Borderland Tactics: Cross-Border Marriage in the Highlands of Borneo

Matthew H. Amster
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/anthfac

Part of the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons, and the South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies Commons

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.


This is the publisher's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/anthfac/20

This open access book chapter is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.
Borderland Tactics: Cross-Border Marriage in the Highlands of Borneo

Abstract
The first time I traveled to Borneo was near the end of 1989. The Berlin Wall had recently fallen and the economics of Southeast Asia were booming. The towns of Sarawak, an oil-rich state of East Malaysia, were experiencing rapid economic growth - due to both the oil company and an expanding logging industry. Rural-urban migration was draining indigenous people from the longhouses of the interior and swelling the populations of coastal towns. Traveling at that time to the Kelabit Highland - a remote interior plateau located in the northeastern corner of Sarawak along the Indonesian border - was to enter a place negatively impacted by outmigration. As young people moved to towns, especially the town of Miri where the majority of Kelabit now live, they seemed to be taking with them much of the vitality and energy of their home communities. A common Kelabit phrase to describe this state of affairs was da ‘at ali, a kind of ‘bad’ silence or lack of activity, something that the elders I met lamented.

Given what I saw on this initial trip, I assumed, somewhat incorrectly, that in the coming years few youth would remain or return to their home communities after completing their schooling in town, and that the longhouse communities of this part of central Borneo would continue to decline. I formulated a research project aimed at exploring the relationship between those who remained in the rural homelands and the growing population of Kelabit living in Miri and other towns, with the aim of looking at changing expressions of ethnic identity and the ongoing relationships between urban migrants and their rural counterparts. What I had failed to account for at the time was how proximity to the border of Indonesia, with its weaker economy, and mobility of people from the other side of this permeable jungle frontier, would also factor quite significantly into this situation. I had also not thought about the implications of doing fieldwork along an international frontier and the kinds of practical and ethical issues this would raise. [excerpt]

Keywords
Borneo, Southeast Asia, rural-urban migration, Indonesia, Kelabit people, Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak

Disciplines
Anthropology | Social and Cultural Anthropology | South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies
6 Borderland tactics: Cross-border marriage in the highlands of Borneo

Matthew H. Amster

The first time I traveled to Borneo was near the end of 1989. The Berlin Wall had recently fallen and the economies of Southeast Asia were booming. The towns of Sarawak, an oil-rich state of East Malaysia, were experiencing rapid economic growth—due to both the oil economy and an expanding logging industry. Rural-urban migration was draining indigenous people from the longhouses of the interior and swelling the populations of coastal towns. Traveling at that time to the Kelabit Highland—a remote interior plateau located in the northeastern corner of Sarawak along the Indonesian border—was to enter a place negatively impacted by outmigration. As young people moved to towns, especially the town of Miri where the majority of Kelabit now live, they seemed to be taking with them much of the vitality and energy of their home communities. A common Kelabit phrase to describe this state of affairs was *da’at ali*, a kind of ‘bad’ silence or lack of activity, something that the elders I met lamented.

Given what I saw on this initial trip, I assumed, somewhat incorrectly, that in the coming years few youth would remain or return to their home communities after completing their schooling in town, and that the longhouse communities of this part of central Borneo would continue to decline. I formulated a research project aimed at exploring the relationship between those who remained in the rural homelands and the growing population of Kelabit living in Miri and other towns, with the aim of looking at changing expressions of ethnic identity and the ongoing relationships between urban migrants and their rural counterparts. What I had failed to account for at the time was how proximity to the border with Indonesia, with its weaker economy, and mobility of people from the other side of this permeable jungle frontier, would also factor quite significantly into this situation. I had also not thought about the implications of doing fieldwork along an international frontier and the kinds of practical and ethical issues this would raise.

Returning in October 1993 to conduct fieldwork for twenty-one months, I found Miri further cascading into an urban landscape; the expansion of roads, housing estates, and shopping malls transforming this once quaint town into a sprawling metropolis. At the same time, the longhouse communities of the Kelabit Highlands had not, as anticipated, deteriorated further. To the contrary,
the highlands were experiencing a subtle renaissance of sorts, as rice fields were being expanded, new homes were constructed, and a small cohort of young Kelabit males was returning home, most of whom married women from just across the border in Indonesia. Rather than simply draining the rural homelands, economic boom in town seemed to accelerate the possibilities for harnessing the economic potential of the borderland economy—something I had not considered in formulating my research project.

