32 Interview with M. Ncube, Bembe, 27 July 1989.
33 L. Nthoi, 'Social Perspective of Religion', p. 373.
34 Ibid., p. 384.
35 Interview between J. Alexander, J. McGregor and N. Ncube, Njelele, 2 Sept. 1996.
36 For an account of earlier movements see T. O. Ranger, 'Religious Studies and Political Economy: The Mwari Cult and the Peasant Experience in Southern Rhodesia', in *Theoretical Explorations in African Religion*, eds W. van Binsbergen and J. M. Schoffeleers (London: RKP, 1986).
37 G. Hansson interview with M. Juliana, Mudavanhu, 3 Nov. 1993; A. Mawere and K. Wilson, 'Socio-religious Movements, the State and Community Change: Some Reflections on the Ambuya Juliana Cult of Southern Zimbabwe', paper presented at Oxford, 23 April 1994.
38 Hove and Trojanow in *Guardians of the Soil* (interview of nine men and two women).

7

Rice, Women, Men and the Natural Environment among the Kelabit of Sarawak

Monica Janowski

In this chapter, I look at the way in which both male and female are fundamental to the construction of what one might describe as full and proper humanity for the Kelabit of Sarawak. I suggest that neither gender can be seen as being more 'sacred' than the other through a special, closer relationship with what might be termed 'nature'. Rather, both genders may be said to be sacred through their role in generating humanity via the relationship which the Kelabit have with their natural environment.

The 'Euro-American' dichotomy between 'nature' and 'culture' has been explored by Strathern.[1] I would suggest that it is not only in 'Euro-American' societies that there is a conception of a distinction between that which is not under the control of humans – which we may describe as 'the wild' – and that which is – which we might describe as 'culture' or 'civilization'. Among the Kelabit of Sarawak I found that, although there is no word which could be translated as 'culture' or 'civilization', there is a conception of something called *ulun*, which I shall gloss as 'human life'. *Ulun* implies a special human way of life based on rice-growing that is distinct from simply 'being alive' (*mulun*) which is applicable to wild living things. As is arguably the case in Euro-American societies, for the Kelabit too, to be truly human means to transcend a way of life which is entirely within the sphere of the wild, even though having *ulun* is, in fact, only possible because of a reliance on something I shall gloss as 'wild life force' (*lalud*).

Both for Euro-American societies and for a group like the Kelabit,

gender is profoundly significant in the way in which people order the cosmos in terms of this type of dichotomy. However, male and female cannot be mapped in a simplistic way onto the tension or relationship between 'the wild' and 'the human', whether one describes these as 'nature' and 'culture' or not. This has been explored by contributors to the book edited by MacCormack and Strathern, *Nature, Culture and Gender*.[2] As MacCormack points out in her introduction, it seems more valid to propose that, in general terms, 'they [women] (and men) might better be seen as mediating between nature and culture' and that 'both men and women are nature and culture'.[3] This, indeed, is what I found to be the case among the Kelabit. Here I will explore the subtle way in which gender is related to notions of rice-growing and the forest, both of which are the essential elements in the Kelabit notion of the relationship between what is 'proper human life' (*ulun*) and what is not.

The Kelabit of Sarawak: Rice-Growers and Hunter-Gatherers

The Kelabit are a hill tribe living in the interior of the Fourth Division of Sarawak on the island of Borneo, on a highland plateau about 3,500 feet above sea level which is one of the sources of the Baram river. They probably now number about 7,500, about half of whom live in the highland area – half have migrated temporarily or permanently to the town of Miri, which is near the mouth of the Baram.[4] The Kelabit in the highland area live in small settlements consisting of one or two longhouses. The majority of Kelabit settlements in the highlands are now grouped in an area known as Bario, where the government has built a small airstrip, a clinic and a secondary school. In the period 1986–88, and again in 1992–93, I carried out fieldwork in a settlement known as Pa' Dalih in the southern part of the Kelabit Highlands, about twelve hours walk from Bario.

