my homeland in Central Borneo. I learnt that different ideas and models arose in the field of anthropology in the 1970s through the 1980s which explored issues pertaining to research and research problems. These problems not only influenced how researchers conduct research, but also challenged the social sciences' concept of the existence of a value-free position from which objective research could be conducted, and challenged the conventional models of representation in ethnographies (For further details, refer to P. Stoller, 1999). These developments eventually paved a way for indigenous anthropologists, including myself, to practice "anthropology in one's native country, society, and or ethnic group." This practice is also known as insider or native anthropology or "anthropology at home," (M. Peirano 1998:113) which, according to Peirano, has more than one meaning, but includes "the kind of inquiry developed in the study of one's own society, where "others" are both ourselves and those relatively different from us, whom we see as part of the same collectivity" (1998:107).

³ The paper entitled "The Kelabit Attitude to the Penan: Forever Children" was presented by the ethnographer at the Extra-ordinary Session of the Borneo Research Council in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia in August 1990, and despite criticism voiced by the Kelabit community, the article has since been published in M. Janowski, 1997. *La Ricerca Folklorica*, Vol.34:55-58.

misleading interpretation and representation of the dynamics operating within the Kelabit community.

To my surprise, the ethnographer's claims and arguments did not merely produce great concern amongst members of the Kelabit community, but also evoked a response from them. It somehow sparked a debate, the first of its kind that the members of the community were aware of, on the notions of authenticity, agency, authority and responsibility in the representation and depictions of the "real" life experiences and struggles of the communities mentioned. The debate not only reflected a sincere concern over misrepresentation by "outsiders," but also indicated a growing awareness of one's own culture as a subject of reflection and awareness among members of the community. Therefore, a meeting was called in September 1990 to discuss and draft⁴ a response to the ethnographer's claims and suggestions. The response eventually was sent to the ethnographer whereby the ethnographer was accused of misrepresenting facts and thus endangering future relations between the Kelabit and the Penan. The responders not only claimed to have a "wider knowledge and experience of ethnic relations among the Penans and Kelabits," but also suggested their rights as "insiders" to vocalize their views and to question claims made by the ethnographer on various issues.⁵ In one of the general comments, they state,

The response to this paper [the paper that the researcher had presented] may cause other researchers to consider the wider issue concerning the right of the subjects studied to their own views, or the insider's view versus that of the researcher's⁶ ...we feel that remarks made are misleading and we fear that in years to come, attitudes falsely attributed to the subjects studied may have a deeply damaging effect on ethnic relations between the Penans and Kelabits.

The complexities surrounding the notions of "otherness," "crisis of representation" and the dynamics of the insider's versus the outsider's point of view

⁴ The draft is unpublished and entitled "Reply to the Paper entitled "The Kelabit Attitude to the Penan: Forever Children" presented by Monica Hughes Janowski at the Extra-ordinary Session of the Borneo Research Council in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia in August 1990.

⁵ It is interesting to compare their response with Heider's (1988) "Rashomon Effect," a term Heider uses to explain situations when ethnographers are in disagreement because they look differently at the same culture. What is missing in his account of the Rashomon Effect though, is the importance of the subjects' views and responses in these ethnographic accounts.

⁶ As a person who is interested in the discipline of anthropology, I assume that the problem was not so much because the ethnographer was a non-Kelabit or an outsider, but suggest that the problem occurred as a consequence of the methodological approach and theoretical frame of reference, which had been decided upon before the fieldwork was conducted. These research and theoretical agendas were determined prior to the actual fieldwork to describe, explain and categorize social life from the data which was then collected during the fieldwork. Thus, the ethnographic study was a work of 'fitting things into an existing framework,' basically in a quest of substantiating a fashionable theory. As a result, the work was deprived of a rather complex and positive picture of the community under study and of the Kelabit's relationship to the Penan. This was compounded by the ethnographer's keen engagement with the use of the complementary opposition method (binary opposition) to discuss and highlight the symbolic centrality of rice amongst the Kelabit by contrasting rice growing with other economic activities. In an attempt to emphasize the centrality of rice, the ethnographer categorized/dichotomized the community into several sets of opposing categories, such as male and female, child and adult, play and work, all in their relation to food production and consumption. This model has been significantly shaped by certain Western dualistic modes of thought, which generally have pushed aside culturally specific gender meanings and practices in smaller communities like the Kelabit. Gender relations among these communities are not particularly shaped by fixed differences between male and female, but can be molded or shaped by complex sociopolitical dynamics. These dynamics involve the intersection of gender-based norms of behavior with culture, ethnicity, nationality, knowledge and power which influence the ways gender relations are expressed and practiced in these societies.

become more apparent through some other unique experiences I encountered while doing my fieldwork in the Highlands. One of these unique experiences was doing collaborative work with another anthropologist, a non-Kelabit, who was also conducting anthropological research in the Highlands, and was then a graduate student from a university in the U.S.A. Since we were working at the same field site, we decided to do some collaborating. A significant fact we found interesting was the difference in informants' responses to us individually. This was particularly obvious in regards to their answering his and my questions. Although we both asked the same questions, some people deliberately would give each of us separate and different information. Besides that, their responses, or the way some answered us, were different. While some were very gentle and often used terms of endearment when addressing me, there were times when they would be very brief and blunt with my collaborator.

