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The Story of *Lun Tauh*, “Our People”: Narrating Identity on the Borders in the Kelabit Highlands*

Valerie Mashman**

This article shows, through a historical narrative set in precolonial times in Sarawak, Borneo, how people think of themselves in two contrasting ways, one fluid and one more fixed. The first is *lun tauh*, which means “our people.” This presents a fluid, inclusive identity through the course of warfare, alliances, and migrations across watersheds and borders. It differs from the second way in which the narrative presents people as thinking of themselves—with the ethnic label “Kelabit,” which came into use with the colonial state. The article goes on to investigate how the relational concept of *lun tauh* and the reified notion of “being Kelabit” coexist with and interrogate one another and contribute to the identities of peoples who transcend national borders and undergo processes of division and separation across natural boundaries, be they rivers, rapids, or ridges. The notion of *lun tauh* shows that alternatives to bounded exclusive ethnic identities are particularly evident in the borderlands, demonstrating that cultural identities transcend ethnic constructs and territorial borders. This leads to a different way of looking at ethnicity, which is focused less on discrete groups and more on the construction of social identities on the basis of context. The two forms of identity—the fixed reified notion of “being Kelabit” and the wider inclusivity of *lun tauh*—coexist as strategies for survival for a marginal people, operating at different levels. The narrative demonstrates how local perceptions of ethnicities and identities are bound up with ways for creating larger groups, creating allies, remembering kin across borders, and struggles to claim territory.

Keywords: borders, ethnic identity, Sarawak, Kelabit, historical narrative

* I have been associated with this village and the Kelabit community for over 30 years through marriage. Fieldwork took place through participant observation and unstructured interviews during visits to the Long Peluan area and related settlements from 1998 to 2000 and from 2010 to 2016.

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Introduction

The Kelabit are about to forget their history. This is because they have made a “break with the past” (Lian-Saging 1976/77, 211) and are reluctant to talk about warfare and belief systems from the time prior to their embracing Christianity in the late 1930s. So it was a great surprise when, in 2006, I was offered—and accepted—three narratives about the past which included details of warfare, by Malian Tepun, the headman of the longhouse of Long Peluan in the borderlands of Sarawak. Here I will examine the first of these narratives.

The narrative, set in precolonial times, shows how people think of themselves in two contrasting ways, one fluid and one more fixed. The first is as *lun tauh*, which means “our people,” rather than in terms of component ethnic groups, such as being Kelabit, Ngurek, and Sa’ban. In terms of the meaning of identity and ethnicity, this contrasts with the second way in which the narrative presents people as thinking of themselves—with the apparently primordial ethnic label “Kelabit.” This is a term that came into use with the colonial state. A label such as Kelabit defines and reifies ethnicity, while the idea of *lun tauh* is much more fluid, relational, and inclusive.

This article will investigate how the relational concept of *lun tauh* and the reified notion of “being Kelabit” coexist with and interrogate one another and contribute to the identities of peoples who transcend national borders yet undergo processes of division and separation across natural boundaries, be they rivers, rapids, or ridges. The concept of *lun tauh* demonstrates that, in the context of a borderland, alternatives to bounded exclusive ethnic identities are particularly evident. This fits in with the discourse of the deconstruction of the nation-state, particularly through the subdiscipline of borderland studies. As Alexander Horstmann and Reed Wadley (2006, 16) note from the perspective of borderland studies in Southeast Asia, “the border concept serves to question the very notion of a bounded culture.” Taking the idea further, Rozanna Lilley highlights the need to redefine ethnicity as “a changing alignment of social groups with neither fixed boundaries nor stable internal constitutions” (Lilley 1990, 176). This process of redefinition should override any preconceptions regarding cohesion and boundedness, because cultural identities transcend ethnic constructs and territorial borders and consist of “a choice of identifications and affiliations that are picked up upon because they seem advantageous.” This leads to a different way of looking at ethnicity, which is focused less on discrete groups than on the construction of social identities on the basis of contexts (Lilley 1990, 176).

Narratives on Borders

This article fills a gap by utilizing indigenous historical narratives to provide local insights into perceptions of identities across borders. The demand for this is highlighted by Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel (1997, 238), who call for oral history to be used as a conceptual tool and as a means to explore new sources of knowledge to redress the balance away from the dominant view located at the center—often taken from the documented archives on one side of the border which deny an active role to borderland populations—to the periphery. This is particularly pertinent in Southeast Asia, where in many cases language groups and ethnic identities are shared across borders. As this article illustrates, peoples have long memories of histories of political alliances, trading partners, shared farmlands, and family networks that existed across their own territories, before political borders were imposed with the emergence of the nation-state, when peoples living within the locality of borders came to be split up and marginalized (van Schendel and de Maaker 2014).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to survey in detail the literature on Asian borderlands, which is richly interdisciplinary, encompassing political geography (Newman and Paasi 1998), international relations (Migdal 2004), history (Baud and van Schendel 1997; Thongchai 2003; Tagliacozzo 2005; 2013; Scott 2009; Aung-Thwin 2013, 94), and anthropology (Horstmann and Wadley 2006) and including cross-disciplinary anthologies such as those edited by Doris Wastl-Walter (2012) and Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan (2012). Van Schendel and de Maaker (2014, 4), in reviewing the subdiscipline, note, however, that ethnographic studies have been scarce—although Borneo is probably something of an exception here, as the implications of porosity of borders in Borneo have been explored in the work of a number of anthropologists. This includes the work of Ishikawa Noboru (2010), Reed Wadley (2000; 2001; 2004), and Michael Eilenberg (2012; 2014) for West Borneo; I Ketut Ardhana, Jayl Langub, and Daniel Chew (2004) for the Lun Bawang-Kerayan highlands; and Poline Bala (2000; 2001; 2002) and Mathew Amster (2005; 2006) for the Kelabit-Kerayan highlands.

