\textit{LATI'\,BA'} SYSTEM OF THE LUN BAWANG IN BA' KELALAN: CHANGE AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES

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ABSTRACT

(For centuries, the Lun Bawang of Borneo highlands have produced a sustainable farming by integrating their social and residential arrangements with a complex but highly productive system of wet-rice cultivation known as latt’ ba’.)

However, the Lun Bawang culture has been experiencing drastic changes including their latt’ ba’ system especially the agricultural work groups. Therefore, this study, taking Long Rusu, Long Ritan and Long Nawi villages in Ba’ Kelalan as the study sites, is to uncover the changes on latt’ ba’ and the Lun Bawang community responses to these changes.

The study found a considerable changes on latt’ ba’ for example, rice has become a means for obtaining cash, problem of finding enough labour, limitations in buffaloes rearing and all these have implications on their agricultural work groups and the use of chemical inputs such as fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides in latt’ ba’. In order to cope with these changes, the Lun Bawang had made alteration to their agricultural work groups, the church became the centre points of arranging ngumum and initiated a transboundary networking to address environmental issues and promote the continuation of traditional and organic farming in the highlands of Borneo.
ABSTRAK


Kajian ini mendapati pelbagai perubahan terhadap lati’ ba’, contohnya padi/beras telah menjadi satu cara untuk mendapatkan pendapatan, kebergantungan tenaga kerja, kengkangan memelihara kerbau and perubahan – perubahan memberi implikasi terhadap kerja kemasyarakatan mereka dan penggunaan bahan kimia seperti baja, racun rumput dan racun serengga dalam lati’ ba’. Untuk menyesuaikan dengan perubahan – perubahan ini, masyarakat Lun Bawang telah mengubah cara aktiviti kemasyarakatan mereka, gereja menjadi institusi penting untuk mengurus ngumum dan mereka telah membuat inisiatif membentuk jaringan merentas sempadan negara untuk menangani isu masalah alam sekitar dan mempromosikan keterusan pertanian secara tradisi dan organik di Dataran Tinggi Borneo.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Rice is the staple food amongst most Asians. It has been cultivated in Asia for over a thousand years where it has become a major crop and the most preferred to other grains in the region. There are many varieties of rice, but *Oryza sativa* of Asia and *Oryza glaberrima* of West Africa are the only two cultivated ones (Latham 1998:3).

In Sarawak, rice is the staple food for all residents except the nomadic Penans who prefer starchy sago. For all the natives in Sarawak, rice cultivation has been and continues to be a part of their life and culture. Rice has now become the focal crop and is regarded as *proper* food (Janowski 1991:45). It is also the cornerstone of their life (except the Penans) and among all the 27 different ethnic groups, the Lun Bawang and Kelabit are well known for their productive rice cultivation system. This distinguishes them from most of Sarawak’s interior farmers (Paddoch, 1988). Because of their remarkable irrigation technology, the yield is always high and produces surpluses every year. The surplus is stocked for consumption, given as a gift to visitors, as food rations for travellers, and sent out to their children residing in towns.

1.2 Importance of Rice in Sarawak

According to Agriculture Department records, an area of 66,784 ha in Sarawak is planted with dry rice and 57,665 ha for wet rice. However, Sarawak accounts the lowest yield of production in the period of 2000/2001 and stood at 1,661 kg/ha for that 57,665 ha for wet rice (Agriculture Department 2002: 35 - 37). This indicates Sarawak’s rice production is the lowest in Malaysia.
For a long time Sarawak has imported a considerable amount of domestic rice to meet consumption needs. Historically, concern over dependency on imported rice was expressed even during the Brooke era (Jackson 1968). The current government has also always encouraged increasing local rice production to lift the dependency on imported rice. Sarawak’s self-sufficiency is still very low, therefore the State Government is gearing its effort towards increasing local rice production. This is as reported by the Dewan Undangan Negeri (DUN) sitting on November 24, 2011 which announced that there are two new rice projects covering an area of 5,100 ha in Batang Lupar and 200 ha in Bario, the Kelabit Highlands. RM232 million has been approved and allocated in these two projects which are expected to start in 2012.

