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Prey into kin: the cosmological role of the pig  
in the Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak

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COUVERTURE / COVER:

Baye tenant Bulan Nalan (Crocodyle Esprit tenant la Lune Errante). Ce tableau du peintre kelabit Stephen Baya, créé en 2009, exprime la relation cosmologique profonde entre les humains et les autres espèces vivantes, et l'environnement naturel dans lequel vit le peuple Kelabit / *Baye holding Bulan Nalan (Spirit Crocodile holding the Wandering Moon)*. This painting by the Kelabit painter Stephen Baya, created in 2009, expresses the deep cosmological relationship between humans and other living species and the natural environment in which the Kelabit people live.

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# Prey into kin: the cosmological role of the pig in the Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak

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## ABSTRACT

In this article I explore the role of both the wild pig (*baka*) and the domesticated pig (*berak*) among the Kelabit of Sarawak, focusing in particular on their pre-Christian cosmological role. The wild pig (mainly *Sus barbatus* Müller, 1838 but also *Sus scrofa* Linnaeus, 1758), the main source of wild meat in the area, used to be associated with the spirit world, particularly with the Great Spirit. The domesticated pig (*Sus scrofa*) was, in pre-Christian Kelabit belief and practice, important in communication with the spirit world. I suggest here that the pig is transformed into kin to humans through being fed rice, and that this may be seen as the basis for its appropriateness as a way of communicating with the spirit world.

## RÉSUMÉ

*De la proie à la parenté: le rôle cosmologique du porc dans le haut plateau Kelabit, Sarawak.*

Dans cet article, j'explore le rôle du porc sauvage (*baka*) et du porc domestiqué (*berak*) chez les Kelabit du Sarawak, en me concentrant en particulier sur leur rôle cosmologique pré-chrétien. Le cochon sauvage (principalement *Sus barbatus* Müller, 1838 mais aussi *Sus scrofa* Linnaeus, 1758), principale source de viande sauvage dans la région, était autrefois associé au monde des esprits, en particulier au Grand Esprit. Le cochon domestiqué (*Sus scrofa*) était, dans la croyance et la pratique kelabit pré-chrétienne, important dans la communication avec le monde des esprits. Je suggère ici que le cochon est transformé en parent des humains en étant nourri au riz, et que cela peut être considéré comme la base de sa pertinence comme moyen de communication avec le monde des esprits.

## KEY WORDS

Cosmology,  
rice,  
house,  
prayer,  
kinship,  
gender.

## MOTS CLÉS

Cosmologie,  
riz,  
maison,  
prière,  
parenté,  
genre.

## INTRODUCTION

I want to begin by conjuring up a spirit. In the forests of the Kelabit Highlands at the headwaters of the Baram river in Sarawak, East Malaysia, there dwells, it is said, a powerful spirit called Puntumid (literally “Ancestor/Grandfather Heel”) (Janowski 2014b). Puntumid is a shape-shifting giant said to have red eyes, long hair and white/colourless skin (whiteness – *buda*’ – is conflated with lack of colour, is associated with the spirit world). It is said that Puntumid used to belong to a race believed by the Kelabit of the area to be ancestral to themselves, the Lun Rabada, but on a hunting trip as a young unmarried man with his brothers, he had an accident and twisted his heel so that it faced forward. Because of this deformity he decided to remain in the forest and hunt humans – “hairless ones” (*tsok na’am bulu*). He told his brothers to return home and hunt pigs – “hairy ones” (*tsok inan bulu*). He himself is said to now eat human spirits (*ada’ lemulun*). Puntumid is also referred to as the “Great Spirit” (Ada’ Raya). As well as being dangerous to humans, he was, before the Kelabit became Christian, also a key source of cosmic power (*lalud*). This was through his friendships with unmarried Kelabit men, to whom he gave *tabat* – powerful substances that can heal or kill – and also through the pigs that he gave men to hunt, when they prayed to him. Nowadays, the Kelabit are Christian and they have abandoned Puntumid. Our next door neighbour, the late Balang Pelaba, who had been friends with Puntumid in his youth, told me that he had heard Puntumid crying in the forest. Young men now pray to Jesus for pigs.

The story of Puntumid emphasises the special nature of the relationship between pigs and people, and the way in which this was, at least in pre-Christian times until the 1960s, grounded in the relationship, both practical and cosmological, between people and the forest (*polong*) (Janowski 2003a, 2014a). Not only is the hunting of wild pigs (*baka*) one of the most important ways in which the Kelabit, like other Dayak peoples of Borneo, relate to the surrounding forest, both practically and, in pre-Christian times, spiritually through Puntumid, but the slaughter of domestic pigs (*berak*) was also, before the Kelabit became Christian, one of the most important means through which the people of the Kelabit Highlands related on a spiritual level with the powers residing in the forest.

Kelabit – like all Dayak, the indigenous people of Borneo – adore pig meat, especially wild pig meat. One of the first things a Kelabit visitor to another longhouse asks is: “Are there any wild pigs around?” (*Inan baka?*). Children can be heard singing a version of a Christian hymn to the two words *kuman baka* (eat wild pigs). When we lived in Pa’ Dalih in the late 1980s and early 1990s conversations around the hearth in the evening among men, and sometimes even among women, revolved around hunting stories and hunting plans. Often this would be accompanied by a rack of pig roasting slowly over the fire, a tasty snack for those present. Pigs must be fat (*lemak*), and the relative fatness of pigs – measured in finger-widths – is always a focus of conversation. Pig fat is used for cooking other foods as well as being a food in its

own right. We found that it had a higher barter value by volume than cooking oil brought up from town, despite the high cost of commercial cooking oil, especially after it had been carried so far (it was a 10 hour walk through the forest to Pa’ Dalih in the 1980s and 1990s). When I arrived in Kuching in 1986 with my husband Kaz and baby daughter Molly, to begin fieldwork in the Highlands, we stayed in a flat belonging to Jayl Langub, who comes from Long Semadoh in the Highlands and belongs to a group closely related to the Kelabit, the Lundayeh. In his fridge we found some solidified pig fat in a bottle. At the time, we found this disgusting. By the time we had lived in the Kelabit Highlands for a year or so our mindset had become much more Kelabit: we too sought out fat pig meat and felt fortunate to have the money to buy cooking oil in town to bring up to the Highlands to barter for pig fat, since my husband did not hunt and could not therefore get his own pig fat.

I will focus here on the relationship between pigs and people as I knew it in the 1980s and 1990s, when I carried out my first two periods of fieldwork in the Highlands. The relationship between pigs and people is changing. While there is still a good deal of forest in this part of Borneo, which has been described as the “Heart of Borneo” – there has recently been an international project aiming to support the natural environment in this area (<http://www.heartofborneo.org/about-us/>, last consultation on 4 June 2021) – logging reached the edges of the Kelabit Highlands in the late 1990s and in 2006 it reached Pa’ Dalih<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1), my field site, which is near the headwaters of the Kelapang river, the river that flows through the southern part of the Highlands and is the source of the mighty Baram river. The Kelapang became muddy in late 2004 because of logging and after that there seemed to be fewer pigs in the forest. Their migrations were probably disrupted by disturbances related to logging. Logging in the headwaters of the Kelapang ceased about 10 years ago but there still seem to be fewer pigs migrating through the area than previously. Domestic pigs, which had been kept by many families in the late 1980s and early 1990s in preparation for feasts, are now rarely kept; when one is needed, it is likely to be brought up from town or across the border from Indonesia. The Kelabit themselves are rapidly migrating down to the coast permanently, though they still feel a strong bond to the highland area. What I am describing here may soon be history.