For the Kelabit, their physical relationship with the natural environment involves two major areas of interaction: rice-growing on the one hand and hunting and gathering in the forest (*polong*) on the other. They practice both wet and dry cultivation of rice, in which they are very successful, and they also plant tubers, mainly cassava, and maize, for snack foods, and a variety of other vegetables to be eaten with rice as side dishes at the rice meal. In the primary and secondary forest they hunt animals for meat, and gather vegetables as well as materials for crafts. All of the meat

eaten on an everyday basis and a large proportion of the vegetables eaten with rice at the rice meal are derived from hunting and gathering, demonstrating the importance of these activities in terms of subsistence.

A profound distinction is made by the Kelabit between rice on the one hand and wild plants and animals on the other; the latter are said to 'grow on their own' (*mulun sebulang*), while rice is considered to need human help to grow. All cultivated plants except rice are treated as 'wild', and also as 'growing on their own'. They are given away freely as are wild plants and meat, in contrast to the way in which rice is very explicitly owned and is not given away without creating a debt.

These two areas of interaction with the natural environment – rice agriculture and the exploitation of plants and animals which 'grow on their own' – are, in Kelabit eyes, very different from a symbolic point of view. Rice cultivation, for the Kelabit, enables them to be fully human, distinguishing them from animals who are dependent solely on the forest and also from humans who depend purely on hunting and gathering, such as the Penan who share the forest with the Kelabit. Rice-growing is judged, probably rightly, to be a considerable achievement in the context of the surrounding rainforest. It requires planning, foresight and skill. Above all, rice-growing work is *lema'ud*, a category of activity which is close to the English notion of 'work'. Hunting and gathering, on the other hand, are described as *raut*, a word also used to describe the play of children – something enjoyable, which one engages in willingly.

Play, Work and Gender

As they grow up, marry and have children, both young men and young women have to make a transition from purely *raut* activities as children to becoming involved in *lema'ud* and rice-growing. This is always perceived as involving a certain effort of will.

There is a sense that humans will easily revert to *raut* activities in the wild unless a constant effort is made to engage in *lema'ud* activities. Unlike *raut* activities, those of *lema'ud* are not conceived of as pleasurable, although there is considerable satisfaction in being successful in them. I use the phrase 'revert to' because I had a strong sense that hunting and gathering are seen by the Kelabit as a way of life which comes naturally, easily. It is, in fact, to a large degree equivalent to what Euro-Americans conceive of nowadays as

'natural'. Rice-growing, on the other hand, is, for the Kelabit, something which humans have imposed upon the natural environment.

Men are particularly attracted to *raut* activities. While young women almost invariably make the transition to becoming rice-growers smoothly, well before they are married and have children, young men do not. They resist the necessity of giving up a life of daily hunting in the forest. Some young men fail to make the transition even after they have become fathers, which is seen as the time when it is essential to take up adulthood and rice-growing. Men, then, may be said to be, in some senses, more closely associated with the wild where *raut* activities take place, and to be less closely associated with *lema'ud*. Things are not, however, quite as straightforward as this.

Gender, the Couple, and the Generation of 'Human Life' from the Life Force of the Forest

What is the meaning of rice-growing? Why should the Kelabit want to impose rice upon the rainforest? I would suggest that this is because, for the Kelabit, growing rice means being able to generate *ulun* 'human life'. This is achieved through the rice meal. The rice meal is provided by the leading couples of households, described as 'big people' (*lun merar)*, for their dependants and descendants (described as their *anak*, or 'children', although they are not always biological children).[5] Such households are described either as 'houses' (*ruma'*) or as 'hearths' (*tetal)*. I describe them as 'hearth-groups' because of the focal role of the hearth, where the rice meal is cooked and next to which it is consumed.