As a neophyte fieldworker this provided some dilemmas as well as opportunities. Given my commitment to anthropological ethics, I did not want to expose my Kelabit hosts to the potential harm that a discussion of illegal movements and illicit economies might bring. In addition, since I only had research permits to work in Malaysia, I was concerned about whether I could write about my excursions into Indonesia. For a long time, I simply chose not to write too explicitly about this aspect of my research, relegating to footnotes and minor comments key details about the borderland economy that were some of the most interesting dimensions of my fieldwork. Over time, it has become clear that the borderland practices I worried about concealing were both well known and of no particular concern to the governmental authorities I initially feared might learn about them through my work. Furthermore, a Kelabit author had written about these issues in a book (Bala 2002), making it unlikely that harm would come from my doing so as well. Nonetheless, working ethnographically in two countries remains problematic from a practical point of view and, indeed, a challenge to the anthropology of borderlands generally. And, just as my Kelabit hosts often improvised their borderland tactics, so too, I have had to improvise my ethnographic tactics in doing this research and writing about the borderland economy.

The focus of this chapter is to examine examples of cross-border marriages between Kelabit men and women from neighboring and related indigenous peoples from across the frontier in Indonesia.1 In presenting these cases my aim is to illustrate how these marriages constitute a highly creative form of local agency, a kind of borderland tactic, one that allows Kelabit to draw upon aspects of state power for their own benefit. In so doing, I seek to contribute to recent discussions in anthropology about how state power can serve as a kind of malleable and locally appropriable resource (Berdahl 1999; Das and Poole 2004; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Trouillot 2001; Wilson and Donnan 1998), as well as how different ‘zones’ or forms of sovereignty (Ong 1999)—including ‘informal sovereignties’ (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 305-308)—may exist at the margins of the state. As Baud and van Schendel (1997: 216) write: ‘Borders create political, social, and cultural distinctions, but simultaneously imply the existence of (new) networks and systems of interaction across them’. The practices presented here highlight such dynamic and emergent dimensions of the borderland economy (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 90-91), of which cross-border marriages are one component. These marriages offer the Kelabit a novel solution to the problem of household-level decline caused by outmigration to urban
areas, and thereby help to reproduce the rural household in these borderland communities.

The Kelabit community and the international border

The Kelabit are one of the smaller indigenous groups in Sarawak, numbering approximately five thousand people. Roughly three-quarters of this population now live in town areas and, of these, approximately three-quarters are married to people from other ethnic groups—primarily other Christians (Amster 1998). While the Kelabit are a relatively small group, they have been unusually successful, in local terms, in a range of political, economic and educational endeavors. They are widely viewed in Sarawak as an example of indigenous success and known for their strong Christian orientation (Amster 2003). Town-based Kelabit exhibit many of the obvious emblems of modernity, yet they also retain a strong sense of ethnic pride, despite their high levels of intermarriage. Kelabit have also been active in creating ethnic associations which hold many communal events each year, and most Kelabit migrants maintain strong social and economic ties in their traditional homelands (Amster 1998, 2004; Tan Chee Beng 1994).

Kelabit traditionally lived in multifamily longhouses and practiced both wet-rice and shifting hill-rice agriculture. Since the 1960s, access to the highlands from coastal towns has principally been by way of light aircraft, operated under government subsidy by Malaysian Airlines. The airstrip is located at Bario, where there are primary and secondary schools, numerous shops, and a range of government offices including a small Malaysian army post, immigration office, agriculture department, and medical clinic. In 2002 a highly publicized satellite-linked internet telecentre was established in Bario that operates on a combination of solar and diesel power and has made telephone communication possible in the highlands for the first time. Air travel remains the main route in and out of the Kelabit Highlands, though with the recent arrival of timber operations, it has now become feasible to use the nearby logging roads, a topic of great controversy in the Kelabit community today.

Directly to the east of the Kelabit Highlands across the international border—which is defined by a mountainous ridgeline that only in the mid-1990s was formally marked with border stones—is another highland plateau in Kalimantan, Indonesia. The administrative center of this region is Long Bawan, the economic and transportation hub for the approximately forty or so villages and the perhaps nine to ten thousand people in this region, substantially more populous than the dozen or so communities and roughly one thousand people that make up the year-round population of the Kelabit Highlands. The communities on the Indonesian side of the border are closely related indigenous peoples, who, like Kelabit, are primarily wet-rice farmers and devout Christians. For many decades, people from the Indonesian side of the border have traveled on foot to the Kelabit side of the border to work as seasonal wage laborers, typically during the labor-intensive planting and harvesting seasons, but also
increasingly to work on construction projects. Movement between the Kelabit Highlands and these adjacent Berian and Kerayan areas of Kalimantan remains exclusively by way of small footpaths and the flow of seasonal labor is unregulated, though loosely monitored by small immigration outposts on both sides of the border. In Bario the immigration office is usually staffed by one and at most two people at any given time.

