A History of *Lun Tauh* Our People at the Borders of the Kelabit Highlands: from Warfare to the Life of Government and to the Life of Christianity

Valerie Anne Mashman

Doctor of Philosophy
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UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK

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Matric No:12010021
Faculty of Social Sciences
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK
Date:
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Ose without whose support and insights this thesis would not have been possible. It is also dedicated to Joel and Alena who have sustained me with their enthusiasm and encouragement.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis would never have come about without the support, encouragement and help of a number of people, too many to name here. However, it is necessary to acknowledge Malian Tepun, the narrator of the Long Peluan narratives, my husband Ose Murang, and my supervisors Associate Professor Dr. Poline Bala and Dr. Peter Nwanesi Karubi and the Faculty of Social Sciences at UNIMAS, all of whom have been instrumental to the production of this thesis. The research was funded by a Zamalah Graduate Scholarship and through a DPI Investigation grant. In addition, the School of Archaeology and Anthropology at the Australian National University granted me the status of School Visitor in 2014, which enabled me to attend the ANTH8081 Contemporary Anthropology Theory course and to join the Anthropology Thesis Writing Group for three months. This experience greatly enriched the outcome of this thesis.
ABSTRACT

The Kelabit are about to forget their past. This is because since embracing evangelical Christianity in the 1940s, they no longer recite epics, legends or narratives relating to warfare, headhunting and their previous belief-system. This thesis provides an unprecedented insight into Kelabit values and their worldview through the recital of three historical narratives from a longhouse on the edge of the Kelabit highlands, located in northern Sarawak, one of the East Malaysian states on the island of Borneo. The first narrative is about warfare and the migrations of *lun tauh*, “our people.” The second is about the life of government and the third story is about the life of Christian prayer. The aim of this study is to provide a context and understanding of the purpose of the headman-narrator in telling the narratives using an anthropological approach to deal with his subjectivity. The research problem is to establish the meanings of these three oral historical narratives, of three different episodes in longhouse history, which the narrator calls “stories of history” *cerita sejarah*. Geertz’ interpretative approach using the process of “jungle fieldwork,” entails letting the narratives shape the research journey. Although these three narratives are about episodes that mark transformational change, I argue that there is an underlying continuity uncovered through the value system which prizes the quality of *doo’*-ness, goodness, or prestige which is both inherited at birth and acquired through effort. This provides an opportunity for an analysis of the mobility (*iyuk*) of value which continuously generates the standards of *doo’*-ness which enhance social relationships and provide the means for the bringing together and consolidation of *lun tauh*, “our people”. Furthermore, another continuity through the narratives is the voice of the headman-narrator who urges for the conventional values of unity and peace in the longhouse at a time when his authority is facing challenges. In the process, I uncover another common thread that runs through each of the three narratives, the quest for the good life, *ulun nuk doo’*. In the first narrative, this is at Long Di’it.
where “our people,” lun tauh find the soil is fertile for abundant harvests of rice. In the second narrative, the good life is living the life of government, with consensus in the community, reinforced by the values of peace-making. In the final narrative, the good life comes in the era of the life of prayer; a time that is free from omens, a time of change, yet a time for extended sociality and living close to the Penan. This is history garnered through the value indigenous people give to their experiences, which is unlike national and post-colonial histories that represent people on the margins as the helpless victims of colonial power. This approach to history can only be fulfilled by using oral histories which demonstrate how indigenous peoples manage their lives through their value system and how these perceptions account for their actions. This affirms their agency and their capacity to impact episodes of history.

**Keywords:** historical narratives, interpretation, value system, ethnicity, change.
Sejarah Lun Tauh "Orang Kita" di Sempadan Tanah Tinggi Kelabit:
Peperangan dan Penghijrahan Serta Kehidupan dalam Sebuah Kerajaan dan
Kehidupan dalam Agama Kristian

ABSTRAK

Orang Kelabit akan melupakan masa lalu mereka. Ini adalah kerana sejak memeluk agama
Kristian evangelis dalam tahun 1940-an, mereka tidak lagi ceritakan syair, legenda atau kisah-
kisah yang berkaitan dengan peperangan, ngayau dan sistem kepercayaan mereka sebelumnya.

Tesis ini memberikan gambaran yang belum pernah dibentangkan berkenaan nilai serta alam
maya Kelabit melalui tiga kisah sejarah naratif dari sebuah rumah panjang yang terletak di
pinggir kawasan tanah tinggi Kelabit di utara Sarawak, sebuah negeri di Malaysia Timur di
Pulau Borneo. Kisah yang pertama adalah mengenai peperangan dan migrasi "lun tauh,”
"orang kita”. Kisah kedua adalah berkenaan kehidupan sebuah perintah dan kisah ketiga,
mengenai kehidupan melalui sembahyang dalam agama Kristian. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk
memberikan sebuah konteks serta pemahaman terhadap fungsi seorang ketua kaum yang
memainkan peranan sebagai pencerita dan menceritakan kisah-kisah sejarah melalui
pendekatan antropologi demi untuk menangani subjektivitinya. Persoalan kajian ini adalah
untuk mengwujudkan makna kepada ketiga-tiga kisah lisan ini, dalam tiga episod berkenaan
sejarah sebuah rumah panjang, yang dikenalkan oleh pencerita sebagai “cerita sejarah.”

