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Keywords

gossip, social interaction, Kelabit, Malaysia, interpersonal interaction, conflict management, community life

Disciplines

Anthropology | Civic and Community Engagement | Social and Cultural Anthropology

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This paper considers the role of gossip and social interaction among the Kelabit of Sarawak, Malaysia. Focusing on gossip in everyday life, the paper explores the tension between desires for individual privacy, concerns for group cohesion and, more broadly, desires to adopt a more modern style of living and social interaction. These tensions are vividly manifested in discourses about the problematic nature of gossip in the Kelabit community. Critical to this is a discussion of Kelabit styles of interpersonal interaction and conflict management, including the role of mediation. Offering a range of examples illustrating the social contexts of Kelabit gossip, this paper focuses on meta-discourses of gossip, contestations of community life, and gossip as a motivating force affecting decisions relating to choices of group affiliation.

Introduction

In a web-based discussion board of the “Online Kelabit Society” — a members-only, online forum established in 2002 by people from this

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indigenous group of Borneo — a person posted a message suggesting that a new type community could be forged in the online realm. The posting described the forum itself as a kind of cyber-longhouse where some of the problems of life in the off-line world might be avoided. The posting, written in English by a Kelabit living in Australia, raised concerns about certain well-known pitfalls in traditional Kelabit social interaction and suggested that some of these ought to be avoided in the new online forum. In particular, the posting focused on the problem of gossip and the tendency of community members to communicate indirectly about and to one another with potentially destructive effects. He called this the “terrible 3Ms,” citing three specific Kelabit words starting with the letter *m*: *muat* (gossip), *mekibut* (slander), and *mekitang* (to act as an intermediary [in a conflict]). The post strongly suggested that everyone in the new online forum refrain from these “terrible 3Ms” and that they agree to a Kelabit “netiquette” that could transcend and improve upon styles of social interaction experienced in their normal, offline, daily life. Anyone in the Kelabit community reading this posting, even if unfamiliar with the term “terrible 3Ms,” would likely understand the nature and relevance of the problem raised in this posting. One person responded enthusiastically in support, making the further point that “especially among the young Kelabits, the seeds of 3Ms should not be planted as it can destroy the fabric of our ‘culture,’” and went on to declare: “let us all live in this ‘global longhouse’ in an open atmosphere free of 3Ms!”

This paper is an ethnographically informed exploration of the broader problem being raised in these candid comments from members of the Online Kelabit Society, views I heard echoed in various contexts throughout my ongoing fieldwork among the Kelabit.¹ I proceed from the notion that gossip, as both a centripetal and centrifugal force, is a critical component in the social life of any community. Gossip contains a fundamental irony: while it can bind people in a community — reinforcing group values and norms — it can also fuel animosities and provoke community withdrawal.

My aim is to explore a range of discourses about gossip — talk about talk — in the Kelabit community, as a critical factor in understanding Kelabit experiences of sociocultural change and engagements with modernity. In highlighting the roles gossip plays in fostering and fragmenting the social group, this case also illustrates some of gossip’s complexities and contradictions. As Kelabit make sense of the changes they have undergone and continue to undergo, gossip stands out as a key

point of tension and contestation, and is often commented upon in Kelabit discourses of identity. Focusing on talk about talk, I identify some mechanisms by which gossip moves through Kelabit social networks, and the dual nature and intrinsic tension of gossip — its potential to unite and divide.

The Kelabit Community²

The Kelabit are a small indigenous group with a population of around five thousand (Ko 1987:35). Traditionally rice farmers from the interior of the Malaysian State of Sarawak on the island of Borneo, the majority now live in town areas and are engaged in a range of professions. Their homeland lies in the northeastern part of Sarawak, approximately 100 miles from the coast and adjacent to the mountainous jungle border with Kalimantan, Indonesia. This region, known as the Kelabit Highlands, is an upland plateau covering approximately 2,500 square kilometers, bordered on the west by the Tamabu mountain range and on the east by the Apad Uwat range — which also serves as the border with Indonesia.³ The Kelabit were relatively isolated until World War II, when allied forces parachuted into the highlands and the first of a series of airstrips established at a place that has come to be known as Bario (Harrison 1984 [1959]). Most Kelabit converted to Christianity around this time, as the area became more accessible to missionaries (Southwell 1999). The Kelabit have since adamantly embraced Christianity and are actively involved in the local evangelical church. The airstrip at Bario has since become the main center of settlement and commerce in this part of interior Borneo. Today the Kelabit Highlands is serviced by regularly scheduled flights operated by Malaysian Airlines.

As of the mid-1990s, only about one-quarter of the total Kelabit population remained in rural settlements, while the majority of Kelabit, approximately three-quarters, have taken up residence in town areas throughout Sarawak. The largest concentration of Kelabit reside in the coastal town of Miri, whose economy is intimately linked to an offshore oil industry, the main source of jobs.⁴ Kelabit out-migration from rural longhouse-based communities began in the 1960s and accelerated through the 1970s, in part as a result of opportunities for schooling and work in town (Lee and Bahrin 1993). Today there is a large Kelabit population established in Miri, and among these town dwellers, intermarriage with other ethnic groups is extremely common, accounting for nearly three-

quarters of all marriages. This combination of extensive out-migration and high rate of intermarriage has created an atmosphere of concern among Kelabit regarding their cultural survival. Among the main concerns commented on by community members is the decay of Kelabit language skills among youth (Martin and Yen 1994), in part a result of formal education in Malaysia being conducted mainly in Bahasa Malaysia and English.

Prior to migration to town areas, the Kelabit were subsistence rice farmers who lived in communal longhouses, each of which had its own headman selected by longhouse residents. The community continues to play a major role in the selection of headmen, although they are now officially government appointees. The character and layout of rural longhouses is gradually changing as people construct new types of longhouse spaces and single-family homes that allow for more privacy (Amster 2000). There is a high degree of mobility between rural areas and towns and nearly every Kelabit has some family links to both rural and urban households. Despite the high level of out-migration, the rural family farms and households persist, largely made possible by the regular influx of seasonal migrant wage laborers and the in-migration of wives from across the border in Indonesia (Amster and Lindquist 2005).

