



# Border History from a Borneo Longhouse

*The Search for a Life that is  
Very Good*

Amsterdam  
University  
Press

Valerie Mashman

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Drawing on anthropology's special insights into the particularities of local times and places, Dr Mashman's study provides historians of Southeast Asia with new sources of information by which to counter-balance an earlier generation of historians' heavy reliance on colonial and national archives that tended to foreground the perspectives of those at the center of imperial and post-colonial power. Thus, for post-colonial and nationalist historians this information provides, Mashman argues, much needed insight into the agency of indigenous actors located far from the centers of state power. It also contributes to our understanding of life in Southeast Asian borderland zones among people, like the Kelabit, whose traditional social and cultural relationships became, with the imposition national borders, transnational, and so, when seen from the center, problematic, or even potentially transgressive.

*Clifford Sather, Professor Emeritus, University of Helsinki*

This is a very detailed and valuable account offering a presentation and analysis of an indigenous perspective on the history of Sarawak. In this sense it is an important contribution to the field and advances an approach to anthropology that prioritizes the presentation and analysis of local narratives. The scholarship is strong.

*Matthew H. Amster, Professor, Gettysburg College, USA*

The book excels in terms of its rigorous engagement with the narrative database, and the methodological innovations taken by the author beyond the limits of the ordinary. For Sarawak anthropology, this is a pioneering and path-breaking research and work.

It represents an innovation into the anthropological method of researching oral historical narratives, and a contribution to the writing of an alternative indigenous history, excluded in the grand narratives of national and colonial history writing.

The whole presentation ...oozes o excellent craftwomanship, visionary planning with painstaking "jungle fieldworking."

*Zawawi Ibrahim, (d. 2022), Professor, Universiti Brunei Darussalam*

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*The Search for a Life that is Very Good*

*Valerie Mashman*

Amsterdam University Press



This book is dedicated to the memory of my father-in-law, headman Melian Tepun, “elder to millions,” who later inspired headman and narrator Melian Tepun to take on his name. It is also dedicated to Ose, Joel, and Alena Murang, and the scattered family, friends, and colleagues across the globe, who continue to sustain me with their encouragement and enthusiasm.



Frontispiece: Tama Pasang Murang, later known as Melian Tepun, the headman who inspired narrator Melian Tepun to take on his name. Photograph taken in 1971. *Nicholas Kusing Nga'ang*.

Cover illustration: The narrator, Melian Tepun, in ceremonial dress 2014. *Osart Jallong*.

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I have to end by stating that this book is my own work and I alone am responsible for any failings.





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# 1 Introduction

## Abstract

I begin by explaining how I received three narratives in the longhouse of Long Peluan by chance, prompting a reflection on serendipity in fieldwork. The act of passing on the narratives on a cassette is a new way of disseminating intangible oral heritage, of vital importance to humanity because of the relationship of such knowledge to culture and identity. Subsequently, the knowledge generated by the narratives is outlined indicating the questions this raises. This book sets the narratives and the knowledge transmitted within the context of the longhouse and the Austronesian-speaking world.

**Keywords:** Serendipity, longhouse, intangible heritage, Austronesia, oral narratives, decolonizing history.

## 1.1 Introduction

This book was prompted by an unexpected gift, which came about by pure chance. One day, sometime in 2010, I was visiting Long Peluan, my husband's longhouse, to follow up on some previous research on basketwork. I was unexpectedly given three cassette tapes and a tape recorder complete with batteries. Melian Tepun, the elderly headman of Long Peluan, wanted me to listen to three narratives he had recorded for his eldest son, Berrick, in 2006. Sadly, Berrick had since died. Melian's reason for recording these narratives was so that, firstly, his sons and then the wider community would know "why things are the way they are." As I listened to the narratives, I became very excited as I realized that there was a great deal of new, previously undocumented material that was worth transcribing and translating. These stories were particularly precious as the Kelabit are reluctant to talk about their history since becoming evangelical Christians.

