

# **THE HIGHLAND DRAGON: FEARSOME PROTECTOR OF NATURE**

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## **The Dragon in Borneo**

Following more than 30 years of research among the Kelabit of the upper Baram river in Sarawak, I began, in 2017, to carry out research into beliefs about the powerful watery beings which I will describe in English as dragons. As I discuss elsewhere (Janowski 2019), I use this term because these beings are almost always glossed as dragons when they are discussed in English, by informants from all ethnic groups. This is because they are regarded as related to, if not identical to, the Chinese dragon (龙 or *long*). I began this research as part of a one-year research fellowship (2017 – 2018) at the Sarawak Museum on the topic of ‘Animals in Indigenous Cosmologies’. I continue to pursue this research.

My interest in dragons is rooted in an interest in the way in which the peoples of Sarawak perceive their interaction with the natural environment. For all of the peoples of Borneo – indigenous peoples, Malays and Chinese – this interaction is not just a matter of practicality or of ‘making a living’; there is a widespread perception that there are innumerable sentient spirits surrounding humans, which express themselves through the phenomena of nature. Humans cannot avoid relating to these spirits; and there are widespread beliefs that it is important to have the right relationship with these spirits in order for humans to thrive.

Dragons are closely associated with water, a central element of the natural environment and of cosmological beliefs worldwide (Strang 2015), and are thus an important category of spirits in terms of the human relationship with that environment. Indeed, as we shall see here, dragons are sometimes even conflated with the entire natural environment. They are associated with springs gushing out of mountains; streams coming down mountains; rivers; the sea; and rain. Beliefs in beings that may be called dragons are present among all ethnic groups, including Chinese, Malays and indigenous groups. Borneo ideas

about dragonish beings appear to derive partly from the Chinese dragon (龙 or *long*), which is closely associated with *chi* (氣) – cosmic power or life force – and the water cycle (Carlson 2006; Pankenier 2013; Schafer 1973; Visser 1913); partly from the Hindu *naga*, a powerful being which is part-human and part-cobra and which lives in the water and under the earth; and partly from indigenous beliefs, some of which appear to be pre-Austronesian and to be related to beliefs in the Rainbow Serpent in New Guinea and Australia (Janowski 2019).

Dragons are regarded as powerful; as protective; as dangerous; and are sometimes associated with hierarchy. Different qualities come to the fore among different groups. I have recently discussed beliefs about the *nabau* among the Iban, one of the largest groups in Sarawak (ibid), examining the ways in which, among the Iban, this dragon being is regarded as protective. In the present article I explore beliefs about dragons among the Kelabit and Lundayeh, whose heartland is in the interior of the island, close to the headwaters of a number of rivers. These two groups are closely related culturally and speak closely related and mutually intelligible languages, which belong to a bigger language group, which Hudson described as the Apo Duat (Hudson 1977).<sup>1</sup> Among the Kelabit and Lundayeh, as we shall see, the dragon as fearsome comes to the fore; and among the Lundayeh the dragon is associated with the Great Spirit and with protection of the natural environment.

What I present here is based on discussions held over many years with people living in my main field site in the Kelabit Highlands, Pa' Dalih, and during visits made in 2017 and 2018 to Bario and Pa' Dalih; and on discussions with people belonging to the Lundayeh communities of Sipitang, Ba' Kelalan and Long Pasia, during visits made specifically in order to carry out interviews about dragon beliefs and experiences.

### **Kelabit and Lundayeh Beliefs about Dragons: the Impact of Christianity**

As the Kelabit and Lundayeh are very closely related peoples, one would expect them to have similar cosmological and religious beliefs and practices. In many respects this is true. However, it is notable that Lundayeh informants told me about a much wider variety of watery spirit beings that can be described as dragons than did the Kelabit.

This difference between the Kelabit and the Lundayeh may at least partly, and perhaps wholly, be rooted in the fact that for the Kelabit Christianity has meant an extremely thoroughgoing abandonment of all pre-Christian practices and beliefs – more extreme than among the Lundayeh. Although practically all Kelabit and Lundayeh in Sarawak and Sabah now belong to the same Christian evangelical church, the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB), there are differences between the Kelabit and the Lundayeh engagement with Christianity and in attitudes to pre-Christian beliefs and practices.