Given their geographic dispersal, the Kelabit face challenges for maintaining group identity. One response to town life has been the creation of ethnic associations that provide a forum for Kelabit to gather for sports competitions, banquet dinners, cultural performances, religious services, and formal meetings. Informal social networks also remain critical in sustaining community (Amster 1998, 1999; Tan 1994). Communities, as Irvine notes, are "constructed, and continually reconstructed, in and by discursive and other interactional practice; and as they are constructed, they can be imagined" (1996:124). The ongoing reimagining of the Kelabit community, as I detail in this paper, is substantially perpetuated by networks of talk and social interaction, and this itself is a controversial topic among Kelabit.⁵ As one middle-aged Kelabit woman quipped, "there are too many mouths (*mula ta'eng*) in the community; people talk too much."

Community, Social Networks, and the Role of Gossip

Prior to the rapid out-migration from rural settlements over the past thirty years, the Kelabit community could readily be identified with geographic

territory, a discrete language, and shared cultural features. Today, Kelabit have fewer ways of organizing and imagining their community, and these depend more on fostering social networks and a sense of social belonging than on clear-cut criteria such as can be provided by a physical community or common linguistic or cultural competence. Although links to rural homelands retain a strong emotional pull among many Kelabit, the community can no longer define itself by either place or attributes of "traditional" culture or language, but rather as a dispersed and "imagined community" (Anderson 1991 [1983]). In this deterritorialized space of community, gossip takes on an important role.

Louis Wirth (1937) observed that every community has a certain "emotional tone" determined, at least in part, by whether information flows through the community in an intimate or impersonal way. He contrasted small communities, where gossip and rumor form the basis of communication, to larger, more impersonal groups where communication tends to be "news" rather than "gossip" (Wirth 1937:498). While Wirth's dichotomy may seem oversimplified, it represents an early attempt to theorize the nature of social networks and their relationship to the collective mood or, in Wirth's words, the "emotional tone" in a community. In discussing such dimensions of community life, whether among the Kelabit or any group, it is useful to acknowledge that each person's perception and experience will be unique. As such, I encountered highly varied views and orientations within the Kelabit community on virtually every subject, including gossip, and such individualistic orientations deeply color my attempt to make sense of people's varied decisions about group participation and nonparticipation, including attitudes and orientations regarding their own ethnic identity. Having said this, the problematic role of informal talk and information flow through social networks repeatedly emerged as a subject of importance to many Kelabit, and certainly one that colors the emotional tone (or tones) of communal life.

Although Kelabit are widely dispersed within and between town and rural areas, certain kinds of information, such as announcements of births, deaths, marriages, and the dates and locations of events sponsored by ethnic associations, typically travel with efficiency between Kelabit households in both rural and urban settings. The fact that information moves so easily over a wide geographic space without reliance on any formal mechanisms provides evidence of a degree of community cohesion created through informal social networks. Oftentimes, however, news and

gossip transmitted through such informal networks includes (mis) information that many consider private, personal, or embarrassing. The flow of information through this Kelabit grapevine was often highlighted by Kelabit as a source of ethnic pride as well as a problematic aspect of their community. In interviews and observations, this feature of social life — the lucrative and open flow of information through social networks — was repeatedly cited by individuals as shaping their thoughts and decisions regarding community participation and nonparticipation. Sensitivity and awareness about information flow could be seen influencing everything from relatively insignificant decisions, such as whether or not to attend an ethnic-based event, to more important ones, such as choosing who one would or wouldn't marry or where one would live. Explicit comments about wanting to withdraw from the community's endless gaze most often came up in interviews with young and unmarried Kelabit in town areas. Not incidentally, I often found such comments about the social implications of gossip to be highly analytical and deeply self-reflexive. For instance, a young single woman in her early twenties, when asked about whether she would attend a large Kelabit ethnic association function, commented: "I feel like I should go just so that people see me there. I really don't want to go, but I am afraid that if I stay home people might talk about me."

Casual observation would suggest that news moves through Kelabit social networks primarily along the contours of extended family networks. The telephone plays a critical role in town, facilitating the rapid spread of information, while in rural settings information is spread mainly through face-to-face interactions. Despite geographic constraints, information moves quickly within and between town and rural communities and, indeed, these different settings are viewed by Kelabit themselves as forming a single community. Airports, such as those at Bario in the Kelabit Highlands and in the town of Miri, act as "gossip centers" (Mukhopadhyay 1989), key locations facilitating social interaction and the spread of information. Going to one of these airports at the appropriate time offers the best opportunity to transmit and receive messages (and goods) between rural and town Kelabit settlements. While technically the Malaysian postal service covers rural areas, this service is infrequently utilized and Kelabit send mail informally by passing letters, verbal messages, or even audiotaped communications to friends or relatives at the airport — a practice jokingly known as the "Kelabit post". Even when flights are canceled — a frequent occurrence prior to the opening of an all-weather airstrip in Bario a few years ago — it is common for people to visit the

airport in Bario or Miri in order to access news and gossip, to socialize, or simply to see who is coming and going.⁶

In rural Kelabit communities, face-to-face communication remains the predominant mode of information transmission and is generally reliable and fast moving. Announcements are regularly made in church, a focal point of social interaction in longhouse-based communities, particularly regarding information affecting the longhouse community as a whole, such as upcoming events and details of communal work groups. Written or verbal messages, including announcements of formal events, can be sent from one rural community to another and are simply passed to someone going in the direction of the message's destination.⁷ The rapid dissemination of information throughout the Kelabit community, both between and within town and rural settings, illustrates the existence of efficient social networks.

Gossip in Anthropological Discourses

Many anthropologists have commented on the special role of gossip in small groups and, indeed, anthropologists have commonly relied on gossip as a critical means of collecting information essential to their work (Murphy 1985; Rabinow 1977). As outsiders, anthropologists often become the subject of gossip, further bringing it to their attention and interest as a dimension of social life (Firth 1967:141; Gaffin 1991:204; Wilson 1974). Firth noted that rumors, which have largely pejorative associations in our society, and are the means by which the content of gossip is often spread, can have important, and positive, social value. He asked the fundamental question: "What is the functional significance, if any, of rumour in relation to the structure and organization of the society where it occurs?" (Firth 1967:141-2). Attempting to answer this question, he focused on rumor "as an instrument, helping groups or individuals to gain their ends" (Firth 1967:142).

