

Monica Janowski

PUNTUMID: GREAT SPIRIT OF THE HEART OF BORNEO

Introduced and translated by Monica Janowski

Puntumid is said by the people of the Kelabit Highlands to be a manifestation of the *Ada' Rayeh*, or 'Great Spirit'. It seems likely that a belief in a spirit described in local languages as 'Great Spirit' exists widely in the highland area recently designated the 'Heart of Borneo' by the WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature), including among the hunter-gatherer Penan, who call it Bale Ja'au (see Janowski, [forthcoming](#)). There are, in fact, two Kelabit terms which can be translated as 'Great Spirit': *Derayeh* and *Ada' Rayeh*. The two terms are essentially the same semantically; *Derayeh* is a shorter form of *Ada' Rayeh*. Through their relationship with *Derayeh* or *Ada' Rayeh* people attempted in pre-Christian times (until about the 1960s) to accumulate and manage the power or life-force – *lalud* – of the cosmos. *Ada' Rayeh* and *Derayeh* seem to be male and female manifestations of the Great Spirit. Through rice-growing, women relate to *Derayeh*, while through hunting and forest activities men relate to the *Ada' Rayeh*, through Puntumid (see Janowski [in press](#) and Janowski [forthcoming](#)).

Puntumid was regarded in pre-Christian times as the owner ('it is his' – *iah wen*) or 'king' (*rajah*) of the entire landscape and forest. He was and still sometimes is encountered by men in the forest, manifesting in a human-like giant form. As a spirit, Puntumid is not 'seen' with the eyes (*ne'ar*), but he is 'perceived' (*kelit*). He is said by those who have 'perceived' him to be white (*buda'*) and to have red bracelets; whiteness (or transparency) is a characteristic of spirits and red is said to be the only colour they can see.

Men used to pray to Puntumid for hunting success, and he is said to approach certain young men with a view to friendship, an offer young men now refuse, because they are Christian and Puntumid is now regarded as *setan* (a Malay word used by local Christians to refer to demon, bad spirit, devil). Our neighbour in the community of Pa' Dalih, Balang Pelaba ('Forever a Spirit Tiger'), was a friend of Puntumid's in his youth, before World War II. To those with whom he made friends, including Balang Pelaba, he gave powerful substances known as *tabat*, which could heal and kill.

Puntumid is potentially dangerous; he is said to hunt humans and to eat their spirits. He insists on certain behaviours in the forest, particularly in relation to fire; he does not permit people to heat cooked rice on a fire or to throw citrus peel into a fire in the forest, and threatens to eat their spirits if they do these things. However, people

respect these restrictions to a limited degree now, as Jesus Christ will, it is believed, protect people from Puntumid's vengeance.

It is said that Puntumid used to belong to a race of people ancestral to present-day humans. His name, which means 'Grandfather Heel', derives from the way in which he was transformed into a spirit. Below is the story of how he became a spirit.

How Pun Ngera' became Puntumid

As told by Aren Tuan of Long Peluan and Balang Pelaba of Pa' Dalih

There were once two brothers called Pun Ngera' and Pun Luun, who belonged to a race of people who were the ancestors of present-day humans, the *lun rabada*. They went into the forest one day together and killed a wild pig. They slept overnight under a rock overhang in the upper Kelapang, known as the *Lepo Batuh* ('Stone Shelter', see [Figure 1](#)).



FIGURE 1 Under the Stone Shelter (*Lepo Batuh*) where the rockfall occurred which turned Pun Ngera' into Puntumid. Photo: Monica Janowski (2006).

There was a storm that night and the rock overhang collapsed onto Pun Ngera's feet, which caused his feet to be reversed, so that when he walked forward he appeared to be walking backwards. He was transformed into a spirit and from then on he was called Puntumid or 'Grandfather Heel', because of the reversal of his feet.

Puntumid was embarrassed to return home and told his brother, Pun Luun: 'You go back home, I'll stay in the forest. You hunt hairy animals – pigs – and I'll hunt hairless animals – humans.' His brother went back to the house with the pig they'd killed. Puntumid said: 'Don't open your basket with the pig inside until you get home.' Pun Luun set off and Puntumid stayed in the forest. On his way back, his brother wondered why Puntumid had told him not to open his basket. He opened it and found that he couldn't get the pig back into his basket – it had become too big! Puntumid now had the power to make the pig too big to fit into the basket, and Pun Luun was able to take back lots of meat to the people of his longhouse community.

Now Puntumid wanders the forest hunting human spirits, but he also helps men, who are his relatives, after all, to get wild pigs. He also makes friends with men and gives them substances (*tabat*) which can kill and cure.

References

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Author biography

Monica Janowski is a social anthropologist and a research associate at SOAS, University of London. She has been carrying out research in the Kelabit Highlands since 1986 and has a particular interest in the relationship between people and the natural environment with a focus on cosmological aspects of that relationship. She recently led the anthropological work on a major AHRC-funded project, The Cultured Rainforest, a collaborative project with archaeologists and environmental scientists which aimed to develop a time depth to our understanding of the ways in which people relate to the environment and the landscape in the Kelabit Highlands. As part of this project she guest-curated, with Mark Elliott, an exhibition at the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in 2013 and worked with Douglas Cape of z360 to create 'virtual visits' of the Highlands, which can be seen at <http://www.z360.com/sara/>