## HUMANS, THE FOREST AND THE WIDER COSMOS

Before World War II, the people of the Highlands were distributed in small settlements over the area. Since then, much of the population (around 1000 people) has become concentrated, still living in separate longhouses, in an area now called Bario – meaning “windy place” – in the northern part of the Highlands, where the only government-run airstrip is situated.

1. Together with my husband Kaz and daughter Molly, I carried out fieldwork in Pa’ Dalih for 20 months between 1986 and 1988, returned for another four months between 1992 and 1993 and have made a number of shorter visits since then.



FIG. 1. — The longhouse community of Pa' Dalih, Kelabit Highlands in 1987. Photo credit: Kaz Janowski.

There remain six small longhouse settlements isolated in the forest with about 50-120 people in each settlement.

The forest surrounds and dominates the lives of Kelabit communities in the highland area such as the community of Pa' Dalih. The Kelabit Highlands, which has been described as the Kelabit-Kerayan highland (Schneeberger 1945), is part of a large forested tableland in the highest part of Borneo, divided from inhabited areas further downstream by mountains. Arrival at a longhouse community like Pa' Dalih feels like coming home to an oasis of humanity in the midst of the wild. It was presumably because of this that Tom Harrisson, who was parachuted into the Highlands during the World War II to organise resistance “from the inside out” against the Japanese, gave the title *World Within* to his book about his experiences among the Kelabit (Harrisson 1959). Pa' Dalih is a light green patch of wet rice fields, dry fields and pasture in the midst of darker green forest. Living in this kind of environment and constructing a human lifestyle means, for the Kelabit, thrusting that forest back a little, and cultivating rice (Janowski 2004). The Kelabit emphasise their identity as rice-growers. However, they also rely heavily on the forest, where they hunt and gather. Many materials were taken for craftwork and building when we lived in Pa' Dalih in the 1980s and 1990s (Janowski 2003a). Fish were taken from the river Kelapang, although these were small as the river is quite close to its source. Monkeys, civet cats, porcupines, bear cats (*Arctictis binturong* (Raffles, 1821)), monitor lizards, pythons, fruit bats, tree squirrels and various types of bird were hunted on an occasional basis. Pigs and deer are the main prey for the Kelabit; and a good fat pig was (and is) the game animal *par excellence*. The tropical forest, at this altitude, is sub-montane and contains a lot of oak, rather than dipterocarps as in the lowland forest. The oak trees produce huge acorns the size of a human fist, which the wild pigs love to eat (Fig. 2). The forest of the Kelabit Highlands can be described as a “cultured rainforest” (Janowski *et al.* 2013), and that is the title we chose for a large interdisciplinary project that I led, together with the archaeologist Professor Graeme Barker and a team of other



FIG. 2. — Huge acorns in the forests of the Kelabit Highlands, the favourite food of the wild pig species *Sus scrofa* Linnaeus, 1758 and *Sus barbatus* Müller, 1838. Photo credit: Kaz Janowski, 1988.

anthropologists, archaeologists and environmental scientists, in and around Pa' Dalih between 2007 and 2011.

The forest looms large in the Kelabit imagination, and to the degree to which it is not managed by humans (which is less and less the case as you go further from the longhouse), it is a place of mystery, potential and fear. It is full of food and useful products of other sorts; it is also brimful of wild life force, *lalud*, necessary to human life but potentially dangerous. There is a tendency to conflate the landscape and the vegetation of the wild world beyond the area tamed by humans. Mountains (*apad*) and forest (*polong*) go together in the Kelabit mind, and are an expression of the broader cosmos, beyond the small area that humans have carved out through rice-growing. This wider cosmos is regarded as full of spirits (*ada*) and teeming life, much of it mysterious and unknown (Janowski 2016). The boundary between normal living creatures and spirits is blurred in the forest or mountains, where both humans and animals have special powers. Stories about Kelabit heroes such as Toked Rini (Fig. 3) tell of their wanderings in strange and wonderful places such as the Hollow Roaming Moon; the Mouth of the Great River Connecting Earth and Sky; and Outside the Sky (Rubenstein 1973: 723-1127; Janowski 2014c), performing in the process superhuman feats and battling with other warriors who also have superhuman powers. In these stories, the heroes are said to live in a flat and fertile area (Luun Atar – “On the Flat Land”), and the contrast between that flat cultivated land and the wild, mountainous areas in which they travel is clear. Animals blur into spirits.

Crocodiles (*bayeh*) and “tigers” (*balang*)<sup>2</sup>, which do not exist in the flesh in the highland area, are said to be present in the forest – but in spirit form, as *ada*. Other animals that occur in their normal fleshy form are also believed to exist in spirit form, when they are more powerful.

Unlike many peoples in Southeast Asia, the Kelabit do not have tales of immigrant ancestors who had to make peace with and/or intermarry with local inhabitants, whether spirits or humans. They believe themselves to be autochthonous to the Kelabit Highlands. However, they place emphasis, as do many forest peoples, on maintaining a proper balance between human areas carved out of the forest and the wild places of which the forest forms part, although this is not sealed through any pact or agreement with the spirits of the forest or any ongoing rituals as it is, for example, among the people of Kerinci (Bakels 2004). However, it was, at least in pre-Christian times, regarded as vital to have a good relationship with the spirits, to do well in the hunt and to avoid being attacked by spirits through inadvertent misbehaviour. Now that they are Christian, Kelabit men are prone to declare that they are no longer afraid of spirits and to boldly state that they are quite happy to fell big trees inhabited by spirits. However, many men privately admit that they do not dare to do this.

## THE SPIRIT WORLD

The Kelabit are animist and regard the entire world as populated by innumerable spirits (*ada*). They took on a form of evangelical and charismatic Christianity between the 1950s and the 1970s, and now belong to a church called the Sidang Injil Borneo (Borneo Evangelical Church). The Kelabit consider that their adoption of Christianity is the basis for their considerable success in the modern world (Bulan & Bulan-Dorai 2004) Christianity has not meant that they no longer consider the world to be populated with spirits. It means, rather, that they have taken on a relationship with a being whom they regard as much more powerful than any of the *ada*, Jesus Christ. He “trumps” all the spirits. The Kelabit therefore no longer need to concern themselves – at least in theory – with respect for the “small-small” spirits<sup>3</sup>, which are now classified as *satan* or “devils”. In pre-Christian belief, things were very different. Caution had to be exercised in relating to the innumerable spirits present in the forest.

2. When using Malay, Kelabit translate *balang* as *harimau*, which refers to physical tigers; and in English they use the term “tiger”. Nowadays, many Kelabit will have seen photographs of physical tigers or seen them on TV, and they clearly associate the *balang* with the tiger/*harimau*. In the past they would have heard stories of large cats called *harimau* in Malay from other parts of the region, and identified these as being the same as the *balang*, although it is not clear if they would have seen the *harimau* as a spirit or a physical animal (or perhaps both). However at that time they would have a somewhat vague idea of what a *harimau* actually looked like. A story about the hunting of the *balang* by the culture hero Tukad Rini gathered by Guy Arnold in the 1950s tells of it being as large as a buffalo (Guy Arnold’s unpublished field notes).

3. This is how Jayl Langub, a friend and fellow researcher who himself belongs to the Lundayeh – a group closely related to the Kelabit – once translated a term used in speaking to him by a member of the Penan hunter-gatherer group, who continue to fear and respect those “small-small” spirits.

