The Legend and Landscape of Tuked Rini

Culture Heroes in the Highlands

In the Kelabit Highlands and in the wider highland area of which it forms part, stories were told up to the mid-late 20th century about men and women who exemplified, for the Kelabit of the past, ideal virtues. These can be called ‘culture heroes’, as they laid down models for the right way to live and to act.

Tuked Rini and Aruring Menepo Boong

Tuked Rini (‘Good Support for all’) and his wife Aruring Menepo Boong (‘Aruring who gathers together huge valuable beads’) are culture heroes. The longhouse which they lived in has been near to the ‘moon pond’ (taka bulan) close the Kelabit community of Pa’ Mada in the southern part of the Highlands. Until the early 20th century, stories of Tuked Rini’s adventures used to be told around the fire to encourage men about to go headhunting. Ngemong Raja of Pa’ Mada told some of his adventures to the American poet Carole Rubenstein in 1972, and Balang Pelaba of Pa’ Dalih told others to Monica Janowski in 1986.

Painting Tuked Rini

The two paintings illustrating this leaflet are by the Kelabit artist Stephen Baye of Ulung Pelang longhouse in Bario, grandson of the first Kelabit overall chief or pemanca. They are part of a series illustrating the story of Tuked Rini.

The Cultured Rainforest Project

The Cultured Rainforest Project investigated long-term and present-day interactions between people and rainforest in the Kelabit Highlands of central Borneo (Malaysian Sarawak), so as to better understand past and present agricultural and hunter-gatherer lifestyles and landscapes.

The project had three main strands:

Anthropology Studied oral histories and collected information on present-day relationships between people, the landscape, and the past as people remember or imagine it.

Archaeology Surveyed and excavated selected monuments to reconstruct the lives of people living in the highlands in the past.

Palaeoecology Analysed fossil pollen in sediment cores and from archaeological sites to document the long-term history of the rainforest and human impacts upon it.

The core study area was the Upper Kelapang valley. The fieldwork took place between 2007 and 2011, and was based mainly in and around the village of Pa’ Dalih.

Acknowledgements and Further Information

The project involved scholars from the University of Cambridge, University of Leicester, University of Oxford, Queen’s University Belfast, Sussex University, the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, and from the Sarawak Museum, Kuching.

The project was funded by a major research grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK). The State Planning Unit of Sarawak granted permission for the fieldwork. The project is indebted to the community of Pa’ Dalih who hosted the team, supported its programme, and most importantly made available information about their culture and history to the public domain.

Printing costs supported by a National Research Foundation of Korea Grant funded by the Korean Government (NRF-362-2008-1-B00218) to the Institute of East Asian Studies, Sogang University, Seoul.

Text by Monica Janowski. Layout by Borbala Nyiri. Maps by Mike Athenson. The front image by Stephen Baye. All other images are by members of the Cultured Rainforest Project team.


The Cultured Rainforest Project: long-term human ecological histories in the highlands of Borneo will be available from the Sarawak Museum and international bookstores.

www.culturedrainforest.com Leaflets, articles, view archive photographs, illustrations and audio-video recordings.
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**Tuked Rini and Headhunting**

Stories told about Tuked Rini focus on the adventures of male heroes who travel around the cosmos seeking people to battle with.

Tuked Rini and his close kin are said to have had superhuman powers, including being able to fly, and they carry their followers - hanging on to their sword sheaths - to places beyond the sky (langai), to the ‘wandering moon’ (tulan matem), and inside a great rock which is also a spirit tiger - the Batu Belang.

**Tuked Rini and the Spirit Tiger**

A story is told in the Kelapang valley about how a culture hero, said by many to have been Tuked Rini, hunted down and killed a balang - a spirit tiger - which was threatening his people and his lighthouse. Using his sister as bait, Tuked Rini tracked the balang to its lair, a cave within a stoney outcrop on a ridge near Pa’ Dalih. Here he killed the balang.

Tuked Rini traced an outline of the balang with his fingers on a stone by the river Kelapang, and then butchered it on a stone called the batu penagan. He then distributed its meat to all people of the highlands and depending on which part they received they became ethnic groups speaking different languages.

**The Time of ‘Joining with Power’**

Tuked Rini is said to have lived at a time in the past when there was more power in the cosmos, called getoman lamul’ or ‘joining with power’, when people were giants and able to perform feats which are imposable now.

Tales tell it was at that time that the stone jars and slabs in the megalithic cemeteries of the highlands, and most of the carved stones (batu ramu) and huge mounds of stone (perumpun) were made. Only then did people have the power to make them.

Baya Ribu standing beside a stone slab - possibly an ancient grave - said to have been used by Tuked Rini to sharpen his knives.

**Tracing of the spirit tiger made by Tuked Rini on a stone by the river Kelapang**

Aeons-long battles take place with the people living in those distant places in the cosmos. Help comes from Tuked Rini’s kin, who are called from other parts of the cosmos by a cosmic grandmother figure living at the Gate of the Sky (dupu langai). Eventually Tuked Rini is victorious. Many of his followers have been killed but he brings them back from the spirit world - where they have found that everything grows much better and are reluctant to leave - using the ‘water of life’ (pa’ lamul’).

**Tuked Rini returns with heads to his wife Anuring Menepo Boong, who expresses her complementary female power through her ability to lead all the other women to grow rice. A big feast is held to celebrate the accomplishments of the heroes - male and female.**

An ikat fest in 1987 in Pa’ Dalih in the southern Kelabit Highlands

**Map of the southern Kelabit Highlands showing the cultural sites associated with the story of Tuked Rini.**

Tuked Rini himself is said to have had the power to make marks on stone just by touching them with his hands and feet. Tales tell that he travelled around the highlands by jumping across the bends in the river, leaving marks on stones in the river where he landed.

Tuked Rini’s footprint in the Kelapang river

Tadun Bula and Dominic Leah are sharpening their tongkols on the same stone slab.