

# Becoming like us

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## Conversion and Penan-ness at Long Beruang, Sarawak

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**Abstract:** How did the Penan of Sarawak, East Malaysia stop their nomadic life and become settled farmers and retain their identity as Penan? This article presents the memories of settled Kelabit and the neighbouring Penan of a time when they were reluctant to meet one another, when the Penan were nomadic. Their lifestyles were very different: the Penan were wary of outsiders, and the Kelabit children were scared of the Penan. The processes which brought about change between these two groups were motivated by the Kelabit urge to evangelise to the Penan. They began meeting and sharing food. Gradually, the Kelabit farmers encouraged the Penan 'to become like us', to settle as their neighbours at Long Beruang and become Christians like them. Eventually the Penan became successful padi-farmers and made their livelihood from both the forest where they hunted and foraged and from the padi fields where they grew rice. However, this did not lead to the assimilation of the Penan by the Kelabit but to a greater deliberate expression of Penan identity. This appears to be in keeping with phenomena elsewhere in the world, which suggest that when an ethnic group is under threat from external forces and assimilation, people assert their ethnic identity.

**Keywords:** sedentarisation, Penan, neighbours, Christianity, Sarawak

## Introduction

This article draws on the Kelabit oral narrative from Long Peluan of converting the neighbouring Penan to Christianity and their becoming neighbours at Long Beruang, a Penan settlement located in the upper region of the Baram River in the Miri division of Sarawak. This transformation is not just about a change in ritual practices and beliefs to becoming Christian, but also a major transition to settling and becoming padi-farmers. On close analysis, this paper argues, Christianity provided the means for the transition for the nomadic Penan to

become settled padi-farmers. This is in accordance with ideas of conversion which encompass reaching out to others, making new identities and a widening of perspectives, for both the Kelabit and the Penan. As aptly noted by Hefner (1993:17), ‘conversion implies the acceptance of a new locus of self-definition [...] it always involves commitment to a new kind of moral authority and a new or a reconceptualized social identity’. Taking a cue from the notion of emulation formulated by Tim Bending (2006:62), I suggest that the Penan come very close to becoming like the Kilobit through emulating them as they shed aspects of their nomadic lives, but with conversion, culture becomes practised, in the words of Sahlins (1992:13), in a much more self-conscious style and leads to a contemporary expression of Penan-ness which is readily articulated to interested visitors, be they tourists, journalists or international scholars.<sup>1</sup> This article draws material gathered during fieldwork amongst the Kelabit of Long Peluan in 2012–2015. The fieldwork focused on the influence of the Kelabit as swidden farmers on the neighbouring Penan of Long Beruang.

Firstly, the paper presents the setting, as this particular case study is unique to a specific time and place and is layered with issues relating to land and precedence. The next section provides a brief review of the literature on the Penan, sedentarisation and Christianity, which highlights the lack of historical research on relationships between Penan and their neighbours and the role of Christianity as a factor in their settlement. Next the paper explains the methodology used, the positioning of the researcher and the social roles of narratives. The paper then highlights the nature of nomadic life through the testimonies of Penan and through Kelabit anecdotes regarding first contacts with the Penan in the forest and trade meetings. These highlight Penan-ness, the valuation of a separate Penan cultural identity and the perception of this as difference by the Kelabit. This is followed by the Kelabit accounts of the first Christian prayer meetings and the first school, started by Tama Lawai Lahang. The next section examines the role of the Kelabit in wanting the Penan ‘to be like us’ and Penan elders talking of copying and emulating them. Finally, the paper examines the way in which the Penan have taken on a Christian identity that has affirmed Penan-ness and has led to the Penan developing their own parallel narratives.

1. Penan-ness is not a term of my own coinage. Penanness is utilised by Sercombe (1996:261), possibly based on similar usage referring to identity as Punan-ness by Sellato (1994:209).