It has long been said that there is an element of serendipity in anthropological fieldwork. The best gifts or insights from the field are never planned. Serendipity is "the combination of accident and sagacity in recognizing



the significance of a discovery” (Remer 1965: 6). At another level, the serendipitous gift of the narratives caused me to ask myself another question. Why had Melian Tepun given these narratives to me, rather than anyone else? In many ways, I was a good target for disseminating the content of the narratives as I had been a regular visitor with my husband, asking questions in the village for over 12 years, researching baskets and recording traditional songs (Mashman 2012; Mashman et al. 2014). We had been to the village many times since my first visit in 1984, which had involved an epic four-day boat journey on the Baram River and three days of trekking over highland ridges. At the time, we had made recordings of elders talking about the past, in particular Melian’s father, So Tepun.

Another clue to answering this question comes in the word *turis* that Melian himself uses in the first narrative to refer to visiting Western scholars who have been researching the megalithic stone culture and investigating the cultural sites in the highlands (Barker et al. 2008; Hitchner 2009). He says that it is *turis* who say that the stone megalithic graves represent the earliest history of the Kelabit people, and he states that they say the land in the upper Kelapang belongs to the Kelabit. He uses the word *turis* to refer not to tourists, who rarely come to Long Peluan, but to researchers as outsiders and authorities. So, it may be that he saw me as a *turis*, a person who is an outsider with another kind of knowledge. Perhaps he saw my connection with my husband and other members of the longhouse diaspora as a means of enabling the narratives to circulate in a new way.

This leads me to pause a moment to consider the significance of this book, which is the fulfilment of the headman-narrator’s intention to disseminate the narratives in a new way.

In the old days, stories were handed down across the generations in a time-honoured manner within the longhouse setting, or on journeys across the landscape. This provided continuity for the transmission of oral traditions, which have now been identified as intangible cultural heritage. Oral traditions have become a fragile legacy of indigenous knowledge conveyed in local languages. Their continuously shifting nature and lability have come to be valued globally (UNESCO 2016). The indigenous knowledge embedded in the narratives through generations of transmission is recognized today as being of vital importance to humanity because of the unique relationship of such knowledge to culture and identity. An appreciation of this knowledge has become a basis for sustainable development, as a means to address environmental issues and climate change, to develop modern medicines and treatments, and to sustain indigenous cultures. However, as Rashidah Bolhassan points out, there is a danger that such knowledge

becomes “static, archaic or obsolete” in the process of transcription and translation, unless there is interpretation and understanding on the part of the knowledge-holder (Bolhassan 2018: 1, 3). With this in mind, a key aim of this book is to provide a context for the headman-narrator telling the narratives by using an anthropological approach to deal with his partiality and subjectivity. It is important to set the background to the narratives and the knowledge transmitted within the cultural setting of the longhouse and the Austronesian-speaking world.

## 1.2 The Austronesian setting

Poring over the volumes produced by the Comparative Austronesian Project at the Australian National University, I was excited to discover that other peoples had similar narratives. People at Long Peluan speak Kelabit, Sa’ban, and Kenyah Lepo’ Ke’, Austronesian languages spoken by an estimated 270 million people across the world from Taiwan to New Zealand and from Easter Island to Madagascar. The source of these languages is thought to be mainland China and Taiwan with the dispersal going back some 6000 years, although there is some debate over the origins and nature of the dispersal of these languages, (Bellwood, Fox, and Tryon 1995).

Anthropologists have built on ideas of a common linguistic ancestry shared by the Austronesian-speaking world (Fox 1993a; Jolly and Mosko 1994; Fox and Sather 1996). This heritage is manifest in the majestic longhouses of Borneo, the great houses of the Toraja Highlands in Sulawesi, and the Minangkabau houses of Sumatra. These houses stand for much more than imposing physical dwellings. The Austronesian house represents an intangible cultural category, which defines the social groups that identify with it (Fox 1993b: 1). For example, for the Toraja, the house is “a substitute for written history,” as the elaborately carved great houses are the prerogative of the aristocracy, who remember extensive genealogies through their houses (Waterson 1997: 67). Similarly, in Sarawak, longhouses represent much more than a physical dwelling place for most ethnic groups. For the Iban, living in longhouses means that every family is “subordinated to collective goals,” which are “encompassed by a larger totality,” from the household *bilik* family to the longhouse to the wider river region and beyond (Sather 1993: 107). Likewise, the Lahanan in Sarawak have a strong attachment to their longhouse as place of origin and the urban diaspora return to the longhouse with a strong sense of it being a place of their own (Alexander 1993: 41). The Kelabit share similar ideals, as demonstrated by the urban diaspora