Kelabit draw heavily on these neighboring communities for labor, and, while marriages across this frontier are not a new phenomenon, they are certainly increasing in their regularity and importance and it seems that some Kelabit men return home or remain in the highlands with the prospect of such marriages specifically in mind. As one Kelabit urbanite commented: 'If not for cross-border marriages, our longhouses would be empty.' Thus, a direct result of these marriages is that the rural population, long in decline, is now slowly rising, reversing a long pattern of rural depopulation (Lee and Bahrin 1993). These marriages not only help reproduce the Kelabit family and keep the family farm alive, but they serve as an alternative to life in town for a cohort of Kelabit men. These unions are also a vehicle for women and their families from the Indonesian side of the border to have their children and grandchildren grow up as citizens of Malaysia, with all the advantages that may bring.

**Examples of cross-border marriage**

I will now present three specific examples of cross-border marriage, all from the same longhouse-based community of the Kelabit Highlands, which I call Pa’ Dabpur, where I conducted anthropological field research—beginning in the mid-1990s and returning in 1999 and 2003. These examples highlight some patterns and idiosyncrasies of these marriages, which have become the overwhelming norm in this community since the mid-1990s. In a detailed survey of Pa’ Dabpur carried out between 1993–1995, and repeated a decade later, I identified a substantial increase (from already high levels) in the number of marriages taking place between young Kelabit men and women from the Berian and other border communities in Indonesia. In the 1993–1995 survey data, based on a total of 26 couples, nearly three-quarters of all existing marriages among those aged 35 and over were unions between two Kelabit. Among those under 35, however, the inverse was true: Kelabit-Kelabit marriages constituted only one quarter of the total. The re-survey in 2003, however, indicated that all marriages that had been initiated in the intervening decade—a total of six—were between Kelabit men and Berian woman. Given this common pattern, it is worth looking more closely at a sample of specific cases for which I have detailed knowledge.
**Allaister and Ramli**

I begin with the marriage of Allaister, a handsome and easygoing Kelabit who was in his early twenties when he agreed to an arranged marriage to Ramli, a Berian woman roughly the same age. Ramli first came to Pa' Dabpur in February 1994 as part of a work group hired to expand the wet-rice fields of the community headman, Tama Mawan (‘Tama’ means ‘father of’ in both Kelabit and Berian languages). The harvest was over and most the winnowing and threshing complete and Tama Mawan and his wife had already sent a number of sacks of milled rice to family members in town by way of the airstrip in Bario. They now sought to convert some extra pastureland into wet-rice fields. The project was contracted out to a distant relative from the other side of the border, Tama Leput, a village headman from the Berian. Tama Leput assembled a group of ten people, including his daughter Ramli, and received a payment of RM 3000 (approximately US$1200) for the project—funds which came from Tama Mawan’s eldest son, a university graduate and professional working in West Malaysia.

For about three weeks, equipped with metal hoes and one wheelbarrow, the workers transformed rough pastureland into a series of wet-rice fields. Sleeping in a nearby farm hut, the group experienced none of the traditional hospitality typically lavished on longhouse visitors (Amster 2000). Some nights, however, Tama Leput was invited to the longhouse to eat with Tama Mawan and his wife. One of their topics of conversation was his unmarried daughter, Ramli, who was suggested as a potential wife for one of the eligible bachelors of the village.

Their first choice was Edward, already in his thirties and still unmarried. Edward was fed up with town life and had come back to Pa' Dabpur with the hope of marrying a particular Kelabit woman, who had herself recently completed her schooling and was home to help with the harvest. The girl’s family, however, rejected Edward’s marriage proposal, and their daughter—as with most Kelabit women—returned to town seeking office work. When Tama Mawan approached him with the idea of marrying Ramli he turned down the offer, claiming he no longer wished to remain in the village. It was then proposed that Ramli marry his younger brother, Allaister, who had also returned home after completing his schooling and was helping look after his aging parents.

