




2008

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Amster, Matthew. "Where Spirit and Bulldozer Roam: Environment and Anxiety in Highland Borneo." *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 2:1 (74-92). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v2i1.74>

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Keywords

Kelabit, Borneo Interior, Kelabit Highlands, Nawar Keniu, Religion, Environment

Disciplines

Anthropology | Politics and Social Change | Sociology

Where Spirit and Bulldozer Roam: Environment and Anxiety in Highland Borneo*

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Abstract

This paper explores changing perceptions of the natural environment among the Kelabit, an indigenous people of the Borneo interior. It considers both traditional and post-Christian conversion understandings about forest spaces. The former animistic ritual practices of the Kelabit centered on a spiritual dialogue with the natural world and this dialogue was often marked by active efforts to avoid or mitigate danger through ritual practice. One key example presented here is the former ceremony of 'calling the eagle' (*nawar keni*), a ritual employed in times of crisis that exemplifies the *dialogical* and entwined relationship Kelabit had to the natural world. Such former animistic beliefs are contrasted with contemporary Christian practices, including a local mountain retreat on Mount Murud and present-day political and economic anxieties over logging in the Kelabit Highlands, as a means to consider relationships between religion and attitudes toward the environment among the Kelabit.

Introduction

Prior to converting to Christianity around the time of World War II, the Kelabit, an indigenous people in interior Borneo, adhered to a set of

* I am deeply indebted to many Kelabit for sharing generously of their knowledge. These include: Tama and Sina Galang, Bekan Ayu@Sina Napong, Pian Ayu@Sina Bulan, Edto Mengadih@Galih Balang, Ribuh Balang, Bala Paleba, Stanley Mikat Balang, Tama and Sina Raban Bala@Lucy Bulan and David Labang, Robert Lian@ Balangalibun and others too numerous to name. Special thanks are due to Poline Bala who worked closely with me in the Kelabit Highlands during May 1995, collaboratively recording and translating examples of ritual speech, including the one presented in this paper. I alone, however, take responsibility for any errors or misrepresentations in this material.

beliefs that clearly deserve to be labeled as 'animistic' in that they were concerned with maintaining good relationships with non-human persons and entities that were seen as inhabiting their social and natural world (Harvey 2006). A fundamental concern of this paper is to consider how such an orientation may or may not be thought of as shaping indigenous environmental ethics, both in terms of traditional and post-conversion beliefs, to the extent that it is even appropriate to apply such terms based on the ethnographic and ethnohistorical evidence presented here.

The Kelabit were traditionally rice farmers who lived in large multi-family longhouses in the interior of Borneo, with the largest concentration in a region known as the Kelabit Highlands along the Malaysian-Indonesian frontier. Traditionally Kelabit longhouse communities had a single headman of hereditary high status and much agricultural work was organized collectively. The major ritual complexes prior to conversion centered on large-scale longhouse ceremonies held in conjunction with mortuary rites as well as protective initiatory rites for children, both of which were linked to headhunting and involved copious drinking of rice beer in multi-day feasts. In converting to Christianity in the post-World War Two years, the Kelabit rapidly abandoned these key rituals, and eventually the drinking of rice beer as well. To a certain degree the former longhouse feasts have been replaced by newly invented 'traditions', such as contemporary name-changing ceremonies (Amster 1999), as well as Christian holidays such as Easter and Christmas, which are now major events. The Kelabit have also been directly involved in powerful Christian revival movements focused on the advent of the Holy Spirit, notably the Bario Revival of 1973 that took place in the Kelabit Highlands. More recently, they have been involved in a prayer mountain movement that began in the 1980s among neighboring Lun Bawang people, as discussed further below.

The majority of the Kelabit population, roughly three-quarters, now resides in town areas, with the largest concentration in Miri along the coast, where the economy is based on an offshore oil industry. In rural communities, the role of the headman and the focal importance of the longhouse have gradually diminished as Kelabit increasingly opt for living in individual single-family houses and many people have permanently outmigrated to town areas.

Kelabit today are widely known in Sarawak for their successes in education and economic advancement as well as a strong Christian religious affiliation, as members of the SIB church (*Sidang Injil Borneo*, formerly the BEM or Borneo Evangelical Mission). SIB is one of the fastest growing churches in Malaysia, and there are local SIB congregations in every

rural Kelabit community as well as throughout urban areas of Sarawak.¹ The SIB church is in many respects a focal point of both rural and urban Kelabit life today, with church services taking place literally every day in the highlands and involvement in church attendance serving as a key way to maintain Kelabit ethnic identity as well as broader indigenous pan-ethnic links in town.

