

Masculinity, Potency and Pig Fat: the Kelabit of Sarawak

Monica Janowski

130

When my husband, baby daughter and I arrived in Kuching, we stayed at a flat where another social anthropologist, Peter Brosius, sometimes stayed too. Peter was carrying out fieldwork among the Penan of Borneo. In the fridge, we found something belonging to him which disturbed us: a bottle of something that looked, and smelt, like cold, solidified animal fat. What was Peter doing with this? Was he *drinking* it? We later realized that it was rendered pig fat, but it was only after we had been in the Kelabit Highlands for some time that we came to appreciate – and empathize with – the fact that he, like the Penan and the Kelabit, had fallen in love with pig fat, and that this explained the presence of the bottle in his fridge. He was, of course, not drinking the fat in the bottle; he was simply cooking with it.

Arrival on foot or by plane at a Kelabit settlement feels like coming home to an oasis of humanity in the midst of the wild. And indeed the Kelabit place a lot of emphasis on constructing a human world in the forested mountains in which they live, in constructing what they describe as *ulun*, which I would gloss as 'human life'. Because of his strong feeling that it is a tiny self-contained human cosmos, Tom Harrisson, who was parachuted into the Kelabit Highlands during the Second World War to organize resistance 'from the inside out' against the Japanese, described it as a 'World Within' (Harrison 1959). A longhouse settlement like Pa' Dalih, my field site, is a light green patch of wet rice fields and pasture in the midst of the sea of darker green forest. Constructing human life means thrusting that forest back; but it also means drawing on it for many needs including food. The life of a Kelabit community is a perennial balancing act between the longhouse and its surrounding fields on the one hand and the forest just beyond on the other. Both are important, and both are expressed through food. Achieving the construction of human life is epitomized by the growing of

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rice. But humans cannot be truly human without also having access to a force which the Kelabit call *lalud*, which I will gloss as 'wild life force'. *Lalud* comes ultimately from the Creator Deity. It can, the Kelabit now believe, be most easily accessed through Jesus Christ; but it is present in all living things, and is brought into the settlement in wild plants and the meat of hunted animals. It is particularly strongly present in the fat of the wild pig.

The Kelabit Highlands

The Kelabit Highlands is part of a tableland area at 3000-3500 feet above sea level. Apart from the wet rice fields which the Kelabit make and pastureland around Kelabit longhouses, the tableland is covered with tropical forest, consisting, at this altitude, predominantly of oak. Although around longhouses much of this is secondary, the majority of the area is covered with primary or very old secondary forest. The area is rich in game. Animals which are hunted and eaten on an occasional basis include monkeys, civet cats, porcupines, bear cats, monitor lizards, pythons, fruit bats, tree squirrels and various types of bird. Although fishing is practised too, fish are not large because of the proximity of the headwaters of the river, and fish represents only perhaps 10-20 per cent of the protein diet. Deer and pigs are the creatures brought in from the wild most often; and a good fat pig is the game animal *par excellence*. Pigs (*Sus barbatus*, S. Muller and other varieties of *sus*, Linn) migrate regularly through the area in search of beech nuts, and acorns the size of a human fist; deer are always resident and are hunted if there are not many pigs around. Of all the creatures brought in from the wild for the Kelabit table (actually, for the mat, since the Kelabit eat on the floor), only the pig has significant amounts of fat, and it is this which makes it so valuable.

Before the Second World War, the people of the Kelabit Highlands were scattered over the area. Since then, most of the population has become concentrated in an area now called Bario in the northern part of the Highlands, where the only government-run airstrip is situated. However, there remain three longhouse settlements, of between 50-100 people each, in the southern part of the Highlands. Together with my husband and baby, I carried out fieldwork in one of these, Pa' Dalih, for 20 months between 1986 and 1988, and I returned for another four months in 1992/3. In addition, I spent short periods periodically in Bario.