The young couple met only once before everyone involved agreed to the marriage, and only a few more times before Ramli returned home to prepare for the wedding—scheduled to take place the following month in her village. As expected, Allaister’s family had agreed to provide a substantial bride payment (purut), to which they turned to Allaister’s elder sister Bulan, married to an Australian expatriate working for Shell Oil in Miri. Bulan agreed to supply the funds but also expressed a desire to be present for the wedding, causing the wedding to be delayed until May when she could come.

In May, a group of more than a dozen people, including Bulan and myself, set off on foot for the Berian. Prior to our departure, Tama Mawan went to the immigration office in Bario to get an official letter of travel (surat jalan) naming
all the members of the wedding party. This formality, perhaps unnecessary, was meant to prevent potential problems from Indonesian immigration officials, known for their tendency to demand money from Western foreigners (mainly backpackers) entering on foot from Malaysia. I strongly suspected that this formality was a result of my coming along and, indeed, when we went into Long Bawan during the trip, the Indonesian immigration officers there—who never actually saw this letter—did in fact attempt to extort money from me, but were talked out of it by our host Tama Leput, whose authority was sufficient to protect me from having to pay a large ‘fee’ (supposedly for an improvised ‘temporary visa’, but in actuality itself an illicit source of income for the immigration officers). There were, however, a few tense hours during which Indonesian immigration officers held my passport and I became concerned that my fieldwork might be in jeopardy.

The walk to Indonesia made for a difficult day, involving ten hours of steady slogging on slippery trails, crossing streams and gullies on wet logs, often holding onto my Kelabit companions to steady myself as I tried not to think about the treacherous terrain below. Meanwhile, Tama Mawan and his elderly wife slid along smoothly in their bare feet. On top of the third hill, Tama Mawan pointed out—with an uncharacteristically ironic smile—that we were standing on the international boundary line, made obvious by a patch of recently cleared jungle used to land the helicopters by the Malaysian government when they were installing the border markers. The clearing made for a beautiful vista as we looked down on the Indonesian Berian, an area of half a dozen villages with its mosaic of rice fields that, by Kelabit standards, were quite expansive.

The wedding took place the day after we arrived. The bride and groom dressed in Western-style wedding attire, and approximately five hundred people were present. Following a hybrid mix of customs, the bride walked down one aisle with flower children escorting her, while the groom and his two best men walked down the other. A church band—drums, electric guitar, bass, and keyboards—played Christian songs resembling American country music and the preacher asked the couple to kneel down, praying over them in the evangelical style of local churches on both sides of the border. Prayers were also said over envelopes, one of which contained the bride payment. The familiar question, ‘Does anyone present know any reason why this couple should not be married?’ was asked in both the Berian and Indonesian languages, the couple exchanged simple vows, and a church service followed. Finally, announcements were made about a village-wide collection of wood scheduled for the next day, as part of traditional Berian labor exchanges associated with marriage.

The following day the Kelabit guests presented the bride’s family with the marriage gifts—the central item being the freshly cut lumber procured in the forest about two miles from the village by the groom’s close friends. Bags of gifts and cloth sarongs were hung from a pole in the center of the gift display and the wedding party was photographed in front of it. The bride’s family provided food and drinks as the celebration went on throughout the day and into the night.
The next day, the Kelabit contingent returned home and began preparations for a second wedding party. This offered Allaister’s family the chance to reciprocate hospitality and receive reciprocal labor. In keeping with Berian custom, members of Ramli’s family performed a day’s worth of labor on the new couple’s future rice farm. Meanwhile, the men of the village busied themselves slaughtering pigs and water buffalo and cooking meat, while women prepared the traditional large wrapped rice packets (*nuba laya*) for that night’s feast. Approximately ninety guests arrived on the night of the celebration, which included speeches, songs and dance (traditional and Christian), and games. Whereas on previous visits many of the visitors had experienced minimal hospitality as workers, they were now treated with the full hospitality of welcomed guests (*sakai*).