1.3 Background of the Study

Lun Bawang is one of Sarawak’s smallest ethnic groups. They inhabit the highlands of Ba’ Kelalan, Long Semadoh and Lawas but are well known throughout Sarawak for their rice production system that produces surpluses every year and could provide enough rice for the households for two to three years. Geographical isolation and mountainous terrain did not deter them from creating and practicing a unique, complex, and productive form of wet rice cultivation known as lati’ ba’ which has sustained them on these isolated mountains for generations. The system is very traditional and “primitive” (Harrisson 1958) but the Lun Bawangs have brilliantly crafted the valleys with bamboo and wooden sticks into blocks of rice fields in the valleys between the mountains which enables them to utilize the flow of the streams from mountains to irrigate their lati’ ba’. Intricate canals were built to direct the water flow into each block. Lati’ ba’ is filled with water, inundated all year round, therefore lati’ ba’ literally means wet rice.
With little agricultural tools, they used wood and bamboo to build the *lati' ba'* structures, bunds and dykes. Buffaloes were released into the *lati' ba'*, and in their playful manner softened the soil and fertilized it with their dung. This technique and system was very simple thus creating the least disturbance to the ecosystem (Langub 1984:3). Modern tools or methods were not available then due to their isolation from other communities for trade.

This system has been practiced for hundreds of years retaining its preeminent elements which are manual construction, environmental design, and the use of water buffaloes. These elements still co-exist until today. In addition, the Lun Bawang agricultural work groups have made it possible to complete the strenuous tasks in *lati' ba'* such as clearing the land, planting and harvesting the rice. Agricultural work groups are a method of pooling manpower to work for the benefits of the Lun Bawang. The Lun Bawang agricultural work groups are admired and considered to be the most effective means of not only completing work in *lati' ba'* but also sharing local news, passing on the culture and norms to the younger generation through songs, stories and chants. It is even an opportunity to look for a possible spouse for their children.

### 1.4 Problem Statement

As mentioned above, *lati' ba'* has always been central to Lun Bawang culture since hundreds of years ago. They have accomplished sustainable farming by integrating their social and residential arrangements in a manner which both preserves the quality, quantity and distribution of water and at the same time ensures the availability of the *lati' ba'*. This system was sustained by their ‘primitive’ techniques with a close
connection between people, buffaloes and the environment. In addition, their unique agricultural work groups have ensured the success of *lali' ba'* where the labour comes from the communities themselves.

However, the Lun Bawang have experienced changes notably since the 1920s. These changes have altered a large part of their culture including their *lali' ba'* system and associated practices, especially the agricultural work groups. Therefore, this study uncovers the changes in the *lali' ba'* and determines to what extent the changes have affected the *lali' ba'* system and associated elements and the Lun Bawang responses to those changes.

### 1.5 Research Questions

This study is to look at the changes in *lali' ba'* practices and of the Lun Bawang responses of adjustment to these changes. The following research questions were posed and these questions will act as a study guide. The questions are:

i. What are the changes in the *lali' ba'* system experienced by the Lun Bawang? To what extent do they still use the same *lali' ba'* system as past generations? Are there any changes to the old practices? What are the changes that have taken place and what are the contributing factors of these changes?

ii. How did the people respond to these changes? Did the response include changes in the agricultural work groups that are closely associated with *lali' ba'*? If yes, what are the agricultural work groups that still exist and what new forms of agricultural work groups have
been initiated to replace the traditional ones? What actions or strategies have the people initiated to adjust to these changes?

1.6 Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to explore the changes of the lati’ ba’ system of the Lun Bawang community and to look at how the people reacted to these changes. The following specific objectives were formulated to as a guide to the study:

i. Understand the changes in the lati’ ba’ system and the resulting experiences of change of the Lun Bawang community in Ba’ Kelalan;

ii. Identify the problems faced by the Lun Bawang in continuing their traditional lati’ ba’ system;

iii. Explore the organizational strategies adopted in coping with changes.