The spirit world contains much more cosmic power than does the normal human world. It exists in parallel with the material human world, but does not appear to be situated within the progress of time. In myths and stories, the Kelabit talk of *getoman lalud*, “linking with cosmic power”, which is closely associated with the spirit world, and also with ancestors believed to have been bigger and stronger than humans nowadays. Culture heroes like Tuked Rini (Fig. 3), believed to be ancestral to the Kelabit, are said to *getoman lalud*. *Getoman lalud* is in one sense situated in a mythical past; but it is also situated in a kind of parallel reality that humans can sometimes access.

Tales of a time when humans were fully situated in *getoman lalud* and the spirit world of the forest may perhaps reflect a group memory of a time in the past when the ancestors of the Kelabit were not agriculturalists but lived as hunter-gatherers in the forest. Tales told about heroes tend to culminate in huge rice meals held at *irau* feasts (see “Domesticated pigs and the *irau* feast”), indicating that they are considered to have been agriculturalists. However, this may be because nowadays rice-growing is so important and so closely associated with Kelabit identity and social and kin relations. There are indications that rice-growing on any significant scale only arrived in the highlands a few hundred years ago; it seems likely that managed stands of sago palm, which until recently were the source of starch for nomadic Penan in nearby areas, were the main source of starch in the Kelabit Highlands too until then (Barton 2012; Jones *et al.* 2013).

The most important of the spirits is the Great Spirit, known by two terms that derive from the same origin, literally meaning “great spirit”: Derayeh and Ada’ Rayeh. Derayeh is associated with rice cultivation and women; the Ada’ Rayeh is associated with the forest and hunting, and with men. The Ada’ Rayeh manifests as Puntumid, the spirit evoked at the beginning of the chapter. Puntumid is said to have once belonged to a race that was a precursor to humans, the Lun Rabada. The story goes that he went hunting with his brother and a rock fall twisted his feet around and inverted them. He therefore remained in the forest (inversion is a characteristic of spirits) and hunted “hairless ones” (humans), while his brother returned home and continued to hunt “hairy ones” (pigs). Puntumid was at this point conflated with the Great Spirit. From then on he both gave pigs to humans to hunt and hunted human spirits.

## THE DEEP UNDERPINNINGS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RICE-GROWING AND THE FOREST

To understand the role of pigs in the Kelabit Highlands, one needs to understand the relationship between agriculture and the forest, rice and meat, and the rice meal at which these are consumed together. On an overt level, the Kelabit see themselves primarily as rice-growers, and the rice meal is the most clearly emphasised eating event, repeated three times a day and shared by the members of one household – or hearth-group, as I describe the basic unit of Kelabit society. The term hearth-group is a translation of *tetel*, which is both one of the terms for the household and

also a term for the hearth itself. I use this term because the household/hearth-group is defined by cooking and eating the rice meal together at the hearth (see Carsten 1997 for an analysis of a similar process in Langkawi off Peninsular Malaysia). The rice meal is the foundation of what I have termed rice-based kinship (Janowski 2007). I have argued that this is rooted in and related to biological kinship but is also in some senses in opposition to it. The kinship created through rice meals is ordered, structured and also hierarchical – those who provide meals are considered to be of a higher generational level, and of higher status, than those who are fed. Having ties based on rice-based kinship differentiates the Kelabit, in their view, from animals – and also from the Penan hunter-gatherers who wander in the forest, and, until recently, relied on forest foods and did not cultivate rice<sup>4</sup> (Janowski 1997). In the traditional Kelabit view, dominant before World War II and still of some significance despite increased contact with the urban, outside world, while those who do not grow rice are related through biological kinship, they are not linked through rice-based kinship, and this also means that they do not live in a structured and hierarchical society. With increased contact with people in the outside world who do not grow rice but are not hunter-gatherers either, this view is being modified; however, statements like “his/her work is his/her rice field” (*kerja late' iah*), which I have heard from Kelabit living in the highlands in reference to kin working in town, reflect continuing attempts to understand and categorise the world outside the Highlands in traditional terms, at least among older people.

Despite the centrality of rice, the rice meal does not consist of rice alone but also of side dishes, described as *nok penguman* or “something to eat with (rice)”. In Pa' Dalih, side dishes for the everyday rice meal are made up of foods which are either actually wild or are treated as though they were wild. I have explored elsewhere the symbolic make-up of the rice meal (Janowski 1995, 2007). The most important of side dishes is meat, and the most important meat is pork. At everyday meals, this is from wild pigs (*baka*); at naming feasts (*irau mekaa ngadan*), it is from domestic pigs (*berak*).

The importance of both rice and meat (mainly pork) is expressed in the fact that the life of a Kelabit community is a perennial balancing act between the longhouse and its surrounding fields on the one hand and the forest just beyond on the other. The people of the Highlands see both as important and necessary to human life (Janowski 2003a). For them, rice is basic to their way of life and to a proper human way of life, which is described as *ulun*. But humans must also have access to the force that the Kelabit call *lalud*, which can be glossed as cosmic power or wild life-force, and this comes from the forest. Rice and *lalud* are complementary and together they structure human life (Janowski 2007). *Lalud* comes ultimately from the Creator Deity,

4. Over the last couple of decades the government has been trying to settle the Penan and has been introducing them to rice agriculture; the forest upon which the Penan depend, particularly in the lowland areas, is fast disappearing with logging. However, most Penan are reluctant to give up their nomadic life style and are not proving enthusiastic farmers.

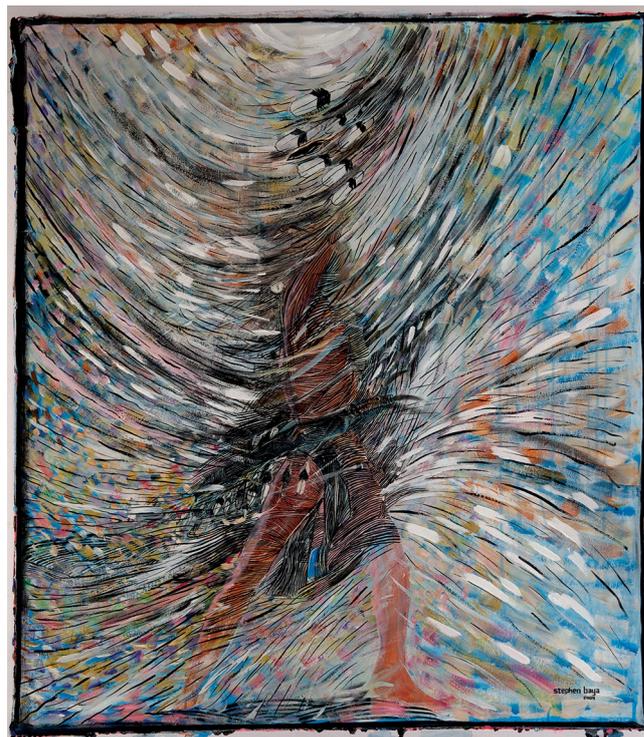


FIG. 3. — The Kelabit culture hero Tuked Rini shimmering with *lalud* (cosmic power). Painting by Stephen Baya, 2009.

now conceived of in Christian terms and known as Tuhan. In the past it came through Puntumid; today it is accessed through Jesus Christ. It is considered to be present in all living things (Janowski 2012, 2016); as the late Balang Pelaba, our neighbour in Pa' Dalih, who used to be a shaman and was once a friend of Puntumid, once told me, “*Tulu na'an lalud na'an eko mulun*” (Without *lalud* you would not be alive). It is brought into the settlement in wild plants and the meat of hunted animals – and especially in pigs, the main and preferred game animal. The Kelabit concept of *lalud* is one of a group of Southeast Asian concepts that refer to a quantifiable something, of finite quantity in the universe, which has been described by Anderson (1972) as “power” or “primordial essence”, by Geertz (1980) as “charisma” and by Errington (1990) as “potency”. Geertz (1980: 106) has argued that this something may be equated with the force which is, in Polynesia, described as *mana*.