The Rice Meal and the Structuring of Kelabit Society

For the Kelabit, as with all humans, eating has social significance. What you eat with whom is extremely important. The rice meal is the most clearly emphasised eating event, repeated three times a day and shared by the members of one household or hearth-group. It is the foundation of what I will describe as rice-based kinship (Janowski 1998). Rice-based kinship is rooted in and related to biological kinship but is also in opposition to it. The term hearth-group is a translation of *tetal*, which is both one of the terms for the household and also a term for the hearth itself. I use this term because the household/hearth-group is defined by cooking and eating the rice meal together at the hearth (see Carsten 1997 for an analysis of a similar process in Langkawi off Peninsular Malaysia). This is true not only at the level of the hearth-group but at the level of the longhouse, and of the entire Kelabit community, both of which eat huge rice meals together on certain occasions. The kinship created through rice meals is ordered, structured and also hierarchical – those who provide meals are considered to be of a higher generational level, and of higher status, than those who are fed. Constructing ties based on rice-based kinship is the basis of *ulun*, human life, and differentiates the Kelabit from animals – and from the Penan hunter-gatherers who wander in the forest, and live on forest foods (Janowski 1997). Animals, and people who do not grow rice, are related only through biological kinship.

132

Rice meals are described as *kuman nuba*, 'eating rice', and their focus is the consumption of rice. Rice, as a crop and as a food, is privileged by the Kelabit in terms of the attention and importance given to it. However, despite its name the rice meal does not consist of rice alone but also of side dishes, described as *nok penguman* or 'something to eat with (rice)'. In Pa' Dalih, side dishes for the rice meal are made up of foods which are either actually wild or are treated as though they were wild. I have explored elsewhere the symbolic make-up of the rice meal (Janowski, 1991 #435]; Janowski 1995). The most important of side dishes is meat, and the most important meat is the meat of pigs, particularly of fat pigs.

Meat

Meat is highly valued by the Kelabit as a food. Although vegetable foods make up a considerable proportion – perhaps 60 per cent – of side dishes, it is desirable to have at least one meat-based side dish at each rice meal. Solid pig fat is eaten together with the meat at rice meals. Meat (and fat) is usually boiled for rice

meals, although it can also be roasted (usually for snacks), and lean meat is sometimes fried nowadays as a side dish for the rice meal, in rendered pig fat. Vegetables are usually boiled, but may also be fried in pig fat. The Kelabit place a good deal of emphasis on hospitality for visitors, and when visitors are present, the presence of meat is essential. Even without visitors, to go for more than a day or so without any meat to eat at the rice meal makes people uneasy. This illustrates the centrality of meat as the most important accompaniment to rice at the meal. Meat – and the crackling from rendered fat – is also eaten as a snack food.

All of the meat eaten on a daily basis in Pa' Dalih while I was there was from wild, hunted animals. At *irau* feasts, however, domestic animals – pigs, always, and buffaloes sometimes – are slaughtered. In the past, before buffalo were introduced in the early part of the 20th century, deer were tamed and kept for slaughter at *irau*. *Irau* are naming feasts held by the heads of hearth-groups after their child and child-in-law have had their first baby, at which they themselves take new grandparental names, parental names are given to their child and child-in-law and a name is given to the baby.

The following extract from the *adi* (sung story) of Agan, a Kelabit mythical hero, illustrates the importance of having meat to eat at a rice meal, and ideally lots of different kinds of meat. Agan's mother has just prepared a rice meal for him. She tells him to eat, initially stating that there are very few side dishes, and that even they are not meat-based. This implies that the meal is a poor one, showing humility. Agan, however, discovers that this is far from the case:

I have placed a bit of rice here [she says], but there is no garnish,
just these two *abang* shoots, just these two stalks,
and a few *beluan* mushrooms and *alang* mushrooms
that grew on a log and which I picked this morning.

She breaks open a bamboo tube in which she has cooked fish,
And there are big pieces of *paliyan* and *dalo* fish inside.

Agan looks down at his wrapped rice

And sees along with it many different garnishes,

There are pig meat and smoked dried meat,

There are the flesh of the tiger,

And the smoked flesh of the tame deer.