The selectivity of information given and the variations in responses and answers to our questions, I later figured out, were largely due to the fact that my collaborator was considered an "outsider" and therefore should not know too much about "us." Since he was an "outsider," coming into the village and community to study "us" and write about "us," some were sincerely concerned that he would write about everything he knew and found out, and consequentially would expose personal histories and stories that were too private and should not be told to the public.⁷ There were times when the respondents gave excuses by saying that my collaborator would not "really" understand "our" situation, for he was not a local or a native, therefore it was enough to just give him some simple answers to his long and, at times, taxing queries.⁸ Fortunately, my collaborator was constantly cross-examining his information!

Besides that, what I found most intriguing was the fact that some people were concerned about the idea of my collaborator earning a Ph.D "out of us," which subsequently would entitle him to a better living. Some even maintained the idea that he was gaining some financial benefits out of the research;⁹ therefore, they considered the community as being *dipakai* or "used." These comments were not limited to just my collaborator. Months later, or even after I came back from graduate studies, once in awhile I hear comments and suggestions that "outsiders," especially researchers, are getting their Masters and Ph.Ds through the information that "we" give them.

Some of these individuals had personally approached and expressed their apprehensions to me. On the one hand, I could identify with their concerns because I was also disappointed by (mis)interpretation and (mis)representation in ethnographies by anthropologists in the past. On the other hand, I shared my collaborator's interest in anthropological research and his ardent interest in the

⁷ The differences in people's responses towards us were also perhaps due to the fact that my collaborator was a male and I am a female.

⁸ I was confronted with the same issue again in a recent dialogue pertaining to some problems and challenges we faced in implementing the Internet Access Project in Bario. One of the respondents turned to me and said, "Don't tell the person about our weaknesses [the community's]. He is an outsider and thus will not understand our problems."

⁹ Contrary to this opinion, the collaborator, in fact, spent personal savings to make the fieldwork possible. The collaborator was "adopted" by a family and contributed food items, money, time and energy generously to his adopted family.

Kelabit community. I was caught in the middle between two sides—my anthropologist collaborator, with whom I share an academic identity, and these others, members of the Kelabit community, who share my cultural and social identity.

My encounter with these notions throughout my fieldwork made me conscious of others' autonomy, particularly of Western anthropologists in anthropology as an academic discipline, and also made me aware of my own integrated identities. One part of me is a Kelabit, and another part, a native anthropologist; the latter by definition, means "the subjects of enquiry become the authors of their own group" (Peirano 1998:113).¹⁰ In positioning myself as a native anthropologist, I found it particularly challenging (sometimes ripping at my emotions) to fulfill the demands and paradigms in anthropology—for distance from, objectivity towards, and abstraction of, the social facts being investigated. The idea of being objective when approaching a topic involves distancing oneself from the subject. It means studying the subject without being swayed by an emotional attachment, which may color or influence my interpretation or understanding of the subject. It therefore requires some analytical distance in observing, collecting data and writing about what I have experienced. This means putting up boundaries between myself as the researcher and describer of the social facts I am investigating, and my identity as a Kelabit, and that entails disassociating my personal feelings from the impersonal social facts. As a native seeking to describe a culture with which I am intimately familiar, it is not an easy task. I have to make a conscious effort to avoid any exoticization of the stories in my representations of my experiences, observations and data collected.

It is not only that I had trouble determining my own multiple identities¹¹ within these conflicting interests; I was also confronted with a dense jungle of texts, representing variations of research strategy, with different dominant theoretical bodies, and sometimes confusing, although helpful emphases on different elements in the texts. I found myself having to constantly negotiate my way through this jungle of texts. And the difficulties did not end there, for oftentimes I struggled with abstractions and grand theories. This I found especially tiring while pursuing my Master of Arts at Cornell University.¹²

Unlike my experience studying anthropology in my undergraduate years in Malaysia,¹³ the academic tradition of arguing, challenging, criticizing or opposing,