Rice has the central position in the rice meal. The meal consists of both rice and wild foods (or cultivated vegetables, which are treated as 'wild') cooked as side dishes. The fact that it is described as 'eating rice' (*kuman nuba'*), however, highlights the central position of rice in the meal; side dishes are described as *nok penguman*, literally 'something to eat with [rice]'.

At the rice meal *ulun* is generated which is passed from the couple who provide the meal to their dependants and descendants. This process is dependent on the provision of *lalud* (wild force) through the wild foods eaten with rice. Without these wild foods a rice meal cannot take place; at the very least a meal must consist of rice and salt, which is a wild food processed from brine springs in the forest. Although there is a public insistence on the importance of rice, wild

foods, and particularly meat, are as essential as rice to the meal. This is made clear at *irau* feasts, where domestic animals are slaughtered and a great deal of emphasis is placed on the provision, by the hosts, of plenty of domestic meat which has a monetary value.

The Importance of both Unity and Division of Male and Female

Errington has suggested that in insular South-East Asia there is a broad distinction between what she terms 'centrist' and 'exchange' societies.[6] In 'centrist' societies, there is an emphasis on the generation of power or potency[7] within focal centres in society, whereas 'exchange' societies emphasize the generation of potency through exchange between entities (most importantly, houses).[8] The Kelabit belong to the geographical area which Errington categorizes as 'centrist'.

Errington stresses the 'unity' of the genders in 'centrist' societies. In South-East Asia, male and female tend to be complementary and together make up a whole,[9] and the union of male and female is very potent; deities are often male plus female.[10] The Kelabit data, however, underlines the fact that it is important not to overstate this unity. At least for the Kelabit the separation of the genders is important as well as their unity.

I would suggest that the Kelabit hearth-group, with the 'big people' couple, is a potency-dispensing centre. Among the Kelabit, the gender make-up of this centre is vital to the process of generating *ulun* out of *lalud*. The couple is not only represented as unitary, a seamless whole whose division into male and female is veiled, but also as being clearly separated into its component genders, male and female.[11] The first representation is projected through the everyday emphasis on the cultivation of rice by the couple, on the rice meal as a *rice* meal, and on the delineation of hearth-groups through rice, which is very clearly owned by the hearth-group, unlike wild foods. The other representation of the couple as made up of male and female becomes apparent at communal meals, particularly at *irau*, child-naming feasts.

The suggestion that in 'centrist' societies of South-East Asia men and women are fundamentally the same sort of being has been made by some writers. Atkinson, for example, states that the Wana of Sulawesi 'underscore the fundamental likeness of the sexes'.[12] In the case of the Kelabit this would be too simplistic an analysis.

Among the young it is definitely not true. For the 'big people' couple, it is both true and not true, since there is an emphasis *both* on the 'sameness' of the two members *and* on the difference between them, and both perspectives are vital.

The concept of power, life force or potency in South-East Asia has been discussed in unitary terms.[13] For the Kelabit, however, there is a distinction between the concept of *ulun*, or human life, dispensed by 'big people' through the rice meal, and that of *lalud* or wild force, which is accumulated by the 'big people' in order to be processed into *ulun*. The role of the 'big people' within the hearth-group at the rice meal is to achieve this processing. Kelabit men and women *must* be different in order to make the generation of *ulun* possible.

In South-East Asian 'centrist' societies, power and stillness are concentrated the closer one gets to the very centre of the society, while activity is associated with the periphery. The Kelabit associate the centre with the longhouse, the ricefields and the hearth, while the periphery is the forest and mountains where hunting takes place. The centre is associated with the female, the periphery with the male. The male association with the periphery does not imply a superior, or a more powerful, role any more than the female association with the power-dispensing centre does. Men, in their association with the forest, have a vital role in accumulating *lalud*, the wild force necessary for the generation of human life. Rosaldo and Atkinson have noted a similar association between men and forces from outside the settlement for the Ilongot and the Wana.[14] But *lalud* would be meaningless without being brought together with rice, associated with women, at the rice meal. In the same way the powerful, still centre associated with the female, and rice which is linked with it, could achieve nothing without the *lalud* contributed by men.