The paper begins by presenting an overview of the traditional belief system of the Kelabit. This animistic epistemology promoted a close integration of the human and non-human spheres and did so in a manner that, I argue, was also highly anxiety ridden. Prior to conversion virtually all dimensions of the physical and social world were potential sources of fear and spiritual concern, and particularly so with regards to signs communicated by birds, animals, and forest-dwelling spirits.² In exploring the *dialogical* relationship between Kelabit and the forces that they engaged with in this merged physical/spiritual landscape, I focus on an example of ritual speech—the calling of the eagle (*narar keni*)—as a means to illustrate the nature of this dialogue.

In contrast to the former animistic orientation detailed below, I then consider some of the ways that contemporary Christian practice, and modernity generally, has reshaped the Kelabit relationship to the natural world, including a discussion of the ongoing environmental challenges faced by the Kelabit people today. In post-Christian conversion Kelabit society, relationships to natural spaces have begun to take on more ambiguous and diverse—though no less anxiety ridden—meanings. In some cases, Christian worship, such as the religious retreat to nearby Mount Murud, as discussed here, can tentatively be linked to a *resacralization* of aspects of nature in a Christian idiom. In other instances, one can point to evidence that Kelabit (to the extent one can generalize given

1. The BEM was originally founded by Australian missionaries and today has both evangelical and charismatic orientations as well as some Pentecostal influences. The individuals who founded the BEM did not link it to a particular Christian denomination though they personally had Protestant backgrounds (see Southwell 1999). There is considerable variation today among SIB congregations and, at times, even overt disagreement over what is considered the appropriate level of charismatic activity (such as speaking in tongues).

2. It is important to alert readers that my own fieldwork, begun in the mid-1990s and continuing up to the present, was conducted among Kelabit who themselves have a universally strong Christian orientation. This fact certainly shapes the ways they would discuss pre-conversion traditional beliefs, though I have attempted, to the extent possible, to be aware of and correct for this bias when presenting ethnohistorical material in this paper.

their heterogeneous lifestyles and beliefs) have not adopted many features of Western-style environmental ethic or practice, this despite exposure to pro-environmental discourses and anti-logging protests among neighboring forest-dwelling Penan—with whom Kelabit have much contact, connection, and sympathy.

By looking at both traditional beliefs and environmental engagements in the post-Christian conversion era, my aim is to explore how religious beliefs and practices have positioned, and continue to reposition, the Kelabit vis-à-vis the natural world. In so doing, I argue that the local landscape has gone from being conceived of as a highly problematic—at times a terrifying—source of anxiety in spiritual terms to being an equally terrifying source of political and economic anxiety and stress in the present day.

The Kelabit Animistic Perception and the Natural World

The Kelabit pre-conversion worldview was one of constant dialogue with nature, spirits, and the environment. From the animistic perspective of the Kelabit, it is appropriate to define the natural world quite broadly as including both living things, a range of named spiritual entities, and physical attributes of local space including the earth, wind, sky, and meteorological phenomenon. As I demonstrate below, birds were particularly central to many former Kelabit ritual practices and beliefs and virtually all elements in the social and natural environment—including what we think of in Western societies as non-living things—were seen as having communicative potential. Thus, spirits (*ada'*) were not only seen as inhabiting the forests and rice fields, the earth, and the varied layers of the sky, but also capable of entering one's dream states. Hence it would be misleading in such an epistemological framework to attempt to separate the physical and spiritual realms as distinct from one another, since the 'natural' and 'supernatural' were certainly merged (see Hornborg 2006).

As Christian converts, much of the former animistic orientation has been forgotten, except among the very eldest Kelabit, and virtually none of the pre-conversion ritual complex is practiced today. Indeed, for the most part, today, the former beliefs are highly stigmatized and often cited as examples of Satan's influence on the Kelabit prior to conversion—with discourses about headhunting and infanticide in particular being used as examples of how they have since emerged from the time of darkness when they were under Satan's spell or followed *adet Satan* (the way or 'custom' of Satan). That said, bits of folklore about the past

and former beliefs persist even among the younger generation, and those that do remain are quite revealing.³

For instance, a common former belief and one still widely known among Kelabit as well as neighboring groups, is the belief that if one laughed at an animal it could lead to calamity and disorder (*masab*). The most common example of this, told in many different versions in various locales, is a story of a longhouse feast during which a frog falls into a large jar of rice beer and hops about drunk, causing people to laugh hysterically. As the story is typically told, this leads to the sky turning dark, hail falling, and the entire longhouse and its inhabitants turning into stone as they flee in haste. The message of this parable is obvious: one must not mock animals and such transgressions toward other living entities can have dangerous consequences.