In the morning most of the visitors, along with some Kelabit, returned to Indonesia to attend a large church meeting in Long Bawan, the main attraction being an American evangelical preacher. I suspected that a few stayed in the highlands to look for work. Worn out from the journey, I turned down the invitation to go to the church meeting back across the border. I was left to reflect, however, on how, in a matter of just a few days, people from both sides of the border had moved back and forth across this frontier so casually and for multiple purposes. By simply following my hosts, I had been initiated into the pleasures and rigors of cross-border research, and also gained a new respect and appreciation for the effort required of migrant workers to traverse this border. While my own lack of an Indonesian research visa proved insignificant given the length of my stay, it was clear, however, that it would be risky to try anything more than brief sojourns across the border without proper permits. I also lamented that without doing proper fieldwork on the other side of the border, I could not get a more complete understanding of the Berian perspective on these marriages (and other cross-border practices), and that my understanding of this borderland economy would remain incomplete.

In sketching the story of this wedding and the cross-border sociality and movement it engendered, my purpose is to begin to paint a picture of the social contexts in which these events take place. Cross-border marriages involve a range of economic factors and forms of exchange, some of which are improvised, some traditional, and some entirely based on what the market will simply allow. As I have shown, this marriage was embedded in local forms of reciprocal exchange as well as linked economically to regional economies, such as the fact that Allaister’s sister, married to an expatriate oil worker, could serve as a key player by providing cash for the bride payment, and that Tama Mawan’s son sent the remittances that allowed him to employ the work group that initially brought Ramli to Pa’ Dabpur in the first place. It is also apparent that the state—barely mentioned at all here—played little, if any, role in regulating the movements and forms of exchange that made this marriage possible, as well as my own ability to traverse this border, which was never really problematic, except for minor inconveniences.
During my subsequent visits, I found Allaister and Ramli well adjusted to life in the highlands. In 1999, they had moved into their own single-family house, were expecting a second child, and working their own rice fields. By 2003, they had four children and spent much of their time with Allaister’s elder brother Edward, who returned to the village after another period in town and eventually married a Berian woman as well. It was striking how well Ramli was integrated into the community; had I not met her years earlier as a shy migrant worker working in the hot sun in a muddy rice field under construction, I would probably not have known that she was not Kelabit. She now had her own well-developed and gender-specific social networks, socializing with the growing cohort of Berian women, the wives and mothers who have become the critical component of what has kept this rural Kelabit community alive.

Roslyn and Gerawat
In October 1994, six months after Allaister and Ramli’s wedding, I was again invited to join another group traveling on foot to Indonesia, this time for an engagement negotiation. Gerawat, 22 years old at the time, had completed his schooling in town up to Form 5 (equivalent to eleventh grade in the U.S.) and had recently returned to the highlands to help his parents. The youngest of eight children, Gerawat was the only sibling not married and settled in town. His parents encouraged him to marry a Berian woman, in the hope that he would remain in the highlands.

Gerawat’s decision to agree to such a marriage was motivated by more than simply his parents’ desires. Many of his close friends residing in the village had already entered cross-border marriages and were starting families. He saw limited opportunity for himself in town and, as the youngest child, felt pressure to remain in the rural community with his parents. Unlike other men who return home disappointed with town life and their opportunities for work there, Gerawat had not yet worked in town and seemed unsure about the life he wanted, but he enjoyed the camaraderie with his friends and, with his parents’ help, began to look for a potential bride. It had been arranged by relatives for Gerawat to meet Roslyn during a trip Gerawat took to attend a soccer competition, held each year in Long Bawan, Indonesia in conjunction with Indonesia’s National Day. This was a popular event among Kelabit youth, who formed a team each year, and also used the event as an opportunity for scouting potential brides. Indeed, before leaving the men openly joked about the real purpose of the trip: to ‘mix’ with the girls in Long Bawan. Gerawat and his friends spent two weeks in Indonesia, during which he had a number of meetings with Roslyn, a quiet, shy schoolgirl of eighteen. He was never alone with her during this time, and said there was never anything resembling romantic talk between them, nor did they discuss marriage openly. Prior to the wedding, I asked Gerawat if he was nervous and he said he ‘trusted his relatives.’
Arrangements were made for an engagement negotiation in her village two months later. When the date arrived to go, a small group, including myself and Gerawat’s close friends and family, set off on foot to Indonesia. Our group took no precautions with letters from immigration and I was determined myself to keep my passport out of the hands of Indonesian authorities if at all possible. When we arrived in the host’s home, I quickly realized that none of the members of our group knew what to expect in terms of the protocol for negotiating an engagement. Tired from the long journey, we learned that the negotiations would last late into the night, regardless, it turns out, whether there was disagreement over the bride payment (purut). The talks went on until 3.00 a.m., punctuated by short periods of sleep, making for a tough night for the already exhausted members of our party, having just walked all day. The girl’s parents began by asking for nine water buffalo and retreated to the kitchen so that Gerawat’s family could discuss the proposition. Eventually, the two families settled on four water buffalo, three of which were to be given in return; this meant that Gerawat’s family only needed to give one water buffalo, and even that could be paid as the cash equivalent. They also settled on the sum of RM 1300 (about US$500), to be distributed to various relatives along with other gifts.