(Rubenstein 1973, p. 861)

Rice, Meat and Gender

Rice is much more the province of women than of men. Rice-growing is a cooperative endeavour engaged in by a married couple heading a hearth-group, in terms of labour. This couple is described as *lun merar*, 'big people', which means that, together, they have been able to become full adults through providing the rice meal for their dependants and descendants (not all of whom are necessarily close biological kin). However, women are the decision-makers, the seed-selectors, responsible for the more difficult parts of the process which are susceptible to failure for practical or spiritual reasons. In pre-Christian times they had a special relationship with the deity *Deraya*, who was considered to be responsible for success in rice-growing.

Men, on the other hand, are associated with the forest, with wild foods, and with hunting and meat. The reliance on the forest in a community like Pa' Dalih is not only practical; it is also spiritual. On a practical level, the forest provides a large proportion of food, all handicraft materials and all firewood. On a spiritual level, the forest is a source of *lalud*, which may be translated as 'raw life force'. Christensen, who carried out ethnobotanical research among the Kelabit, calls it 'life energy – the ability to do things, to make things happen' (Christensen 2002 p. 97). *Lalud* is both awesome and frightening on the one hand and essential for human life on the other. It is regularly brought in to the longhouse community in wild plants and the meat of hunted animals, and, in the past, through head hunting.

The association between men and the forest is explicitly or implicitly associated with men's acquisition of *lalud*, or wild life force, while in the forest. The forest is believed to be full of *ada'*, spirits, who have very high levels of *lalud*, with whom men, through their visits to the forest, are in contact. There is a continuum between game animals and spirits, since some animals – such as the tiger – which do not exist in the forest in the flesh, are believed to exist as spirits. Although these are obviously not game animals in the flesh, it should be noted that the flesh of the tiger is one of the kinds of meat which the mythical hero *Agan* sits down to in the rice meal described in the extract above. Spirits also include the spirits of the human dead and the 'great spirit' (*ada' raya*), *Puntumid*. *Puntumid* is an important source of *lalud* for humans, through his friendships with certain men, to whom he supplies powerful substances called *tabat* (the same word used for modern shop-bought medicines) which can kill or cure humans. This indicates the dangerous a

well as life-giving potential of *lalud*, which underlies the fear and caution linked to it. It would appear that the less an area is under the control of humans, and the longer it has been since an area has been cultivated, the more likely it is that there will be spirits in it and the stronger the *lalud* in the area.

Although women do gather wild vegetable food, they rarely go into the 'big forest', *polong raya*, and they never hunt. Women's fear of *ada*' is the reason most often given for this. It is men who go into the *polong raya*, and make contact with *lalud*, mainly through hunting. ~~All men~~ it seems that men are, in their association with wild life force, credited with the ability to transmit life, to make physical life possible through their contact with its source. This is reflected in their role in conception: women are said to be nests in which men put their seed, implying that the life force which makes the baby comes from the man. Through their contact with the forest, with hunting and with Puntumid, men could prove their valour, their maleness, their desirability to women. Women in Pa' Dalih often joked to me that men were more sexually desirable when they returned smelling of the forest.

However, humans, unlike animals, must generate *ulun*, 'human life'. *Ulu*n needs to be generated by human effort, through constructing a human way of life. For the Kelabit of the Highlands, this means growing and consuming rice, a plant believed incapable of surviving without human help. Rice growing and consumption generates an ordered, hierarchical life. In their association with rice, women make *ulun* possible. At the rice meal, the female, ordering, *ulun*-generating power of rice is brought together with the wild, male potency of meat to make possible an ordered, but vitalised, way of life for the dependants and descendants of the couple heading the hearth-group and supplying the meal.

Pig Fat, Potency and Sex

Two-thirds to three-quarters of the meat eaten in Pa' Dalih while I was living there was from wild pigs (*baka*). Pig meat (*labo baka*) is considered the tastiest meat, as well as the most important. At *irau* naming feasts, domestic pigs (*berak*) must be slaughtered; buffaloes are an optional extra whose slaughter increases the status of the feast-givers due to their large size. However, their meat is generally not much liked.