The relationship between agriculture and the forest, between rice and meat and between *lalud* and the generation of human life, *ulun*, is actualised through gender (Janowski 1995, 2001). It was women who, in pre-Christian times, used to relate to Derayeh, the aspect of the Great Spirit associated with rice growing, and it is women who are primarily responsible for growing rice; men used to relate to the Ada' Rayeh as Puntumid, and they are primarily associated with the forest and the wild. They are responsible for bringing back the meat (mainly wild pigs) that is the core accompaniment to rice at the rice meal, and are also responsible for access to wild *lalud* or life-force through that meat, which is, I have argued (Janowski 2007),



FIG. 4. — Kelabit hunting equipment and hunted meat from a wild pig (*baka*), probably *Sus barbatus* Müller, 1838. This includes a basket (*bekang*) containing the meat; a shotgun and cartridges; a quiver for blowpipe darts (*selongan*) together with small gourd (*bua tabu kre*) containing flights for the darts (*ra'o*); and a large forest knife (*tongol*). Photo credit: Monica Janowski, 1993.

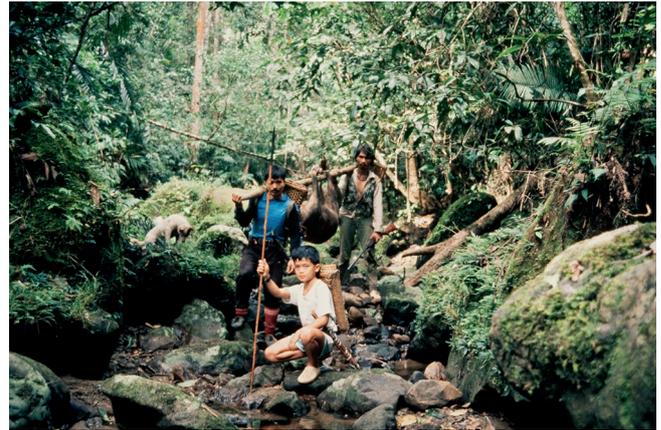


FIG. 5. — Telona Bala, Jolly and Melkey after a successful hunting expedition, carrying a wild pig (*baka*), probably *Sus barbatus* Müller, 1838. Photo credit: Kaz Janowski, 1993.

brought together with rice at the rice meal to generate proper human life, *ulun*. A close and intimate relationship with the forest is part of masculine identity. This is most importantly through hunting.

#### THE WILD PIG

The main animal that the Kelabit hunt is the wild pig. This is (or was until recently) a readily available source of wild meat, and it is considered to provide the tastiest meat, largely because it is the most fatty. Fat is highly valued both for taste and because it can be rendered down to provide lard for frying other foods. I have discussed the symbolic significance of pig fat, which is closely associated with masculinity, elsewhere (Janowski 2003b). Pork from wild pigs was, when I lived in Pa' Dalih in the 1980s and 1990s, the core protein food. Venison was acceptable, but was (and is) not liked as much as pork. Many people, especially women, would eat no wild meat other than pork or venison, some even expressing disgust at the idea.

The main species of wild pig in Borneo are *Sus barbatus* Müller, 1838 and *Sus scrofa* Linnaeus, 1758 (Caldecott *et al.* 1993). When I lived in Pa' Dalih in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were almost always some pigs in the forest (probably *Sus scrofa*), and occasionally large migrations of pigs (*Sus barbatus*) passed through the Highlands, following fruit and/or nut seasons. Men normally hunted singly or in groups of two or three (Figs 4; 5), but when migrations of *Sus barbatus* were taking place they would hunt in larger groups and often intercepted the migrating pigs as they went through gullies and passes in the mountains. Very large numbers of pigs would often be killed at these times and the longhouse would be awash with pork.

In the late 1980s most men kept a pack of dogs whose job was to find and corner pigs. Once a pig was located, it was either shot or, especially if it had been cornered by dogs,

speared. Not all men in Pa' Dalih owned shotguns, as licences are passed from father to son and they were prized possessions. Until World War II, blowpipes were used instead of guns. Over the border in Lun Dayeh communities in East Kalimantan, only a couple of hours walk from Pa' Dalih, the closely related Lun Bawang people possessed fewer guns, and blowpipes were still used in the 1980s and 1990s.

Large numbers of pigs were killed in the 1980s and 1990s. A study carried out between 1993 and 1995 in the Kelabit community of Long Peluan (just outside the Kelabit Highlands) by Elizabeth Bennett *et al.* (1999) found that 67% of evening meals there on average, and sometimes up to 90%, included wild meat. By far the preferred type of wild meat in all the communities in which the study was carried out (one of which was Long Peluan, with the others being communities from other ethnic groups) was the bearded pig. The bearded pig was found to represent 72% of all hunted meat in Sarawak (deer meat was 10.9%) (Bennett *et al.* 1999: 312). The amount of meat eaten is considerable – in Long Peluan each Kelabit family consumed, according to the study, about 396 kg of wild meat per year and the replacement value of wild meat for the whole 17-family longhouse would have been about 21 523 Malaysian dollars per year (Bennett *et al.* 1999: 315).

Pigs were in the 1980s (and still are) butchered in the forest and brought back in large pieces in men's *bekang* baskets (Fig. 5). Once back in the longhouse, in the 1980s and 1990s the hunters cut up the pieces and sent portions of meat to neighbours, kin and friends through children. Everyone was very interested in the preparation of the pigs, including the children (Fig. 6). There was a festive atmosphere when there was lots of pork, and people would stay up late eating roast pork and chatting. Some meat was smoked to preserve it for a few days but most was consumed very quickly, since there was no refrigeration. In a community like Pa' Dalih the whole longhouse benefitted from hunting, not just the hearth-groups to which hunters belong. There was no sense of charity nor was any debt created by the distribution of

meat. This also applied to the gathering of wild vegetables as well as cultivated vegetables and root crops which were freely shared with others in the longhouse without any implications of debt except in the sense that it was polite to reciprocate in kind in due course. This contrasted with the attitude to sharing rice, whether cooked or uncooked; if a hearth-group ran short of rice and had to borrow it from neighbours this created either a debt which needed to be repaid or a sense of inferiority and shame on the part of the recipient.

Pork from wild pigs is no longer distributed in the same way within the longhouse. After a road was built to Pa' Dalih in 2006, a non-Kelabit entrepreneur began to make regular trips up to Pa' Dalih in his four-wheel drive, providing a taxi service for local people to and from town (a 12-hour journey). He also bought wild meat in Pa' Dalih to sell in town. It also became possible for employees at the logging camp, about three hours drive away, to come and buy wild pig meat in Pa' Dalih. Nowadays many local Kelabit have four-wheel drive vehicles and take meat down to town. This has radically transformed the way in which wild meat is shared. Instead of sharing wild pig meat with their neighbours and kin, people now sell it. Whilst there was at first a lot of criticism of this, it has now been accepted, although feelings about it are part of a general sadness around the loss of cohesion within communities. It is also harder to get a wild pig nowadays, as there seem to be fewer wild pigs in the Highlands, presumably due to logging. Rousseau (2013) describes a similar system for sharing wild meat and fish among the Kayan of Borneo, which collapsed in the early 1970s because of the availability of a market for it among the Chinese.