The next day, Gerawat and his entourage spent the day gathering, transporting and stacking a large gift of firewood for the family of the bride-to-be, and again photos of the couple were taken in front of the gift display. At every step, it was apparent that the Kelabit guests were learning to navigate norms (and perhaps idiosyncrasies) of unfamiliar Berian engagement negotiation practices. The wedding was set for five months later, a lively event where there were numerous opportunities for not-so-subtle flirting and matchmaking. On the day of the wedding, the bride’s family and friends spent a day expanding a wet-rice field on Gerawat’s family farm and that night a large contingent of guests arrived from Indonesia, bearing gifts of hand-woven mats placed in an impressive pile. Kelabit guests also arrived bearing gifts as well, mainly large tins of biscuits, which have come to serve as standard wedding gifts in the highlands. After a short ceremony, the signing of the marriage license took place—overseen by the local headman—and there were presentations of speeches, prayers, and numerous Christian songs performed in turn by Kelabit hosts and Indonesian guests. Later the youth danced to recordings of rock music and socialized late into the night, and it seemed likely that the wedding would help facilitate future cross-border unions.

After the wedding, Gerawat went to Miri, where he acquired a menial job working in a warehouse, leaving his new wife with her new in-laws to work on the farm. He said he had felt the need to acquire funds to support his family. Given this initial arrangement, it seemed that the main outcome of the marriage was the provision of help to Gerawat’s parents, all of whose children—and now Gerawat as well—were living in town areas. On my return in 2003, Gerawat and his wife were both permanently settled with his parents and growing rice as their main occupation. They had three children and appeared to be in an intimate,
harmonious relationship and had replaced Gerawat’s parents as the primary couple in control of the household and family farm.

**Harry and Esther**

Harry is a soft-spoken and intelligent man who was already in his mid-thirties when he was coaxed back to the highlands by his extended family. It did not take much to convince him to return. After a decade in Miri, he had become concerned that he would never find a wife and was still doing relatively menial work as an accounts clerk. He said he was ready to leave town when his ailing father asked him to come home to look after the family farm. Once in the highlands, he began rice farming and, in part because of his ability to speak passing English, got a part-time job in Bario working as the local booking agent for Malaysian Airlines. Less than a year after returning home, in 1996, he was married to Esther from the Berian.

Esther had first come to Pa’ Dabpur as a migrant worker two years before Harry’s return (in fact, she was in Tama Leput’s work group with Ramli). The couple met once prior to their wedding and, as with previous examples, in order to secure the marriage his family had to produce a substantial bride payment of 3600 Malaysian Ringgit (approximately US$1000). Otherwise, as Harry explained, he would have been obliged to go to live with her family. When I sat with Harry and Esther in their extremely modest single-family home in 2003, they both stressed a key advantage of their marriage was that their children would attend Malaysian schools. Esther emphasized that Malaysian schools offered instruction in English—a language she did not speak—and required fewer expenses and fees than schools in Indonesia. Harry hoped that his children would do well in school and would not be farmers.

After seven years of marriage, Esther had established a close network of female friends from her home village in Pa’ Dabpur. She made periodic trips home and, even more often, had visits from family members coming over to work—some employed by her household. By 2003, there were already ten other women from her home region married into the village, a substantial presence for a community with an average year-round population of only about one hundred people. The only times Esther traveled to town was when she gave birth to their children, in a hospital in Miri. Traveling to Miri was not only a medical decision, but also aimed at securing their child’s place in the Malaysian system, where birth certificates are critical documents that help secure future access to the identity cards needed to be legitimately recognized by the state.