1.7 Research Site

The study was carried out in Ba’ Kelalan cluster located in the highlands of northern Borneo. Ba’ Kelalan is a cluster of eleven villages. Figure 1.1 below shows the particulars of these villages.
Among these eleven villages, Long Rusu, Long Ritan and Long Nawi (Buduk Bui) were selected as the study site as the case study. In these three selected villages, the total population is 235 people in 39 households. The selection of villages was based on several major considerations in the choice of the study area.

### 1.8 Research Method

An ethnographic method was used which included:

i. Fieldwork

ii. Participant observation

iii. Interviews of two groups of people:
   a. Households
   b. Key informants
In addition, these methods were supplemented by the use of two questionnaires. 25 households were selected based on purposive sampling. All the above methods will be described in detail in Chapter 3.

1.9 Significance of the study

The findings of this study will provide an understanding of the lali' ba' system and the Lun Bawang responses coping with the changes. Understanding the changes of the lali' ba' also provide some insight into how they deal with social-cultural changes.

The lali' ba' system of the Lun Bawang has been poorly studied eventhough it is highly productive compared to other types of rice cultivation by other people in Sarawak. There is little research on lali' ba', but what exists is centred on the Krayan of Indonesia and the Kelabit in Bario. There area few articles and some research on the lali' ba' in Ba Kelalan, but it is quite sparse. Other researchers are keener to study the possibilities of temperate fruits and flower farming in Ba Kelalan due to its cooler climate, cattle rearing, and the tourism potential with golf courses and horse-back riding to attract tourists to this hidden jewel of Sarawak.

This study, therefore, hopes to enhance the knowledge base on lali' ba' which has a close relationship with the natural environment and has organic elements. Organic farming is an interesting subject of discussion because there is a huge market for it, especially in Europe. Organic sales are rising and organic foods are one of the fast-growing market segments within the food industry (Baldwin ed. 2009:162).

Conversion to fully organic rice production can be a valuable alternative for lali’ ba’. Organic agriculture fits perfectly into current practices of lali’ ba’. The study of
agricultural innovation and indigenous development is surely a unique opportunity for researchers for further research.

Enhancing awareness among the general public on the importance of natural forests in *lati’ ba’* continuity hopes to create a greater appreciation and a more responsible use of the highlands. The highland environment is sensitive and a little introduction of outside concepts and disturbance to its ecology may greatly affect the *lati’ ba’* system.

1.10 Overview of the study

The study mainly looks at the changes in the *lati’ ba’* system and how the Lun Bawang have reacted to these changes to ensure the tradition will continue to survive. Using the data collected in Long Rusu, Long Ritan and Long Nawi, this information is an important source for this study. Information from books, previous research and online information also have had a great input to guide this study to focus on the *lati’ ba’* system and the community responses its changes.

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the purpose of the study, overview of the study, the objectives and significance of the study. Chapter 2 contains a review of related literature on the *lati’ ba’* of the Lun Bawang. Chapter 3 offers a detailed description of methodology used in the research: approaches, techniques to data collection and data analysis of the study. Chapter 4 is devoted to the findings and discussion of data collected. Finally, Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter. It summarizes the findings and recommendations based on lessons learnt and gives suggestions on areas for further research.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Rice cultivation is a traditional occupation of many people in Sarawak. Their cultivation system, especially swidden rice cultivation, has been the interesting object of a number of studies such as Freeman on the Iban agriculture (1955), Jackson (1968) about rice cultivation in the Second Division of Sarawak, Grijpta (1976) about rice cultivation efforts in rural Sarawak, rice cultivation among the Kenyah by Chin (1985), Appel on Kayan’s land tenure (1986) and other studies generally on development in Sarawak with part of it on rice cultivation.

Research on people, landscape, culture and agriculture, rice cultivation systems among the people in Kerayan - Kelabit Highlands has been and is always interesting (Selato 1995). However, study on the rice cultivation system of the Lun Bawang are quite few compared to other remote ethnic groups in Sarawak especially if we compared them with their cousins, the Kelabits, who are practising a similar wet rice cultivation system. The Lun Bawang’s relative isolation has been a factor of this negligence in the Bornean literature (Crain and Pearson-Rounds 1999:321).