Two themes relevant to this article emerge from studies based in the Kelabit highlands. First, the Kelabit borderlands is a place where local agency can shape and articulate local meanings of “stateness” and forms of “governmentality,” as the Kelabit have managed to utilize the power of the state to assert their own dominance in interactions with their neighbors (Amster 2006, 224). This is linked to the way in which the Kelabit use their reified ethnic construct of “being Kelabit.” Second, Bala (2002, 26) identifies mobility and hybridity of populations as crucial factors in the context of Borneo. I will explore these topics more fully when I go on to analyze the Long Peluan narrative. However, it

is first necessary to contextualize the setting, to review local notions of ethnicity and identity, and to set the background for the narrator who related the narratives.

Long Peluan and the People of the Kelapang River

The basis for this article, a narrative which provides a window into shifting views of ethnicity, comes from the longhouse of Long Peluan in Sarawak, a state belonging to the federation of Malaysia, situated on the island of Borneo. Long Peluan is remote; the area is served by a twice-weekly rural air service from the coastal city of Miri. The alternative is to hazard an eight-hour journey along a logging road. Before the road was constructed, the journey involved a three-day hike across mountainous country and a six-day journey by motorized longboat down the Baram River.

Long Peluan is located by the Kelapang River, and the people from the longhouses in the Kelapang area call themselves Lun Kelapang ("people of the Kelapang"). The people of Long Peluan recall another place, Long Di'it, far up the Di'it River (Pa Di'it), as a former village of origin, although no one lives there anymore. The identification with the Kelapang River echoes the importance of rivers in generating identity in the interior of Borneo. Both Long Di'it and Long Peluan are located close to the political border with Kalimantan in Indonesian Borneo, and genealogies originating from Long Di'it recall kinship ties through marriage with both the Sa'ban and the Ngurek who used to live on the Bahau River and with the Lundayeh or Lun Krayan along the Krayan River in Kalimantan.

There are other groups which are historically related to the longhouse of Long Peluan in the same river system: the Penan, who are settled upriver at Long Beruang on land that was cultivated by ancestors of the village of Long Peluan; and the Sa'ban and Lepo' Ke', who live at Long Banga, over the hills on the Puak and Balong Rivers. Farther downriver, the Ngurek live at Long Semeyang.

Long Peluan, then, is surrounded by diverse neighbors with whom in many cases its inhabitants share kinship ties (see Fig. 1). The effects of this on the longhouse are discussed in the next section.

Heterogeneity in Long Peluan and Beyond

The Long Peluan community is, in fact, heterogenous; it does not consist only of Kelabit, despite the primary identification of the community as Kelabit. This is reflected in the use of numerous languages within the longhouse, something that is typical of central



Fig. 2 Kelabit Women from Long Peluan; Sina Eo (center) Has Sa'ban Tattoos (photo by Valerie Mashman)

concluded that people in Sarawak “cannot think of themselves as named, tabbed, static, classified groups” (Harrisson 1958, 295).

Ethnicity and the Malaysian State

The flexible concept of ethnicity in Borneo is similar to other parts of the Malay world, where populations are continuously shifting, with new migrants coming into communities (Carsten 1995). In the past, people “were at home in a diversity of places at different times in their lives. And particular localities were either impermanent or flexible, continually being made and remade” (Kahn 2012, 64). This changed with the politics of colonialism and the administration of the census, which had the “capacity to erase and deny the legacy of cultural borrowing and cross fertilization that had taken place” (Noor 2010, 78).

An example of the way in which perceptions of identity became more fixed is the way in which the idea of “Malayness” changed: “Malayness is purged of a migratory history and is portrayed with a sedentary settler imagery describing those who own and live on Malay land (*tanah Melayu*)” (Hoffstaedter 2011, 39). Thus, Malayness has become a fixed ethnic category relating to identity, territory, and the Islamic religion. For Malays,

this was linked to the idea that they were *bumiputera*, or sons of the soil, a category which provided for affirmative action for their benefit under the New Economic Policy (1971), intended to remedy the perceived poverty and "backwardness" of Malays. Malays were "assigned a more or less fixed, stable modern identity anchored in a particular territory through the suppression of the *possibility* of alternative narratives" (Kahn 2012, xxiii). The "authority-defined" concept of Malayness masked their mixed ancestry and migrations and gave them advantages over the Chinese and Indians, who were perceived as *pendatang* or newcomers. Thus, a newspaper in 1941 stated in response to other groups lobbying for Malay political rights, "Malays have rights not because they were born here but because they belong to the Malay *bangsa* and are the first *bangsa* that own the land" (Ariffin 1993, 18, quoted in Reid 2004, 17). A similar dynamic can be observed within the narrative, as will be seen below, in relation to the definition of Kelabit ethnicity and Kelabit's occupation of the highlands.

At this point, it is useful to ponder what is meant by ethnicity, and to consider how it contrasts with the notion of cultural identity. Ethnic classification, which can be defined in the Malaysian context as "authority-defined ethnicity" (Shamsul 2004, 147), is rooted in the colonial census (Anderson 2006, 184) and is imposed by the state for the purpose of governance. This is set against the "everyday defined reality," which is how people experience the processes of cross-ethnic interaction on a daily basis (Shamsul 2004, 148). The importance of this "everyday defined reality," of the fact that on an everyday level people live in a situation where their identities are not fixed but fluid, can be seen regularly in studies of ethnicity in Sarawak. For example, the concept of moving in and out of identities is further investigated with subtle exegetical nuances by Liana Chua (2007) as "fixity and flux" with reference to the Bidayuh in Sarawak. Similarly, Shanthi Thambiah highlights the importance of inclusivity in a concept of identity which embraces diversity, among a very small ethnic minority of close to four hundred people, the Bhuket. Yet this is set against the ethnic category of "Bhuket" bestowed by the state, which is based on exclusiveness and boundaries (Thambiah 2009, 339–340). These examples show that a notion of bounded ethnicity contrasts with a broader reality of fluid cultural identity. Victor King's definition of cultural identity is useful here:

[P]rocesses of cultural construction and transformation and the various forms and levels of identity can never be taken to be complete and firmly established. They are always in the process of "becoming" . . . (King 2012, 17)

Here, cultural identity is seen as the fluid processual way that people actually identify themselves on an everyday basis, which is linked to the performative actions of shared experience.