Gluckman also focused on gossip's integrating effects and argued that in small groups gossip can help suppress conflict, providing a forum for "internal struggles within the group" to be "fought with concealed malice, by subtle innuendo, and by pointed ambiguities" (1963:313). Identifying gossip as a tool for competitive struggles *as well as* a means to create group amity, Gluckman writes: "The main moral norm is that you must scandalize about an opponent behind his back; if your allegations are at all open, to his face, you must be delicate and never give him ground to state

that you have insulted him. For insults of this kind, if open, make impossible the pretense of group amity" (Gluckman 1963:313). In response to Gluckman's theory of gossip, Paine (1967, 1968, 1970) and others (Cox 1970) suggest that individual interests, rather than those of the group, lie at the heart of gossip's social utility. Paine considered the notion that a community could be the locus of interested action problematic, arguing instead that gossip is primarily a tool to manage and exert influence over information within a community.⁸

Other anthropological works have highlighted a broad range of social processes in which gossip can be implicated. In a shift of focus away from small-scale and indigenous societies, Hannerz (1967) looked at gossip in an urban setting in the U.S., considering the relationship between gossip and social networks and how they helped define the boundaries of subcommunities. Szwed, working in Newfoundland, considered the relationship between drinking, gossip, and social control, and how gossip serves both as a way to get information and as a "sort of tally sheet for public opinion" (1966:435). Handelsman (1973) focused on the type of social encounter created by gossip and Bleek (1976) examined gossip as a means to make secretive accusations about witchcraft. Sociologists, such as Rosnow and Fine (1976), explored the social psychology of rumor in large societies in relation to mass media. In the 1970s and 1980s, a number of anthropologists began to look at gossip in relation to issues of direct and indirect speech (Irvine 1979; Brenneis 1984a; Lederman 1984; Parmentier 1987; Bauman and Sherzer eds. 1974, McCall 1979), including Haviland's (1977) study of Zinacantan and others that consider gossip's qualities as a genre of speech (Arno 1980; Brenneis 1984; Besnier 1989; Goodwin 1980, 1982). In a review of anthropological literature on gossip from the early 1980s, Merry (1984) emphasized the role of gossip in both formal and informal "institutions of social control" (295), though clearly gossip can be implicated in many other aspects of social life.⁹

In an attempt to offer a synthetic theory of gossip, Bergmann (1993) has identified three interconnected social functions of gossip. First, gossip plays a role in social control, helping establish the norms and values to which people may be pressured to conform (Bergmann 1993:143). Secondly, gossip helps preserve social groups, and here Bergmann makes the point that gossip can just as easily have the opposite effect: "If a social group dissolves and the members no longer recognize the group's ideas of values and goals as binding, *the function of gossip is reversed, namely, it accelerates the process of disintegration*" (Bergmann 1993:145, italics

mine). Finally, gossip provides a "technique" for the management of information (see also Paine 1967, 1968, 1970; Goodwin 1980, 1982; Briggs 1996a). Bergmann argues that these functions, each of which operates on different levels, still ultimately fail to capture the ironic, paradoxical, and contradictory nature of gossip. "It is only as something bad that gossip can be something good" (Bergmann 1993:153).

This paradox of being both "bad" and "good" creates a fundamental problem in observing gossip. Typically defined as private, informal talk between two people about an absent third person or persons that spreads by word of mouth,¹⁰ gossip has an intimate and secret character that can "protect it from observation" (Spacks 1986:48). "Even anthropologists hear what people say about gossip far more often than what they say in it; and if those people gossip with the anthropologist, the observer could yet never know how they gossip among themselves" (Spacks 1986:48). Gossip, then, is a fundamentally problematic area of study from a pragmatic standpoint; further, as gossip, and meta-narratives about gossip, migrate through social space, so too do their meanings. Gossip has intended and unintended consequences, serves and fails to serve explicit aims, or it may simply disappear as noise in the broader system of meaning production. Information put into circulation can just as easily mutate and grow in significance or evaporate as uninteresting depending on the social and cultural context. "The power of any particular piece of gossip lies in the importance of the contradictions it reveals" (White 2000:70). Characterizing this process, and the hyper-complex play of power associated with it, even given the best of observational skills, is a difficult task. Attention is therefore more fruitfully focused on discourses *about* gossip and the role social networks play in ongoing negotiations of community and self.

Gossip and Kelabit Styles of Social Interaction

Social networks, as discussed above, are sufficiently dense in the Kelabit community for information spread through informal means to potentially become public knowledge within a short time frame. Such information, varying in accuracy, can and is used by members of the community to influence opinions and reputations and to manage conflicts. It is valuable to outline the kind of information circulating in Kelabit social networks and, more broadly, the kinds of values, interests, and concerns at stake in contestations of Kelabit public and private life.

Privacy is a hotly contested issue about which Kelabit opinions vary. Some individuals and families seek to insulate themselves from the opinions of the broader community by attempting to keep certain information contained within their own, smaller social network. The aim is to avoid "public" (i.e., Kelabit) scrutiny of potentially embarrassing "family only" information and creating niches of privacy for one's family, clique, social class, or occupational network — a strategy somewhat feasible in town.¹¹ The nature of rural longhouse life, however, makes secrecy more difficult, as it is an environment in which one is constantly open to public gaze. As Helliwell argues in commenting on the changing Gerai longhouse, this extends to sound as well as sight. Rephrasing Robert Frost, she suggests, "it is not the walls which make good neighbors, but the gaps and tears that occur within them" (1992:191). Not surprisingly, among both the Kelabit and Gerai, there is a trend toward constructing single-family homes by young people, which can be seen as both reflecting desires for privacy as well as economic differences that make it difficult for families to continue to cooperate in longhouse construction (Amster 2000).

The Kelabit language has a variety of terms and expressions for types of gossip, most of which have negative connotations. The term most closely matching the English verb "to gossip" is *muat*. This refers to a class of gossip that may be either true or false. The Kelabit term *mekibut*, on the other hand, refers specifically to the spreading of rumors or bad news that often contain untruths. A person can be referred to as a *mekibut*, or a "teller of tales." Both of these terms, *muat* and *mekibut*, are among the "terrible 3Ms" mentioned at the outset of this paper. Another related term, in the title of this article, is *mula ta'eng* or "many mouths." This term has two related meanings, both referring to the act of gossiping and both carrying negative connotations. On the one hand, a person can exhibit *mula ta'eng* — meaning they are believed to gossip a lot and, literally, have a "big mouth." Another usage of *mula ta'eng* is to indicate when people "talk too much" in general, referring to an atmosphere of gossip created by the community having "too many mouths." Thus, when I asked a middle-aged Kelabit woman why she was moving away from Miri she responded: "I don't like living in Miri. Everybody is *mula ta'eng* here; there are too many mouths in this community." The third of the "terrible 3Ms" — *mekitang* — refers to the process of mediating disputes. The act of mediation has relevance in understanding gossip within the context of its broader connection to Kelabit styles of social interaction, as will become clear below.¹² Before commenting on practices of gossiping and mediation, I

first offer a brief discussion of "traditional" Kelabit etiquette and the importance of formal greetings, or *peburi*'.