Pigs, in pre-Christian times, had a special symbolic significance, being associated with humans in some respects. The association of pigs with humans was particularly visible in rituals at feasts held to initiate young children (*borak lua*

Masculinity, Potency and Pig Fat: the Kelabit of Sarawak

anak) until the 1950s, when the Kelabit became Christian. At these rituals, at which children became full human beings with gender attributes, pigs were killed and their blood smeared on the children (Talla, 1979, p. 198-210; Lian-Saging 1976/77, p. 138-144). It continues to be considered essential to slaughter pigs at *irau* naming feasts nowadays, which are derivative of the pre-Christian initiation feasts.

Pigs have a tendency to fatten up in a way that other animals hunted or kept by the Kelabit do not, and this attribute, the fattiness of the pig, is central to its special role. The fat is the part of the animal in which the Kelabit are most interested – it is the tastiest, the most desirable part of the pig. A wild pig brought into the longhouse at Pa' Dalih while I was there was always described and assessed in terms of the thickness of the layer of fat on its body. The importance of the fat of the pig is not only dietary. It seems to symbolize the 'pigginess' of the pig. At pre-Christian initiation feasts, what is described by Yahya Talla (himself a Kelabit) as a 'prayer' is recited to the pig about to be slaughtered which emphasises the fatness of the pig, and after its death a strip of fat from its neck is hung around the neck of the father of the child to be initiated, who then carries the child back and forth under the shower of blood from the pig (Talla 1979, p. 209)

136

Both wild pigs and domestic pigs are valued much more highly as food on an everyday basis too if they are fat. The people of Pa' Dalih had, we found, an interesting and complex attitude to pig fat. They seemed to find it fascinating, compelling, absolutely delicious; and at the same time to be cautious, a little fearful and just a little disgusted by it. We, coming from a culture which has tended in recent years to downplay and suppress the appeal of animal fat and to emphasise the disgust reaction and the adverse health impact of it, initially found it quite difficult to understand or empathize with the Kelabit interest in fat. However, by the time we had been living in Pa' Dalih for six months we were avidly seeking out anyone who had some rendered fat for sale, and participating greedily in the consumption of the crackling left over from rendering pig fat. By then, we had no difficulty in understanding why Peter Brosius had felt that he had to take some down to town so that even there he could cook with it. Our stay in the Kelabit Highlands has, in fact, had a long-term effect on our attitude to animal fat. I now consider the fat on roast beef or roast pork as the tastiest part of a meal.

Both women and men exhibited both of the two reactions to pig fat described above, but the former (positive) reaction was more evident among men and the latter among women. This is because of the different relationship that women and

Masculinity, Potency and Pig Fat: the Kelabit of Sarawak

men have with *lalud*. While all meat carries *lalud*, fat carries much more than lean meat. Just as meat is associated with masculinity and men, so fat, which carries the highest levels of *lalud*, is even more strongly associated with them. Women, on the other hand, do not want to come into contact with high levels of *lalud*, are actually fearful of such contact. Although they certainly feel the attraction of fat, they deliberately limit their consumption of it. I will return to this shortly.

The importance of the fat of the pig is particularly clear at *irau* feasts. Here, the only food provided by the hosts is rice and meat from domestic pigs and buffaloes (often only pigs). Lean meat and fat are both cooked (boiled, in this case) and distributed by men, while rice is cooked and distributed by women. The fat is distributed separately to the lean meat, by older, higher-status men, full heads (with their wives) of hearth-groups. The lean meat is distributed by the younger, unmarried or just-married men, who are not yet heads of hearth-groups. The pattern of distribution and consumption as described in the song-story of Burung Siwan, as collected by Carole Rubenstein in 1973, could just as easily be a description of the pattern in Pa' Dalih in the late 1980s (except for the exaggerated size of the sticks of meat and the pieces of fat!):

The old man Burung Siwan says to the people of the longhouse:

"Distribute the rice."