I have found that Kelabit informants are almost without exception very firmly convinced that all spirits are *saitan* (devils), and that they no longer need to pay attention to them, as Jesus Christ protects them from all spirits. Some, perhaps even many, Lundayeh informants, on the other hand, are less extreme in their position *vis-à-vis* their previous practices and beliefs, and have not entirely abandoned these. Lundayeh informants appear to both fear and respect spirits more than do Kelabit informants, and Lundayeh do not always appear to regard all spirits as evil. As I will describe below, in some cases dragons are clearly seen by Lundayeh informants as actually protecting the natural environment, and are therefore arguably regarded in some sense as being ‘good’ – or at least good to have around. These differences may explain the more detailed present-day knowledge about different varieties of dragon among the Lundayeh as compared to the Kelabit. It may be that detailed knowledge about spirits has been lost among the Kelabit and that there was originally a belief in a wider range of dragon spirit beings, more similar to the range of beings Lundayeh informants described to me.

The Kelabit view of the dragon as *saitan* is expressed clearly in the rejection of any use of the word *menegeg* (the term for ‘dragon’ in Kelabit – see below) as a ‘name element’. I use this term to refer to parts of the names with meanings that Kelabit take when they become parents and grandparents (Janowski 2016b). I was told by one young man that he had wanted to take the name Menegeg Mudut (‘Creative Dragon’), but that his elders would simply not countenance this possibility. He told me (somewhat jokingly) that perhaps when he becomes a grandfather he might try again – perhaps taking the name element ‘dragon’ in another local language – using *galau* (‘dragon’ in Lundayeh – see below) or *nabau* (‘dragon’ in Iban – see Janowski, 2019).

## The Dragon among the Kelabit

The main Kelabit term for dragon is *menegeg*, a word that may be derived from the term *naga*, which is a Sanskrit word meaning ‘snake’ that is widely used in Borneo to refer to the Chinese dragon (龍 or *long*). I was first told of the *menegeg* on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1987, a little less than a year after I had arrived in Pa’ Dalih, a small Kelabit longhouse community where I lived for two years while gathering material for my Ph.D. thesis. I was told by Baye Ribuh, the headmaster of the Pa’ Dalih school at that time, that in the deepest part (*taka*) of a rice field close to the longhouse, in an oxbow lake that was once part of the Kelapang river, there had, until not long before, been what in English was described to me as a ‘monster’ or ‘dragon’. He told me that this was, in Kelabit, called a *menegeg*. Since that time I have spoken to many people living in Pa’ Dalih, of all ages, about the *menegeg* in that rice field. I carried out a series of focused interviews on the topic of the *menegeg* in January and February 2018 among people from Pa’ Dalih and in Bario. Those from Pa’ Dalih were Tse Aren, Muned Aren, Ellie Malang, Juliet Malang, Rabruh Aren and Telona Bala. Two older men in Bario, Tama Oreng and Ngelibun Tepun, were also interviewed (I interviewed Ngelibun Tepun, while Tama Oreng was interviewed on my behalf by a Kelabit friend, Stephen Baya).

In Pa’ Dalih only one term is used for dragon – *menegeg*. In Bario, on the other hand, two terms were given by both Tama Oreng and Ngelibun Tepun – *menegeg* and *lalau*. The *menegeg* was said by both informants to be smaller than the *lalau*. Most of my informants told me that a *menegeg* develops from a python (*menelun*) living under the earth up on mountains (see Fig. 1), although Tse Aren in Pa’ Dalih told me that it develops from a crocodile (*bayeh*) (it should be noted that there are no crocodiles in the highland area, meaning that it appears to be regarded as a spirit creature). When a python becomes very large, it transforms into a *menegeg*. Some informants said that it lives initially in a pool on the top of a mountain. Eventually, a *menegeg* comes down the mountain with a landslide (*toran*), opening up a stream in the process, moving earth and stones as it comes down. It ends up in the main river. There, it lives in deep pools. Ngelibun Tepun said that the *menegeg* develops into the *lalau*. Tama Oreng, on the other hand, said that the *lalau* develops from an eel.