Peburi' and proper use of names and titles are often cited as critical features of Kelabit etiquette and important markers of ethnic identity. In the past, formal greetings were elaborate, consisting of a long series of ritualized questions. Greetings today have become highly condensed in form and content, typically reduced to a handshake and a concise verbal exchange. In rural areas, it is highly unusual for Kelabit to pass someone *without* offering some form of greeting, even if only an inaudible shout between two passing motorbikes. In town, where one cannot easily greet everyone encountered in public space, it is still possible for Kelabit to attempt to greet *every Kelabit* one knows and sees, and this remains common practice, regardless of whether one has genuine affection for the person or not. To not do so is considered a sign of bad character. The elaborate formalized greetings of the past, however, have become an item of cultural pride and even humor; they are often performed on stage at public Kelabit gatherings by knowledgeable elders and provide a kind of nostalgic theatrical performance that has become a genre in its own right.

To not greet someone is considered a sign of bad character, as noted above, and intentionally ignoring another Kelabit can potentially be viewed as a serious insult.¹³ Such norms of public acknowledgment can conceal conflict and create ambiguity in social encounters. As such, one must be aware of subtle clues that might indicate problems or conflicts, since these will rarely be expressed overtly. Many Kelabit pointed out that mastery of such etiquette (variously described as "deception" and "politeness") is a central feature of a Kelabit style of social interaction, where face-to-face confrontation is rigorously avoided. The cultural inappropriateness of direct confrontation is clearly linked to a reliance on intermediaries (*mekitung* — one of the "terrible 3Ms") to settle disputes and other indirect means of communication, of which gossiping is a variation.

Kelabit practices of conflict avoidance were often cited as a cause of underlying tension and competitiveness in the Kelabit community, with the proliferation of false gossip of particular concern. Concerns about gossip were, first, that it might contain false information and, secondly, that it could lead to quarrels — traditionally viewed as hazardous to the spiritual harmony of the longhouse community. Gossiping in a longhouse community is considered a potentially serious breach and a finable offense. Thus, not only is gossip viewed as unpleasant, but it falls under the jurisdiction of customary law (*adet*); cases involving gossip may be

brought to the headman's court in a longhouse community. Actual examples where gossip resulted in court cases are quite varied. In one, a rumor had been spread in a longhouse community that a young woman had had an abortion. Denying the truth of this rumor and defending her reputation, the woman brought witnesses forward in the headman's court and successfully accused and convicted a neighbor who spread the rumor and this person was fined. Another case involved a pastor who was rumored to have impregnated a woman, and he was similarly vindicated. Other cases have involved false accusations of theft and even simple accusations about slander to someone's character.

There are no formal mechanisms, such as the headman's court, by which people in town can formally dispute gossip or attacks on one's reputation. People often expressed frustration about this and related tales of how false gossip had been spread about them with no recourse. Typically, gossip might concern such things as accusations of adultery and illicit affairs, drunkenness, theft, dishonesty, corruption, the existence of illegitimate children, and other controversial behavior. Once in circulation, these accusations are difficult to refute, although mediation can certainly play a role in helping settle cases that involve specific conflicts.

Generally, whenever significant tension erupts between people, in both rural and town areas, attempts are made to bring in a neutral third party to act as mediator (*mekitang*). Depending on the severity of the conflict, these disputes can be taken to the headman's court, though more often they are resolved informally or left to "cool down" with time. Such patterns of conflict management are common in Borneo societies. Among the Gerai, Helliwell describes a case where a daughter-in-law called for "a public moot" and subsequently received compensation for "comments constituted as a slur on her character" (2001:97). Armstrong (1992:197) emphasizes that the Kenyah Badeng highly value "restraint," severely restrict spontaneous public display of aggression, and allow anger to be expressed publicly only by using a special style of oratory. Such examples, of course, are not limited to Borneo, and we can observe similar forms of conflict management in other parts of the world. For instance, in the Faeroe Islands, "(t)o quarrel out loud, to call people names face-to-face, to accuse others of deviance directly, are themselves deviant behaviors" (Gaffin 1991:208). Thus, as Coser suggested nearly half a century ago: "Closely knit groups in which there exists a high frequency of interaction and high personality involvement of the members have a tendency to suppress conflict" (1956:152).

The desire to avoid conflict is also linked to local notions of embarrassment and shame (*migu'* in Kelabit, *malu* in Malay). Shame is a powerful emotion for Kelabit as well as a recurring theme throughout the ethnography of Southeast Asia (Geertz 1973; Rosaldo 1983; Heider 1991; Peletz 1995). Among the Kelabit, people will sometimes leave the longhouse community without telling anyone why they have left or where they have gone simply to avoid embarrassment or shame. Avoiding conflict means both sparing oneself shame and exposing others to its consequences. I witnessed a case where a young female pastor — recently stationed in a longhouse community in the Kelabit Highlands — left her post with no explanation, abandoning her job and the house the community had built for her. She went to Miri to stay with relatives and when she eventually returned to the highlands, she would not go back to the community in which she was expected to serve as the pastor. When approached by the church leadership about what the problem was, she refused to explain. When I asked why she had left, she replied: "I haven't even told my best friend. Only I know why. I don't want to hurt someone there, so I can't say anything."

Problems often emerge for Kelabit familiar with such norms of conflict avoidance when they move to town, where work environments often demand that conflict be handled differently. For example, I've been told of numerous dilemmas in work environments in Miri, especially in the oil industry, where employees work with Western foreigners and are encouraged to express their opinions and be assertive, even if it means contradicting coworkers or superiors (and, where, indeed, not doing so might be viewed as a sign of incompetence). Differences in style of social interaction are particularly problematic for Kelabit professionals who, in attempting to embrace modernity, must learn to develop different work and home personalities.

