

CHAPTER 17

RICE BEER AND SOCIAL COHESION IN THE KELABIT HIGHLANDS, SARAWAK

Monica Janowski

The etiquette of drinking is considerable ... the women are usually allowed to lead off, singing in high falsetto a song of welcome in which every few lines the audience, consisting of the entire house, repeats the last line or two as a chorus, allowing the singer a 'breather' and to think what she is going to say next, although some songs are of more or less permanent repetition. Having carried on like this for as much as five minutes, the glass is presented and the whole house joins in a deep ueh, rising in tone as the glass is tilted, and dying away as the glass is lowered again. (Banks 1937: 4)

While I was living in the Kelabit community of Pa' Dalih in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the etiquette described above accompanied the drinking of tea and coffee at *irau* feasts in the Kelabit Highlands in Sarawak, Malaysia.¹ Until the 1960s, it was part of the ceremony accompanying the drinking of *borak* – rice beer. The Kelabit were, in the past, famous for the quantities of *borak* which they made and drank. Now, though, they no longer make rice beer. Here I want to look at *borak*-drinking in the past, at the reasons for the abandonment of *borak*, and at the social world which has replaced the old *borak*-focused cosmos.

The plateau on which the group now known as the Kelabit² live, in the interior of Sarawak at the headwaters of the Baram River, is not the most obvious place to grow rice; the ecology is sub-montane tropical forest. However, the Kelabit of the Highlands are very successful rice-growers and this has meant that they are able not only to eat rice at every meal but have also, in the past, been able to make large quantities of rice beer. Tom Harrisson, the colourful character who, based in the Kelabit Highlands, directed the resistance move-

ment against the Japanese code-named 'Operation Ants' during the Second World War, and who later became Curator of the Sarawak Museum (Heimann 1997), had this to say about Kelabit rice growing and *borak*-drinking:

The Kelabits grow much more rice than they need to eat. They may drink almost as much again. Every sort of event – especially the only too frequent death feast – is an excuse for alcoholism ... A common excuse for alcoholism is the arrival of any distinguished visitor ... For the guest, the bombardment of rice beer is hard to take The stuff can be prepared in five days, unfortunately, since quantities can be prepared at news of your approach – which will always be at least a week ahead of you. The consequent 'party' may involve anything up to sixty tall Chinese jars of beer. (Harrison 1949: 145–46)

Kelabit society and economy revolved at that time around the growing of rice, and indeed the same is true now. Success in rice-growing meant, and still means, social status. One of the most important ways in which this was expressed, until the 1960s, was through the brewing of rice beer to be shared with others. Beer was made by boiling rice, sprinkling it with a starter yeast, *lamud*, making the rice into balls (Figure 17.1), putting these balls of *penapa* into a large *bu'an* basket covered with banana leaves for a few days, and then transferring the balls of rice and yeast into jars where it would ferment for days or weeks. The alcohol which was generated through fermentation, called *pa pade* (rice water), was often put aside for consumption by smaller groups; water was then added to the *penapa*, and this was drunk as *borak* (Figure 17.1).

Other grains were also used to make *borak*. The small amounts of other grains such as Job's tears (*kului*) and millet (*bua' lenamud*) – still being grown in the late 1980s in Pa' Dalih but more rarely by 2009 – were grown primarily to make *borak*. However, *borak* was usually made of rice.

The essence of status, and the point of making rice beer, was providing for others. The Kelabit system of status hinges on a differentiation between people who are *doo* (good), and those who are *da'at* (bad). Being *doo* means being good at everything, such that you are able to host others as lavishly as possible; being *da'at* means the opposite, in other words always being dependent on others rather than having others dependent on you. You can provide for others through food and drink, mainly through the rice meal and, in the past, through providing rice beer. The prestige associated with making *borak* is underlined by the fact that it was made in valuable ceramic jars, including, at *irau* feasts (see below) in Chinese dragon jars (*belanai*); *belanai* were only owned by those of high status, leaders of longhouses and groups of longhouses.

For the Kelabit, consuming rice is a fundamental attribute of being a fully civilised human – as indeed is the case among most people in South East Asia, whether urban or upriver. I have argued that, for the Kelabit, feeding the rice meal to dependants is the basis of both kinship and of status (Janowski 2007).