**Fig. 1:** Menegeg with Mountain (Painting by Kelabit artist Stephen Baya, 2019).

Some informants told me that the head of a *menegeg* looks like that of a Chinese dragon. Others said that its head is black. Some said that it has horns (*nga'ah*). Both Ngelibun Tepun and Tama Oreng said that the dragon develops horns once it has become a *lalau*, in other words once it is really big. However, as it is not usual to see it and survive (see below), there is a lot of speculation as to what it actually looks like, as few living people have ever seen it in its true or original (*to'oh*) form. It is said to be capable of transforming (*balio*) into another animal – a wild boar, a cow, a buffalo, a deer – which is seen on the banks of the river, or into a log floating in the river, and it is in those forms that humans usually encounter it (see Fig. 2). Many informants said that they had encountered a dragon in one of these forms.



**Fig. 2:** Menegeg transforming into a Deer (Painting by Kelabit artist Stephen Baya, 2019).

### **The Dragon among the Lundayeh**

My data on Lundayeh beliefs about dragons derive from visits to Long Pasia in December 2014 and February 2018, to Ba' Kelalan in August 2017 and to Sipitang in February 2018. Informants whom I interviewed were Ricky Ganang, Naman Pengiran, Parsi Labo, Matius Benut, Samuel Lasong, Singa Libat, Cecilia Paran and Johannes (Cecilia's husband) in Sipitang; Lait Lakong and Nooh Dawa in Long Pasia; and Sang Sigar, Gerald Usud, Darius Tagko and Kaya Meru in Ba' Kelalan.

Among the Lundayeh the main term for ‘dragon’ is *galau* or *lalau*, depending on local dialect. The *galau/lalau* is said to live in deep pools in the river and is associated with and causes floods, coming down from the mountain in landslides and then living in deep pools in the river. *Galau/lalau* are said to sometimes lie across rivers, blocking them. They are often said to take the form of logs. It is in this form that humans normally see them, just as among the Kelabit it is in this form that humans see *menegeg* or *galau*.

Lundayeh informants also told me of other species of dragon: the *rayap*, the *fanid tana’* and the *kamekar*. Like the *galau/lalau*, the *rayap* lives in the river, while the *fanid tana’* and the *kamekar* are said to live in the earth. It is said that very big pythons (*menelun*) transform (*misu’*) into *kamekar*. The *kamekar* is said to live in caves and under the earth. However both the *fanid tana’* and the *kamekar* are said to eventually make their way to the river, where they become *galau/lalau*. Some informants said that *galau/lalau* come straight out of the earth, without the intermediate stage of being *kamekar*. The dragon (whether termed *kamekar* or *galau/lalau* at this point) only makes its way down to a river when the water is high enough to allow for a sufficient depth, or else it enters a deep pool. There are specific pools where it is said that dragons are known to have arrived after coming down landslides, either already as *galau/lalau* or transforming into *galau/lalau* when they reached the river. Once the dragon reaches a stream or river, some informants said that it makes its way down to the main river, leaving a clear trail as it takes with it huge boulders and logs. Once it reaches the main river, it is said to continue down to the sea. One informant speculated that perhaps it then makes its way back up, or perhaps there are many dragons which keep coming out of mountains and making their way down to the river – the logic of this speculation appearing to be that there must be a source for the dragons which regularly come down landslides. Among the Kelabit too informants said that the *menegeg/lalau* made their way downstream with floods but that they somehow made their way back to certain deep pools.

One informant told me, like Tama Oreng in Bario, that eels (*delo*) can also transform (*misu’*) into *galau*. He said that a *galau* that was seen in July 2017 in a village near Ba’ Kelalan had transformed from an eel.

The *fanid tana’*, which is said to live underground, is said to be like a big worm, with scales, with a kind of fin which splits the ground as it passes along underneath. It makes its way to the river, where it causes floods. Like the *kamekar*, it comes out of the earth in landslides; informants told me of specific

instances where trees, earth and stones had been disturbed in a way believed to have been caused by a *fanid tana*'.