Finally, in Kelabit social life it is an accepted fact that one needs to be careful about sharing information. I was told that it is not always good to say what you really think: Kelabit-style diplomacy, when skillfully deployed, makes it difficult to know if someone is being genuine. A middle-aged Kelabit woman active in the local church lamented, "You cannot trust a Kelabit," and went on to explain that while Kelabit are invariably friendly to your face, you "cannot know what they really think about you or what they might say about you when you are no longer present." An elderly Kelabit woman shared the following advice regarding how to behave toward visitors to the longhouse:

When someone visits the longhouse and behaves badly, you must not say anything about it to them when they are there. Only after they have gone away can you say: "This was a bad person." If someone visits the longhouse and behaves well, you must not say anything to them either. Only after they are gone away can you say: "This was a good person."

Similarly, a young Kelabit man told me that if I really wanted to act like a Kelabit I needed to "learn how to lie better," adding: "You *lun buda* (white people) are no good at lying; that is your problem."¹⁴ Such views are controversial, and many Kelabit, particularly those who self-identify as committed Christians, often object to these practices on ethical grounds, viewing such deceptive behavior as a form of "false humility," as one person labeled it. Many expressed the view that Kelabit should adopt more "modern" styles of social interaction, ones that do not risk the subtleties and potential misunderstandings that can emerge from this non-confrontational interpersonal style. Along these lines, a middle-aged man expressed frustration connected to organizing a Kelabit event: "When you do a good job nobody says much, but when you make a mistake, everybody points fingers. But people are not direct with criticism in the Kelabit community." He found this aspect of Kelabit style problematic not simply because he did not receive acknowledgment for hard work he did in service to the community, but because it hindered his ability to get accurate feedback. One consequence of this pattern is that some people choose to limit community involvement, while others feel pressured to participate for the same reasons — i.e., out of concern over public criticism.

Gossip and its Discontents

Virtually all Kelabit are related to each other and often in multiple ways. As such, the line between extended families and the broader Kelabit community is ambiguous. Networks of gossip highlight this interconnectedness as well as the roles and structures of participation embedded in informal talk. As noted above, there are limitations in observing and understanding gossip. "Understanding gossip requires understanding social rules, values and conflicts; such understandings put scholars on the same ground as the gossipers" (White 2000:58). As such, the evidence I present here comes mainly from commentaries made by Kelabit about gossip and gossiping (meta-discourses) and examples from personal experience.

One of the most significant ways gossip can be used is as a means to

transmit sensitive messages or communicate indirectly. Certain topics of discussion may be considered inappropriate or unacceptable for direct face-to-face interaction and may require sensitive handling. Such forms of indirect communication are used both within tight-knit social networks, such as that of the family, and in wider social networks. It is not uncommon for someone to communicate to either family members or more distant kin and acquaintances indirectly, using others as intermediaries (*mekitang*). For instance, I observed a situation where an elder brother was deeply concerned about the behavior of a younger sister and what he viewed as her poor career choices. He chose not to speak to her directly, feigning normalcy in her presence. However, he privately expressed his concerns to his wife, who facilitated the process of communicating his concerns so that they ultimately reached the ears of his younger sister. His wife did not speak to the sister directly either, but spoke to another sister in the family who is closer to her in age. Before long, the elder brother's concerns came to the attention of the younger sister, and while she felt shame (*migu'*) in light of learning about her brother's disappointment, she had been spared being openly confronted and a certain degree of normalcy and harmony could be maintained in the household. Such use of indirection can work to relay replies as well, and, indeed, the younger sister was able to communicate back to her brother through the same chain of intimacy and intermediaries. Both individuals maintained "face" and avoided the discomfort of direct confrontation. This allowed them to behave as if nothing were wrong in each other's presence, though the younger sister still appeared visibly humiliated and withdrew into a private bedroom to cry for a few hours.

This example illustrates, on a small scale, patterns that also occur at the larger, macro-level of the community. Formal intermediaries (*mekitang*) are recruited to stand between people in disputes, and can intervene and negotiate in these processes themselves. This technique facilitates information management, mediates conflict in Kelabit social networks, and is also critical to understanding the problematic nature of gossip for Kelabit.

The next case I relate concerns Michael and Paula (not their real names), a Kelabit couple in their mid twenties who had been dating for a few years. Both Paula and Michael live in Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, a place where they can experience a great deal of personal freedom in their interactions and behavior. Michael and Paula openly dated for a few years, but over time gossip and rumors began to circulate in the community and

strain their relationship. Much of this gossip was about Paula, who is very free-spirited and not afraid to go out to bars and drink quite openly. The gossip seemed to be started by members of Michael's family, suggesting that they were not pleased with Paula as a potential daughter-in-law. At first this didn't concern Paula very much and certainly did not deter their relationship. However, the gossip got worse, and eventually, when Michael began to question some of the things being said about Paula's family, the couple broke up. Paula said: "I didn't mind when they were saying bad things about me. I really don't care about gossip that much. But then they began to talk about my family, and that made me really angry." She explained that as long as Michael was supportive of her and commiserated about the unfair nature of the gossip, she didn't mind. However, as Michael began to question her about some of the things he was hearing about her family, she could no longer overlook the insult and broke off the relationship. Paula was adamant that she is normally quite thick-skinned about gossip, and by Kelabit standards not just strongly independent but also not easily swayed by the opinion of others about her lifestyle choices. Still, she said it was mainly the gossip, and not her and Michael's feelings for each other, that ended the relationship. At age 28, Paula remains single and has serious doubts about dating another Kelabit in the future; she is not sure it is worth the risk of having to deal with all the talk that seems inevitable when getting involved with a Kelabit man.

The next example concerns a woman in her mid-thirties who related painful experiences from childhood about being the subject of gossip. As a schoolgirl living in the Kelabit Highlands, the woman recalled how she had been falsely accused of having sex with a young man. This experience led her to seriously consider suicide, and she spent many years recovering from the sense of shame (*migu'*) and anger that she experienced from this incident. Although she had long since recovered, and even related this story in a sermon during a Christian church service to emphasize the importance of forgiveness, the incident clearly illustrates the powerful effect gossip had on her. As in the example of Paula above, this woman remains single and has been unsuccessful in forming relationships with Kelabit men, despite (or perhaps because of) family efforts to help her find a suitable Kelabit spouse. Such cases are not isolated examples, but point to a pattern wherein choices regarding marriage and relationships have profound implications in terms of how people approach the public space of the Kelabit community.