In considering the vast repertoire of pre-conversion spiritual beliefs and practices of the Kelabit, one is struck, first and foremost, by how the natural and spiritual realms were closely intertwined and how indigenous beliefs posited potential hazards in many aspects of daily life. As people navigated the social and natural world, rife as it was with messages of spiritual consequence, any number of spontaneous events—often coming from nature but also emerging from people's dreams or the trance states of shamans—would necessitate ritual response and often immediately. The world was conceptualized as having many layers, with animals, and especially birds, seen as able to communicate signs that portend both hazards and positive messages across these layered dimensions of the spiritual world. Kelabit also had many food taboos and beliefs relating to dream interpretation and to the sighting or hearing of particular animals. Among those most often mentioned today, and also considered most onerous and thereby cited in justifying the wisdom of conversion, was the belief that if a pregnant woman sighted a snake during her pregnancy she would have to bury the newborn infant alive, as was also the case with the birth of twins. The death of a woman in childbirth was also considered a particularly onerous event and one that required purification rites for an entire longhouse (Amster 2003b).

3. It is important to stress that any effort to retain aspects of traditional cultural practices are guided first and foremost by a contemporary Christian orientation, and there is no evidence of Kelabit actively reviving aspects of their traditional culture, except for the more benign elements of expressive arts such as song and dance. As I have documented elsewhere, Kelabit have, however, selectively maintained and reinvented elements of traditional ritual practice and reconstituted them as Christian rites, the most notable being recast in the contemporary name-changing ceremonies, which have their roots in rituals that existed prior to conversion (Amster 1998, 1999).

Discussions with elders sometimes revealed former beliefs and practices that may have helped avoid over-exploiting the local environment. For instance, if one was too successful in hunting or fishing this was considered a potentially dangerous sign that a spirit (*ada'*) was 'feeding' the person and could lead to their early death. As such, I was told people tended to restrict their hunting and avoid having too much success, and perhaps this helped limit the overexploitation of local ecosystems, though given that this was an historical claim, there is no empirical way to demonstrate whether this in fact had such an effect and, if so, whether this was an intended goal. Indeed, as Dwyer points out, 'Past or present localized practices may have outcomes which are analogous to those desired by conservationists. But analogous outcomes need not imply a common ethical basis' (1994: 92).

The Kelabit also had many food taboos and restrictions, some of which may have created limitations or at least awareness about species-specific care and concerns and hazards. For example, the meat of a clouded leopard (*kuir*) could be eaten, but it was considered essential to cover its head when brought into a house; this in order to protect people, especially children, who otherwise might be endangered by this animal's spirit who, as one elder commented, 'wants to eat the spirit of people'. Also the meat could not be eaten in an ordinary manner, but had to be placed on a skewer and brought up from under one's legs. Similarly, one could not step over clouded leopard meat or that of the honey bear (*beruang*); otherwise it was believed one's knees would become swollen.

Kelabit attributed specific dangers to people entering certain ecosystems such as springs and salt licks where animals go to drink (*rupan*). To ignore such taboos was believed to cause illness that would require the intervention of a shaman (*dayung*). Kelabit also conceived of certain areas of land as spiritually dangerous, including 'bad land' (*tana da'at*), where people who died unnatural or untimely deaths would be placed (Amster 2003b). Other beliefs concerned locations to be avoided, such as the homes of dragon spirits along the bends of rivers and certain kinds of anthills. Dreams, as well, were viewed as a potential source of powerful signs; in most cases positive dreams were worrisome, whereas bad dreams were generally considered good (with the exception of dreams about drowning, which were taken as bad). Thus, if one dreamt of a bountiful harvest or success in hunting, this was a bad omen and a sign of imminent danger. To dream of someone dying, on the other hand, was a positive sign and affirmation of that person. All of these beliefs, of which this is only a brief and eclectic sample, enforced a kind of spiritual humility and respect in one's relationship to the natural world as well as people's social relationships with one another.

Bird omens were undoubtedly one of the central concerns in the former ritual life and something that had a daily impact on people's lives. This was also true of many beliefs linked to sounds of forest animals, whose calls were seen as carrying a range of specific messages from spirits. Among the numerous bird omens, the most commonly cited were those linked to the movement of the *ngae'* (spider hunter). In the past, anytime the *ngae'* crossed a path in front of people traveling, the direction of its movement was viewed as an important sign. Movement from right to left across a path was considered a dangerous sign and would cause people immediately to turn back from whatever task was at hand and return home. If a *ngae'*, however, crossed from the left to right along a path, it was also a potentially bad sign, but in this case its movement from the left was considered the 'correct' direction so long as it could be coaxed with the help of ritual to return back in that direction. When such a sighting occurred, people would pause their journey and perform a ritual, described (though with some variation) as involving making a fire and 'showing the *ngae'* the smoke' as one person explained, and calling for it to return before proceeding on the journey. Such bird omens, and many other related taboos, would often force people to stop doing a particular task, whether it was working in the farm, setting out on a journey, going hunting, or any number of other activities. In certain extreme cases, people might interpret an omen to mean that one must abandon a farm or move an entire longhouse.