The form of any of these varieties of dragon is unclear, apart from the general fact that they are long and snake-like. Some informants said that when a dragon enters the water and becomes a *galau/lalau*, it develops feet. Informants in Ba' Kelalan told me that a *galau* was seen in July 2017 in one of the villages in that area, and that it had red eyes and horns like a deer. As with the *menegeg/lalau* in the Kelabit Highlands, a *galau/lalau* is said by Lundayeh informants to be able to transform itself (*misu*') into a log of wood or into another animal such as a cow or a buffalo. One informant said that it is often to be seen in this form near the river, eating the growing rice in fields. In Nooh Dawa's dream (see below) an old man appeared to him, who later appeared to him as a black *kamekar* dragon near a series of waterfalls; thus it would appear that there are instances where a dragon can appear as a human.

The *rayap*, the *galau/lalau* and the *kamekar* are all said to be instances of what is termed *luk moo*' – which can be roughly translated as 'something that has no specific form'. It is not entirely clear whether the *fanid tana*' is a *luk moo*' as it is not capable of transforming itself (*misu*') into other forms. The ability to do this appears to be a characteristic of *luk moo*'.

### **The Powerful Highland Dragon**

The dragon is regarded as possessing a lot of power (*lalud*). Its ability to transform from one form to another is a manifestation of this. The ability to transform (*balio* in Kelabit, *misu*' in Lundayeh) is a characteristic of powerful beings. Spirits can manifest in different forms; and so could the powerful culture heroes of old, living in the time of 'joining with power' (*getoman lalud*) (Janowski 2014/2016: 97–100).

This power can sometimes be harnessed by humans. I was told that where there is evidence of the passage of a *fanid tana*', people search for its scales, and keep them as powerful charms. Another instance of the use of dragonish materials as charms comes up in a story told to me in Sipitang in February 2018 by Ricky Ganang. This was a story that his grandfather told to him about something that had happened long ago in his village, Pa' Kefulod. Near the village there is a high waterfall called Futok-Futok. Once, a man from the village was chopping at a strangler fig (*lonok*) at the top of this waterfall. There was believed to be a dragon living in the pool, Riberuh Nekuyan, at the



bottom of the waterfall. He accidentally dislodged a boulder around which the strangler fig was wrapped, and it fell into Riberuh Nekuyan. A few days later the people of the village noticed a smell of rotting coming from the pool. At first they thought that this must be from the remnants of animals that the dragon had eaten. But when they had a look they found what they took to be the bones of a dragon. They took these away with them, as they believed that they possessed power (*lalud*). These were subsequently used as charms in war. It was also believed that anyone who possessed one of these bones would be able to instruct their dogs to bark and their cockerels to fight or to stop fighting.

### **The Fearsome Highland Dragon**

The Kelabit and the Lundayeh are very frightened of the dragon (see Fig. 3). They believe that it is very dangerous to encounter it. It will eat any creature, human or animal, that enters the water near where it lives. A number of Lundayeh informants told me about how people they knew had seen what they interpreted as being a *galau/lalau* or *kamekar* and that they had been terrified and had fled. Nooh Dawa told me how very close to his village of Long Pasia there is said to be a dragon living in a deep pool, Reberuh Mekusul. The dragon is said to have slid down into the pool from a mountain nearby, Sinupong. Nooh Dawa's father once saw this dragon jumping out of the water and diving in again. It was, in his time, considered very dangerous to enter the water as the dragon would eat you. It also ate any animals that tried to cross the river. It is not clear how much the people of Long Pasia still fear the dragon, but there continues to be a belief that it may still be present in the pool.

The Kelabit believe that it is dangerous simply to see the *menegeg*. If a human sees it in its true form, Kelabit informants said that he or she is likely to die. The *menegeg* was said by informants in Pa' Dalih to make a noise like someone hitting something against the surface of the water. The sound moves around constantly, being heard first here, then far over there. Informants told me how, when they were children, they were told not to go near the river when they heard that sound, and that they had to be careful not to go near the river when they had eaten cooked food as this would cause the teeth of the *menegeg* to tingle, and it might eat them. A number of Lundayeh told me that it is dangerous to take cooked food near the river, or even to talk about cooked food, as this causes the *galau/lalau*'s teeth to tingle and it might kill you by drowning you. The *galau/lalau* is said, among the Lundayeh, not to like blood, and to get angry if it smells it. If you wash blood out of clothes in the river, it is said that it will surface. It is also said not to like chilli.