Before long the young girls have distributed all the rice.

The young men wearing parang sheaths

Distribute the sticks full of pieces of meat.

Each stick is very long,

Taking two young men, one at each end, to carry a single stick.

When the food has been distributed

Outward to both ends of the longhouse,

They all begin to eat.

After everyone in the longhouse has eaten,

The leaders of the men distribute pieces of fat to each one.

For each share of fat he gives out,

The distributor has pushed back at him one piece he must eat.

They give out two chunks of fat to each person in turn,

Each chunk at least one handspan long.

(Rubenstein 1973, p. 830-831)

Mention is made here of the practice of feeding each other with fat, something which occurred regularly at *irau* I attended in the 1980s and early 1990s. This usually involves men and especially full adult men. Fat-eating competitions are often held at *irau* – I witnessed two at *irau* I attended – in which older men participate. They symbolize and underline the essential role of the fat of the pig as a food, and also its close association with men, especially those men who have attained full adulthood and are successful heads of hearth-groups, together with their wives. Interestingly, although men at these events made a point of relishing fat, an undercurrent of reluctance and distaste to participating in these contests was quite palpable, although it was also clear that men felt that they had to make a public show of not only participating but enjoying the fat.

This seemed to indicate that men were actually a little fearful and unwilling to make close contact with large amounts of fat and the high levels of *lalud* which it carries, but they felt that this was something which they had to do to show that they were men, particularly if they were full adults. It was as if they had to demonstrate that they were brave, that they could overcome their natural feelings of fear vis-à-vis contact with *lalud*. This was also evident in their general attitude to the forest; men always made a point of proclaiming that they were not afraid of entering the forest or encountering spirits, to the point that one felt that they were actually fearful and were counteracting this by this kind of brave assertion.

It was clear at the *irau* I attended that women, on the other hand, were very reluctant to eat solid fat – or to make contact with high levels of *lalud* present in it – and that they were not in the least bit reluctant to make this clear. In the same way, women are not reluctant to make public their fear of the forest and of the potent spirits within it. I witnessed one mother respond with what can only be described as panic when she realised that her daughter had been eating fat, while she was quite content that her son of a similar age should do so. It seems that eating too much fat is seen as dangerous for women, and particularly young girls. This is almost certainly due to the potency of fat, which makes it inappropriate for women to eat too much of it, although they need to eat some.

Sex, fat and *lalud* are related. I often saw men trying (jokingly) to force-feed women with fat at *irau*. I was the subject of such attempts more than once. When such attempts were made there was a clear sexual innuendo, which is what made the attempt amusing. This should be understood in the context of the fact that sexual congress between men and women involves the transmission of *lalud*. Fat,

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too, carries *lalud*, and a man joking about force-feeding it to a woman implies sexual activity between them.

Although women should not take in large quantities of *lalud* through consuming large pieces of fat, the consumption of small amounts is not problematic, and is indeed considered necessary. The consumption of side dishes at the rice meal, especially meat and small attached amounts of solid fat, involves the consumption of some wild *lalud* through food. Nowadays, the use of rendered animal fat involves the consumption of more. Until the 1950s or 1960s the Kelabit could not render fat, because they had only earthenware pots fired at low temperatures, which were used for boiling ranged around the fire. With the importing of large numbers of metal pans (Chinese *wok*) it has become possible to render the fat from pigs. Now, much of the food eaten as side dishes, and not just meat itself, is imbued with rendered fat from wild pigs. When a pig is killed, one of the first tasks is to render all the fat, which is then stored for use in frying food. The fat which is distributed at *irau* to women is taken back to be rendered, while that distributed to men is often eaten at the *irau*. There is not a problem with the consumption of rendered fat by women, as there is with the consumption of solid fat. I would suggest that this is because, with rendering, the potency of the fat can, in frying, be spread through the food, and only a small amount eaten.