¹⁰ This situation reminds me of what Tom Harrisson (Harrisson 1949b: 65-69) once wrote some years ago: "It could be nice if they [the Kelabit] could write for themselves, but until early 1946, when we opened the first school, none of them could write. Now four of them have traveled a month to the coast and then to the capital, Kuching for teachers' training course. In a few years, they, who are natural orators, singers, bards, and moulders of words (as of iron and ivory, hardwood and horn), may well be able to tell their own tale. Meanwhile, willy-nilly, it falls on me, the only white man so far to live among them and get to know them." Since Harrisson's statement, a number of Kelabit have written about the Kelabit as a people. For example Luun Ribuh (1955); Lian Labang (1958), (1962); Galih Balang (1965); Malam Maran (1969), (1971); Robert Lian Saging (1976/1977, 1979); Yahya Talla (1979); Lucy Bulan and David Labang (1979); Garnette Jalla, (1981); Doris Bala Lian (1988/1989), Bilcher Bala (1994), Poline Bala (1994), (1999).

¹¹ This is where part of Oommen's claim makes sense to me. Through this experience I realized my identity as an anthropologist, which is not normally part of being a Kelabit. While my identity as a Kelabit came "naturally" as I grew up, my identity as an anthropologist has involved deliberate and conscious effort on my part.

¹² I can identify with Behar's experiences in conducting ethnographic work and writing ethnographies. She writes, "What I do find tiresome is the habit of using whatever theory happens to be fashionable whether it is Gramsci on hegemony, or Foucault on sexuality, or Spivak on can the subaltern speak, or Bourdieu on practice as substitute for really engaging with tough questions posed by those whom we encounter on our journeys as ethnographer" (1999: 452).

¹³ As mentioned previously, anthropology was a subject I learned during my undergraduate years at the University of Malaya. I studied the history of anthropology, its development and main figures. In a sense, this study included the concept of the anthropologist as the subject, which we scrutinized in our classes and discussions.

and promoting meanings or interpretations of concepts, theories or methods was not only puzzling, but created a sense of displacement in me while in graduate school in the U.S. There were often times when I found myself representing or being a part of the subjects that were discussed in classes, books and articles. This was particularly so when the subject matter of the study or discussions revolved around indigenous people and their cultures. These feelings of displacement were especially uncomfortable when the discussions focused intensely on questions of categorizations, abstractions of frameworks, methodologies, social categories, theories and concepts to describe, explain, illustrate and analyze indigenous cultures and livelihood, but for me were vital issues of survival for the native. Often I found that the subject matter, and especially the natives, were “displaced” or “misplaced” in the process of discussion.

There were also other times when I found myself struggling to be the observer, times when I was constantly grappling with questions such as where do I locate myself within the many theories, concepts and ideas, which are often abstract questions of social theory? What theory can explain my ideas? Which concepts or categories should/can I manipulate to represent my assumptions, experience and ideas? How can I illuminate realities using models of life which are divided into social categories, when these models are often limited in meanings, or even sometimes exclude other realities in life? I tried hard to locate myself and find my own path through this dense jungle of theories, concepts, categories and methods. I often felt overwhelmed and intimidated.

I searched the library for books and articles in quest of a theoretical framework. I also met with professors, friends and colleagues for ideas and advice to help with my dilemma. I was glad to know that some individuals did understand my inner conflict between my intellectual work and my sense of who I am. Making a huge intellectual effort, I strove to distance myself from the topic in order to be objective, but my emotions told me that I am part of the story and history that I am writing about. Issues came up such as how might my biographical subjectivity color my attempts at objective representation? Is there any possibility of using my personal experiences to give depth and passion to my writings? How can I separate my personal, borrowing Behar’s (1999:479) words, “sense of emotional, ethical, political and historical connection to the intellectual project [I am] taking on?” In an attempt to answer these questions I turned to the idea of autobiographical ethnography,¹⁴ which involves writing about the topic in a personal voice. I not only struggled to write this ethnography differently, but also grappled with, borrowing Bochner and Ellis words, “the connections between what [I] write, who and what [I] write about, and the rival moral claims that govern [my] life and work” (1999:490) It is particularly difficult to write with academic objectivity about a topic that has such a powerful connection to my own life, and to do it in a personalized way.

¹⁴ I am mainly referring to anthropologists transforming given personal experiences, in the context of fieldwork or in the realm of the lived, into ethnographic writing. Other terms used to refer to this are “ethnic autobiography,” which is a personal narrative, or autobiography, written by a member of an ethnic group, and “native ethnography” meaning ethnographies written by native members of the group studied. These different genres sometimes are categorized as Auto/ethnography. Auto/ethnography, according to Lepselter (1999:610), aims “to identify, perform, and explore points of connection between important genres of writing about self and society which can, in their openness, yield rich and surprising insights. It is an exploration whose effects vary depending on the essay, but which at its best here is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally stirring.”