It cannot be said that either male or female, among the Kelabit, are more associated with power or potency. Men are associated with access to wild life force, *lalud*, but women are more closely associated with the centre which processes this into human life (*ulun*). There is also a sense in which both men and women are connected with that *ulun*-generating centre, through the symbolism of rice.

The Complex Association between Rice and Gender

Rice is associated with women. It is women who are specialists in rice-growing, although their husbands may become expert

assistants and spend almost as much time in the ricefields as their wives. It would probably not be possible for a man to cultivate rice without a woman (I know of no cases where this occurs) while there are cases of women cultivating rice without a man. Certain key activities, in particular seed selection, are not done by men. It is women who, in the past, were said to have had special relationships with the deity associated with success in rice cultivation, Deraya, and who may still be said to have 'good *deraya*', using the word as a noun equivalent to 'luck' in English.

Rice stands symbolically for the entire rice meal. This is projected linguistically through the fact that the rice meal is described as '*kuman nuba*', literally 'eating rice'. Rice is cultivated together by the 'big people' couple and it stands for their achievement together, as a whole. From this perspective the couple is a seamless unity within which the distinction between male and female is minimally visible. Rice is associated with the 'big people' couple in opposition to the childless, who are described as *anak*, or 'children'. Young people rarely engage in rice-growing, although girls do so more than boys. It is once a young couple have children and have taken parental names that they begin to become seriously involved in rice-growing, and they spend more and more time together in the rice-growing enterprise as they grow older, reach grandparenthood, and take grandparental names. Rice, then, has the capacity to join the two genders together productively. It stands for their unity, which is achieved in relation to child-related status.

Rice is attributed an ambiguous position. Although closely associated with women it also represents the unity of the couple and 'stands for' the *ulun*-dispensing centre. Rice is counterpoised to the other vital element of the rice meal, wild foods, and particularly meat. A rice meal cannot take place without side dishes consisting of foods which are either actually wild or which are treated as such. This includes cultivated vegetables for side dishes, which have been simply planted and left, unlike rice which has to be protected and weeded.

Wild Life Force and the Forest

Meat is strongly associated with men. It derives, on an everyday basis, solely from the forest (*polong*). The forest is described as 'bigger' the less it is controlled by humans, and the more this is so the more it is associated with men. Although women gather

vegetables in secondary growth, they do not enter big secondary growth and they almost never enter primary forest, being afraid, they say, of the spirits which dwell there. Men, on the other hand, say that they are not afraid of spirits, and indeed some have developed 'friendships' with forest spirits.

The natural environment beyond the longhouse and the rice-fields is quite explicitly a source of *lalud*. It is the abode of spirits carrying *lalud*, the most important of which is named Puntumid. Puntumid's *lalud* gives him the power over life and death. It is said that, before the Kelabit became Christian, Puntumid made friends among the young men and gave them substances carrying *lalud – tabat* (the same word as is used for modern medicines) which gave them the power to heal and kill, the power over life and death. Puntumid can also give success in hunting, and apparently before the Kelabit became converts men used to pray to Puntumid for hunting success; now they pray to God, who is believed to be an even more potent source of *lalud*. The environment beyond the settlement is also said to be the abode of other peoples, similar to the Kelabit but existing on a mythical plane, who have great *lalud* and with whom mythical Kelabit male heroes, also carrying great *lalud*, have done battle according to the stories.[15]

Men, then, through their hunting, bring back *lalud* to the settlement. In the past, until perhaps 1940, men were also involved in headhunting, although much less frequently than among some other tribes in Sarawak such as the Iban. Headhunting is a major source of life force in many tribal societies in South-East Asia.[16] Among the Kelabit it would seem that headhunting, practised by men, was a means of bringing back *lalud* although *lalud* from this source was not fed into the rice meal.