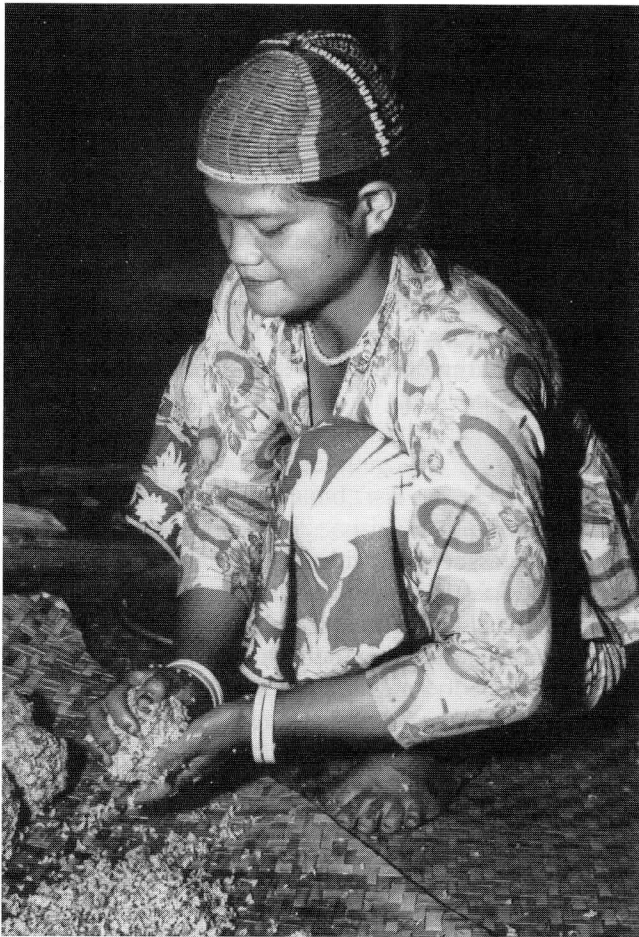


Figure 17.1 Shaping partially dehusked and boiled rice mixed with starter yeast (*lamud*) into balls to be made into borak. These will be placed in *bu'an* baskets for a few days to begin to ferment. Mariam Lutup Ulun, September 1962. Photographer possibly Zunaidi bin Bolhassan or Tom Harrison. Copyright Sarawak Museum. (Printed with permission of the Sarawak Museum).

Kelabit children are introduced to rice as early as possible. This is, nowadays, through the medium of thin rice porridge. In the past it was through borak; it would appear that in the past borak was considered an alternative, perhaps even a better, food for babies than rice porridge, as is reflected in what Cutfield, District Officer for Limbang and Lawas, wrote after his visit to a Kelabit house in the Limbang in 1936:

'I went and examined ... [a sick child at the Kelabit leader Balang Imat's house], which looked anaemic, and found that its mother was dead. I enquired what they were feeding it on, and to my surprise they replied – 'burak'. I asked if they were not giving it rice or water or *bubor* [rice gruel] or *krebang*, but they replied, 'No, only *burak*.' (Cutfield 1936: 116)

With the coming of Christianity from the 1950s onwards, the Kelabit gradually began to abandon the making and consumption of borak. The cessation of borak-making was seen as an important symbol of the transition to Christianity by the missionaries of the Borneo Evangelical Mission, who converted the Kelabit (Lees 1979). The Kelabit now belong to its successor church, the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB). Many continue to believe that alcohol consumption is un-Christian.

Borak and Fertility

The drinking of borak was also associated with bringing men and women together sexually, and hence has associations with fertility. Rice in general brings men and women together; as I have discussed elsewhere, it is grown by the married couple as a unit, gradually bonding them as they establish a lasting marriage (Janowski 1995).

Although borak appears to have been drunk rather more by men than women, women were apparently willing drinkers too: 'The (Kelabit) women join in and neither dislike nor fear too much drink' (Banks 1937: 5). As older people in Pa' Dalih told me, drinking a dish of borak together was what united a couple in marriage before the Kelabit became Christian. At feasts young people took the opportunity to meet youngsters from other longhouses, and many unions were made at these events, lubricated by borak consumption. In the version of the Tukad Rini story told by Ngamung Raja of Long Dano to Carole Rubenstein in 1972, Tukad Rini's brother Iya' Utul Aling Bulan is wooed by Aruring Salud Bulan of the Moon through her offering of borak to him before coming to join him in the sleeping compartment in her longhouse (Rubenstein 1973).