Both the concepts of cultural identity epitomized by the idea of “our people” and a fixed notion of ethnicity, “the Kelabit,” interrogate each other through an analysis of the Long Peluan narrative. However, before going on to this, it is important to understand the history of “the Kelabit” as an ethnic category.

Kelabit Ethnicity and the Kelabit Highlands

The Kelabit came to be so called, supposedly, through a misunderstanding on the part of Charles Hose, a Brooke administrator, who was told through an interpreter that they were “Lun Pa Labid,” and he heard “Kalabit.” Thus, they came to be labeled and classified as Kalabit, in line with the Brooke administration’s policy of identifying the tribes under its jurisdiction by name (Lian-Saging 1976/77, 4). When Kelabit leaders came to Marudi to seek allegiance to the Brooke government in the interests of security, they accepted a common identification as Kelabit. However, they actually represented groups speaking a common language with mutually intelligible dialects from different river systems flowing out of the highland plateau, some of which were in what was then Dutch Borneo. This common identity was a convenient way for them to come together in larger groups to negotiate terms of peace with the Brooke government. They inherited from Brooke-era cartography the convenient equation of being Kelabit with occupying the highlands. This began when the term “Kalabit Country” appeared on the first map of the area by R. S. Douglas (1912) and the phrase “the Kelabit Highlands” became a legacy. This meant that being Kelabit was synonymous with living in the highlands as their territory.

In the same way that within Malaysia “Malayness” has become a fixed category, equated with owning and living on Malay land and enshrining preferential rights as *bumiputera* or sons of the soil, the Kelabit’s relationship with their territory, the “highlands,” is synonymous with their identity. Today, Kelabit differentiate themselves and their territory from their neighbors, the Lun Bawang in Sarawak and their Brian and Krayan cousins over the Indonesian border, all of whom speak dialects of the same mutually intelligible language. This differentiation is illustrated in narratives by educated Kelabit, who describe their history in terms of isolation and confinement to their ecological niche. Together with the notion of inaccessibility and separation from their neighbors is an emphasis on “their exclusive occupation of their ancestral territory” (Bulan 2003, 19) and the idea “that they have roamed the highlands from time immemorial” (Talla 1979, 13). The claim is that only the Kelabit have lived in the highlands since the beginning of time. Thus, the Kelabit now see themselves as a bounded ethnic group,

defined against the outside world and their neighbors. Historically, this notion of being Kelabit was consolidated as disparate longhouses came together with the Australian forces during the Japanese occupation to fight to expel the Japanese from the highlands within Sarawak and the river systems beyond the border in Dutch Borneo. Subsequently, through their association with military leader and museum curator Harrison, the first Kelabit trained as teachers, museum staff, and health assistants, and their identity as Kelabit came to be known to the outside world.

Being Kelabit as a Strategy, Conflict, and the Headman-Narrator

The next generation of Kelabit are said to have experienced the power of the Holy Spirit during the revival of Christianity in the 1970s, when they were students in Bario. Many went on to obtain tertiary qualifications and created a legacy of success, which had previously been measured in terms of size of padi harvests. This success is measured today by the number of Kelabit of this generation who have attained prominent positions in the fields of education, government, the oil and gas industry, and corporate affairs. Some urban Kelabit have petitioned for the gazettement of remnants of virgin and partially logged forest as a national park, the Pulong Tau National Park, which covers about one-tenth of the highland area. The name of the national park, Pulong Tau, means “our forest” in Kelabit. This is in line with the Kelabit perception that all land in the so-called Kelabit highlands belongs to the Kelabit. Megalithic graves and other cultural sites have been documented through recent archaeological and anthropological research projects (Barker *et al.* 2008; 2009; Hitchner 2009; Lloyd-Smith *et al.* 2010; Lloyd-Smith 2012; Lloyd-Smith *et al.* 2013). This research has recently been drawn on to reinforce the notion of the ancient occupation of the highlands by the ancestors of the Kelabit.

Logging in the highlands, which began in the 1990s, provided the impetus for action on the part of the Kelabit to prevent outsiders from gaining possession of the land and resources, although logging was also regarded as a means of gaining greater access to metropolitan centers through the use of logging roads and the building of strategic bridges. Conflicts did, of course, come about within and between communities in the wake of the allocation of logging licenses and the assertion on the part of the state that the land in the highlands did not belong to those who lived there but was state land. While in the central part of the Kelabit highlands, inhabited only by people who considered themselves Kelabit, conflicts arose among Kelabit, things were more complex in the Long Peluan area. Here, the community negotiated together with the local Sa’ban and Penan and with logging companies to strategize the best route for the road to optimize

access to their villages and to install new water supplies due to the lack of reach of the state to this frontier area. The logging company provided jobs and opportunities to sell farm produce in the logging camp. However, access to bulldozers meant that individuals could grab parcels of land to farm without going about the traditional consultation with the elders. This created considerable conflict within the community, which was heightened by the disparities that came about through cash coming into the village. These new sources of tension were beyond the capacity of Malian Tepun, the headman-narrator, to dissipate. This is the background to Malian Tepun relating the three narratives to me.