Calling the Eagle (nawar keniui)

Whereas the *ngae'* and other lower-flying birds communicated potential danger in a rather immediate way on the ground, the *keniu* or eagle was considered especially powerful and intentionally called by ritual specialists to gain valuable information. The calling of the eagle was generally reserved for auspicious occasions, such as when holding a large ritual event, including mortuary rites or initiation ceremonies, in response to illness and epidemics, or when considering moving a longhouse to a new location.⁴ The *keniu* was seen as imbued with substantial power (*lalud*), or at least an intermediary of powerful spirits or deities. In all of the callings, whether to the eagle or other bird or spiritual entities, ritual

4. Metcalf (1989) describes similar practices among the Berawan, for whom the 'weightiest of all forms of divination is the seeking of signs from the eagle' (p. 184). Metcalf suggests that the main difference between the eagle and other omen birds has to do with the fact that the eagle is called upon to 'give council' whereas other birds are limited to providing people with good or bad signs, or as he puts it 'promise of success or warning of danger' (1989: 185).

specialists would always first perform a rite involving the offering of gifts. For the eagle, this typically involved offering a number of pieces of fat held up in the air on a stick festively carved for the occasion.

Among the handful of elders who could recite eagle callings, each offered different pieces of information, and their narratives, while stylistically similar, varied in content. These recitations often had esoteric words and specialized vocabulary that were difficult to translate, and even the person reciting them did not always know the meanings of many words.⁵ Such limitations noted, I offer the following example of a relatively concise calling to the eagle, one that would have been performed for a young child who had fallen ill:⁶

Oh my powerful friend, the tiger eagle, you of light bones,
where are you now?
Oh, listen, lift up your head, hear my request, my plea to you.
It is just this: Piringano's family is in bad health, their child ill.
Maybe she is ill because her spirit has been scattered by the rain which
falls when it is sunny, the rain which falls when there is a rainbow.

Her soul has departed therefore she has fallen ill. She is with fever and
shakes, and so we call upon you.

Even if your little eaglet's mouths are groping in hunger,
even if you are turning your eggs to hatch them,
come and fulfill our request, come and respond to our plea,
come and respond to our calling, come and respond to our groans.

Here is a bit of wild durian, a bit of pig fat, a pig we bought from the
headwaters of the Umor River, from the headwater of the Dabpur River.
We bought it in exchange for a coffin with the head of a deer
with large branching antlers as well as a water-buffalo
with horns as big as two hand spans.

This fat is as thick as a hand span, that's why we are offering it to you.
And ask you to bring her spirit back.

Even if they've kept the spirit in a case, you go and open it and take it.
Wherever your wings take you, whether it's to the seventh sky, the eight
sky, the ninth sky, you shall go there to take her back.
Come and bring her here.

5. In collecting the ethnohistorical material described here, it is noteworthy that none of the elders who could recite callings still believed in their efficacy, nor did any admit to having performed them in actual ritual contexts. One person even referred to a published volume on Kelabit oral tradition as a source of his knowledge on a particular eagle calling (Rubenstein 1973: 799-804). Finally, there was a great deal of variation in the callings as well as in the ways similar rituals were described by different informants, suggesting stylistic, regional, and historical variety.

6. This calling was recited by Ribuh Balang in Bario in mid-May 1995 and translated collaboratively with Poline Bala.

Then the family will be happy, will be pleased with you that you came.
Come, come and let us see you soar upwards.

Even though there is an eagle that comes near to catch rats, even though
there is an eagle that comes near to catch grasshoppers,
we are not calling for him.

Even though you may be as small as a tick, as small as a fly, you, the eagle
which soars upward reaching under the white sky, under the black sky,
under the blue sky, you are the one whom we call upon.

This calling illustrates how such recitations were framed as a negotiation, with the eagle acting as a kind of intermediary asked to act on the behalf of the ritual specialist. Thus the phrase, 'Even if *they've* kept the spirit in a case, you go and open it and take it', seems to imply that there is some other entity, whether a spirit or deity, who is holding the soul of the person who has fallen ill, and the eagle is called upon to help release it. As was also conventional in such narratives, pains were made to stress that this was not an ordinary eagle, such as one who 'comes near to catch rats', illustrating the respectful manner and tone of the calling. Finally, we see in this calling speculation about what may have caused the illness and the disharmonious condition that brought it about. The ritual specialist, thus, wonders if 'she is ill because her spirit has been scattered by the rain which falls when it is sunny', illustrating how contradictions in nature, such as sun and rain together, can cause spiritual danger. In this ritually charged engagement, it is of course critical to treat the bird with care and respect, offering gifts to coax it to show the hoped-for signs. In the event the *keniu* does arrive but soars nearby in a way that was not desirable, I was told one is not supposed to look straight at it but rather only from the corner of one's eyes. In contrast, if it soared high as desired, it was essential to look at it directly.