The consumption of wild pig meat is, for Kelabit living in town, symbolic of their idyllic childhood in the highland area. Another symbol of this life is the consumption of fruit. Fruit trees are widespread in the highlands, many of them planted in upland rice fields in the past (upland rice fields are very rarely made nowadays; rice is grown in wet fields) to mature in the years after the rice harvest. Periods when there are pig migrations are accompanied by a fruit season (with the pigs migrating to eat the fruit). This is a time of plenty and of festivities. Kelabit living in town come up to visit and everyone gorges on wild pig meat and fruit. The pigs at that time are fat because they too have been eating plenty of fruit, acorns and other nuts. Their fatness is symbolic of plenty.

## MEN, MEAT AND WILD LIFE FORCE

The Kelabit do not have a concept of “primary” and “secondary” forest; for them, forest is “big” (*rayeh*) or “small” (*iit*). There is a gradient, for them, between “big” and “small” forest, not a sharp division; how “big” the forest is described as being depends on the degree to which humans have affected it by cutting down trees for upland fields in the past. Women enter “small” forest to gather vegetables and to fish from small

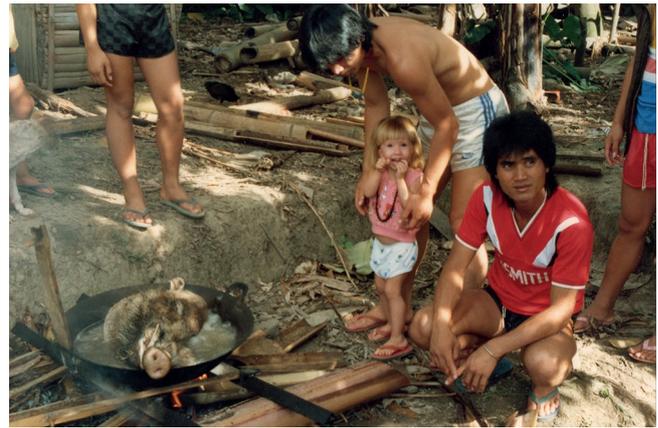


FIG. 6. — Judin, Elvis and other young men of Pa' Dalih scalding the head of a wild pig (*baka*) of the species *Sus barbatus* Müller, 1838 prior to scraping off the hairs. Elvis holds Molly Janowski between his knees. Photo credit: Sally Greenhill, 1987.

streams, but very few will enter “big” forest except, before the road was built, to travel between settlements, and then in the company of men.

There is, then, a strong association in the Kelabit Highlands between men and the forest; and also, I would suggest, between men and *lalud*. Women in Pa' Dalih used to joke with me about the sexual appeal of men who have just returned from the forest, who were said to smell of it. There was a clear feeling that this smell, and other traces of the forest, were related to men's potency and attraction. However, there is a sense in which women are not only attracted but also, at the same time, somewhat repelled by it. I would suggest that this reflects the fact that they are attracted by *lalud*, which is essential to life, most obviously in the form of wild pig meat, but are also afraid of it because of its overwhelming power. The forest, the place of *lalud*, is not their place; their place is the hearth and the rice field, and women do not hesitate to say that they would not enter the forest alone. For them, there is no embarrassment associated with being afraid to do this. No man, on the other hand, would say that he was afraid of entering the forest. To say such a thing would be to unman himself. Men living in the highlands in the 1980s and 1990s had to go into the forest regularly in order to be seen as proper men; and nowadays, when many men do not go into the forest to hunt, or only in their four wheel drives, the one man in Pa' Dalih who still goes regularly and has good forest skills is regarded with respect, and other men are somewhat embarrassed to admit that they are not like him. Kelabit men living in town return to the Highlands when they can, to go into the forest and to hunt, both because they enjoy it and arguably because they must do this to be seen as proper men.

Manliness is, then, associated with contact with the forest and with possession of *lalud* deriving from this. I would suggest that men bring *lalud* in their sexual activity; and, in the form of hunted meat – mainly pig meat – they supply it, in parallel, for the rice meal (the association of hunting and sex is widely reported cross-culturally [Fiddes 1991]). Women organize and order *lalud* to produce proper human



FIG. 7. — Balang Pelaba, Baye Ripug, Pun Nibu and another unidentified man participating in a competition to eat fat from a domestic pig (*berak*) at the name-changing *irau* held for Balan, the first child of Paran To'oh and Sinah Paran To'oh, in Pa' Dalih in April 1987. Photo credit: Kaz Janowski.

life, *ulun*. It is said that the man deposits the baby in the woman's womb; the not-yet-ordered, wild life force (*lalud*) of the baby is his, in other words. The woman's womb is able to order this to create a human being. This is continued after the baby is born, when it is fed rice. Janet Carsten has analysed the significance of rice in this context, for Langkawi (Carsten 1995). I have argued (e.g., Janowski 1995, 2007) not only that rice is significant in creating "proper human life", but that the wild foods that go with rice at the rice meal are part of this process and express the complementary of male and female in that process.

Hunting is the quintessential male activity. In the 1980s and 1990s, all men living in the highlands hunted during some period of their lives, although some were better at it than others and young men hunted much more frequently than older men. In Pa' Dalih in the late 1980s and early 1990s, young men in their teens, twenties and thirties in Pa' Dalih typically spent their nights hunting, their days sleeping, playing the guitar and singing hymns and their evenings playing football. They went hunting almost every night, while older men in their 1940s, 1950s and 1960s went once or twice a week. Even men in their 1970s and 1980s expressed great interest in hunting and participated in interminable and highly animated fireside conversations late at night over a rack of pig about the progress of different hunting expeditions.

Not only are men hunters; I observed that they were also the keenest consumers of what they brought back. Although both men and women enjoy meat, men particularly relish it, they eat more of it, and they eat the fat of the pig quite freely. Pig fat seems to be considered dangerous in large quantities for women and girls. I once witnessed a good friend of mine panicking because her daughter insisted on eating pig fat at an *irau* feast (see "Domesticated pigs and the *irau* feast"). She told the child that if she ate pig fat she would become ill. At the same *irau*, I saw that she was quite unperturbed that her son of a similar age was also eating pig fat. The logic of this attitude arguably derives from the fact that fat is, as mentioned above, considered

the "meatiest" part of the pig, and by implication is most laden with *lalud*. At *irau* feasts, men feed each other with pig fat. The fat seems to be particularly associated with older men, perhaps because they are the most mature of men; older men hold fat-eating competitions at *irau* (Fig. 7). Men would tease women at these events by trying to feed them fat, something that appears to underline the association between the sexual relationship and the transmission of *lalud* on the part of men. Although fat is distributed to everyone at *irau*, while men often eat it on the spot, women do not eat it "neat" but take it home and render it into lard with which to cook. This dissipates the fat and distributes it among all members of the hearth-group through the food in which the lard is cooked. In these quantities, fat is not problematic and is, indeed, beneficial, as *lalud* is essential to human life. As part of cooked food, fat distributes *lalud* among the members of the family. Food cooked with lard is considered very tasty; to cook in vegetable oil was seen as second best in taste terms.

The strong association between animal materials, maleness and potency is underlined in the stories told about the mythical heroes Agan, Balang Lipang and Tukad Rini, whose beauty and strength are expressed and displayed through the animal materials which they wear, in particular the skin and teeth of (spirit) tigers (*balang*). I recorded several of these stories and have published the full legend about Tukad Rini (Janowski 2014c). The *balang*, being a spirit (there are no tigers in Borneo), has high levels of *lalud*. The fact that Agan, Balang Lipang and Tukad Rini are said to wear *balang* teeth and *balang* skin cloaks and caps (with the face of the tiger on top of the head) is a strong statement of what it means to be as male as male can be: possession of the *lalud* of the spirit tiger. In the story of Agan, he is said to be in control of the spirit that rules the tiger skin cloak he wears, *Ada' Akang* (Rubenstein 1973: 868). Agan sits down to a rice meal which includes the meat of the *balang* (see below). Male grandparental names both in the past and now often include "Balang", expressing the boastful expression of possession of high levels of *lalud* (Janowski 2005).