Borders, Longhouses, and Oral Narratives

In the same way that longhouse populations are dynamic and fluid, with migrations and intermarriage, oral narratives change as they are retold, depending on the context and audience. As a genre, in Borneo, they often describe the origins of a group and major episodes which relate to their earliest times. These relate to customary laws, the institution of leadership, and the history of migrations and territory and are part of the collective identity of the community at the core of the very existence of a longhouse. Moreover, even as they comment on the present and are shaped by this, Borneo narratives typically contain “the system of traditional values that are often expressed in the conceptualizations, which the group has about its own past” (Maxwell 1989, 168).

The narrative analyzed here works on two levels. First, it tells of origins, migrations, and events in the history of the group; and second, it outlines the group’s conceptualization of this, how the community makes sense of the past, and what gives meaning to them in the present. Often such meanings relate to tenure of land, just as they do among the Punan Bah: “the oral tradition is seen as ‘the truth’, as a proof of the legitimacy of their claims on a number of traditional rights within their territory and is by them described as a weapon” (Nicolaisen 1976, 91). Thus, the significance of a narrative set in the past is often related to claims to land, demonstrating its potentially partial and political nature. Implicit in this is the paradox that ethnic groups can often live side by side, each with differing and conflicting narratives regarding origins and rights to territory that can be described as “oral ways of knowing” (Tuhiwai Smith 2004, 33). Discussion and contestation of narratives in everyday life are often muted, given the need for peoples and their histories to coexist side by side.

Thus, the way in which the Kelabit of Long Peluan see the history of their area at any moment is quite different from the version of that same period of history of their Penan, Sa’ban, or Ngurek neighbors. However, people get on with their daily lives, work

on one another’s farms, trade game and fish among themselves, and rely on each other for labor, cash, and food supplies in order to survive. The longhouse has endured as a consequence of such interactions, and this is because in everyday life ethnicity is not an issue.

This alternative, everyday identity is expressed using the term *lun tauh*, “our people.” This term is extremely important. Kelabit use this term so much that at one point it was considered an alternative name for them (Amster 1998, 30). However, it is notable in that it does not refer only to the Kelabit themselves; it can refer to related groups over the border, political groupings along a river, or even the broad concept of the unity of church district (*daerah*) which embraces multiple ethnic categories. Its core meaning can be said to be “to have a unity, to be different from people who are not *lun tauh*” (Janowski 1991, 212). I will consider the way in which this *lun tauh* identity is expressed at different stages in the historical narrative.

The Long Peluan Narrative: The History of *Lun Tauh*, “Our People”

The narrative I am exploring here is set in the era of warfare and headhunting, and describes the alliance between the Ngurek, Sa’ban, and Kelabit at a place called Long Moyo, during a conflict with another group called the Lepo’ Tepu. The coming together, separation, and dispersal of these communities to thwart their enemies is recounted in the narrative. The narrative also describes the feats of an ancestral hero, Telen Sang, who was endowed with supernatural charisma (*inan lalud*) and led *lun tauh* to migrate upriver. The community then separated—some went to the Bahau River, in Dutch Borneo, and some stayed at Long Di’it, the place of origin for the Kelapang people. “Marks” (*edtu*) on the landscape, including in particular megaliths, are identified in the narrative; these offer tangible evidence of the presence of Ngurek and Kelabit in the area of the Baram around Long Peluan. The narrative concludes, however—paradoxically—that menhirs, dolmens, and stone mounds on the landscape are the exclusive work of Kelabit ancestors.

A Summary of the Long Peluan Narrative: Understanding *Lun Tauh*

The story laid out in the narrative suggests a more dynamic and heterogeneous history of population in the Kelabit highlands than indicated in the narratives of contemporary Kelabit cited previously (Lian-Saging 1976/77; Bulan and Labang 1979; Talla 1979; Bulan

2003). A time is recalled when there was a close and dynamic relationship, a unity, between the people on the Kelapang River, which is now in Sarawak, and those on the Bahau, which is now in Kalimantan, due to the absence of territorial borders; the inclusive idea of *lun tauh* denotes this unity. An example of this dynamism is that Belawing Tungang, a Lun Kelapang from Long Di'it, the community of origin of Long Peluan, became paramount chief of several predominantly Sa'ban longhouses on the Bahau River at Pei Atang in Dutch Borneo in the late nineteenth century. Thus, the community of Long Di'it was multiethnic in the same way as Long Peluan, and this is supported by genealogies from both Ngurek and Sa'ban ancestors.

The narrative opens: "We want to know our relationship, our history of being together with the Ngurek" (*Tauh la' kali' idih atur tauh, sejarah tauh, peruyung ngan Ngurek*). The emphasis is on inclusion, through the use of the word *tauh*, referring to *our* history. The formulation *peruyung ngan*, "together with" the Ngurek, suggests a shared history. The narrative explains that there is Ngurek ancestry in many households in Long Peluan through a Ngurek ancestor, Bilong Salo', and his son, Araya Ajin, who was one of the founders of Long Peluan together with his three sisters. The story then recounts the migrations of the Ngurek from Bawang Ipong to Long Upun on the Bahau in Dutch Borneo, where they lived with the Sa'ban of Pa' Nar, who, according to the narrative, "are considered as 'our people' (*lun tauh*)."*Lun tauh* is thus an inclusive term that conveys the idea of "us"—Kelabit, Ngurek, and Sa'ban—as a group of people made up of subgroups, each with its own identity but related to the others. The Kelabit term *lun tauh* is used today in everyday life by Kelabit themselves to denote relationships not just within the Kelabit community and with their immediate neighbors but extending, depending on context, to include people on the same river system and others regarded as kin (*lun ruyong*) who are related not only through blood ties but also through ties created by marriage or adoption. The context for the use of the term is relational, and its features are fluid and flexible.