A number of elders described how in seeking a sign from *keniu*, it was common to set up a gate or series of gates (*awang*) on a hillside through which they would request the *keniu* to pass (at least visually) as a means to provide an answer to their specific question. There was considerable variation with the way this ritual was described; one person described setting up two poles like a door or portal through which the eagle must be sighted. Another described how in divining guidance about an epidemic, two sets of gates (*awang*) would be set up using four bamboo poles, with the gate on the left called *awang ate* (death gate), the one on the right the *awang ulun* (life gate). If the eagle was sighted through the left gate, they believed an epidemic would affect them, whereas if the eagle appeared within the right one, they would be spared misfortune.⁷

7. Most of the callings and blessings I gathered were recording with the assistance of a video camera. It is interesting to note that after performing eagle callings

The purpose of describing these practices, and the eagle calling in particular, is to highlight the dialogical and agential nature of the relationship that Kelabit had to their surroundings. The eagle callings serve as a poignant example of Kelabit attempts to communicate with spiritual forces around them and seek guidance at times of anxiety or major ritual undertaking. This example supports recent reappraisals of the term 'Animism' that show how animistic worldviews exhibit a form of mutual engagement and 'constant dialogue' with the natural world (Bird-David 2006: 35). For instance, Ingold argues that among people with an 'animic perception of the world' (2006: 12) that 'life is not an attribute of all things at all', and hence 'does not emanate from a world that already exists, populated by objects-as-such, but is rather immanent in the very process of that world's continual generation or coming-into-being' (2006: 10). In such societies, then, relationships with the natural environment are ones of constant engagement and an unfolding process of negotiation, much like a conversation. 'What we have been accustomed to calling "the environment" might, then, be better envisaged as a domain of entanglement. It is within such a tangle of interlaced trails, continually raveling here and unraveling there, that beings grow or "issue forth" along the lines of their relationships' (2006: 14).

For the Kelabit prior to Christian conversion, as these examples show, the relationship between people and their environment was clearly one of such entanglement and constant engagement. Within this epistemological orientation, anxieties about interpreting signs and behaving properly in response to them were a constant source of concern and never dormant. In this social universe—rife with omens, taboos, and proscribed modes of acting and reacting to the signs present in everything from the movement of birds and animals, the winds and weather, and dreams—danger was an endemic theme. Furthermore, most hazards or sources of misfortune had a ritual means by which people could attempt to communicate, plead, or coax these powerful forces that reigned over life and death. While in some instances certain practices might be hypothetically linked to what look to be examples of environmental stewardship, I believe it would be an oversimplification of the broader epistemological framework to reduce these beliefs to serving the function of environmental management.⁸ Rather, as these practices suggest,

none of the elders interviewed thought to see if an eagle actually came, and my interviewees found it humorous when I turned my camera to the sky, suggesting we might check.

8. For a number of case studies from Borneo that directly consider the complex and historically contingent relationship between ritual practices and environmental

the very notion of the 'environment' as a distinct conceptual category is problematic when viewed through the lens of such an animistic epistemology.

Christianity and Religious Retreat on Mount Murud

In the post-Christian conversion era, such entangled spiritual beliefs relating to the forest and the communicative potential of birds, animals, dreams, weather, and land have become muted. Yet, despite their commitment to Christianity, rural-based Kelabit still often cite fear of spirits lurking in the forests, though pointing to the superior power and efficacy of Christian belief, and Jesus in particular, in keeping these potentially troublesome forces at bay. In discussing pre-conversion beliefs, many Kelabit elders described having had no religion prior to conversion, having accepted the missionary perspective and preferring to refer to their former beliefs as 'superstitious'. Nonetheless, on many occasions people described troubling incidents involving angry spirits. For instance, after a hunting accident that took the life of a young boy in the Kelabit Highlands people became fearful of his spirit roaming in the forest and would not enter the region for many weeks. When a fire consumed a longhouse for the second time, it was widely commented that the cause of the fires might be that it had been build on former 'bad land' (*tana da'at*), a place of dangerous spirits that used to be off limits. Finally, many elders openly admitted to believing in a mountain spirit (*Pun Tumid*) and other dangerous forces lurking in nature, yet expressed the overwhelming belief that Christianity essentially trumped these primordial nuisances. It is safe to generalize, then, that the former system of belief, to the extent that it is still part of people's awareness, is still viewed as highly onerous and that life as Christians is viewed as a great improvement.