The importance of being able to provide meat from wild animals to eat at rice meals, both pork and, ideally lots of other kinds of meat too – including that of the spirit tiger, the *balang* – is illustrated in the following extract from the *adi* (sung story) of Agan, a Kelabit mythical hero, collected in 1972 by Rubenstein (1973) from Niar Ayu of Bario. Agan's mother has just prepared a rice meal for him. She tells him to eat, initially stating modestly that there are very few side dishes, and that even they are not meat-based. Agan, however, soon discovers that this is far from being the case<sup>5</sup>:

"I have placed a bit of rice here [she says], but there is no garnish, just these two *abang* shoots, just these two stalks, and a few *beluan* mushrooms and *alang* mushrooms that grew on a log and which I picked this morning.

5. Rubenstein also provides the original Kelabit text. It should be noted that there has been some criticism of both her transcription and her translation (see Maxwell 1989; Rousseau 1989).

She breaks open a bamboo tube in which she has cooked fish,  
 And there are big pieces of *paliyan* and *dalo* fish inside.  
 Agan looks down at his wrapped rice  
 And sees along with it many different garnishes,  
 There are pig meat and smoked dried meat,  
 There are the flesh of the tiger  
 And the smoked flesh of the tame deer.” (Rubenstein 1973: 857-913)

The presence of the meat of the tiger in Agan’s rice meal is interesting, since the tiger does not exist in Borneo. Therefore this must be the meat of a spirit tiger (*ada’ balang*). As such, it carries a lot of *lalud*.

### DOMESTICATED PIGS AND THE *IRAU* FEAST

The Kelabit keep pigs, buffaloes and chickens for meat, and dogs for hunting. Originally, it seems that sambar deer *Rusa unicolor* (Kerr, 1792) (*payo*) brought in from the forest were also kept, for slaughter at *irau* feasts. Buffaloes, *Bubalus bubalis* (Linnaeus, 1758) (*kerubau*) gradually replaced deer after the peace conference held in Remudu in the southern part of the Highlands in 1911 (Douglas 1912; Talla 1979: 383); they were walked up from the coast and became status symbols, as they already were and are in many parts of the region. Nowadays, sambar deer are not normally kept, although the headmaster in Pa’ Dalih, Bayeh Ribuh, was keeping a few in 1986-1988 when we lived there; he explained this as a commemoration of the old practices. Buffaloes were kept mainly for slaughter at *irau*, and this is still a major function. Since permanent wet rice fields began to be made in the 1960s (Janowski 2004) they have also been allowed into the wet rice fields to trample and fertilise them after harvest.

The domesticated pigs (*berak* in Kelabit) kept by the Kelabit are similar to one of the two species of wild pig (*baka* in Kelabit) that live in or pass through the Kelabit Highlands, *Sus scrofa*. It is not clear whether they are the same subspecies as the wild *Sus scrofa* in the area, or whether they are feral *Sus scrofa* originating from previous domestication, and if so whether the domestication was carried out *in situ* from local wild *Sus scrofa*. They are kept in pens at present, as the Kelabit were told by Christian missionaries of the Borneo Evangelical Mission in the 1950s and 1960s that it was unhygienic to allow pigs to wander about and defecate freely. Until then they would wander around and eat rubbish and excrement, and interacted intimately with humans. This argues for the possibility that they may have interbred with wild pigs in the forest, as described for Mentawai by Persoon & De Jongh (2004) and as witnessed among the Kayan of Borneo by Jérôme Rousseau (pers. comm.), and strengthens the likelihood that for the Kelabit the wild and the domesticated or semi-domesticated pig are seen as equivalent or very close, although they are described using different terms.



FIG. 8. — A young couple, Balang Ngeluun and Sinah Balang Ngeluun, posing with their two children and older members of the community with the domestic pig *Sus scrofa* Linnaeus, 1758 (*berak*) about to be slaughtered for their name-changing *irau* in Bario, April 1987. Photo credit: Kaz Janowski.

However, for the Kelabit there are significant differences in their social, cultural and cosmological significance between wild pigs (*baka*) and domesticated pigs (*berak*). First of all, it seems that *berak* have always had a monetary (or at least an exchange) value, while wild pigs have not had a monetary value in Pa’ Dalih until very recently. This is despite the fact that the meat of domesticated pigs is not considered to be as tasty as that of wild pigs. Increasingly pigs are brought up from town for slaughter at *irau* feasts, and these “Chinese pigs” are considered even less tasty than the domesticated pigs from the Highlands or from across the border in Kalimantan (the border is very close to this part of the highlands). Efforts are made to fatten them up after they have been brought to the highlands, to make them fatter and therefore tastier. Domestic pigs are fed a diet similar to the human diet, based on rice. I will return to the significance of this later.

*Berak*, domestic pigs, have considerable social significance and are part of the complex interactions between people, helping to generate social structure through the way in which they are processed, distributed and eaten. They are never eaten at everyday meals, but only at *irau* feasts. Today, the only *irau* feasts that are held are *irau pekaa ngadan* – literally, “name-changing *irau*”. The slaughter and consumption of domestic pigs is at the centre of this event, which is essentially a huge rice meal (Fig. 8). Both rice and meat are provided by the hosts and when they are held in the Kelabit Highlands the whole of the social world is invited, who are all considered “kin” (nowadays some *irau* are held in town and there is a more restricted guest list). *Irau* in the Highlands aim, in fact, to host as many people as possible, as to have many guests is status-generating. *Irau pekaa ngadan* are hosted by one hearth group, headed by the grandparents of the child or children being named and including the parents of the child or children. Until about 20 years ago, when “Chinese pigs” began to be brought in, the hosts had to spend years fattening up pigs for *irau*.

The word *irau* is used by highland peoples, by the related lowland-dwelling Lun Bawang of Sarawak and Sabah, and in Malinau in East Kalimantan, to refer to a large festival or feast. In the lowlands, these are nowadays held as large public events organized through local government and associated with ethnic identity (e.g., Moeliono & Limberg 2004: 15). In the past their role appears to have been the establishment and recognition of leadership among interior groups.

In the Kelabit Highlands, *irau* are central to attempts to build status and leadership. In pre-Christian times, as today, they were held to initiate a child into social life and to establish formally the role of the child's parents and grandparents. Such an *irau* was described as *borak ngelua' anak* or *irau ngelua' anak*. Literally, these terms translate as "rice-beer drinking" and "irau to ngelua' a child". We will return shortly to the term *ngelua'*. We have descriptions of these events held during pre-Christian times from two Kelabit who wrote their undergraduate dissertations in the 1970s based on data they gathered from elderly relatives (Lian-Saging 1977: 138-144; Talla 1979: 191-205). Pigs were central to *borak ngelua' anak*, and played a role not only in initiating children to society in a general sense but also to assigning to them appropriate gender roles. While full-blown status-generating *irau* were not held for all children, all children would be initiated with the slaughter of at least one pig.