pooling resources to support the continuity of the longhouse. The rebuilding of the longhouse that burnt down at Long Peluan in 2018 is only possible through their fundraising efforts. To them, the longhouse represents a deep attachment to a shared past, the legacy of ancestors, which has to be rebuilt to provide the continuity of this legacy for the next generation. To sum up, the Kelabit longhouse, like the Austronesian house, represents more than a building made of wood or bamboo, as, from the house, it is possible to trace the ideals and values of a society, as articulated by James Fox:

In a complex way, the house is culturally emblematic: it has a clear, concrete representation but relates to and embodies abstract social ideals and a variety of culturally specific values. From a physical structure – a particular arrangement of posts and beams – one can begin to trace the ideals and social values of society (Fox 1993b: 2).

These intangible aspects of longhouse culture, the ideals and values, are recurring themes in the Long Peluan narratives: the leadership qualities of founders, the customary law, the *adat*, which encompasses values and ideals that bind the house together through genealogies, migrations, alliances, and places on the landscape that make connections, linking the current members of the longhouse to wider domains. The recital of the narratives reinforces the narrator's status and reveals the importance of values in maintaining cohesion in the longhouse.

Thus, the comparative Austronesian project is a source of rich analogies, as there is a common interest in the narration of shared history to construct the past, in spite of the religious and cultural diversity embraced by the Austronesian language groups (Bellwood, Fox, and Tyron 1995: 4). The major interest in origins, related to social identity and social differentiation, is manifested in narratives that tell of the arrivals of founders, migrations, journeys of groups or individuals, and contests to give precedence (Fox 1993b: 17). This places the Long Peluan narratives beyond the narrow confines of the nation-state, locating them in a common wider heritage embraced by millions of Austronesians, many of them also linguistic minorities of less than a thousand speakers (Blust 2013).

### 1.3 What the narratives are about

The first narrative, set in the early part of the 19th century, which I call “Warfare and the migrations of our people,” describes the migrations and



Figure 1.1: So Tepun, father of Melian Tepun, inside his kitchen, November 1984. Valerie Mashman.

separations of the alliance of Ngurek, Sa'ban, and the Kelabit, as “our people,” and how they came to Long Moyo and then upriver to Long Peluan. After this, a group under the leadership of the charismatic ancestor Telen Sang eventually defeated their enemies in warfare and migrated to Long Di'it, the homeland of the southern Kelabit.

The second narrative, entitled “The quest for the life of government,” deals with Tai Iwan, another ancestor-hero, and his alliance with the Ngurek chief Aping Nyipa and his mission to end warfare from across the border. This comes about by seeking the intervention of both the Brunei representatives and the Brooke administration, which acquired the Baram District in 1883. The latter eventually supported an expedition to raid Tai Iwan's enemies at Pa' Ibang. This leads to Tai Iwan engaging in peace-making, giving taxes to the government, and summoning “our people” from over the border to build a fort, a government office at Lio Mato. Around this time, his descendants and other family members set about moving downriver to be closer to the fort, and thus Long Peluan begins to be established, as a longhouse settlement.

The third narrative is entitled “The coming of the life of prayer.” At some point in the late 1930s, the narrator's father, So Tepun, goes to seek Christianity in the Krayan River area of Dutch Borneo, arranging for an Indonesian missionary to come and teach people about Christianity. He describes how people gave up rituals of observing omen birds and animals and how they were asked to stop drinking *borak* (rice beer). However, not everyone converts at once. He also outlines how So Tepun and others in turn

evangelized to the Penan, how they gradually became settled neighbours at Long Beruang, and how they helped the Kelabit carry goods and letters from downriver into the highlands (Figure 1.1).