Borak was brewed by women. Rice as crop and as food at the rice meal, and not only in the form of borak, is associated with women (Janowski 1995). In the story of Tukad Rini as told by Ngamung Raja, Aruring Salud Bulan sings a song of power (*nadadir*) telling of her making of borak before offering it to Iya' Utul Aling Bulan (ibid). This is parallel to the *nadadir* recited by Tukad Rini, Iya' Utul Aling Bulan and other male heroes in the story, which is about making war and killing enemies. Thus there was a parallel between borak-making for women and war-making for men, and both were associated with accessing, processing and possession of potency or power (*lalud*). Rice beer is associated more generally in South East Asia with a life-giving force, a force also associated with the valuable dragon jars (*belanai*) in which it is brewed,³

form of cohesion, contrasted to the hierarchical nature of the controlled event which is the rice meal, then and now. Edward Banks had this to say about borak-drinking bouts he had witnessed in the 1930s: 'The scene is almost indescribable ... all authority of their Chief has long since faded away for the moment' (Banks 1937: 5–6). Tom Harrison found the same in the 1940s and 1950s:

The socially senior person is served first; the distinguished visitor has dish after dish pressed upon him. The lower classes sit out on the perimeter, until gradually all barriers break down and people are serving each other in all directions, amidst an indescribable babble of conversation and that loud laughter beloved of the Kelabit. (Harrison 1949: 146)

Robert Lian-Saging has pointed out that his grandfather, Semera Langit, a high-status leader, made a point of brewing special jars of the strongest form of borak, *abpa pade*, especially for drinking with his 'common' guests, telling these guests: 'I can drink with my peers but that is common, you are all my special guests so let's have a drink to that, I can join my peers later for they will not leave the *belanai* till I join them' (email from Robert Lian-Saging, 1 September 2009). In doing this he was clearly emphasising an egalitarianism associated with consumption of borak.

Thus, although borak was provided by one hearth-group, which derived status from this, borak-drinking itself was not associated with the clear construction of a social hierarchy between the provider of the borak and those provided for. This is in contrast to what happens in the provision of food for others through the rice meal; as I have discussed elsewhere, this generates social differentiation (Janowski 1995, 2007). It seems likely that the regular dissolution of differences and emphasis which came out of regular informal drinking bouts contributed to a sense of community which was less structured than the hierarchical relations between people established through feeding or being fed a rice meal.

'New Life' and the Abandonment of Borak

The Kelabit are devout Christians. They became Christian through their own volition, inviting missionaries in, encouraging them and supporting them. All are now Christian apart from a small number who are Muslim through marriage to Muslims, and one unusual individual who led his family into Islam. For the Kelabit, Christianity is a way of providing them with a means of effectively accessing the power (*lalud*) of God. They see their Christianity as the basis of their success in the modern world. This has been considerable, with many Kelabit holding prominent posts in Malaysian society.

The abandonment of borak is seen not only by the missionaries but also by the Kelabit themselves as emblematic of their adoption of Christianity, of their 'break with the past', of their adoption of a 'new life' (*ulun bru*) (Lian-Saging

frequency of their potations, quarrels are scarce ... less than a hundred people will finish up 300 gallons or more of rice spirit [probably rice beer is meant here] in two nights and a day. (Banks 1937: 5–6)

The 'two days and a night' mentioned here are almost certainly a reference to a secondary burial feast. The most ostentatious consumption of borak was at such feasts, which were often simply referred to as borak, although they could also be described as *irau* or *tseraad*. They were held by high-status individuals (*lun doo*, literally 'good people'), for the honour of their deceased relatives (and themselves). Such feasts brought together huge groups of people, and vast quantities of rice were needed to feed them and provide them with adequate rice beer. Being able to do this, and to make possible such a level of social activity, was associated with high status. At these events, very large amounts of borak were consumed, interspersed with rice meals at which the only accompaniment to rice was meat from domestic animals – buffaloes, pigs and deer. Twenty to thirty Chinese dragon jars (*belanai*) full of borak were commonly drunk at one of these feasts. The longer the feast went on the better – two or three days was usual and four or five days was not out of the ordinary. As part of the festivities, a mark on the landscape was made – a stone erected, a notch cut in a mountainside, or an oxbow lake created by diverting a small river. This was a permanent mark which inscribed in the landscape the prestige of the individual who had died and of his heirs, who had proved their ability to bring large numbers of people together, bonded through the consumption of borak. This bonding was emphasised by the settling of all debts prior to the commencement of drinking on the part of guests. Thus, all guests were allies and friends. Feasts were a means of settling social tensions and clearly delineated the social universe within which there should be peace.