*Irau* were also held, until the 1950s when the Kelabit began to adopt Christianity, at secondary funerals for persons of significance in the community, when they were known as *irau até* (death *irau*) or *borak até* (rice-beer drinking at death). These were hosted by the heirs of the deceased, as part of a bid to underline his own status as well as that of the person being commemorated. A big feast consisting of a sequence of rice meals was held, lasting several days, and the guests participated in making a mark on the landscape. A megalith or set of megaliths could be erected; a cut might be made in a ridge; or a river might be diverted to create an oxbow lake for rice agriculture. This mark commemorated the dead person or couple. In the past, *irau* were also held after successful war expeditions aimed at collecting human heads, and indeed *irau até* were often held after such an expedition. *Irau* held after war expeditions are described as part of the stories of the culture heroes Balang Lipang as told by Ngemong Raja and of Agan as told by Niar Ayu to Carole Rubenstein (1973: 807-1067).

At *irau até* both pigs and buffaloes were slaughtered. While the slaughter of pigs was primarily of cosmological significance, bringing the child out of the spirit world into the human world, the slaughter of buffaloes generated status. Buffaloes continue to be slaughtered at many *irau pekaa ngadan* nowadays and their slaughter is still associated with wealth and status. Before buffaloes were available, before about 1900, domesticated or semi-domesticated deer were slaughtered instead of buffaloes. The more animals slaughtered, particularly buffaloes, the greater the status of the hosts, since more people could be fed. I have argued

elsewhere that for the Kelabit status derives from being able to provide for as many people as possible within a basic or expanded hearth-group, through the rice meal (e.g., Janowski 1995, 2003a).

## MAKING KIN: PIGS AND KELABIT COSMOLOGY

The slaughter of *berak*, domestic pigs, at *irau* in pre-Christian times not only had social significance; it also had cosmological significance. The initiation of a child, in pre-Christian times, appears to have enacted an effective transition from the spirit world into the human world. This was primarily through the slaughter of one or more pigs and the use of the body parts of the pig to communicate with the spirit world.

In Borneo, communication with the spirit world is often effected, within traditional cosmologies, through animals. Birds have a special role in communication, as omen creatures, often associated with ancestors, for many peoples including the Kelabit (Harrisson 1960; Jensen 1966; Metcalf 1976). However, omen birds are not hunted, domesticated or eaten. Like birds, pigs were, in traditional Kelabit cosmology, an important means of communicating with the spirit world, but in a very different fashion to birds. Rather than bringing messages *from* the spirit world when they were alive, their primary function seems to have been to carry messages *to* the spirit world once they were dead; through the examination of their livers, they also brought messages *from* the spirit world. Through their death, via their blood and their fat, they also allowed humans to effectively make transitions *out of* the spirit world. This was necessary to bring a child into the human world; it was also necessary in other situations where humans had had close contact with the spirit world or entered into it, such as at secondary funerals and after war expeditions into the wild cosmos.

When children were initiated in pre-Christian times, at *ngelua' anak*, pigs played a central role in the transition of children out of the spirit world and into the human social world. The blood of the domesticated pig (*berak*) that was slaughtered was smeared on the child or children and on his, her or their parents and grandparents. Just after slaughter, fat from the pig was draped around the neck of the father of the child being initiated, who then took the child for a "bloody shower" (Talla 1979: 209) below the dripping neck of the pig. Others present also smeared themselves with blood. The child then refrained from bathing for eight days, leaving the dried blood on for that time.

Their role in *ngelua' anak* indicates that, before the Kelabit became Christian, pigs had a role in structuring cosmological relations. The procedure called *ngelua'*, which involved smearing with blood from a slaughtered domestic pig, was an important part of the management of relations with the wild and the wild life force residing there, *lalud* – not only at *irau ngelua' anak* but in other contexts too. Talla (1979) describes *ngelua'* as "blood purification".

It was used when someone had had a bad dream (which was believed to carry messages from the spirit world) or where a whole longhouse had to be put under what Talla (1979: 291) describes as a “taboo”, presumably because of potentially dangerous contact with the spirit world. *Ngelua*’ appears to have been used to manage potentially dangerous contact between the wild, spirit world and the human world. Domestic pigs were also killed at secondary funerals, *irau até*, and their blood was smeared on the men who had deposited the dead person’s remains in the megalithic graveyard in the forest (*menatoh*) (Lian-Saging 1977: 147; Talla 1979: 250). When warriors returned from battle one or more domestic pigs were slaughtered and an *irau* held, and the blood of the pigs was smeared on the returning heroes. This appears to have effected a transition from the wild places where the heroes had been travelling back into the human social world. These practices are described in stories about culture heroes like Balang Lipang and Agan (Rubenstein 1973: 831, 909). Thus within pre-Christian Kelabit cosmology domestic pigs were believed able to mediate between humans and the spirit world. Through their own body parts – blood, and the examination of their livers – they were able to communicate messages to humans from the spirits. Among the Kayan, pigs are also believed able to mediate between the spirit world and the human world, because they sleep under the house and know the dreams of the humans sleeping above them – dreams that are usually the reason for a ritual being necessary to communicate with the spirit world (Jerôme Rousseau, pers. comm.).

When they were slaughtered in pre-Christian times, pigs were addressed directly by the person about to slaughter them. Domestic pigs were never killed except in a ritual context or without being spoken to, with an explanation of the killing and a request for help and protection. A pig to be slaughtered at a *borak ngelua’ anak* was addressed using what Talla describes as “prayers”, asking for its protection and that it foretell the future through its liver, which would be examined after it was slaughtered:

“Ooi, beloved one, you well-fed boar,  
Fed by cultured and refined ladies, ladies that have settled down,  
Fed with the best of rice, the most selected ears, the finest of rice.  
We feed you under the ladder, under the house,  
Yes, we have had very bad dream, this is why we want to sacrifice you, to slaughter you,  
Have you stored any bile in the bladder yet?  
Have you got a liver yet?  
Now we want to slaughter you, to cut off your head.”  
(Talla 1979: 208)

The pig (or rather, its spirit – *ada*) appears in this prayer and others like it as benevolent towards the humans who have raised it and fed it, and its blood and fat are seen both as potent and as protective. There appears to be no expecta-

tion that the pig will resent being slaughtered by humans, but rather an expectation that it will willingly communicate with the spirit world to pass messages and discover information useful to humans. Among the Kayan in Belaga District in Sarawak the spirits of slaughtered pigs are also believed capable of communicating with the spirit world. A pig was slaughtered at harvest, and before slaughtering was addressed and asked to go to the “top point of the staff of life from which we descended”, to ask for a good life for its human owners (Rubenstein 1985: 199).

The foundation of this good relationship between pigs and humans is to be found within pre-Christian cosmology. Puntumid, the Great Spirit of the forest, was regarded as giving wild pigs to humans to hunt – while he, in his turn, hunts human (spirits) (Janowski 2014b, 2016). Thus, killing and eating wild pigs was regarded as part of the correct cosmological order within pre-Christian cosmology.

I suggest that the special relationship between humans and domesticated pigs is grounded in their close relationship with humans, and particularly in the fact that domestic pigs, like humans, eat rice. Domesticated pigs live with humans, and eat the same rice as do humans. They, like children and grandchildren within a hearth-group, are fed rice. In the prayer quoted above, there is an emphasis on the fact that the pigs to be slaughtered have been fed rice and that they have lived under the house. Their close association with humans is very clear. Wild pigs were never killed for the ritual of *ngelua*’; the pigs had to be domesticated pigs. The fact that domestic pigs are fed rice is also referred to in stories about mythical heroes, such as that of Balang Lipang, Agan and Toked Rini (Rubenstein 1973: 807-1125; Janowski 2014c).

The term for kin in Kelabit is *lun royong*, which means “people together”, and refers to those who live together – and eat rice meals together. Co-consumption of rice creates kinship (Janowski 1995, 2007). Through the rice that they are fed, domesticated pigs are brought close to humans, to become in some respects like humans. I would argue that they are, in fact, made into kin.