#### 1.4 Questions raised by these histories

The Kelabit are not interested in their history and most of the people anthropologist Matthew Amster interviewed twenty years ago “had very little knowledge of their collective past.” He reckoned that historical discourse was disappearing for the Kelabit (Amster 1998: 6). In fact, there is a tendency to suppress and reject knowledge of the past: a Kelabit anthropologist, Poline Bala, describes how past practices are seen “as a burden from which they seek to be freed” (2008: 116). Out of curiosity, I asked an elderly headman, Dara Balang, about the old warrior songs that extolled headhunting and warfare. I was reprimanded for even posing the questions and was told that these were aspects of the past that, as a devout Christian, the headman wanted to forget about. In fact, I could not find any other Kelabit who could narrate such stories, nor could I find any similar historical stories transcribed and published. I began to realize how unique these narratives are, and how important it is to publish them.

Nonetheless, the serendipitous ways in which the three historical narratives were given to me seem to challenge ideas about Kelabit disregard for the past. In fact, the narratives are laden with stories of previous places and episodes, providing glimpses into the life of the Kelabit longhouse community through time and space. However, certain questions recurred as I thought more about the narratives. Why are these three oral historical narratives told at this point in the social history of the community? What is their significance in the contemporary world of the Kelabit? What kind of indigenous knowledge is transmitted? Why are they introduced as *cerita sejarah* (stories of history) by their narrator, Melian Tepun? Would they be able to provide a window into the Kelabits’ knowledge of their collective past? Or, would the narratives offer “conceptualizations, which the group has about its own past” (Maxwell 1989: 168). What are the underlying themes, if any, that link these three narratives? When examining the narratives against parallel accounts or documented history, what is the oral or written evidence to support or refute events in these narratives, and how do we deal with historical anomalies? What meanings is the narrator intent on conveying? Is the telling of the narratives related to the contemporary problems faced by the community caused by logging and road building?

Does the internal conflict the community is experiencing create a challenge to the narrator as a headman? Are changes in the value system brought about by the penetration of a cash economy affecting the authority of the elders and the headman? Is the act of telling the narratives an attempt by the headman to assert authority? It is these issues that I grapple with in the chapters of this book as I set the background to the narratives or align events described by the headman-narrator with reports in the *Sarawak Gazette*, or seek to explain details of history.

### 1.5 Minority indigenous history matters

Related to these questions is the position of the oral historical narratives of indigenous people, such as the Kelabit, in the national history of Malaysia. The documentation of the oral historical narratives of indigenous peoples has yet to gain a place in the national history of Malaysia. The neglect of oral history and the voices of minorities is an issue that Wang Gungwu already highlighted, some 15 years after the formation of Malaysia. Wang identified that the voices of minority groups had been left out of the body of colonial and nationalist history (Wang 1979: 4). In fact, it is widely claimed that Malay nationalist historians have used written history as a political tool to unite Sabah, Sarawak, and Peninsula Malaysia under one nation. In this process, the local experience of colonialism and the nationalist struggle have become subsumed into the project of national history. As a consequence, each locality on the margins has its own historiography, its own fragile traditions, which need to be affirmed in the face of the cultural domination of the homogenizing tendencies of national history at the centre.

However, to attain this, a methodology is required for understanding and discussing history in a plural society. As mentioned, there has been a deliberate omission in the documentation of the voices of minority groups in the body of colonial and national history. This was because of repeated distrust by colonial historians of oral histories on the grounds of a lack of reliability (Wang 1979: 4; Vansina 2006: 11). In keeping with Western imperialist history, reliability was equated with the idea of scientific objectivity, and that “any culture or people that did not do this, did not have a sense of history and was thus inferior to those who did” (Wang 1979: 5). From this viewpoint, history was based on the reports, letters, and diaries of the colonial governments and, because the colonized did not have written documents, their perceptions were not considered relevant. This negation of the heritage of minority indigenous history is explained by the