Through sexual relations with men, women take in *lalud*, and indeed it is arguable that this is necessary in order for them to produce children. The female role in the biological production of children, as in their contribution of rice to the rice meal, is to organize and order chaotic *lalud*, generating proper human beings and proper human life – *ulun* – biologically, through reproduction, and socially, through the consumption of the rice meal. Men, on the other hand, have the role of bringing in *lalud* and providing it in measured, appropriate doses, to women. This is both through meat – and particularly fat – and through their own semen. Women then process it through their bodies and through the rice meal, to generate *ulun*.

Christianity and *Lalud*

Before the advent of Christianity, there seems to have been a more overt association of men with *lalud*, particularly through their friendships with forest spirits. With the coming of Christianity, access to *lalud* is no longer entirely the province of men. The *lalud* of the Supreme Deity is now sought through Jesus

Masculinity, Potency and Pig Fat: the Kelabit of Sarawak

Christ, and women as well as men are involved with this. However, prayer is considered particularly effective on forested mountains, implying a continuity with pre-Christian practice. The association of men with access to potent *lalud* through their contact with the forest, although no longer through overt relations with spirits, continues at an implicit level. It was clear during my fieldwork that the fervent Christianity of the people of Pa' Dalih did not prevent them from believing that female contact with sources of *lalud* (other than Jesus) was inappropriate and potentially dangerous.

Conclusion: Fat, Vitality and Health

Pig fat, for the Kelabit, seems to be seen as concentrated potency. Partly, this can be explained by the fact that the pig has (or had, in recent pre-Christian times) a special relationship with humans; it is said that as Puntumid (who is still believed to exist, although people no longer pray to him or make friends with him) hunts humans, so humans hunt pigs. Since Puntumid is said to eat the spirits of humans, it may be that in pre-Christian times it would have been possible to elicit from informants the view that humans eat the spirits of pigs, although it would not be possible to elicit this now.

140

The fact that it is the fat rather than the lean meat which is the reservoir of potency seems to be due to the way in which fat forms as well as its physical characteristics. It is clear that fat accumulates in a well-fed animal, and having plenty of fat implies vitality. Fat presents itself not as an essential part of the body of the animal but as an extra accumulation added to the essential body. It is an optional extra, which badly-fed pigs do not have. It builds up, and can be melted and spread around, presenting itself as a substance in its own right rather than a part of an animal. The consumption of pig fat is associated with fun, liveliness, an excess of high spirits – this is quite clear at the fat-eating contests at *irau*, when those participating and those witnessing overtly revel and make a lot of noise. Fat makes people excited in a way which is almost-but-not-quite sexual, underlining the association of the transmission of *lalud* with sexual relations and procreation.

For the people of Pa' Dalih, neither rice on the one hand nor pig meat and fat on the other are just ordinary foods, which could be substituted for alternatives of equivalent dietary value. The Kelabit would most definitely not be willing to become vegetarians whose staple starch is potatoes. Their proper food is rice and pork, eaten together at the rice meal. And it would not be acceptable, either, for

them to eat only the lean part of the pig. Pig fat is associated with both vitality and health, both in the pig and in humans who consume it (albeit, for women, in controlled quantities). It is essential, in fact, to the generation of *ulun*, proper human life. Pig fat is bought and sold at high (cash) prices, and is seen as far, far more desirable as a fat than vegetable oil. Although the Kelabit are keen to embrace new ideas and new technologies, and are very proud of this, they seem oblivious to the harmful effects of their consumption of saturated fat. Now that they have guns (more effective at killing than the pig spears and blowpipes which they used until the Second World War) and are able to render pig fat, it is probable that they are consuming larger quantities of it than before, but they see this as being purely a good thing. The fact that it may carry a future of premature death is a loaded bomb of which the people of a community like Pa' Dalih are, at present, unaware.

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Masculinity, Potency and Pig Fat: the Kelabit of Sarawak

- Association of South East Asian Studies conference, Hamburg, September 1998. To be published in book edited by M. Janowski, F. Kerlogue and I.-B. Trankell, 'The Alimentary Structures of Kinship in SE Asia', publisher probably Curzon Press.
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