In light of this, it is useful to consider how, if at all, conversion to Christianity has transformed relationships to the natural environment. In so doing, I turn to a discussion of the emergence of pilgrimage retreats on the slopes of Mount Murud, the highest peak in Sarawak, that began in the mid-1980s and have evolved into regular, usually yearly, retreats.

Mount Murud is quite remote and can only be reached by foot (or helicopter), the journey typically involving more than a full day's walk from the Kelabit Highlands. After two decades of worship on the mountain, there is now a large church on the northern slope, not too far from the

stewardship, see Wadley (2005) and particularly the chapters by Tagliacozzo, Sellato, Eghenter, and Appell.

peak and surrounding the church are a large number of houses used by congregants, mainly Kelabit and Lun Bawang from surrounding regions but also increasingly other people from throughout Sarawak and Malaysia, as well as from abroad.

During these prayer retreats, some well-known spiritual battles have taken place, including efforts by church members to eradicate primordial spirits from the mountain and to reclaim this natural space for unhindered Christian worship. In particular, one of these battles involved sightings of the spirit of a jungle princess and her female relatives, who, some believed, were unhappy with Christian worship. A group of elder rural Lun Bawang women parishioners, who claimed to have received their instructions directly from God, held a ceremony in which they sought to ritually evict the princess and her relatives from the mountain. One possible interpretation of these events is that in challenging non-Christian spirits in this location, people were asserting a new Christian-based spiritual regime in the midst of a remote forest area that had been viewed as spiritually dangerous and off limits in the pre-conversion era (Amster 2003a). In this sense, the battles over spiritual forces that have taken place on Mount Murud may be viewed, in part, as an effort to recast the relationship between people and the natural environment in more positive and agentive terms.

Not all churchgoers who worship on the mountain, I should point out, agreed with the claims or even the aims of those who have done battle with primordial spirits on the mountain (implying that they consider such dramas the work of the devil). However, there is little question that these retreats, especially for urban-based congregants, offer powerful experiences that emerge in part from their being located in 'wild' nature. Upon returning from a retreat on Mount Murud, one urban-based Kelabit pastor described his experience of feeling deeply refreshed by being in such a remote place where one is exposed raw nature—including cold, wind, and even ice (a relative rarity so near the equator)—all of which allowed him to feel closer to the power of God.

Such an attitude toward nature and spirituality—as a source of positive inspiration rather than anxiety—suggests a new kind of environmental ethic emerging and the possibility that a kind of *resacralization* of the forest is occurring on Mount Murud in the context of Christian worship. This provides an interesting contrast to a study of another indigenous Borneo society, the Rungus Dusun, for whom it has been argued that Christian conversion has led directly to a process of *desacralization* of land (Appell 1997, 2005). Appell argues that conversion to Christianity led to the loss of the ritual sanctions necessary to protect Rungus sacred groves, though I suspect that the loss of such sacred

forests is actually more multifaceted than this and cannot be so monolithically tied to religious change. As other studies from Borneo societies have shown, indigenous environmental stewardship and resource management is often a complex issue to unravel and one needs to take into account a range of historical, cultural, political, and economic factors for each specific case.⁹

What is also interesting about this church site is how it spontaneously manifested in a wilderness area threatened by logging and sought to be preserved by environmentalists. The church on Mount Murud thus sits in the middle of a region of forest that activists had been working to protect and which, in 2005, was ultimately protected by the Sarawak government and named *Pulong Tau* National Park (*pulong tau* means 'our forests' in both Kelabit and Lun Bawang). Despite the use of local native terms for the name, indigenous involvement in creating this park has been fairly minimal. Indeed, most Kelabit have been largely unaware of the efforts by urban elites lobbying to create this protected space, and those who were informed, I was told by politicians, mainly worried that it would impinge on their right to hunt in nearby forests. Members of the SIB church who wanted to be able to continue their worship on the mountain also raised concerns about their ability to continue their retreats and subsequently received assurance from the government that they would be permitted to continue to use the land upon which they had established the church. On the whole, efforts surrounding this protected area have had little grassroots involvement and both the creation of protected forests and the arrival of logging—about which rural and urban Kelabit are concerned—have occurred with minimal local consultation. Regarding the park, my impression has been that what has mattered most to many local people is that are able to maintain their church.¹⁰

In a sense, the former relationship that Kelabit had with the perceived powers in the world at large, negotiated via birds, omens, dreams, and shamanistic intervention, gave them rather more direct channels of communication in contrast to the far more opaque and mysterious ways that decisions now get made by government officials regarding their homelands and native forests. Many Kelabit, particularly those who are educated and live in urban areas, are well aware of the local history of