concept of Orientalism as a system of thought, described as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1985: 3). In other words, to include minority indigenous history in the historical discourse of the nation, there is a need to explore “ways that different cultures formulate their own historicities” in relation to nationalist ideology (Hoskins 1987: 606). This study turns to anthropology to analyse the historicities inherent in the Long Peluan narratives, given the scope of tools that it provides for dealing with the subjectivities of oral history and meanings, both partial and varied, which emerged from fieldwork. This offers a new perspective on history, creating multiple viewpoints (Lai 1998: 101). This is a consequence of interpreting history as it is influenced by culture and values using ethnography.

Another reason why these histories are important is because, as mentioned earlier, the Kelabit are forgetting their history. This is happening for a number of reasons: formal education; large-scale migration out of the highlands; intermarriage with other ethnic groups and the loss of the language and conversion to Christianity. Since embracing evangelical Christianity in the late 1930s, the Kelabit have broken with the past and become reluctant to talk about warfare and pre-Christian belief systems (Amster 1998: 6). Thus, the documentation and analysis of these three historical narratives contribute historical understanding of Kelabit interactions with other ethnic groups and the state at the turn of the 20th century, as well as the first stage of their conversion to Christianity in the late 1930s, which were not covered in previous major studies touching on the Kelabit and their past (Lian-Saging 1976/1977; Talla 1979; Janowski 1991; Amster 1998; Bala 2002, 2008; Hitchner 2009; Ewart 2009; Bulan 2011). However, the circulation of these narratives in 2010 indicates a shift in attitudes on the part of the Kelabit towards history. The current generation of educated Kelabit, aged in their fifties and sixties, understand the need to document history, particularly in relation to migration, megaliths, and land use, as history and evidence of occupation of land are important tools for claiming their land at a time when the boundaries of their territory are challenged by logging and neighbouring groups. Nonetheless, I still encountered resistance among the elder generation to talk about the past. This resonates with discussions of the wider issue of the disappearance of indigenous knowledge due to the introduction of national education systems and proselytizing religions (Bolhassan 2018: 7).

As highlighted earlier, there has been an omission in the documentation of the voices of minority groups in the body of colonial and national history in Malaysia. One consequence of this in Sarawak was that local ethnic groups became identified by the idiosyncrasies of the Brooke administrators’

ideas of bounded homogenous ethnic categories. There was no grasp of the mobility of people and their fluid relationships facilitated by extensive river systems, which supported heterogeneous ethnic identities across a landscape devoid of political borders. Groups became cast with fixed identities in order to expedite the state's policies of control through pacification and taxation. The consequences of this have not escaped Malaysian scholars such as Farish Noor (2010: 79), who notes that historical texts written in the post-independence era have unquestioningly accepted the ideology of fixed racial categories brought about by the colonial era. These texts often deny the reality of the heritage of an ethnically mixed Malaysia, composed of heterogeneous rather than homogenous communities. Noor highlights the need to review this situation and to take a multivalent view of history.

This book contributes to this undertaking by using anthropology to interpret oral history and uncover underlying concepts. The identification of the indigenous concept of *lun tauh* (our people) as a heterogeneous identity across Borneo before the institution of borders and the establishment of the colonial Brooke state, impacts the ongoing debate about ethnicity in Borneo and Malaysia (Shamsul 2004; Chua 2007; Thambiah 2009; Metcalf 2010; Hoffstaedter 2011; King 2012; Sillander and Alexander 2016). Furthermore, this study goes further by establishing a connection between the generation and consolidation of the inclusive social grouping of *lun tauh* (our people) and the value system, which prizes the quality of *doo'* (goodness or standing), which is both inherited at birth and acquired through effort. The fact that status is fluid and can be acquired is accounted for by the Kelabit concept of the mobility (*iyuk*) of value or "what value does" (Miller 2008: 1123). "What value does" is to continuously generate the standards of *doo'*, which enhances sociality, which is the key to survival in the Kelabit longhouse and the community beyond.