The Kelabit used to recite what can best be described as sagas about the travels and adventures of mythical ancestors, and the holding of borak feasts was also associated with status and success in war in such stories. The most prominent of Kelabit heroic ancestors is Tukad Rini, who, with his kinsmen, is said to have travelled beyond the sky and to the moon to do battle with other peoples. Each time he was victorious – always after very long and strenuous battles – this victory is described as being celebrated by the holding of a borak feast. This cemented the relationship between the allies who had been fighting together and made clear the distinction between them and their foes, who did not drink with them. Thus again we see the generation of cohesion through the co-consumption of borak.

Borak and Social Hierarchy

Although the making and drinking of borak was associated with a statement of social hierarchy through the generation of status, the unstructured nature of borak-drinking events actually led, through gradual inebriation, to an egalitarian

form of cohesion, contrasted to the hierarchical nature of the controlled event which is the rice meal, then and now. Edward Banks had this to say about borak-drinking bouts he had witnessed in the 1930s: 'The scene is almost indescribable ... all authority of their Chief has long since faded away for the moment' (Banks 1937: 5-6). Tom Harrisson found the same in the 1940s and 1950s:

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1976/77) and of their ability to take on new things and to innovate. Like adherence, before Christianity, to the bird omens which dictated that people should stay home from the fields many days of the year, drinking was seen as having impeded economic performance in the past. Therefore it was felt that giving it up was sensible, and would allow them to be more rapidly successful in the modern world. Tom Harrisson noted the Kelabit inclination to innovate and the link between this and Christianity:

[T]hen, in 1945, still living strictly in their own Kelabit way of life, they were experimentalists, constantly, and of themselves, trying new ideas ... Always ready to try something else, go somewhere new, do things ... No one from outside told them to do anything they had not evolved for themselves ... Now, in 1958, a new order is coming in. The dead are buried with wooden crosses. The great irau feasts, some of which fed and drank 500 guests for four or five days, are now Christian meetings and festivals at Easter and Christmas ... Some villages are now 100 per cent non-drinking, non-smoking, non-swearing, non-dancing and sabbatarian. (Harrisson 1958: 190–91).

Sweetened tea and coffee have now taken the place of borak in the social contexts when borak would have been drunk in the past. A significant amount of the ritual surrounding drinking has been maintained in relation to drinking tea and coffee. Thus, I witnessed people being encouraged to drink tea and coffee with drinking songs in the late 1980s and early 1990s; tea and coffee being forced down the drinker's throat; and, in Pa' Dalih in the late 1980s, tea and coffee being dispensed at *irau* feasts (now of course no longer called borak feasts) in the same way as was usual in the past when distributing borak (see Figure 17.2). The drinking event still takes place, then; but it is radically different since the drink has no inebriating effect on the drinker.

Prayer may be seen as a partial substitute for drink in leading to an altered state of consciousness and a sense of egalitarian cohesion. The Kelabit are Pentecostalist Christians and individuals sometimes go into altered states of consciousness and 'speak in tongues', communicating the words of God to other believers through translators. Through prayer, it is believed that the *lalud*⁴ – the power – of the Holy Spirit enters into people. This leads to an altered consciousness which has some parallels with the state of inebriation through alcohol.

Economic and Social Changes and the Abandonment of Borak

Greater interaction with the outside world has led to radical social and economic changes. The Kelabit have been successful in education and many now have very good jobs in the town environment; but of course many have more