Geertz, dalam pendekatan tafsirannya, menggunakan proses "kerja lapangan di hutan” yang
melibatkan perkembangan kisah-kisah itu dalam penentuan perjalanan sebuah penyelidikan.

Walaupun ketiga-tiga kisah ini adalah episod yang melambangkan perubahan dan
transformasi, saya berbicara bahawa secara dasar ada kesinambungan dalam sistem nilai
yang menaksirkan kualiti bahawa “doo'-ness,” kebaikan, atau prestij adalah diwarisi sejak
lahir dan ia juga diperolehi melalui usaha seseorang. Perkara ini telah memberi peluang dalam analisis berkenaan mobiliti (iyuk) nilai atau "maksud sesebuah nilai" dan secara berterusan menjanakan nilai piawan "doo'ness" demi mempertingkatkan hubungan sosial dan silaturahim serta penyatuan kumpulan "lun tauh," "orang kita". Selain itu, kesinambungan melalui naratif ini adalah suara ketua kaum sebagai pencerita yang mengesakan perpaduan dan keamanan oleh kerana menghadapi cabaran di rumah panjang keatas pimpinan beliau. Melalui kajian ini, saya juga menemui satu tema yang menghubungkan ketiga kisah ini, iaitu usaha dalam mencari kesejahteraan hidup, "ulun nuk doo'." Dalam kisah pertama, "lun tauh" "orang kita", menjumpai kawasan tanah yang subur di Long Di’it yang melimpahkan hasil padi mereka. Kisah yang kedua menunjuk kehidupan yang sejahtera dalam kehidupan berperintah di mana terdapat sepakatan dalam masyarakat yang diperkukuhkan dengan nilai melalui pendamaian. Dalam kisah yang terakhir, kesejahteraan hidup dinikmati melalui hasil kehidupan bersembahyang oleh kerana kebebasan daripada adat pantang larang yang lama, zaman yang berciri perubahan tetapi juga memperluaskan silaturahim dalam masyarakat serta hidup berdekat dengan masyarakat Penan. Ini adalah sejarah yang dihasilkan melalui makna yang diberikan oleh orang asal terhadap peristiwa-peristiwa yang mereka alami, iaitu sesuatu yang berlainan daripada sejarah nasionalis dan pasca-kolonial yang menggambarkan orang-orang asal sebagai mangsa pasif kuasa penjajah. Pendekatan sejarah sebegini hanya boleh dikecapi melalui sejarah lisan yang menunjukkan bagaimana orang-orang tempatan menentukan kehidupan mereka melalui sistem nilai dan persepsi yang menjanakan tindakan mereka.

Kata kunci: naratif kisah sejarah, tafsiran, sistem nilai, etnik, perubahan.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The Kelabit are about to forget their past. This is because since embracing evangelical Christianity in the 1940s, they no longer recite epics, legends or narratives relating to warfare, headhunting and their previous belief-system. This study is about three unique historical narratives from a longhouse on the edge of the Kelabit highlands, located in northern Sarawak, one of the East Malaysian states on the island of Borneo. The first narrative is about warfare and the migrations of lun tauh, “our people.” The second is about the life of government and the third story is about the life of Christian prayer. The aim of this study is to provide a context and understanding of the purpose of the headman-narrator in telling the narratives using an anthropological approach to deal with his subjectivity. The research problem is to establish the meanings of these three oral historical narratives, of three different episodes in longhouse history, which the narrator calls “stories of history” cerita sejarah. Geertz’ interpretative approach using the process of “jungle fieldwork,” (Geertz 2000 [1973]) entails letting the narratives shape the research journey. Although these three narratives are about episodes that mark transformational change, I argue that there is an underlying continuity uncovered through the value system which prizes the quality of doo’-ness, goodness, or prestige which is both inherited at birth and acquired through effort. This provides an opportunity for an analysis of the mobility (iyuk) of value which continuously generates the standards of doo’-ness which enhance social relationships and provide the means for the bringing together and consolidation of lun tauh, “our people”.

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This chapter explains how I came to be given the three Long Peluan narratives, which are at the core of this dissertation, and the subject of this study. After this, I explain what these are about and how I decided the title of this thesis: A history of lun tauh our people at the borders of the Kelabit highlands: from warfare, to the life of government and to the life of Christianity. I then identify the scope and the statement of problem for this study, frame further research questions and establish objectives. Next, drawing on a review of relevant literature, I establish the significance of this study, before finally outlining the contents of the chapters.