**Borderland tactics and ethnography**

The case studies presented here demonstrate how marriages between young Kelabit men and Berian women are embedded in a range of structural conditions and local expectations that reproduce the Kelabit rural household. As Wilson
and Donnan point out, ‘Why, how and where people cross borders encode these frontiers with multiple meanings, and demonstrate the diversity with which institutional and non-institutional organs of power in local and national society are negotiated’ (1998: 25). By examining cross-border marriages, this chapter highlights one of several ways in which Kelabit embrace the opportunities created by the existence of an international frontier and, in the process, harness the power of the state for uniquely local purposes. Clearly, the permeable border in this region allows a type of productive informal economy to exist, in which local residents—and a curious anthropologist—can move about freely. Such examples expand and challenge our understandings about the nature of citizenship and sovereignty, both of which prove negotiable in the margins of the state. Further, an ethnography of borderlands, such as this, helps to challenge—and hopefully move us away from—an essentialized concept of the state and to recognize how borderlands can serve as ‘sites of practice on which law and other state practices are colonized by other forms of regulation that emanate from the pressing needs of populations to secure political and economic survival’ (Das and Poole 2004: 7).

An implicit factor, among the numerous conditions surrounding these marriages, is the potential crisis faced by rural Kelabit communities due to the out-migration of marriageable Kelabit women. This crisis is linked to a gendered pattern, seen throughout East and Southeast Asia, where educational opportunities have led some women to choose to remain single, while men with less education, and often those in rural areas, seek out ‘brides from poorer countries, who are not in a position to be as “choosy” as local women’ (Jones and Shen 2008: 15). For Kelabit men, cross-border marriages emerge from a range of life choices and opportunities, including desires and experiences—often disappointing ones—relating to life in town. In response to questions about why they chose to enter into such marriages, these men often responded obliquely, claiming that they were encouraged to do so by family and expressing a vague sentiment that it was simply their best option. These marriages might also be viewed as helping dispel a crisis of masculinity brought on by the inability of these young men to achieve marital and/or satisfactory economic success in town (Amster and Lindquist 2005). An Indonesian bride is, in many instances, a Kelabit man’s only choice if he wishes to reside in the rural community, start a family and be considered a mature adult (lan merar), and thereby an alternative source of empowerment for these men, making their choice not to migrate to, or remain in, town viable.10

The Berian women I spoke with, not surprisingly, would regularly tell me that they engaged in cross-border marriage because the economy was better on the Malaysian side of the border, and communities were less crowded than back home—both of which make daily life easier. For these women and their families, cross-border marriages also open up opportunities, enhancing family alliances with regard to seasonal wage labor relationships, and, more pertinently, their own children’s future opportunities as Malaysian citizens. These marriages clearly make sense economically, but this provides only a partial explanation. As
with the men, there are also personal considerations—hopes, curiosities and desires—that help us understand why people engineer and agree to these unions, even if most find it difficult to articulate these reasons, as I found. What also needs to be stressed—and this applies almost equally to the men and the women—is that while potential spouses were consulted, and their opinions considered in the process of arranging these marriages—that the framework shaping these marriages emerges from a form of collective decision-making that involves the input and critical economic support of family members on both sides of the border. And while the structure of these arrangements appears to place Kelabit in an economically advantageous position, they are clearly mutually beneficial, as many forms of reciprocity and economic exchange are embedded in these alliances. The fact that Indonesian residents are in a position to demand such things as bride payments and exchanges of labor shows that the relations of power in these marriages are not entirely one-sided, although ultimately Kelabit have significant control over how migrants are incorporated into local communities, a state of affairs made possible by a kind of tacit collaboration with state agents. Indeed, as I have shown elsewhere, Kelabit commonly use the implicit threat of the state to maintain their hegemony over local resources, particularly access to land (Amster 2005b; Bala 2002).

As the stories presented here show, cross-border marriages are part of the larger framework of contemporary Kelabit life, in part facilitated by the urban dwellers’ ongoing relationship with, and interest in, their home communities. For many urban-based Kelabit, family farms and longhouse communities are viewed as a source of identity, and links to traditional culture carry deep nostalgic value. Many Kelabit claim they would like to return home to help with the harvest, yet most find this impractical given commitments to work and family in town. Furthermore, Bario rice (pade adan) is considered an essential staple food for urban migrants and most Kelabit families in town try to maintain a supply for their daily consumption, preferably from their own family farm. In addition, nearly all Kelabit living in town want to be able to return home to hold key events, such as name-changing ceremonies (Amster 1999), weddings, and funerals. Some Kelabit urbanites also talk about retiring in the highlands, though only a few have done so thus far. Given these sentiments, it is not surprising then that many Kelabit willingly contribute cash for the maintenance of family farms, homes, and churches, and this support to the rural homelands, along with the existence of a ready labor force and potential wives, provides a counterweight to outmigration and has helped stem rural decline. One can imagine, particularly with the current spike in food prices taking place in 2008, that some form of informal cross-border economy will remain intact for the foreseeable future, at least as long as there are economic imbalances to propel such movements.