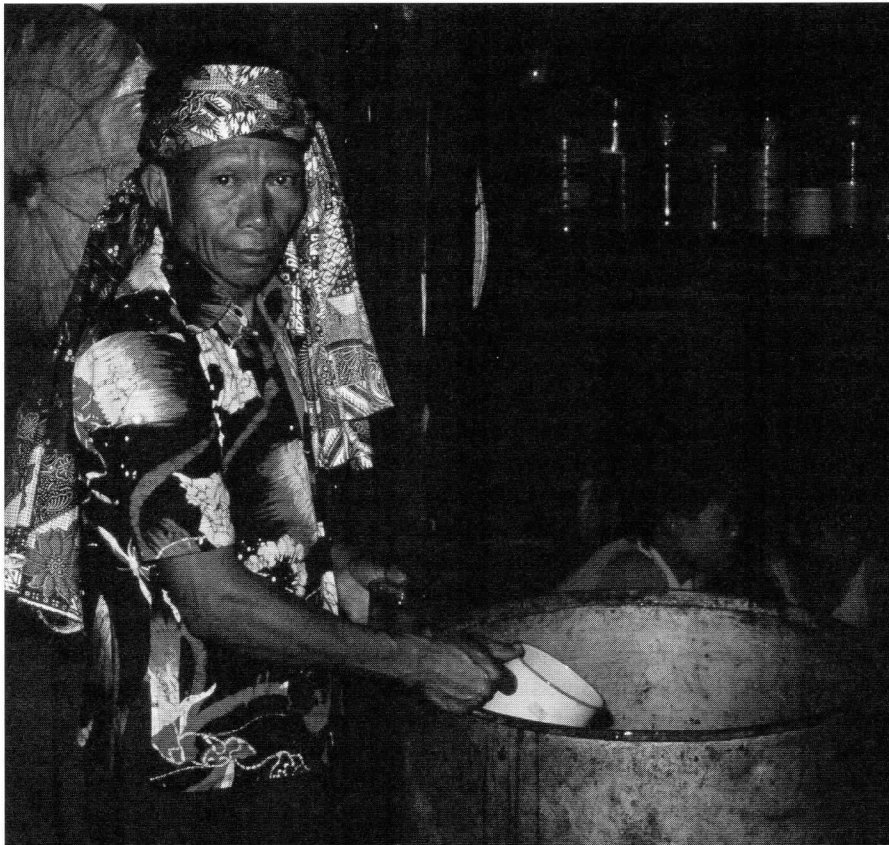


Figure 17.2 Balang Telian dispensing sweet tea at the *irau* for Paran To'oh and Sinah Paran To'oh on 13 April 1987. Copyright Kaz and Monica Janowski.

menial jobs. Differential access to cash and to success in the outside world has created divisions among the Kelabit, since it has led to differences in lifestyle and social environment. There is an increasingly less cohesive social environment both in the highlands and in town. The 'sharing' society which was characteristic of the Kelabit Highlands before the Second World War has gradually been replaced by a more individually oriented, more competitive and divided society. While in the past leaders derived their roles from achievements within Kelabit society, and were accepted widely (if their position was no longer accepted, people would vote with their feet and follow a new leader to establish a new longhouse), nowadays a leader's position derives from a combination of material wealth, which is sometimes resented, and from holding posts which are allocated by the government for political reasons – longhouse leader (*ketua kampung*) or overall chief (*penghulu*).

These changes are reflected and underlined in the switch from making excess rice into borak to selling rice to town. Borak was something in which all partook equally and which did not differentiate individuals in a practical, long-term sense by generating different styles of living. The making of borak meant, in fact, the regular elimination of much of the accumulated difference in wealth between households, although some of this was also converted into prestige possessions (beads, gongs and jars). However, it became possible in 1962, when a regular air service from Bario to the coast began, for those living in the Bario area to send rice to town for sale. Individuals working in town also began to send cash up to their relatives. Some cash is used to pay for sugar, tea and coffee to be offered to participants in cooperative work parties and at feasts, and to buy gifts for guests at *irau*; but much of it is used in ways which fossilise differences between individuals and between hearth-groups – to purchase material possessions made outside the highlands and to generate different styles of living. The sale of excess rice rather than its consumption as borak is arguably divisive and socially differentiating. It is associated with the reduction in a 'sharing' lifestyle among the Kelabit which is linked to the greater presence of cash.

Many Kelabit would argue that the abandonment of borak has led to their society being more ordered and peaceable. However, although there is no doubt that alcohol can fuel quarrels, this depends on the context in which it is drunk. Borak-drinking does not appear to have commonly led to quarrels among the Kelabit, and this was undoubtedly due to the fact that it was drunk within a context in which there was a heavy emphasis on social cohesion and censure of fighting.

