

*The Forest, Source of Life: The Kelabit of Sarawak*

Monica Janowski

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An occasional paper from the British Museum, this book by Monica Janowski talks about the life of the Kelabit of Sarawak, Malaysia. Janowski is a social anthropologist who did ethnography among the Pa' Dalih community in Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak, Malaysia for her dissertation in 1986 to 1988 and in 1992 to 1993. The aim of this book is to provide a discussion of the Kelabit material culture she collected in 1986 to 1988. To achieve this aim, she provides more than just a brief ethnographic description of the people in Pa' Dalih and goes beyond their material culture. She talks about the relationship of the people of Pa' Dalih and their natural environment that they call "God's garden" (*late' Tuhan*, a phrase apparently influenced by Christianity brought by the missionaries). She explains how the Pa' Dalih people interact with the environment and how this is reflected in their material culture. Aside from that, she also explains the meaning of the natural world for the community and how significant it is for them and for their survival.

She opens the book with a descriptive narration of her fieldwork experience in the Kelabit Highlands and the community in it. Unlike some ethnological works (e.g. Schlegel 1999), her account is straightforward and nothing much is discussed about her personal insights or feelings toward the fieldwork.

In the first chapter, she gives a general background of Kelabit—the environment, the people, their history, the changes brought by the introduction of Christianity to their community, and a little bit of overview on the forests and the relationship of the people with it, which is discussed fully in the later chapters of the book. She provides great colored maps and a sketch of what a Kelabit settlement looks like.

Chapters 2 to 6 are descriptive accounts that focus on the material aspect of the Kelabit culture. Janowski structures these chapters by starting at the personal level (the *inside*) and then moving on to the public level (the *outside*). She starts with the individual by discussing personal artefacts such as clothing and adornments in the second chapter. Chapters 3 to 4 discuss the Kelabit longhouse and the Kelabit hearth, which is the center their family life. Aside from the parts of the longhouse and the material culture inside it, these chapters give an idea of what happens inside the longhouse. These chapters also describe the other activities of the Kelabit like music-making, learning, eating, and playing. Chapters 5 and 6 move away

from the inner life to the outside activities involving agriculture and their interaction with the forest (*polong*). The fifth chapter shows how agriculture developed. The people originally do swidden farming then in the 1960s and 1970s, the making of permanent wet ricefields increased. Rice growing and harvesting are activities for the entire community and Monica Janowski succeeds in emphasizing their importance. She also discusses the relationship between gender roles and rice cultivation, which might provide a good insight for researchers who are studying gender. Janowski explores the Kelabit's use of the wild in the sixth chapter and lists all the fruits and vegetables they collect in the forest and their local names. Division of labor by gender is once again stressed in this chapter but in a subtle way. And, like most societies who live in the forest, the men do the hunting of wild pigs and deer and the women do the gathering of wild fruits and vegetables.

Chapters 7 and 9 are analyses of the data presented in the previous chapters, mostly focusing on the Kelabit's worldview, economic activity, social structures, and their relationship with the environment and how this reflects in their material culture. And once again Janowski starts with the innermost cultural level of the society—that is, the worldview, the social structure, then the practices. She focuses on the role of the forest, the mountains, and rice in their community life, apparently taking the ecological approach of analyzing cultures. Chapter 7 talks about the idea of *lalud*, the life force of the wild, which is a central Kelabit concept. The idea of “wild” for a Kelabit is something that is beyond human control, beyond human control, and dangerous. *Lalud* is the “primordial essence” which drives and makes possible all life (similar to *mana* in Polynesia). Perhaps this is also similar to the Filipino concept of *likas*, which is also a “life-giving essence” (Jocano 2001). *Lalud* is found in all things, plant and animal alike, and even stones. This explains the Kelabit's wide range of medicinal plants that can cure illnesses of humans and animals and the Kelabit's special reverence to the mountains—which have lots of rocks and believed to possess high levels of *lalud*. But *lalud* here does not include humans although we are living things as well. What humans possess according to the Kelabit is *ulun*, also a kind of life force that only humans have. Although humans have *ulun*, *lalud* is still needed so that the human life force becomes possible. This is why they perform *ngelua*, a ritual that maintains good contact with the wild (forests and mountains). This worldview exists in the Kelabit consciousness in spite of the introduction of Christianity, an aspect discussed in the later part of the book. Headhunting is included in this chapter, although they do not practice this anymore. The Kelabit's believe that *lalud* resides in human heads so humans also possess this essence. Like the Northern Luzon indigenous groups (Ilongot, Bontoc, etc.) headhunting is triggered by a death of a community member, especially a high

status individual, who possesses a strong life force. Taking the head of an enemy then would mean bringing back the life force to the community. Beliefs in the spirit world are also discussed in this chapter, as it also relates to the idea of *lalud*. The eighth chapter tackles the *irau* feasts and highlights the relationship between rice and social stratification. It is amazing how she emphasizes the role of rice in the generation of social status or ranking. Achieving a high status is determined by the success of their rice cultivation. Janowski also discusses the activities associated with the *irau* feasts like the making of marks on the landscape with megaliths, and the name-changing ritual of their children, all related to generating status. Not only social status is shaped by their rice-related activities, kinship and gender are also shaped by it as discussed in the ninth chapter. The Kelabit, according to Janowski, is a rice-based kinship. Rice establishes relationship with other people as it is seen in their rice growing and harvesting activities. Also in this chapter she discusses fully the role of the rice and the wild (*lalud*) in defining gender roles in the community. As she stated, rice is more closely associated with the women while the wild or *lalud* is more closely associated with men. *Lalud* defines the “manhood” of men in their community, which is measured by their ability to hunt and kill wild animals. This distinction is reflected in their folktales.

The conclusion is a summary of all the chapters emphasizing the significance of the forest and rice in the manufacture of the Kelabit material culture, beliefs, activities, and their social structure. Their relationship with the environment is very essential in maintaining their identity and that anything that happens with the forests such as logging has a great effect on them. Her final thought for this chapter reads, “Losing link to that natural world could mean the eventual loss of that distinctive identity.” This is a thought, which I believe is shared by other indigenous groups—and perhaps anthropologists as well—as their land is slowly being destroyed by modernization.

After the interesting chapters are plates and appendices, which cover more than half of the book. The plates are photographs of the Pa’ Dalih community, their activities, and their material culture, beautifully presented in black and white. The appendices contain a glossary of Kelabit words, materials, and techniques used in craftwork and a catalogue of the material culture she collected. These, including the main text, give us a complete overview of her study and make the book worthwhile reading.