The flexible relationships denoted by the term *lun tauh* come about because kinship is recognized cognatically. When a couple marry, the parents of the two spouses are regarded as *iban*, a title which indicates their status in relation to the new family—regardless of their ethnicity. The new web of family relationships, *lun ruyong*, through marriage stretches to *ruai* (aunts and uncles of the married couple) and *lango'* (brothers, sisters, and first cousins of the married couple). The adoption of children is a further way kinship is extended. In Long Peluan Kelabit children have been adopted into Sa'ban households and vice versa. For instance, the Long Peluan headman's daughter Remat Murang was adopted by Tama Lalo and her cousin Ngalap Ayu by Tama Apoi, both in Long Banga. Such adoptions are made if there is illness in the family, or inauspicious omens are

observed, or to give children to childless couples to provide an heir to the family’s land and property. The child, in turn, provides extra hands for the sustenance of the household and security for the adoptive couple’s old age. In some cases, the children move in and live and eat with their adoptive families, and in other cases they stay with their natal families. This extension of the family group provides support for labor exchange in padi fields, and reciprocity of assistance for celebrations and funerals.

Thus, there is the historical precedent of a fluid, inclusive attitude to kinship in the form of *lun ruyung* as outlined above, which is based on intermarriage and adoption. This can permeate to the wider grouping of *lun tauh*, which consists of whoever should be included at the time of speaking. It is a quintessentially relational term, which can relate at the first level to the longhouse, at the next level to Kelabit, and at higher levels to speakers of other related languages, to Sa’ban neighbors, or to the Lun Bawang or the Kerayan and Brian over the Indonesian border—or even to the Orang Ulu groups, which are dominated by the Kayan and Kenyah.

This inclusive concept of identity, *lun tauh*, denotes an outlook that has been passed down from a time when Kelabit, Ngurek, and Sa’ban were small groups forming alliances against common enemies on a river system, when they intermarried and shared resources, culture, and languages. They formed work parties, hunting groups, and trading groups utilizing resources within their territory (Fig. 3). Such openness was necessary because they needed to keep their population at a viable level for shifting cultivation, warfare, and trading journeys. Longhouses survived over time through these open relationships.



Fig. 3 Work Group Harvesting at Long Peluan (photo by Valerie Mashman)

Thus, *lun tauh* refers to “our people” as people who have come together in multiethnic villages and settled with heterogeneous families and relatives as *lun ruyung*, “people together”—kin.

The Long Peluan Narrative: Creating a People, Alliances, and Conquests

There is an episode in the narrative which describes the attack on the Lepo' Tepu, which is a good example of how alliances in warfare reinforce group bonds and of how loyalty works to create a common identity, of a people united against their enemies. The Lepo' Tepu were thwarted because they were betrayed by the Sa'ban, who alerted the Ngurek and Kelabit to the real nature of their purportedly friendly visit. Thus, each allied group on the river played its part in defending itself and its territory against a common enemy. The identity of *lun tauh* is reinforced by their allegiance to each other against the common enemy of the Lepo' Tepu. The Lepo' Tepu are distinguished from *lun tauh* by the use of feathers in their headdresses, and the carriage of their leader above the group by his followers, emphasizing a cultural difference which creates a boundary between “us” and “them” (Barth 1969, 14).

This kind of loyalty was grounded in the fact that survival depended on each longhouse defending its locality and its river system, and its allies could be of mixed ethnicities, often strengthened by marriage ties. Allegiance was not mandatory for people who spoke the same language. For example, the Kelabit went in two separate groups to the Marudi peacemaking in April 1898, and care was taken to keep them apart lest antagonisms surface (Hose 1898, 122). This suggests that the longhouse was the primary source of loyalty, rather than the wider group speaking the same language, who might live quite far from each other. Locality-based alliances were stronger than ethnic allegiances:

Despite ethnic differences, the members of a central Borneo river-based grouping have a consciousness of kind: they are not simply neighbours, but a people . . . proximity is the basis of commonality. Throughout Borneo, river-based groupings theoretically avoided headhunting amongst themselves. (Rousseau 1990, 117)

Thus, the alliance of Ngurek, Kelabit, and Sa'ban enabled them to be more than neighbors: they were “a people,” *lun tauh*. The identity of *lun tauh* is best understood in terms of a “consciousness of kind” as described above.

The Long Peluan Narrative: How Communities Change

In the aftermath of the attack by the Lepo’ Tepu which is part of the narrative, mentioned above, it became clear that the allied groups of “our people” had to move from Long Moyo, as the Lepo’ Tepu had threatened to return to attack again:

So the Ngurek suggested, “Let us all move downriver.” But the Kelabit said, “We cannot go downriver. We are not used to handling boats, so we shall go up into the headwaters.” They were unable to agree. . . . And so they went their separate ways. The Ngurek went downriver, and the Kelabit went up into the mountainous country of the headwaters. That is how we have Ngurek ancestry. (Extract from Long Peluan narrative)

In response to the threat of a retaliatory attack, Southeast Asian upland groups have often split up and “moved out of the way” (Scott 2009, 209). The episode recounted above accounts for the separation of the Ngurek and Kelabit based on their aptitudes for different terrain, and how they went in different directions, highlighting different cultural attributes, no longer neighbors, yet having at some point in the past common ancestors. The split came about because the Kelabit were unable to handle boats but had the strength and physique to negotiate the rugged mountainous country of the interior, beyond the reach of navigable rivers. Their lack of proficiency in using boats is, in fact, reported by Douglas (1907, 53), who says they had no idea how to paddle boats and that they started crying at the sight of the volume of the Baram River at Marudi. This illustrates how Kelabit came to be identified as highlanders, occupying the niche of the highlands in the narrative, and how their identity came to be shaped by this territory. The rapids of the upper Baram provided a protective boundary for them, creating difficulty in access for outsiders from lowland and coastal centers. By contrast, the mountains between Sarawak and Dutch Borneo were not a barrier, because Kelabit were adept at negotiating the mountainous terrain. This would account for their ready alliances in the Bahau area, to which they could retreat if necessary.