There were a number of surveys and visits by the Brooke administration in Lawas as reported in District Officer’s Lawas Annual Report for 1959 (Langub 1988:6) but not so much on their dealing with their resource use and resource apportionment (Padoch 1981:7). Their reputation as troublesome drunkards had distracted the Brooke administration who did not bother to study them (Southwell 1999). Only after Second World War II, did they attract ethnographic interest due to their conversion to
Christianity which had transformed them into one of the most dynamic ethnic groups in the interior of Sarawak. Only since then, has their resourceful social and ecological system of farming been researched but by that time, most of the traditional elements had been altered due to their conversion. Deegan did a comprehensive study on the changes among the Lun Bawang in the Damit area in 1973. Eighty years later, Christine Padoch had made a study on the Lun Dayeh’s farming system; Crain and Pearson-Rounds on Lun Dayeh – Lun Bawang la’ti’ ba’ system (1993) and Alderson on the swidden economy of the Lun Bawang (1992). Other local researchers who have done studies on the Lun Bawang and their socio-economic systems which include the la’ti’ ba’ system were: Langub (1984, 1987, 1988), Tuei (1995), Datan (1989), Ardhana, Langub and Chew (2004) and the Sarawak Development Institute (2000).

This literary review chapter focuses on the system of rice cultivation among the Lun Bawang. The chapter also reviews the background of the Lun Bawang, their economic activities, social stratification, kinship, agricultural work groups and organisation.

2.2 Geographical Background

Ba’ Kelalan derives its name from the Kelalan River. Ba’ means wetlands in the Lun Bawang language. Ba’ Kelalan is a cluster of 11 villages with a population of 1,071. As noted in Chapter I, the Lun Bawang population in Sarawak is 15,154 (Statistic Department of Malaysia 2008), however, due to the high out-migration of the youth, only 1,071 still remain in Ba’ Kelalan. Chapter IV will show the consequences of this out-migration. Out-migration is not a recent phenomenon in Ba’ Kelalan.
Ba' Kelalan is within the administration of Lawas District. Ba' Kelalan is one of the most remote rural settlements in Sarawak and an exit or entry point of Indonesia in the northeast of Sarawak. Ba' Kelalan is situated in the highlands which averages 1000 meters in elevation. The highlands are the headwaters of many major rivers in Limbang Division but the rivers here are not meant for transportation. This region is inaccessible to river travel. Normal travel is by foot and in the old days when they had to travel on foot to Lawas, it took them more than one month for a loaded journey (Adhana, Langub and Chiew 2002).

Air transport came only in the post-World War II period. The airfield is still operating in Buduk Nur, Ba' Kelalan until today but in Long Semadoh, the airfield has been discontinued due to lack of load (passengers) as the consequence of the opening of the highland by logging road in the 1980s. The people opted to use the logging road which is cheaper and could carry more necessities compared to the DHC-6 Twin Otter aircraft. It is a small aircraft with only 19 seats. Today, Ba' Kelalan is linked by a 125 km road from Lawas town and the journey takes at least six hours. This road was previously a logging trail from Lawas; only four-wheel-drive vehicles can operate on it. The conditions can be pretty bad especially during the rainy season. On a bad day it could take 24 hours to reach Ba' Kelalan from Lawas. However, from one village to another, people still prefer to walk on foot. There are footpaths that link villages which are all within walking distance of one another.

Topographically, Ba' Kelalan is a region characterized by steep hills standing above broad valleys. Settlements and agriculture in the highlands are limited due to the high
terrain, high elevation and difficult access, but the Lun Bawang were able to transform the flat valleys in the highland into valleys of *lati' ba’*.

### 2.3 Background of the Lun Bawang

The Lun Bawang is an ethnic group living in the Ba' Kelalan highlands of northern Sarawak. They are grouped in *Orang Ulu* together with Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit, Penan, Berawan, Kiput and the rest of the minority, indigenous, upriver people. The Lun Bawang is predominantly Christian of the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) Church. Their conversion into Christianity had abolished most of their traditional culture, notably the agricultural work groups.