Borak-drinking has also been associated by missionaries with social disintegration. It would appear that among the closely related Murut people of the Limbang and Trusan rivers high levels of borak consumption were indeed linked to social anomie:

In language and customs Muruts and Kelabits are very closely allied but I think it is fair to say the drink has got the former down ... One may see a man come home from his farm and after food settle down to his own jar until he falls over sideways to sleep without going to bed, and wakes where he fell to stagger off to work next morning their fertility is declining, their physique fails early, and the generally indescribably filthy conditions under which they live is telling and has told on them for so long that the race is declining. (Banks 1937: 6)

There are, however, good reasons for arguing that the consumption of borak is less strongly associated with social anomie than is the consumption of town-bought alcohol. During the 1980s and 1990s industrially processed alcohol was rarely consumed by Kelabit, and when it was this was compound brandy purchased in sachets in town, consumed in secret. In 2009, there is an increasing level of alcohol consumption in the Kelabit Highlands. Although borak is occasionally made, most alcohol consumed is beer brought in from town.

Alcohol is nowadays consumed in a much less structured and controlled context than was borak in the past. Since it has to be bought, it is also associated with a lack of sharing with others. Most alcohol is now consumed by men, individually or in small groups. It is sometimes associated with uncontrolled male aggression and violence. The consumption of town-bought beer now appears to have the function of bonding small groups of men engaged in male activities rather than, as in the consumption of borak in the past at feasts, the whole of society. The consumption of town-bought beer in 2009 is still undoubtedly associated with sexual desire, but without the ordered gender complementarity which was linked to borak making and consumption in the past, when women made borak, offered it to men, and drank it with them.

Conclusion

The story of borak in the Kelabit Highlands reflects the changes which have taken place in Kelabit society over the past fifty years. Borak in many ways stands for the old way of life. The abandonment of borak stood for a move to enter a new world, a 'new life', associated with Christianity. The Kelabit have been eager to succeed in this new world. However, they have not wanted to entirely abandon the old world, which is at the core of their identity on both an individual and a group level. Borak is a difficult symbol, since it is a strong symbol both of what they see as bad and what they see as good in the old world. It represents the old beliefs and practices, and stands in opposition to Christianity; but it also represents the old sharing way of life, a way of life which bonded people together.

While in the late 1980s it seemed clear to all Kelabit with whom I spoke that the abandonment of borak was a positive move, people seemed less sure about this by the early twenty-first century. Many people expressed, by this time, a certain amount of regret about the fact that it is not made any more, and some women openly made it again. It seems likely that it is not a coincidence that, at the same time, people also express a regret that among the Kelabit there is less sharing, more individualism, and less of an emphasis on social cohesion than in the past.

The story of borak can be seen as an illustration of the complex social significance of alcohol and its potential to be on the one hand dangerous and negative and on the other hand unifying and positive (see papers in Gefou-Madianou 1992; Wilson 2004). Due to its power to alter behaviour and consciousness, alcohol perhaps always teeters on the verge, always carrying the potential of both negative and positive. Among the Kelabit, with the advent of Christianity, borak swung from its position on the positive side of the verge right over to the negative side, but is now in a rather anomalous position, representing both the bad and the good in the old world as well as the bad in the new world. As the contributions to the collection edited by Wilson in particular emphasise, alcohol is often associated with constructions of identity. While

borak was associated with constructions of common identity among those who considered themselves kin, town-bought beer is associated with a process of constructing a new identity or identities, particularly among young men. These are individualistic, exclusive, male-only and sometimes associated with uncontrolled aggression. Although Kelabit are generally positive about the 'break with the past' and the new world in which they increasingly live (Lian-Saging 1976/77), they appear to be increasingly negative about some aspects of this, in particular the loss of a strong social cohesion. Town-bought beer can perhaps be seen as standing for this, while there is a sense of some nostalgia about the social cohesion associated with the consumption of borak.

Notes

1. My fieldwork among the Kelabit began with my Ph.D. fieldwork in 1986–88, supported by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. Further periods of fieldwork since then have been supported by the British Academy and the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, the latter through the project 'The Cultured Rainforest' (2007–2010). Thanks are due to these funders, and to the people of the community of Pa' Dalih.
2. The term Kelabit was not originally one used by the people now known by this term to describe themselves, but has now been accepted as a label which is meaningful (Lian-Saging 1976/77: 4–12).
3. 'In his book *The Golden Germ*, the archaeologist F.D.K. Bosch gives numerous examples of this symbol (the jar) in the art of India and of the Southeast Asian regions which have undergone Indian influence. It frequently assumes the form of a vase containing a liquid which holds the "life-giving, regenerating, health, opulence and fertility-bestowing" essence, from which one or more flowers – often lotuses – protrude' (de Josselin de Jong 1964–5. 288–9).
4. Sometimes the Malay translation of this term, *kuasa*, is used.

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