The alliance between the Ngurek and the Kelabit continued down the generations, with Ngurek transporting Kelabit by boat to the administrative center of Marudi or on trading expeditions to the Bahau. There were reports that Kelabit was spoken as a second language in Ngurek longhouses on the Baram River in the 1940s (Bolang and Harrisson 1949). Such networks were crucial for trade, ritual, and the maintenance of local cosmologies, as prestige items such as jars, beads, and commodities were sent upriver and exchanged for forest products. This was typical of social ties deriving from migration patterns in Central Borneo, where relationships continued between families still connected across vast distances. What this episode demonstrates is that Ngurek

and Kelabit had lived together as one community, allied against a common enemy, yet they made a decision to split and separate according to their own aptitudes and survival skills in different types of terrain. This was, according to the narrative, determined by their own agency, an example of how “Kelabit have been active agents and subjects of their own history” (Bala 2008, 83). The decisions about whether to stay put or move on, retreat to the hills or go downriver, are all presented in the narrative as examples of choices that Kelabit made, in important measure out of a desire to maintain their autonomy.

In the narrative, the Kelabit communities are said to have later split further and come to be identified with two separate territories—in the upper Baram in Long Peluan and at Long Di’it on the Kelapang River. This exemplifies the continuously changing nature of longhouse communities, which are often rebuilt by ethnically diverse populations, as described by Peter Metcalf: “Whatever categories colonialists thought they had discovered, longhouse communities were founded, grew, went into decline, and dispersed, in a process of formation and reformation that paid no attention to ethnic ‘boundaries’” (Metcalf 2010, 313).

The alliance between Ngurek and Kelabit is similar to partnerships in Burma between Pa’O and Burmese. Here, as in Borneo, relations are not based on ethno-linguistic allegiances “but [are] between villagers and partners, whose exchanges and networks contribute to the establishment of social cohesion, albeit an unstable cohesion, in a multi-ethnic landscape” (Robinne and Sadan 2007, 304). At this point the Long Peluan narrative presents a focus which is less on cultural difference and more on the dynamics of political networks and social interaction, which are continually reshaped in creating the stability necessary to forge the identity of *lun tauh*.

The Long Peluan Narrative: A Further Separation

People were on the move at this time to avoid enemy attack and had to build houses in defensive locations, as well as in areas where land was fertile.¹⁾ Longhouses were built to be easily dismantled so that communities could move quickly and easily; roofs were made of leaf thatch; walls and floors were of bamboo. One part of the narrative, which is told in many versions in the highlands,²⁾ explains why Kelabit have relatives among Bahau:

1) Another reason for moving in the nineteenth century was the frequency of epidemics (Lian-Saging 1976/77, 46).

2) See Lian-Saging (1976/77, 27). This story was also told to Monica Janowski by the people of Pa’ Dalih, near Pa’ Diit (Janowski, pers. comm.).

They couldn't decide where to go. They were on the move against enemies. Some people wanted to go back to the Bahau River. They went out and dug a ceremonial ditch on a ridge. They split into two groups, one on each side of the ditch. A piece of rattan was laid across the ditch. Those who wanted to stay grasped the rattan from one end while those who wanted to go to the Bahau grasped the rattan on the other end. The people on the lower part of the ridge couldn't be seen and those on the higher side were more numerous, so the leaders asked those on the higher side to join the people on the lower side. When the groups had split up and those in the valley left for the Bahau, the Kelabit realized they had been tricked, as they were fewer in number. (Extract from Long Peluan narrative)

From this it may be concluded that Kelabit in the highlands have a tradition of mixed ancestry with the Ngurek and Sa'ban of the Bahau and that there was a movement of people who migrated out of the highlands to the Bahau. Some of the Bahau population went to Pa Ibang and eventually to Tang La'an in the Krayan. The story is retold within the community so that bonds are maintained among kin on each side of the border, reinforcing the porous nature of this division. It is in the interests of people on each side to keep up with each other for the purposes of maintaining kinship ties and trade contacts, as Jerome Rousseau points out: "After migration to another river basin, relations are kept for a long time with relatives remaining in the original area, especially if visits are an opportunity to trade" (Rousseau 1990, 119). In Long Peluan, contacts have been maintained across the numerous paths and tracks which provide access across the border, through mountain passes and across watersheds. Relatives from the Krayan left marks on the landscape around Long Peluan during extended visits. There is a rock called Batu Bayo' in the middle of the Bale River which commemorates the place where a Krayan named Bayo'³⁾ capsized. Moreover, it is said in Long Peluan that padi bunds and fields for farming wet rice in *lati baa'* were perfected by Yakup Pangot and Titus Paran, cousins from the Krayan who came to give technical help when people started to diversify to wet-padi cultivation in the 1970s. Then, there is a type of durian with a fleshy fruit, the seeds of which were originally brought over from Kalimantan by the people of Pa Sing, who brought baskets full of fruit for sale.

These bonds between communities as *lun tauh* are present on the landscape and in conversations and are recreated through narratives in people's imaginations on each side of the border. They are reinforced through the sending over of gifts and invitations to feasts, as tokens of value. For instance, when I gave birth in Kuching to my son Joel Jallong, whose father is from Long Peluan, a cockerel and a hen were delivered to our house from a cousin, Sina Somo,⁴⁾ who lived in Long Layu on the Krayan River, Kalimantan.