As a field worker whose permits and base of study were squarely located in one country (Malaysia), this work clearly has some limitations, the most problematic being simply that I have not conducted equivalent fieldwork on the Indonesian side of the border. The study of borders would surely benefit from
more ethnographic studies that look at borderlands from the point of view of peoples on more than one side of a frontier, something that would require fieldworkers to plan ahead in trying to solve the problems of gaining permits to work in two or more nations. While my own fieldwork was multi-sited, at least within Malaysia—where I worked in both rural and urban Kelabit communities—my sojourns into Indonesia were clearly all too brief. Thus, the ethnographic tactic I used of following my hosts, while capturing the profound impact the borderland economy has on Kelabit people’s lives, still leaves some questions about what drives people from the other side to move across this border.

Notes
1. Some of the ethnographic examples presented in this paper have been discussed in previously published articles (Amster 2005a; Amster and Lindquist 2005) and I wish to acknowledge the editors and reviewers of those journals—Anthropological Forum and The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology—for editorial guidance and insight, as well as my co-author Johan Lindquist. I also wish to thank Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan for inviting me to rework this material for this book and their thoughtful guidance in the process. I alone remain responsible for any inadequacies in this text.
2. As is the case with many borders in Southeast Asia, the boundary between Sarawak, Malaysia, and Kalimantan, Indonesia, is an artifact of the colonial era. Cultural factors were not considered in the negotiations concerning the defining of this border, resulting in a legacy across Borneo that leaves interrelated peoples arbitrarily divided by national boundaries that have little local salience (Amster 2006). It is thus entirely conceivable that all the people of this region could have been classified as part of the same ethnic group, as they have closely related languages and traditions as well as a long history of interaction.
3. As part of an agreement between Malaysia and Indonesia, residents along the Malaysian-Indonesian frontier in Borneo are eligible for border passes to work in neighboring communities, though many are unaware of this rule and few acquire such documents.
4. In an effort to protect people’s identities, I have changed all names. The name of the community I worked in, Pa’ Dabpur, is a pseudonym. All other place names are accurate.
5. Five of these were men in their twenties and thirties, while one, an unusual case, involved a widower in his late fifties who, already a grandparent, now had a child with his new wife. This pattern is apparently typical of what has been happening in many similar communities of the Kelabit Highlands. For instance, Bala (2002: 101) reported in a neighboring community that six out of seven marriages of Kelabit below the age of 50 were to Berian women.
6. In the intervening period, Allaister had second thoughts about the marriage and expressed his wish to back out. However, his uncle, and headman Tama Mawan, made it clear that it was too late as his reputation would be stained and told Allaister to marry her or forget about having anything to do with him in the future.
7. While these practices were described by Kelabit informants as imported Berian customs, Bala (2002: 46) offers evidence that Kelabit have historically had reciprocal exchanges of agricultural labor (palawe) in conjunction with marriage as well. These
practices, perhaps abandoned as an effect of urban migration, were clearly being revived or re-introduced in the context of cross-border marriages.

8. While cross-border marriages are technically given legal status by marriage contracts signed and witnessed by local authorities, the license does not automatically confer citizenship on spouses. In fact, few wives in cross-border marriages attempt to acquire official identity cards and become Malaysian citizens.

9. For children of these marriages, paternity is paramount in determining ethnicity—both in local terms and from the legal perspective of the state in determining citizenship. Accordingly, the children of these marriages are not viewed as being of mixed-ethnicity but, rather, as Kelabit, and they invariably attend local schools and can go on to acquire the necessary documents that secure citizenship.

10. As Toyota (2008: 2) observes, this is a common pattern in the region, and many ‘men with low incomes and/or rural backgrounds are experiencing difficulties in finding a marriage partner in their own countries’.

11. There are interesting parallels here to the cross-border marriages recorded by Lyons and Ford (2008), who discuss Indonesian women who marry Singaporean men but who remain in their home communities while their husbands move back and forth across the border. This arrangement allows both the men and women in these non-cohabitating marriages to achieve a higher standard of living and class position. The mobility of the women engaged in these marriages remains limited, while the men use their position as Singapore citizens to their advantage (see also Amster and Lindquist 2005).

References