As stated above, nearly three-quarters of marriages among Kelabit

living in town areas are with people from other ethnic groups. This high rate of intermarriage creates considerable intercultural complexity. When faced with options of marrying in or out of the Kelabit community, many people find that there are both advantages and disadvantages to marrying out. The kinds of in-group gossiping that helped break up the relationship of Michael and Paula will not be as likely when two people come from different ethnic groups. On the other hand, marrying out can lead to intercultural misunderstandings, as in the next example.

This case centers on a conflict that erupted between two men, one Kelabit (who I call Gerawat) and the other non-Kelabit, each married to Kelabit sisters. The younger sister and her husband, Gerawat, live in the Kelabit Highlands and work the family rice farm. The older sister is married to a Western expatriate who works in a highly paid oil industry job in the town of Miri. The rural-based, "pure" Kelabit couple had been staying with the elder sister's family while seeking medical attention in town. After a few weeks, Gerawat wished to return to the highlands and, lacking money, spoke to his wife about the possibility of receiving financial help for his airfare. Gerawat's wife talked to her sister, expecting that she and her Western husband would help financially. This older sister then approached her husband for the money (which amounted to the equivalent of about \$35 US), but he did not understand why Gerawat hadn't asked him directly. He rejected the request and, as it was relayed to me, made the comment: "If Gerawat wants to ask me for money he should do so himself." This response proved extremely embarrassing to Gerawat, and feeling humiliated he immediately left the household, avoiding a potential confrontation, and went to stay with relatives in a nearby town who subsequently offered him the money to return home. Speaking with Gerawat later, it was clear that he felt shame (*malu*) for having his request denied. The other man was confused by what he saw as Gerawat overreacting.

The next set of examples I offer are ones in which I have personal involvement. My intention is both to illustrate how I came to see the importance of gossip in Kelabit life and some typical outcomes of gossip behavior.

In the course of field research, I moved periodically between the rural Kelabit Highlands and Kelabit homes in town. Often when I came to town, my Kelabit friends already knew details about some of my activities in the highlands. In most cases, this information implied an elaborate chain of gossip (oftentimes far too complicated for me to figure out). One example was the story about me watering my garden in the middle of the day, which

people found amusing, as doing so is generally considered a bad practice. I was fascinated that this story had traveled from the Kelabit Highlands to Miri since, from my own recollection, only one old man in the village had actually observed me doing this "improper" watering. It struck me as fascinating that information such as this could be of enough interest to travel all the way to town (about a hundred miles away), and I could only imagine how many people had heard the story. This process seemed rather benign until the same thing happened with inaccurate information. One time, upon arriving from the highlands at a Kelabit home in town. I was told that they had heard I had been seen drinking alcohol in the middle of the day in Bario. This is a mildly serious accusation, as drinking is frowned upon in the wider Kelabit community for religious reasons. More to the point, the story was not true. With a bit of investigation, I was able to trace the story back to its roots and find out how it got generated and spread — in short, it was the result of being seen in the vicinity of a group of men who were drinking. In another instance, someone told me they heard "from a reliable source" that I had been seen in Limbang (a place known for bars and prostitution), though I have never been to Limbang. The person did not believe my response, and I realized that it was pointless to deny the accusation. Suddenly I understood a point that many Kelabit had already impressed upon me: gossip, once in circulation, cannot be easily controlled or corrected.

From these and other firsthand experiences, I began paying closer attention to what people were saying about gossip. Many people related tales of the difficulties they had suffered through the effects of gossip, perhaps in an effort to correct mistakes in light of my position as an anthropologist who moved widely within the community. A devoutly Christian married woman in her fifties told me of how she had, years earlier, been the victim of a widespread rumor that her son was an illegitimate child of her supervisor at work. She described the frustration of not being able to correct the story, and her concern that many people accepted it as true. Only after many years, when her son was old enough to show a clear resemblance to her husband, did she begin to feel some relief, though the assumption or at least suggestion of her assumed adultery remained in the air. Such stories, often involving rumors of illicit affairs, are both disturbing and interesting to Kelabit (after all, if they weren't interesting, they wouldn't spread). Whether gossip of this sort is true or false, it is virtually impossible to refute or undo damage caused to one's reputation.

Gossip, as these examples illustrate, can result in confusion and error as people seek to manage information in the social space of what is now a highly dispersed community in geographic terms. It can act as a form of social control, both dividing and binding people in common discourse and, in extreme cases, can lead to ostracism. For instance, when a fire destroyed a Kelabit longhouse, widespread rumors blamed the catastrophe on a specific individual and his family. This resulted in the entire family facing a "difficult time," as they put it, and temporarily being scorned by the wider community, even though the actual cause of the fire remained uncertain. In another case, a person caught stealing in the Kelabit Highlands found the pressure of gossip and rumor so intense that she withdrew from the community to a small town where she could avoid contact with other Kelabit until tempers cooled down. The values and concerns about which people gossip are varied; some connect to longstanding norms of conduct in longhouse life, while others emerge from more recent values linked to Christianity and modern life.

Finally, as has been pointed out in anthropological literature, gossip can be used to challenge or undermine people in positions of power and authority, such as educated and politically powerful ethnic elites. The effectiveness of such "counterhegemonic" gossip depends on how well it conceals or makes irrelevant issues of truthfulness (Besnier 1994:24) — i.e., how apparent it is whether gossipers are spreading lies or not. People who occupy positions of power and leadership within the Kelabit community, and especially those with political ties or substantial wealth, can experience subtle and not-so-subtle forms of opposition via gossip. For instance, a prominent Kelabit in a position of political power was subject to a widespread rumor that he was being paid "millions" by a well-known timber tycoon in return for "letting the government develop the Kelabit Highlands for commercial purposes." In this incident, people were so alarmed by the rumors that a formal investigation was mounted and a meeting called to discuss the accusations. When I asked this person how he felt about such gossip, he assured me that he did not take it seriously and expressed the sentiment that "it comes with the territory of being a leader." This response supports Scott's argument that such gossip is ultimately "a relatively mild sanction against the powerful" (1990:143), though clearly the counterhegemonic potential of gossip should not be ignored as it can be used as a means for "speakers to maneuver into spaces of alterity and opposition" (Perice 1997:9).