3) Bayo' actually was by birth a Long Di'it Kelabit who married into a Krayan household at Pa Sing.

4) Her father was named Paran Jalong. At the time we named our son we did not realize that both her father and our son were named after the same ancestor, Jalong.

In the past, in pre-Christian times, such gifts would have been used at the ceremony to initiate a child. A few years later, I received a string of heirloom beads, again from Sina Somo, delivered through an intermediary to our Kuching house. Eventually we managed to visit her and reciprocate her kindness.

At a wider, more public level, *lun tauh* were brought together in the past at the major feasts, *irau*, marking deaths and sometimes, in the case of high-status families, at the ritual initiation of a child. Nowadays, *irau* are held to commemorate the adoption of new names by parents and grandparents at the birth of children, and at Easter. As Monica Janowski notes, “This overarching community of *lun tauh* is represented and generated at *irau*” (Janowski 1991, 212).

The Long Peluan Narrative: Signs on the Landscape—Location, Territory, and Ethnicity

The narrative describes places within the territory of Long Peluan and Pa Di’it, creating for listeners a common identity relating to place as the narrator shares his knowledge, thus indicating his authority and standing. A chronology of movement evoking, for example, the name of the site of a previous longhouse in both the Ngurek and Kelabit languages—Lulau Terong (Ngurek) or Long Moyo (Kelabit)—demonstrates the hybridity of populations living side by side in the same area.

Within the Long Peluan narrative there are references to “marks” (*edtu*) that are evidence of previous occupation of the landscape:

As our people moved upriver, one can see stone mounds and standing stones that they built along the river, and stone graves at Long Nonar. These are the signs (*edtu*) left by them. Another example is the row of trees on the bank of the Kelapang downriver from the Ramudu River. These trees are still there today. They were harvesting and as they sat down to rest in a row they planted the seeds from the fruit they ate. (Extract from Long Peluan narrative)

The identification of places as signs or *edtu* on the landscape informs the audience that their ancestors are believed to have ceremonially buried their dead in megalithic cemeteries, indicated by stone graves (Fig. 4), and that their ancestors previously cleared land and planted fruit trees, which could be claimed by the descendants of those who planted them (see Janowski and Langub 2011). It follows that the process of Malian Tepun’s telling the narrative in 2006, recalling places of occupation, trees, and cemeteries, transmits to listeners crucial knowledge of the land and becomes a vehicle for the mapping of territory for the community, at a time when this has become particularly



Fig. 4 Stone Graves at Long Peluan (photo by Valerie Mashman)

urgent as elders are unable to take younger members of the community out to show them the significant features of their land because of changes in the landscape, or because the younger members of the community are away earning money offshore or in coastal cities.

It is noteworthy that Malian Tepun stresses Kelabit occupation of the land. The cemeteries and stone mounds in the area are regarded as signs of previous Kelabit settlement: “In every place where the Kelabit have lived, there are standing stones and stone graves where human bones are buried . . . this land in the headwaters of Kelapang belongs to . . . the Kelabit people” (Extract from Long Peluan narrative). Thus, the narrative is not simply about Kelabit and Ngurek, who, together with Sa’ban, shared the *sejarah* (story) of the *lun tauh*; it is also about the land in the headwaters of the Kelapang River, and it emphatically functions as a declaration that this is the territory of Kelabit, although it also, somewhat contradictorily, states that Ngurek were the first people in the area, even before Kelabit.

Significantly, what the narrative does not consider is the association of the Ngurek with the stone culture of the area; nor does it allude to Ngurek narratives about the stones (which I have touched on elsewhere [Mashman 2017]) and which state that it was the Ngurek who placed the stones. In the 1980s, when I first visited Long Peluan, people said that the stone sites were linked to the Ngurek, who had previously lived in the area. People now say they do not know who created the stone graves. They forget that one

of the ancestors of their founder, Araya Ajin, was Bilong Salo', a Ngurek. Ngurek leaders from Sarawak readily recognize these stone monuments, which feature in Ngurek oral history as places where they lived as they migrated to the main Baram River (Jalong 1989), and visit such sites associated with their ancestors in Indonesia, which have been systematically excavated and documented (Arifin and Sellato 2003). Thus, parallel narratives by Ngurek exist alongside the declaration by Kelabit that their ancestors built the stone monuments. There seems to be little discussion of the existence of these differing narratives because circumstances have not caused them to be evoked alongside each other. This is characteristic of the "oral ways of knowing" of indigenous communities mentioned earlier (Tuhivai Smith 2004, 33).

The Long Peluan Narrative: Inclusion and Exclusion

Within the narrative there is both a history of an inclusive group, "our people"—*lun tauh*—set in a period of alliances in warfare, and at the same time an assertion of sole tenure of land in the present. The land is defined as belonging to the Kelabit, and this is explicitly an exclusive notion. Thus, there are two models of identity which come through in the narrative. The first is set in the past and consists of the inclusive fluid "everyday reality" of the heterogeneous *lun tauh*, who had shared histories, were interrelated across borders, and had an inclusive mixed identity; and the second is "the Kelabit," the fixed "authority-defined" ethnic group, which derived its identity through the classification of peoples by the Brooke administration, with an exclusive claim to territory. This recalls and indeed echoes the exclusive notion of identity, related to tenure of land, which is narrated by Kelabit elsewhere: "These cultural landmarks are revisited as indications and proof of the occupation of the highlands by the Kelabit . . . Quite clearly they lived and exclusively occupied the highlands as part of their ancestral homeland for generations from time immemorial" (Bulan 2003, 45).