The Lun Bawang is one of the earliest inhabitants of the interior of the Borneo highlands (Harrisson 1959 cited by Datan 1989:143, S. Runciman 1960 cited by Tuing 1995:1). Kerayan-Kelabit Highlands are sometimes referred to as the remote highlands of north-central Borneo are their heartland (Janowski 1999:321). This upland, encircled by mountains rising to 8,000 feet, lies in the north central corner of Borneo. Mount Murud, the highest peak in Sarawak, is located in this mountainous region. The climate is noticeably cooler than in lowland Borneo.

According to Harrisson (1959a: 8-11), they are an ancient interior population who began to move outside their heartland sometime in the seventeenth century. The quest for new lands for farming had prompted some of them to move out from their heartland and they are now scattered within the Limbang Division (Trusan and Lawas) and southwest Sabah (Datan 1989:145). In Sarawak, the Lun Bawang are concentrated in Limbang Division especially in Ba' Kelalan, Long Semadoh, Lawas,
Trusan, Medamit and middle Limbang. Nowadays, they are approximately numbered at 15,154 people in Sarawak (Statistic Department of Malaysia 2008:16). However, a big number of them still remain in Krayan and are numbered at 25,000 (Tuie 1995:1). Krayan is located at East Kalimantan which is part of Indonesia. The people there are known as “Lun Dayeh”.

Eventhough the Lun Bawang and the Lun Dayeh are politically separated, they have one root and are linguistically and culturally the same. Their kinships are still strong (Adhana, Langub & Chiew 2004:158) which results in contact and visiting each other often, helping each other in farming; intermarriages among them are still continuing until today. They are interdependent on each other and the movement of the Lun Dayeh and goods into Sarawak still exists. Trade in jungle and farm products, rice, and buffaloes in return for manufactured goods was a major economic force at work, followed later by wage labour (Adhana, Langub and Chiew 2004:145). For the Lun Dayeh it is closer and more convenient to travel to Sarawak to obtain goods rather than go to the coastal towns of East Kalimantan such as Nunukan due to bad transportation infrastructure on their side. Ba’ Kelalan is only 4 km from the border with Krayan, therefore it only takes them less than two hours to travel to Ba’ Kelalan for trade, social visits and for work.

Lun Bawang is a term of self-reference which literally means ‘people of the place’ or ‘people of the land” (Datan 1989:144, Selato 1994:12, Crain 1994:160). ‘Lun’ means people, ‘bawang’ mean place, country, village or city as well where that person or community is living. Referred to as ‘Muruts’ in the past by Europeans, Lun Bawang do not prefer to being called thus (Tuie 1995:1-3). This term is confusing to
Malaysians or others because there is a Murut ethnic group in Sabah, but linguistically and culturally are the not same as the Lun Bawang in Sarawak (Adhana, Langub and Chiew 2004:147, Tuie 1995:5).

Among other natives in Sarawak, they are culturally and linguistically very close to the Kelabit ethnic group. They are both using wet rice cultivation agriculture. They also have close cultural affinities with the Tagal, but are quite distinct linguistically. Other than that, they are also culturally and linguistically close to the Tabun, Berawan, Treng and Sa’ban (Datan 1989:146). With the Kayan, they also have some close affinities in language and culture (Deegan 1973).

2.4. Social Stratification

Their class system is not as rigid and not as clear a class system as compared to that of the Kayans or Kenyahs. This is confirmed by Selato: “Lun Daye society had no formal stratification system” (Selato 1995:14). Their classes are not hereditary. They obtain their status by hard work, good deeds, personal ability and wealth. A person would attain a higher status in the community through accumulation of wealth, business, charitable deeds, higher education and having anoratorical ability. This is different with the stratification system of Kayan community. The Kayan social stratification is hereditary and only the upper class family member is appointed or selected as headman. Their relatives will be appointed by a committee in any events and organisations in the longhouse. The Lun Bawang can lose his/her social status but the Kayan will bring his/her social rank from birth to the grave regardless of his/her economical and educational achievements.