

## Stories from the Kelabit Highlands. Folklore, Myths and Legends of the Kelabit tribe of Borneo collated and transcribed by Datin Nikki Lugun.

### Reviewed by:

**Valerie Mashman**

Institute of Borneo Studies

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

mashmanval@gmail.com

These stories convey a lively variety of themes, from animal stories about mouse deer and tigers, to stories from the epics about super heroes; to legends about features of the landscape and stories about comic characters. The first three stories feature the wily antics and survival tactics of the Borneo favourite, Agan Pelanuk, the mousedeer, whose feats are widely narrated by other Borneo ethnic groups. Next, comes the poignant story of a baby monkey, Bao Buda' who is shot by Ilan the hunter. This is followed by the love story of Dayang Bulan, the Moon Princess and a human, Lian the hunter. Once their son Agan is born, Lian the hunter mysteriously disappears from the story. The ending to this story is rather sudden with Dayang's impending departure from earth to return to the moon and her separation from her earthly son, Agan.

There is also a sequence of stories that relate to features on the landscape. A chapter deals with a legend about a rock, Batu Baliu on the landscape near Pa' Di'it. This rock is believed to be the petrified remains of a longhouse. The legend relates how its members became arrogant and lacked compassion for a widow who was forced to become an outcast, and was excluded from a head-hunting feast. She played a trick on them. The longhouse people, having drunk a lot at the feast laughed at a frog that appeared in the longhouse. The widow had dressed up the frog in a loin cloth and girded its legs with bells. As they laughed at the frog there was a thunderstorm and enormous hailstones engulfed the longhouse as it became turned to stone. The widow escaped running towards a mountain which is now names after her Apad Bawang Runan. It is interesting to note that this story is very similar to "The Tale of Batu Gading" (Harrison 1955), which focusses on a limestone outcrop near Long Lama, showing how similar themes resonate in different languages and cultures. Another story is about a feature on the landscape near Pa Mada, Toked Rini's rock which was the sharpening stone of a legendary giant called Toked Rini. The famous landmark of Batu Lawi features in another story. Its twin peaks, male and female, come to life as husband and wife and they encounter Batu Apoi a volcano. As a result of Batu Apoi's rejection by Batu Lawi's wife, the female peak, Batu Apoi beheads her. Her severed head is eventually rescued and is known as Batu Uluh. Batu Apoi is overcome in battle by Batu Lawi and becomes an inactive volcano. The origin of the great spirit Pun Tumid who haunts and protects the rainforest narrated in another story.

A complicated love story and a battle about the legendary hero Agan Tadun derived from an epic ballad, *adih*, feature in another story. Two more stories based on the epic *adih* is the heroic narrative of Berapui whose mother has to contend with Bao Buduk, the cunning witch. In another story, Berapui slays the dragon who has captured Ilan demonstrating his heroic qualities. Another story about human courage features a young woman Mujan who gives up herself to be taken by Balan the tiger to rid the village of his threatening attacks.

Many young Kelabit have been entertained by the three stories of the Palug siblings whose ridiculous antics feature underscore an important message of the value of listening to advice.

Datin Nikki Lugun is to be commended for producing the first illustrated volume of Kelabit stories written in the English language. Earlier publications have been aimed at a more academic audience. In the 1950s, Tom Harrisson encouraged the publication of local folk stories in the Sarawak Museum Journal. The Kelabit stories feature Agan Pelandok, the Noble Mouse Deer (Lu'un Ribu and Harrison 1955) and upland stone stories told by Lian Labang (1958). Carol Rubenstein and her team collected transcribed and translated epics, lullabies and love songs which provide sources for some of the stories in Datin Nikki Lugun's collection. Rubenstein's collection is published in both Kelabit and English (1973). At around the same time, aiming at a broader readership, the Borneo Literature Bureau reprinted some abridged Kelabit stories in English (Saunders 1972). More recently, Heidi Munan published Kelabit stories in her illustrated anthology of Orang Ulu stories written in English (2007). What is new is that Nikki Lugun has aimed at these stories at a wide audience by ensuring that the pace of the narratives is kept lively and that the characters appeal to the audience through the use of colourful contemporary anime-style illustrations. The stories are also enhanced with rhymes and poems in the Kelabit language. These consist of lullabies, head-hunting songs and a lament. Each story has an introduction which sets a general context and the primary and secondary sources are clearly indicated.

In addition, Nikki Lugun has written a good concise introduction to Kelabit history and culture. She draws on her extensive experience of Kelabit culture through being married to a Kelabit. Moreover, she has written stage adaptations of two Kelabit epic poems, "The Legend of Agan Tadun (1998) and "Dayang Bulan -the Moon Princess (2016). These have been performed as plays with music, dance and community recitals at the Sarawak Cultural Village.

There are a few very minor issues I have with this collection. The volume has numerous endorsements in the form of four prefaces and two forewords by members of the Kelabit community. These could have been more elegantly summarized as quoted extracts and put together as a single preface. Furthermore, these endorsements should be placed before and not after the general introduction to Kelabit history and culture.

This anthology is aimed at a broad English-speaking audience and is reputedly selling well in the Kinokunia bookstore in Kuala Lumpur. This is no mean achievement for a self-published book. The next step would be to produce shorter versions of the stories in the Kelabit language and in simplified, less sophisticated English for local schools. It is essential that these stories become widely available to Kelabit and Orang Ulu communities to provide a continuity in culture. Datin Sri Garnette Ridu summarizes the importance of this anthology stories in a foreword as follows:

"I hope story-telling will become part of our children's lives not only because the pleasure it will bring but also because of the power of ideas and values it imparts."

## REFERENCES

- Labang, L. (1958). An Upland Stone Story. *Sarawak Museum Journal*, VIII (11), 402-404.
- Lu'un Ribu and Harrison. T. (1955). Agan Pelandok, the Noble Mouse Deer. *The Sarawak Museum Journal*, VI (5), 573-579.
- Munan, H. (2007) *Orang Ulu Stories*. Utusan Publications.
- Rubenstein, C. (1973). Poems of the Indigenous Peoples of Sarawak: Some of the Songs and Chants. (Part 11). *Sarawak Museum Journal Special Monograph* No. 2. XX1 (42).
- Saunders.G E. (1972) *Borneo Folk Tales and Legends*. Borneo Literature Bureau.