These claims assert Kelabit sovereignty over the land, to the exclusion of their neighbors, but overlook histories of neighbors such as the Sa'ban and Ngurek who also have narratives which relate to building stone monuments, as well as overlooking the time they spent together as *lun tauh* with the Sa'ban and Ngurek. This argument for Kelabit sovereignty over the land implies that no one else could have lived in the highlands before them. It also ignores the fact that their ancestors in a previous time may have assimilated a people who were there earlier.

This is part of a process that is recognized in mainland Southeast Asia by James Scott: "Those who successfully stake a claim to resources on this basis acquire a power-

ful reason for embracing the new identity. By the same token, they exclude others from access to these same resources" (Scott 2009, 263). Scott has noted that ethnicity is embraced and reinforced with exclusive claims to resources, something which is very relevant to the statement in the narrative that the land of the upper Kelapang belongs to the Kelabit people. This comes at a time when land available for forest resources is very much reduced to a limited area of community forest, due to forest fires in 1997 and logging activities in the area. Further to this, the people of Long Peluan are facing conflicting claims with their Penan neighbors at Long Beruang. When the Penan settled in 1961 they did so with the consent of the Long Peluan community. Gradually, they started to farm on land that had been previously cleared by Long Peluan, on the understanding that this land was being loaned. However, memory of this agreement has been lost in time, and in Long Peluan there is resentment that the younger generation of Penan and new migrants to Long Beruang do not acknowledge the previous history of the land. Consequently, Kelabit feel insecure regarding their sovereignty over what they regard as their own territory, a common feeling throughout the highlands, due to issues similar to those experienced at Long Peluan. It is arguable that this may be one reason why the narrative concludes with an exclusive model of Kelabit identity, reinforcing their relationship with the land through the stone culture, distinguishing themselves from their neighbors.

Conclusion

The Long Peluan narrative presents the oral history of people whose history spans the border, providing very relevant insights into the social cohesion created by the acceptance of mixed fluid identities of *lun tauh*, which has enabled multiethnic communities to survive in Borneo across the difficult mountainous terrain which now forms political borders. *Lun tauh* as a form of cultural identity is reinforced by the act of performing of the narrative, as listeners become united through shared histories of alliances across river systems and across borders and survival in warfare against enemies, with migratory journeys across the landscape. Association with marks on the landscape becomes part of the process of recognizing and memorizing territorial boundaries, which define the cultural identity of "our people," as people remember their ancestors' migrations and dramatic separations in the precolonial era. This demonstrates a form of common identity based on past alliances, across borders, which contributed to the endurance of longhouses. This fluid concept is used today contextually to embrace inclusive groupings, be they at the kinship, longhouse, or wider multiethnic levels necessary for small minority

groups in a district. These and other forms of socialities create heterogeneous identities which can be embraced by *lun tauh*. The term creates a unity for a group, and its fluidity accommodates the necessary expansion in numbers to make the group viable. It is a relational concept and part of the “everyday-defined” reality of daily life, based on inclusion which enables day-to-day transactions to take place.

Simultaneously, a more fixed model of homogenous ethnicity—“the Kelabit”—comes out of the narrative, a category originating with the Brooke state but taken up by the people who have taken on this label and used it to assert exclusive ownership of land and resources. This comes together with the message that the land in the Kelapang belongs to the Kelabit people, despite the parallel history, given in that same narrative, of coexistence with the Ngurek and the fact that the Ngurek had the stone culture which led to the monuments which the Kelabit claim as their own. This fixed notion of Kelabit identity excludes other people with whom identity and allegiances were shared in the past (and still are in the present). The fact that Kelabit themselves in Long Peluan and indeed elsewhere have taken up this identity can be understood as a response to contestation of their territory by logging companies and neighboring groups.

The ethnic construct of “the Kelabit” has become a bounded common identity aspired to by people who wish to be politically represented by their own leaders, like other ethnic groups in the nation-state. As stated earlier, the Malays have gone through the same process, leading to a forgetting of earlier histories of migrations.

Scott, in his analysis of state making in mainland Southeast Asia, discusses this taking on of an ethnic identity and denying past identities in terms of “the standard mode of claim-making by stateless people who interact with states.” He recognizes this process as the interaction between stateless people and states, as they make claims to resources and territory. This leads to stateless people forming new identities for themselves and excluding others (Scott 2009, 263). In a similar manner, Kelabit have begun to claim their land, their history, and their resources to the exclusion of their neighbors. This has led to the creation of the Kelabit highlands; and Kelabit maintain its physical and metaphorical borders. Kelabit identity can, in fact, be seen as carrying the seed of nationalism. As Scott says:

The point is, once created, an institutional identity acquires its own history. The longer and deeper this history is, the more it will resemble the mythmaking and forgetting of nationalism. Over time such an identity, however fabricated its origin, will take on essentialist features and may well inspire passionate loyalty. (Scott 2009, 265)

“Being Kelabit” has been embraced out of a desire for recognition to create a niche for themselves as a minority group within the Malaysian state (Amster 1998, 28) and has

“grown to a sort of patriotism to the tribe” (Lian-Saging 1976/77, 10). “Being Kelabit” is a source of pride associated with success, due to the early educational success of a number of young Kelabit in the 1960s and 1970s, and this identity is utilized to negotiate contemporary government policy which does not readily acknowledge the existence of customary lands.

Both forms of identity—the fixed exclusive notion of “being Kelabit” and the wider inclusivity of *lun tauh*—coexist as differing strategies for survival for a marginal people, operating at different levels. How this complexity works beyond the longhouse in the multi-sited settings of communities, schools, workplaces, and housing areas and across the border merits further attention. The Long Peluan narrative demonstrates how local perceptions of ethnicities and identities are bound up with strategies for creating larger groups, creating allies, remembering kin across borders, and struggles to claim territory.

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