ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF KETENE':
THE KENYAH VERBAL ART

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Introduction

This paper is based on my research on the Kenyah. My interest on ketene' (lit. stories) arises due to the beautiful nature of this verbal art. This art form uses a selection of words, phrases and other aesthetic elements of language such as metaphor and simile. The best part is not everybody can become a good story teller. Some story tellers learn the skill through listening and learning from the older story tellers and a few are gifted presenters with a naturally good voice.

I remember vividly in my childhood spending time at storytellers' houses or verandah listening to stories. At that time only a few families owned a radio and ketene' was one of the best entertainments for everybody in the village.

My interest also sprung from my fear that this heritage will be forgotten amongst the young generation. This is expressed by Benedict Sandin (1980) when he said “Today, only very few of these informants, who are well-versed in their own legends, genealogical trees and stories are still alive, and if ‘The Living Legends: Borneoans Telling Their Tales’ is not to be published now, Malaysians of the present and the future generations will become ignorant of the glorious past”.

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1The earlier stage of this research was conducted personally in December 2004 and April 2006. I was able to collect and record fifteen stories from Kenyah Uma Bakah communities. The following research on the stories was carried out in April 2007 with the collaboration between Faculty of Social Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) Sarawak Branch. Through this research about twenty-three stories and two songs (parap) from Kenyah Uma Bakah and Kenyah Badeng in Sungai Asap-Koyan were collected.