Finally, this study contributes to the process of the decolonization of history because it establishes the meanings local people ascribe to the events they experience, through their value system, highlighting their agency. This comes about through understanding how local people negotiate the world through their value system and how this explains why they act the way they do. How this takes place is further reflected in the outline of chapters below.

## 1.6 Outline of the book

The purpose of this book is to contextualize the narratives and to provide commentary and analysis, in order to understand their significance and their meanings.





Figure 1.2: A megalithic grave at Long Peluan, Menatoh Lem Dusur, 2011. *Valerie Mashman*.

Chapter 2 provides a general context to the narratives through a description of the geographical setting of Long Peluan at the intersection of a number of ancient trails, across a landscape without borders, which have been part of people's conception of their surroundings and their ordering of space. This explains how the Kelabit and the Sa'ban are linked to a wider group of people embraced by the term *lun tauh* (our people) through language, kinship, and historical allegiances. I then go on to describe the settlement of Long Peluan, outlining features of households, ethnicity, levels of education, subsistence, and income. Next, I consider the mother settlement at Pa' Di'it. A further common factor is touched on: the history of a shared cultural practice of secondary burial, the traces of which are to be found in a megalithic stone culture consisting of dolmens, stone mounds, and standing stones across northern and central Borneo (Figure 1.2).

These monuments, which marked deceased illustrious chiefs, were associated with prestigious death feasts that connected *lun tauh* (our people) across mountain ranges, headwaters, and political boundaries. The sponsorship of such feasts promoted the standing (*doo'*) of the hosts in many complex ways as they mobilized a large workforce to prepare for the feast and erect a monument.

In Chapter 3, I identify the genre of the narratives as oral historical narratives, in terms of "memories of memory" (Morrison 1998: 2) against other forms such as oral traditions and oral histories. Several features characterize this genre. The action is set in historical rather than mythical time, and events take place within an episodic time frame. To further legitimize

the authority of the narrator, genealogies are used to create links with the narrator, the audience, and the central characters or heroes. In addition, a sense of place is evoked, through features in the landscape, to provide a visualization of action in a familiar setting and to give prominence to salient territorial features. A technique commonly used within the genre is the voice of the narrator, who articulates the purpose of the narratives, which can be understood in terms of his concerns as a leader. These can be better grasped through the Kelabit ideas of prestige and standing (*doo'*) and social mobility (*iyuk*). I link this to the notion of value and values as a tool for analysing the narratives (Graeber 2001: 1). I suggest that highlighting values and agency widens the parochialism of the narrator's perspective for the reader.

Chapter 4 deals with the function of an anthropological method to analyse the oral narratives. I look at the role of the narrator, the chain of transmission, concepts of time, and multiple viewpoints. The issues and challenges of translating and transcribing the narratives are also discussed. Finally, I touch on my position in this study as an anthropologist utilizing multi-sited fieldwork.

In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I present summaries of the narratives, translations of the text, and analysis. The analysis of each narrative is treated in a similar manner. Each narrative has been given its title by me as the editor and I have split each narrative into parts with numbered subheadings in order to guide the reader, and to facilitate cross-reference between the translation and the commentary and the original transcriptions in the appendix. The first narrative, Chapter 5, develops the theme of *lun tauh* (our people) through the alliance with the Ngurek and Sa'ban, and this is explored more fully in the discussion section after the commentary of the narrative text. Chapter 6 features the second narrative, which takes place at the beginning of the Brooke government and provides rich and unique perspectives of this era from the borderlands. These are juxtaposed with alternative narratives and Brooke accounts, which are to be found in the appendices. The discussion at the end of the chapter focuses on the meanings that the narrator conveys through this narrative and links are uncovered with the theme of *lun tauh* (our people) and the pursuit of value, *doo'*. Chapter 7 sets the background of the history of the conversion to Christianity in Borneo and the transition of the Penan to a settled life. The commentary and the final analysis examine how far change really takes place for the Penan and the Kelabit in the context of the anthropological debate regarding conversion, continuity, and change.

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