These examples suggest the range of forms and diverse social

functions in which gossip is implicated in the Kelabit community but by no means offers an exhaustive summary. Gossip and meta-discourses about gossip, as with any speech act circulating in social space, reverberate on themselves, generating their own trajectories, histories, and participant roles (Irvine 1992:20). Because the Kelabit are a Christian indigenous group in a Muslim country with a strong urban orientation, and, as individuals, have a great deal of discretion in their lifestyle choices, it is impossible to pin down any single, dominant theme of how gossip works or the values it helps preserve. As with the complexities of social life as a whole, gossip provides an opportunity to experience intimate interaction, show interpersonal loyalties, express both positive and negative attitudes of communal interest, create (and challenge) dominant and alternative discourses, and attempt damage control. In short, gossip offers a rich arena in which to express one's values, affiliations, and interests.

Conclusions

Kelabit commonly describe themselves as people in "transition," and as a "progressive" people who have readily embraced modernity and change. They are urbanites and longhouse dwellers, rural farmers and wage laborers, grassroots and elite. Despite all their internal variation and differentiation, they still, on the whole, see themselves as a community. Many Kelabit are also quite conscious about the issues I have raised in this paper and see their changing styles of social interaction as part and parcel with embracing modernity. In conversations about such changes, people regularly pointed to close family ties and social networks as a critical and positive feature defining Kelabit community life. However, as the posting to the Online Kelabit Society about the "terrible 3Ms" indicates, and as the examples presented here reinforce, many Kelabit also see potentially negative aspects of being a part of an intimate community, and pitfalls to "traditional" styles of social interaction.

As I have shown, concerns about gossip (*muat*), slander (*mekibut*), mediation (*mekitang*), shame (*migu'*), and the "many mouths" (*mula ta'eng*) of community shape and constrain contemporary contestations of Kelabit social life. Among younger people especially, concerns about gossip and lack of privacy are often cited as reasons to withdraw from community participation. Sometimes withdrawal would take a fairly mild form, such as not attending events, whereas other times it can manifest in more extreme behavior, such as marrying out of the community or moving

away. The fact that there are no neighborhoods in Miri where one finds Kelabit heavily clustered, despite thousands of Kelabit living in this town, is indicative of the tendency of Kelabit to want to be independent of one another, yet they also remain highly connected. Many Kelabit are proud of the strong bonds within their community and often point out that they are a relatively successful indigenous group by Sarawak standards and tend to look out for one another.

A final example is in order, by way of concluding. One night, while I was drinking beer with a group of middle-aged Kelabit professionals in a pub in Miri, a woman expressed concern about the possibility of my exposing in my anthropological writings that beer drinking is actually a common activity in certain Kelabit circles. She asked: "You're not going to write about this, are you?", expressing concern that others in the community might be bothered by such negative exposure regarding alcohol use. "I'm not sure," I replied, "but I'll probably write about the fact that you asked me that question — it has interesting implications." Concerns regarding impression management, whether for individuals or the Kelabit people as a whole, are a poignant component of Kelabit discourses and meta-discourses. Many Kelabit, especially those in town, often articulate cultural pride — citing educational advancement, political success, business savvy, religious devotion, and the fact that Kelabit (despite differences of opinion) can still come together as a group at large gatherings. And, naturally, many people expressed concerns about what I would write about them.

This leads us back to a point made in the early anthropological work on gossip. In Gluckman's classic article on gossip (1963), he refers to the Makah Indians of the American Northwest (as described by Colson) as a people "torn by internal dissension and struggles for status," who "constantly use the tongue of scandal to keep one another in proper place" (1963: 310). As Wilson (1971) later noted, Colson herself was the subject of gossip, which probably drew her attention to it as a special focus of interest and concern. It is also suggested that because Colson interviewed many Makah privately, this led to assumptions about the sharing of secret information and probably further fueled animosities and gossip in the community (Wilson 1971). It is not accidental, then, that as an anthropologist working in the Kelabit community, gossip came to the forefront of my understandings of community life, and my role in these interactions cannot be discounted.

As Simmel (1955) argued in his famous essay "Conflict," written

nearly a century ago, it is only by remaining engaged in conflict that people ultimately remain connected to one another and perpetuate their existence and cohesion as a group. The breakdown of society, according to Simmel, occurs not where there is conflict but where the opposite occurs: when people become indifferent to conflict. To quote Simmel: "Whether it implies the rejection or the termination of sociation, indifference is purely negative. In contrast to such pure negativity, conflict contains something positive" (1971 [1908]:71). Thus, it may be argued that the existence of gossip, and the disputes it illustrates and mediates, shows that the Kelabit community is alive and well. More critically, gossip and discourses about gossip highlight and embody "local strands of power" in a community as well as orientations toward modernity and the future (White 2000:68). Negotiating conflicting concerns, including emergent concerns for personal privacy and group unity, Kelabit are well versed in the ironies of gossip.

Notes

1. The fieldwork upon which this article is based spans the years 1993–2003, including twenty-one months of dissertation research between 1993–1995 and additional visits in 1999 and 2003. I wish to express my gratitude to the Sarawak State Government, particularly the State Planning Unit, Majlis Adat dan Istiadat, and Sarawak Museum, for their support. I wish to acknowledge a Faculty Development Grant from Gettysburg College for support of fieldwork during the summer of 2003. I offer my thanks to a number of friends and colleagues who have read earlier drafts of this paper and provided thoughtful comments and feedback, including Douglas Raybeck, Rena Lederman, Johan Lindquist and the editors and anonymous reviewers of *Asian Anthropology*. Finally, I am deeply indebted to many Kelabit, remaining unnamed, who gave generously in sharing the stories at the heart of this paper. I alone remain responsible for any errors or shortcomings.
2. Like many ethnic labels, the name Kelabit, and the bounded social entity that is its present social construction, is the product of historical circumstances (see Amster 1998; Langub 1987). For additional writings on the Kelabit, see: Amster (1998, 1999, 2000, 2003), Bala (2002) Harrison (1984[1959]), Janowski (1991), Saging (1976/77), and Talla (1979).
3. There are also rural Kelabit communities located outside of the Kelabit Highlands at Long Lellang, Long Scridan, and Long Napir.
4. Based on unpublished census figures obtained from the Department of Statistics in Miri, in 1993 the population of Miri was estimated at around 300,000.