9. See Wadley (2005). For more general work on this topic, see Grim (2001) and Greenough and Tsing (2003).

10. As logging operations have pushed closer to the mountain peak and park boundaries, it has also become easier for worshippers to attend mountain retreats, as they can use logging roads and shorten the time needed to walk to the peak.

internationally publicized efforts to challenge government-sanctioned timber operations in the state (as well as attempts to resist incursion on native lands by palm oil plantations). For most Kelabit, direct involvement in protests is generally considered too risky. Indeed, one well-known Kelabit, Mutang Urud, who was active in international environmental circuits and involved in helping the Penan campaign, was arrested and detained under the Malaysian Internal Security Act. Once he was released from prison, he left the country and moved to Canada where he remains today. Privately, many Kelabit express their personal sympathies to the pro-conservationist views of these environmental campaigns, though few would advocate for such tactics in the Kelabit Highlands. Urban Kelabit, especially, are highly cognizant of various anti-logging environmental discourse as well as the counter discourses that proliferate in Malaysian media, and I would characterize these urban Kelabit as politically savvy and aware of what most see as the political limitations of protest movements. That said, there remains widespread concern for preserving forests and historical sites in their native homelands.

In contrast, Kelabit in rural areas typically have had less exposure to both Western environmental discourses and the common pro-development (anti-environmentalist) discourse that proliferates in Malaysian media. In dealing with such issues of development, the overwhelming tendency is to turn to the urban Kelabit leadership for guidance. Among rural Kelabit, I observed a remarkably pragmatic attitude toward the forest, as a source of food and other resources, and never heard abstract conversations about 'nature' or 'the environment' as one might hear in town.¹¹ Rather, on a day to day basis, the forest is more commonly treated as a resource and a place where one must labor to carve out a cultivated space—an often vigorous force that must be pushed back and controlled in order to make room for paths, farms, pastures, and homes. I recall going fishing with Kelabit and marveling at the skillful way they wielded their machetes in cutting a path to the river, only to find on my next visit that the path had been re-subsumed by the forest. It is no wonder that one would not think twice about cutting back anything that grows in such a lush ecosystem. It was also common for people to clear

11. Similarly, among some Penan, it has been noted that they tend to use certain kinds of environmentally oriented discourse 'tailored to its audience', particularly conservation-oriented foreigners (Bending 2006: 48). 'This is the type of Penan speech that has tended to be quoted in environmentalist work. It is not that it should be taken to be insincere or in some way made up, but it cannot be taken as representative of Penan discourse in general' (2006: 48).

forest simply as a means to lay claim to land, an especially destructive practice given the valuable resources lost in the process, but a reasonable response given local perceptions of land tenure where rights to land are in part understood to be acquired by modifying and investing labor in it.

These comments noted, Kelabit have numerous longstanding and, likely, environmentally sound practices involving the stewardship of wild and cultivated forest products that surround their settlements. What a casual observer might see as 'forest' near any Kelabit settlements would far better be conceptualized as a dense and semi-wild mixed-use 'garden' that includes fruit trees, bamboo groves, and cultivated and semi-cultivated materials. At the same time, as tourists who trek with Kelabit guides are quick to point out, Kelabit rarely see the point of carrying trash out of the forest, and any resting points along a forest tracks are littered with items such as empty sardine tins and plastic food wrappers. Similarly, most garbage—which now includes hazardous items such as batteries—are often simply thrown into the river and few people are aware of the threat of toxic chemicals, such as weed killers that are often sprayed around wet-rice fields. In this sense, Western environmental ethics and notions about pollution and toxicity have not penetrated into rural Kelabit thought and practice.

Loss of Agency and the Contemporary Struggles over Local Forests

Environmental politics and logging are hot topics in Borneo and the proliferation of logging in the interior forests of Sarawak has stirred international attention and a number of local responses—most notably the well-publicized blockades by nomadic (or semi-nomadic) Penan during the 1980s and 1990s that engendered widespread support from a range of international environmentalist groups (Brosius 1999, 2003). As the preceding discussion might suggest, Kelabit (again, to the extent that one can make such generalizations) are in many ways conflicted over issues of development and at times respond to *both* conservation and development efforts with skepticism, as each draw almost exclusively on non-local discourses of development and change and thereby share the common feature of being perceived as imposed on them by outsiders.