Although side dishes at the rice meal consist of both meat and vegetable foods, it is meat which is the most highly valued and significant. It is to hunt and obtain meat that men normally enter the forest. The centrality of meat as the most important complement of rice at the rice meal is made clear at *irau* naming feasts, where only meat is eaten together with rice. Here, the association between men and meat is made explicit and is given value in a way in which it is not on an everyday basis. *Irau* are held, nowadays, to mark the birth of a child, which is, of course, the basis of parental status for his or her parents and of grandparental status for the grandparents. Parental, and particularly grandparental, status is vital, together with diligence and success in rice-growing, in the development of 'big people' status for a young couple, and hence

the considerable significance of *irau*. The co-resident grandparents of the child, who are the 'big people' of the hearth-group to which he or she belongs, are the hosts of the feast. On these occasions, side dishes consist of domestic meat from highly valued buffaloes and pigs which are accumulated with great effort by the host hearth-group. The amount of meat provided is noticed and commented on widely by the guests, and it is distributed with ceremony. The distribution is by men, and men engage in fat-eating competitions, underlining the association of men with meat.

The Veiled Significance of Wild Life Force

Only at *irau* and other communal feasts is the central importance of the wild and of *lalud* in the generation of *ulun* explicit. The Kelabit emphasize their identity as rice-growers; indeed, throughout the geographical area there is a tendency to play up rice-growing and to downplay the very widespread reliance on the wild.[17] This relates to the association of the young with hunting and gathering. Not only is the access to wild resources associated with men, it is also associated with the young and childless. Young men in settlements like Pa' Dalih spend a very large proportion of their time hunting in the forest, both primary and secondary, engaging in activities which are very strenuous and skilled but which are nevertheless categorized as 'play' (*raut*) by their rice-growing elders (who also like to indulge in them whenever they have time). For their part young women and girls spend a lot of time gathering vegetables in the secondary forest.

There is undoubtedly an emphasis placed on the need for youngsters to make the transition to rice-growing. The implication is that hunting and gathering must be left behind as a way of life, to be replaced by one based on rice-growing. Hunting and gathering is seen as the easy, straightforward choice, being what, in effect, comes 'naturally'; rice-growing is the difficult option. One is tempted to draw a parallel to the Euro-American evaluation of the taming of the natural environment as associated with civilization. Like Euro-American civilization, rice-growing creates a human site, distinct from the wild, pushing back nature.

Underlying this concept, however, is a recognition by the Kelabit, which is demonstrated at every rice meal, but particularly at *irau* feasts, that the contribution of the wild, and of *lalud* from the wild, is vital to the success of the generation of *ulun*, which

cannot be derived solely from rice. The significance of the association of men with the wild is that men, unlike youngsters, are able to feed *lalud* into the centre because they are part of of it. They are able to harness this wild force, in the form of meat, with rice, in order to make the generation of *ulun* possible.

Nevertheless, although access to *lalud* is important, gaining access to *lalud* is not, in Kelabit eyes, the great human endeavour. The great human achievement is successful cultivation of rice. The transition to being a rice cultivator, which occurs at marriage and particularly after the birth of the first child of a couple (when they begin to be regarded as 'big people' to some degree), is represented as difficult and painful, particularly for men. Some men continue to spend a good deal of time hunting even when they are established parents and grandparents, but this is ridiculed and leads to their being referred to in disrespectful ways behind their backs, for example, through the use of their childhood name rather than their parental or grandparental name or title. This indicates that they have not made a successful transition from childhood to adulthood. The fact that this transition is more difficult for men underlines their greater closeness to the wild and to the hunting and gathering way of life.