This project came about by pure chance, prompted by a serendipitous discovery. One day, sometime in 2010, I was visiting Long Peluan, my husband’s longhouse to follow up on some previous research on basketwork (Mashman 2006, 2012a). I was unexpectedly given three cassette tapes and a tape recorder complete with batteries. Malian Tepun, the headman of Long Peluan, wanted me to listen to three narratives he had recorded for his eldest son, Berrick, in 2006. Sadly, Berrick had since deceased. Malian’s desire to record these narratives was so that firstly his sons and then the wider community would know in his words “why things are the way they are.” As I listened to the narratives I became very excited as I realized there was a great deal of new material that had never been documented before, worth transcribing and translating. This was accomplished with the assistance of my husband, Ose Murang, a cousin of Malian Tepun and Ose’s cousin, Elis Belare.

It has long been said that there is an element of serendipity in fieldwork. The best gifts or insights from the field are never planned. Serendipity is, as coined by Horace Walpole, “the combination of accident and sagacity in recognizing the significance of a discovery” (Remer 1965:6). So, this research project was borne out of a combination of luck and chance. I came to accept that serendipitous discoveries were part of the quest for insights into the narratives as coincidences boosted the research journey. For instance, there were surprises during fieldwork
when I unexpectedly found a photograph of a deceased leading informant, Sina Jau from Long Banga Sarawak, which I myself had taken and had given to her Sarawak-based family. This was displayed in a house in a village in the farthest headwaters of the Krayan River, in Kalimantan. Another surprise came at the Baram Regatta in 2011, when I was tapped on the shoulder by Peter and Philip, Ngurek descendants of the hero of the second narrative Tai Iwan, who were anxious for me to hear their story. This came at a time when I was giving up hope of finding anyone who could help with stories to cross reference the narrative of Tai Iwan. Another revelation was the chance singing of a Kelabit song “The Song of Dayang” by my husband’s relative Sina Radu Ulun at my house, which led me to make connections about Kelabit ideas of value or doo'-ness. Another unexpected moment was when Tama Gerawat told me, while cleaning up a megalithic grave, that according to Kenyah beliefs, the power of building megaliths in the Kelapang river system was attributed to the presence of a friendly white crocodile. All these serendipitous moments generated so much material and inspired the ideas that gave birth to three papers that helped me further define the shape of this project.

The first paper traced the process of discovering common ancestry and kinship by a Ngurek family with Tai Iwan the ancestor-hero of the narrator, Malian Tepun. This story I had to exclude from this thesis project as it became tangential (Mashman 2012b). The second paper helped to provide insight into notions of goodness, prestige and value, which are discussed as themes in this thesis (Mashman 2015). The third paper was prompted by an unexpected story telling a Kenyah version of the history of the stone culture in the highlands. It highlights parallel accounts of history and the need for a more dynamic and heterogeneous history of the highlands, something I touch on in Chapter 5 (Mashman 2017).

As I came to understand that serendipity is ‘the essence of fieldwork research’ (Pieke 2000: 138, cited by Rivoal and Salazar 2013), I learnt that it is not pure chance that generates a
serendipitous discovery in ethnography. Even though serendipity has long been recognized as a key feature of an ethnographic journey, scholars caution that serendipity alone does not generate a classic ethnography (Powdermaker 1966, Merton 1968). It has to be combined with that “sagacity” that was alluded to earlier. Sagacity refers to the preparation and insight of the researcher, combined with the intuitive ability to develop relationships and theoretical insights, identified as relational serendipity and analytical serendipity (Fine and Deegan 1996:441). The task of the anthropologist is to ‘make method out of a rhetoric of circumstance’ (Marcus 2002:198). “Making method” of the serendipitous gift of the narratives led me to search for insights into the narratives. These insights continually eluded the task of creating a methodological framework for this thesis. However, they led me to explore a number of interesting tangents in the papers mentioned above, which delayed the prompt completion of this dissertation, much to the consternation of my long-suffering supervisors.

Although I did not realize it at the time, to begin with a project with a serendipitous finding meant that my research journey did not follow a conventional pattern of formal research that assumes that the researcher knows what she is looking for. Instead, I had to find ways of establishing connections between strands of the narratives with theoretical concerns, engaging with what Fine and Deegan call “analytical serendipity” (Fine and Deegan 1996:441). However much I had prepared, unlike the experiences of other social scientists, my fieldwork and interviews reflect Metcalf’s words “the learning experiences of the anthropologist cannot be learned in advance.” Because of the serendipitous nature of the work, the topics had to be approached repeatedly from different angles; following up different clues, but like good detective work meanings only came after time (Metcalf 2005:12). This supports the idea that “in anthropology, the ‘field’” shapes “the research design, rather than the other way around” (Rivoal and Salazar 2013:3). In order to do this, reflexivity and an open mind are prerequisites.