Let us return here to Puntumid, the manifestation of the Great Spirit of the forest who relates to humans. Puntumid is kin to humans, as his brother is believed to be a human ancestor. I have suggested that pigs are made into kin to humans through being fed rice. Puntumid hunts humans; humans hunt pigs. Humans are at the same time Puntumid’s “pigs” and his kin; and pigs are both human food and human kin. Puntumid eats his kin; and so do humans.

The fact that domestic pigs have been made into kin may be why they are regarded as appropriate mediators in relations with the spirit world. They are a link with the spirit world that has been explicitly and overtly created by humans, who have brought into the human sphere the main wild animal that they hunt and eat. They have transformed their prey (wild pigs or *baka*) into kin (domestic pigs or *berak*) in order both to ensure that these are in correct cosmological order and to take control over these relations in order to be able to manage – and even manipulate – them.



FIG. 9. — Two young men distributing meat from a domestic pig *Sus scrofa* Linnaeus, 1758 (*berak*) at *irau* in Bario, 1987. Photo credit: Kaz Janowski.

### THE COSMOLOGICAL ROLE OF PIGS NOWADAYS

Pigs are still central to *irau* feasts today. I have never been at an *irau pekaa ngadan* (name-changing *irau*) where domestic pigs have not been slaughtered. The process of slaughtering and distribution of the meat is a major focus of the event. Pig fat in particular is a focus, with fat-eating competitions, exchange of fat between people and teasing of women by men in the context of offering fat. Descriptions of *irau* from the past could be descriptions of *irau* I have attended since the 1980s. In the tale of Balang Lipang as described by Ngemong Raja and recorded by Carole Rubenstein in 1973, an *irau* feast is held when the young hero returns to the longhouse from fighting:

“Yes, you dear, my dear,  
 You have been fed with rice to make you very big,  
 Fed to make you reach as high as the floor beneath the  
 verandah.  
 Now Lord Balang Lipang has come home from fighting.  
 So I want to smear him with the blood of your head,  
 my dear  
 If enemies are coming to attack the house,  
 Coming to our house at Long Midang  
 Then your liver will be thin as jackfruit leaves,  
 Your liver will be rotten and crumbling.  
 If no people want to take revenge on this house,  
 Then your liver will have one good big mouth,  
 Your liver will have lines straight and smooth  
 As the edge of the whetstone.  
 Your bile will be full and juicy,  
 As the young shoots of the jackfruit tree.’

When he has finished praying over the pig,  
 He cuts the throat and smears the blood on Lord Balang  
 Lipang.  
 He looks closely at the liver –  
 And the lines of the liver are smooth and straight

As the edge of the whetstone.  
 The bile is full and juicy  
 As the young shoots of the jackfruit tree.

The heart of Burung Siwan leaps with joy,  
 And he praises the good liver of the pig;  
 For no one is to take revenge on them.  
 They kill all the pigs, and blood is smeared on Pun Anan,  
 And blood is smeared on all the people of the longhouse.

The people of the longhouse  
 Singe the bristles of the pigs in the fire  
 And slough them off with their *parang* knives,  
 Taking off all the bristles down to the feet of the pigs,  
 They cut the pigs into pieces on the cutting mat  
 And put them into the big cauldron on the three-legged  
 stand.  
 Before long it is cooked –  
 They cut it into smaller pieces on the mat,  
 Make long sticks to skewer the pieces of meat on the sticks  
 And skewer all the pieces of meat on all the sticks.  
 All the people of the longhouse are called together for  
 the feast.

The old man Burung Siwan says to the people of the  
 longhouse:  
 ‘Distribute the rice’.  
 Before long the young girls have distributed all the rice.  
 The young men wearing *parang* sheaths  
 Distribute the sticks full of pieces of meat.

Each stick is very long,  
 Taking two young men, one at each end, to carry a single stick.  
 Each woman who is seen by her big stomach to be pregnant  
 Is given two sticks of meat.  
 When the food has been distributed  
 Outward to both ends of the longhouse,  
 They all begin to eat.  
 After everyone in the longhouse has eaten,  
 The leaders of the men distribute pieces of fat to each one.  
 For each share of fat he gives out,  
 The distributor has pushed back at him one piece he  
 must eat  
 They give out two chunks of fat to each person in turn,  
 Each chunk at least one handspan long.”  
 (Rubenstein 1973: 830, 831)

The description of the distribution of food could be a  
 description of that at any of the *irau* I have seen. At *irau*  
 I have attended in the Kelabit Highlands food is prepared  
 and distributed just as described in the tale of Balang Lipang:  
 pork (and sometimes buffalo meat) is cooked, skewered and  
 distributed by men, with the older men distributing the pig  
 fat and the young men distributing the meat (Fig. 9), while  
 rice is prepared and distributed by women.

What is missing at *irau* nowadays is the prayer recited to the  
 pigs and the examination of the liver carried out by Burung

Siwan, Balang Lipang's father. In this prayer, the importance of the fact that the pigs have been fed rice is touched upon, as is the practice of *ngelhua'*, smearing of blood, the importance of the pig's liver for foretelling the future, and the role of pig fat. Among the Kelabit, as among the related Lundayeh but the cosmological role of the pig expressed in these prayers has gone. However, the very fact that pigs are regarded as essential animals to slaughter at present-day naming *irau* appears to indicate that at some level that role may remain, under the surface.

## CONCLUSION

Among the indigenous peoples of Borneo, the pig is not only a key source of food but it is socially and spiritually a key being. I have explored this among the Kelabit. Wild pigs exemplify the bringing together of wild power or life force – *lalud* – with the organising power of rice; and, as such, they also exemplify the generation of a way of life/life force that is peculiarly human, expressed as the possession of what is called *ulun*, which I gloss as “human life”. Domesticated pigs, made into kin through the feeding of rice, were, in pre-Christian belief, a key means of communicating with the spirit world.

Pigs continue to occupy a very special place in Kelabit hearts and minds, their presence in the forest a constant topic of interest and discussion, their well-being as domestic animals a central concern. A name-changing *irau* feast cannot take place without the meat of at least one pig, and fattening up pigs for slaughter remains a central part of the preparations for name-changing *irau*. Hunting remains an ideal, if not a reality, for urban young men. For the Kelabit and closely related people like the Lundayeh, who have taken up evangelical and charismatic Christianity, pigs no longer provide blood to be smeared on those undergoing transition from the spirit world or pig livers to foretell the future. However among other indigenous peoples such as the Bidayuh of Sarawak they do continue to play this role (Fig. 10).

The relationship with the Great Spirit of the forest, the Ada' Rayeh – known as Puntumid in the form to which he appears to humans – who gave pigs to humans before they became Christian, is key in understanding the role of the pig. Puntumid is kin to us and gives us pigs, but also preys on us; we are kin to pigs, whom we have made into kin, and prey on them. Puntumid, who used to be befriend young men, continues, I was told *sotto voce* but with a certain amount of pride by some young men, to approach them with the offer of friendship. They, of course, decline, since they are now Christians and it is Jesus, not Puntumid, to whom they turn for *lalud*. However, some young Kelabit men living in town have in recent years expressed interest in meeting Puntumid and re-establishing relations. The forest has a strong pull. Perhaps the old cosmology, and with it the cosmological role of the pig, may only be asleep, rather than dead.



FIG. 10. — Participant who has been smeared with blood in ritual to establish new headhouse in Bidayuh village, Kampong Gumbang, 29 June 2017. Photo credit: Kaz Janowski.

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