Conclusion

I would suggest that among the Kelabit it is not only women, but both women and men, separately and together, who are 'sacred custodians of the earth'. The natural environment, if we equate this with 'the earth', is the source of what, the Kelabit believe, enables them to live truly as human beings, and we can perhaps equate this with what is, to the Kelabit, sacred. Both men and women relate in vital ways to this natural environment – women through their focal role in rice agriculture and their stronger association with rice, and men through their access to the *lalud* (wild life force) of the natural world 'growing on its own'. This distinction between men and women is important. The two vital components of the rice meal provide the means of generating *ulun* (human life). Men and women in the 'big people' couple, however, are also united in rice agriculture, which stands for the entire endeavour of creating something distinctly human. Together, they form a powerful male-plus-female whole which has the capability of processing *lalud* from the forest, brought in by the male member of the couple, with rice, associated more strongly with the female member of the couple. The result is *ulun* – human life.

Notes

1 See for example, M. Strathern, *Reproducing the Future. Anthropology, Kinship and the New Reproductive Technologies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).
2 C. MacCormack and M. Strathern, eds, *Nature, Culture and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 9, 17.
3 In *ibid.*, pp. 9, 17.
4 There were estimated to be 5,057 Kelabit in 1987 and a growth rate of 4% from 1970 to 1980, so it is probable that the total is now about 7,500. T. H. J. Ko, 'Minor Indigenous Groups in Sarawak', *Sarawak Gazette*, CXIII, 1987, pp. 31–35.
5 M. Janowski, 'Rice, Work and Community among the Kelabit of Sarawak' (Ph.D. thesis, London School of Economics, University of London, 1991); M. Janowski, 'The Hearth-Group, the Conjugal Couple and the Symbolism of the Rice Meal among the Kelabit of Sarawak', in *About the House: Levi-Strauss and Beyond*, eds J. Carsten & S. Hugh-Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
6 S. Errington, 'Recasting Sex, Gender and Power: A Theoretical and Regional Overview', in *Power and Difference. Gender in Island Southeast Asia*, eds J. M. Atkinson and S. Errington (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
7 B. Anderson, 'Power', in *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. C. Holt, *et al.* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972).
8 Carsten & Hugh-Jones, eds, *About the House*; C. McDonald, *De la hutte au palais: sociétés 'à maison' en Asie du Sud-Est* (Paris: CNRS, 1987).
9 Atkinson and Errington, eds, *Power and Difference. Gender in Island Southeast Asia*, see esp. S. Errington, 'Recasting Sex, Gender and Power: A Theoretical and Regional Overview', in ibid.
10 J. Hoskins, 'Doubling Deities, Descent and Personhood: An Exploration of Kodi Gender Categories', in *Power and Difference*, eds Atkinson and Errington.
11 Janowski, 'Hearth Group'.
12 J. M. Atkinson, 'How Gender Makes a Difference in Wana Society' in *Power and Difference*, eds Atkinson and Errington.
13 B. Anderson, 'Power'; S. Errington, 'Recasting Sex, Gender and Power' in Atkinson and Errington, *Power and Difference*; C. Geertz, *Negara. The Theatre State of Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).
14 Atkinson, 'How Gender Makes a Difference'; M. Rosaldo, *Knowledge and Passion: Ilongot Notions of Self and Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
15 C. Rubenstein, 'Poems of Indigenous Peoples of Sarawak – Some of the Songs and Chants', pt II. *Sarawak Museum Journal*, XXI, 1973, pp. 723–1127.
16 J. D. Freeman, 'Severed Heads that Germinate', in *Fantasy and Symbol: Studies in Anthropological Interpretation*, eds R. H. Hook and G. Devereux (London: Academic Press, 1979); J. Hoskins, *Headhunting and the Social Imagination in South East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).
17 C. Helliwell, 'Autonomy as Natural Equality: Inequality in "Egalitarian" Societies', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 1, 1995, pp. 359–76. This describes what I call hearth-groups as 'rice-groups'.