The highland area is a plateau at around 3000 feet, with a dozen longhouse-based communities spread over fertile valleys, supporting extensive wet-rice production that could easily be disrupted by logging and the runoff it would generate. In late 2005, logging operations began to penetrate into the settled areas of the Kelabit Highlands, causing grave concern about the future of Kelabit rice farms. Prior to this, it seemed that the region might be immune to the devastation that has

occurred elsewhere in Sarawak, with logging operations hovering many hours walk away from occupied longhouse settlements. The belief that the highlands would not be logged was not entirely naïve. Until recently, prominent Kelabit and neighboring Lun Bawang individuals in influential roles in government and industry had been able successfully to lobby on behalf of protecting the Kelabit Highlands—this in contrast to downriver Kelabit settlements where logging has already taken place.¹² Also the modest flow of eco-tourists into the highlands, often touted in guidebooks such as *Lonely Planet* as a backpacker paradise, has led Kelabit to believe it might be kept as a tourist destination. Such a tourism-centered future now seems unlikely and the current concern of urban Kelabit is that the government will now try to develop the highlands into some form of plantation economy (as has happened elsewhere in the state with palm oil schemes), taking advantage of the proximity to nearby border settlements in Indonesia, which offer a ready supply of labor (Amster 2005).

On the whole, local residents have been taken by surprise and are concerned; they have begun calling community meetings to try to make sense of how they might react, and this has led to debates in the community about appropriate responses. Much of the conversation that has ensued, I am told by Kelabit I spoke with, reflects a resignation that logging cannot be stopped. Some prominent Kelabit have even spoken out in favor of the logging road reaching the highlands, seeing this as a positive development as it allows for heavy cargo such as fuel, costly to fly in to the highlands, to be brought in less expensively. Most Kelabit are nervous about logging, many citing fear that the coming of a road and the 'opening' of the highlands could lead to destructive effects that will threaten their way of life and lead to a loss of autonomy and control on their native lands. While most Kelabit are clearly not supportive of having their native homelands logged, most are also resigned to their lack of ability to stop it and thus focus more on reaping some positive benefits from it, such as the convenience of having a way to reach the highlands by road. The International Tropical Timber Organization

12. One explanation for this sudden change of policy is that it is somehow linked to the death of a prominent Lun Bawang politician, the late Dr Judson Tagal who died in a helicopter crash near Mount Murud in July of 2004. Dr Judson (as he was known) championed local interests and had been an advocate for indigenous input in the long-term development plans for the Kelabit Highlands and Lun Bawang regions. Just prior to his death he had been named as the assistant to Sarawak's Chief Minister, a powerful position in Sarawak government. The fact that logging operations began to penetrate the Kelabit Highlands soon after his death strikes some Kelabit as not entirely coincidental.

(ITTO), in contrast, following up on the establishment of the *Pulong Tau* National Park, has formally recommended that the Sarawak government extend this newly protected area to include the cultural resources of the Kelabit Highlands and thereby form a larger transboundary protected region linking the park (just to the west of the Kelabit Highlands) to similar protected forests even further to the east on the Indonesian side of the border.

In this current state of affairs, in which rural Kelabit have generally looked to the leadership of the urban-based Kelabit ethnic associations to help them navigate an intelligible collective response to logging, little has been done to date to try actively to counter or resist timber operations. While some Kelabit feel that formal requests for compensation ought to be made to the government, others see demands for compensation itself as legitimizing logging on their native land. Meanwhile, state laws are continually being amended to limit claims of title under native customary land laws, effectively disarming any future legal claims. The idea of protesting, such as with the highly controversial Penan blockades that gained international attention in the 1980s and '90s, is generally believed to be counter-productive as it would only irritate the government.¹³

While it is too early to predict whether Kelabit, or some coalition of Kelabit and concerned foreigners, will succeed in curbing logging in the Kelabit Highlands, one observation among the Kelabit I have spoken with is that they do not perceive a clear way to negotiate their concerns. My general point, then, is that Kelabit, who have been well-known for their educational and professional success in town as well as their religious zeal and political savvy, now suddenly appear as disenfranchised and passive agents in the decision-making processes that will likely determine the fate of their homelands in the Kelabit Highlands. Such disenfranchisement stands in contrast to their relationships to nature and forest spaces in the past, where they could respond to the various sources of spiritual anxiety through rituals that gave them an active sense of engagement. While I would be wary to argue that their strong commitment to Christianity has specifically hindered them in this regard, it is difficult to see how it has helped them either.

As Kelabit listen nervously, then, to the approaching sound of bulldozers and chainsaws, I am reminded of how they had formerly listened cautiously to the sound of birds and animals in the forest in the pre-conversion era, hoping one might not hear dangerous omens—such as the sound of a barking deer or catch a glimpse of the flight of a bird in

13. For detailed discussion of how these blockades are now perceived by Penan, see Bending 2006.

the incorrect direction—yet fully prepared to offer an appropriate ritual response by which they could converse with such unseen forces. Now, as people hear the ominous roar of timber operations coming, these new omens portend the destruction of their ecosystem and are propelled by forces so powerful that no ritual response is even attempted.

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