5. Elsewhere, I explore other aspects of Kelabit ethnic identity, such as formal associations (Amster 1998), selective maintenance and reinterpretation of "traditional" ritual practices (Amster 1999), and affiliation tied to active involvement in Christian-oriented church movements (Amster 2003).
6. Radiophones were the only means of communication between rural Kelabit settlements and town at the time of earlier field research in 1993–1995 and 1999. The radiophones were typically used to convey short messages and utilized most heavily at times when flights had been cancelled. Conversations on the radiophone were not private, as many people gathered at the radiophone location and would eavesdrop on each other's calls. In 2001, an Internet kiosk and public telephones were established in Bario using satellite-based, solar-powered, equipment (Bala and Harris 2000). Observations during July–August 2003 suggest that there was relatively limited use of both the Internet and telephone, and both services were unreliable. The most significant change, however, was that e-mail and telephone allow for private communication. The primary means of sending messages between the highlands and town remained the passing of letters and messages at the airports.
7. In the past, when large events were held in longhouses, invitations included the passing of a knotted cord, with each knot on the cord representing one day. By untying one knot each day, people kept track of the day they were supposed to arrive for an event.
8. In a response to Paine, Gluckman (1968) did not wholly disagree with this perspective but continued to stress the significance of community versus individual interests (see also Paine 1968, for his response to Gluckman).
9. A partial inventory of additional literature includes the following: Zinovieff (1987, 1991) looks at gossip and hospitality as antithetical attributes of Greek character and the social role of gossip as a form of entertainment; Almirol (1981) looks at gossip's central role in defining ethnic membership and attaining prestige in a Filipino community in California; Burdick (1990) explores how gossip can motivate choices of religious affiliation in urban Brazil; Gaffin (1991) explores how social talk offers parables about deviance in the Faeroe Islands; Rasmussen (1991) and Briggs (1996a, 1996b) focus on the role of gossip in settling conflicts and mediating disputes, and Eder and Enke (1991) explore gossip among adolescents in the United States as a means to understand their collective expressions. A number of recent scholarly works in anthropology and history look at how gossip can be used as a means to challenge authority (cf. Wickham 1998; Ramos 2000, Scott 1990, White 2000), and gossip's role as an "elementary form of disguised popular aggression" (Scott 1990), and similarly "as a prime site of political resistance" (Besnier 1994). Similarly, Perice (1997) explores gossip's power for marginalized people. Finally, the Internet offers a new arena for research on gossip and rumor (Harrington and Bielby 1995).

10. The issue of defining gossip cross-culturally remains a compelling problem and few attempts have been made in the existing literature to either challenge or defend gossip's validity as a cross-cultural construct. For further discussion see Merry (1984); Ghosh (1996).
11. Sennett has made a similar argument with regard to the transformation of social life in connection with the growth of cities in Europe during the nineteenth century, where public life became increasingly impersonal and the "the family became a refuge from the terrors of society" (1977:20).
12. I was fortunate to be involved in conversations in which each of these terms were discussed as part of a government-sponsored codification of Kelabit customary law, or *adet*, undertaken in 1995, as well as while preparing a glossary of Kelabit terms (Amster 1995). At the meetings held to codify the Kelabit *adet*, gossip was discussed at length and specific provisions were discussed relating to *mekibut* — translated as "to spread false news, to mislead or deceive individuals so as to cause misunderstanding and quarrels between them." This exposed me to the various nuances of different Kelabit terms, and made me aware of how unevenly they are understood within the Kelabit community.
13. On only one occasion did I observe a Kelabit overtly ignore a visitor arriving at the longhouse, and thereby intentionally avoid greeting the person. When I asked why the visitor was shunned, the person explained that it related to a long-standing dispute between them and that he did not think he could conceal his anger. By not greeting the person, he sent a clear message, but it was also done in a manner that could still be interpreted as unintentional.
14. Weiner (1984) reports a similar experience among the Trobrianders, where she was "taught the importance of disguising" emotions in speech (1984: 167) and witnessed instances where "individuals whom I knew hated and distrusted each other interacted as if nothing were amiss" (1984: 168).

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Figure 1. Kelabit man being greeted by his grandmother at the Bario airstrip upon his arrival from Miri (photograph by Matthew Amster).

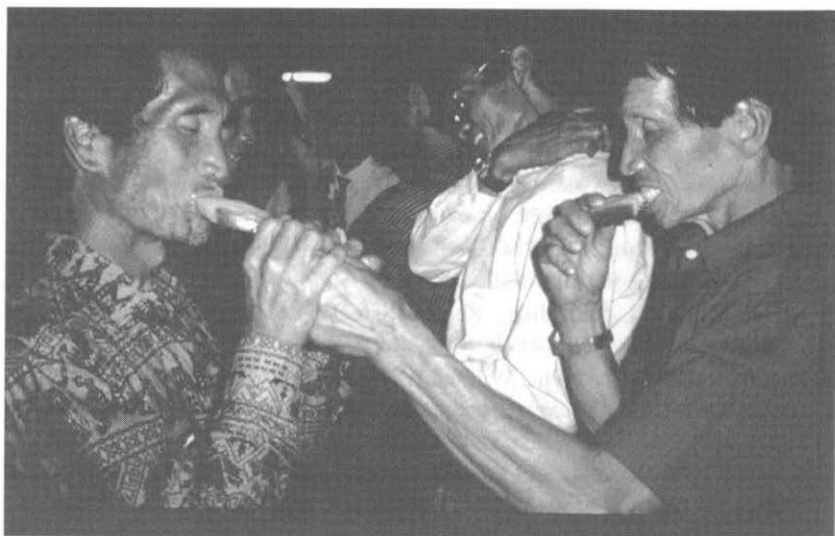


Figure 2. Men feeding each other fat at a longhouse wedding party in the Kelabit Highlands (photograph by Matthew Amster).



Figure 3. Representatives of the Kelabit association RKS marching in a parade in Miri, 1995 (photograph by Matthew Amster).



Figure 4. Kelabit woman at the Bario airport in the Kelabit Highland (photograph by Matthew Amster).



Figure 5. Children learning to use computers at the Bario school, 2004 (photograph by Matthew Amster from digital video by Jake Boritt).