**Fig. 3:** Roaring Menegeg (Painting by Kelabit artist Stephen Baya, 2019).

With Christianity, fear of dragons has lessened among both Kelabit and Lundayeh, as they believe that Jesus will protect them against it. After the Kelabit became what they regard as fully Christian, with the Bario Revival in 1972, informants said that they have not heard the *menegeg*. They believe that their Christian prayers have scared it away, or reduced its power so that it does not manifest itself. Some Lundayeh informants too told me that now that they are Christian they are not afraid of the various forms of the dragon. However, I also heard many recent stories from Lundayeh about people being frightened by or drowned by *galau/lalau* and *rayap*.

### **The Highland Dragon and the Natural Environment**

The stories about *kamekar* and *lalau/galau* told among the Lundayeh show that there is a close association between dragons and the natural

environment. The dragon appears to be protective of the natural environment, to monitor human behaviour *vis-à-vis* the natural environment and in some cases to enlist human assistance in protecting the natural environment. The association of all types of dragon with water is an expression of this close association with the natural environment.

Among the Lundayeh, stories told by informants indicate that the *rayap* and the *galau* appear to both be regarded as what can be described as punishment creatures, monitoring whether people behave as they should and punishing them if they do not. One of the manifestations of this is the fact that they are said to cause people to drown if they do not at least touch food they are offered. In the Lun Bawang language (used by the Lundayeh) what happens to you if you behave in this way is known as *meketepan*. There are, in fact, widespread beliefs in the wider region that refusing food will lead to punishment; in Malay, for example, refusing food is considered very dangerous, and the effect of doing so is described as *kepunan*. The *rayap* is said to drown people by coiling around them and carrying them down into the water. The *galau* is said to drown them by causing them to be washed away in a flood.

Among the Lundayeh, the *kamekar/galau/lalau* appears to monitor human behaviour *vis-à-vis* the natural environment and to punish misbehaviour. This is demonstrated in a story that I was told in Sipitang by Ricky Ganang in February 2018. The story tells of events that occurred in 1959 or 1960. A man called Tadem Salud went with a group of others up the Muaya' river to collect damar resin, and they camped overnight near a waterfall. While they were sitting there in the evening chatting, he picked all the moss off a boulder. That night he dreamt that an old man appeared to him and told him that he must pay compensation for having done this damage by leaving some of his homemade cigarettes at the waterfall the next morning, before he left. However, he didn't do this, as he didn't have many cigarettes left. The next day there was a flash flood and his entire family, who lived further down the river, was washed away, except his son Thomas, who managed to cling to a tree. When Tadem returned to his home he was devastated to find that his wife and his two little daughters had been drowned. He believed that the *galau* had caused the flood and carried away his family, because he had not left the compensation. While his son Thomas was in the tree he was aware of the passage of the *galau*, rushing along with the flood – he heard the noise it made, like that of a buffalo, and he saw two blue lights which were, he believed, the dragon's eyes.

### **The Dragon and the Great Spirit: the story of Nooh Dawa**

The old man who appeared to Tadem was, Ricky Ganang told me, the Ada' Rayeh, the Great Spirit of the forest and mountains – in other words, of the natural environment in which the peoples of the highlands live. The Great Spirit often appears in a human-like form to Kelabit young men (Janowski 2014, 2016a); and he appears as an old man in Lundayeh dreams. This is particularly explicit in the story of Nooh Dawa of Long Pasia, as related below.

With Christianity, the Great Spirit has come to be regarded as evil by many Lundayeh and Kelabit, particularly by the Kelabit. It seems certain that the Great Spirit, who is said to be able to 'eat' the spirits of humans, has always been regarded with awe and caution. The Great Spirit appears to be associated with the antithesis of human settlement focused on the cooking hearth. Cooked food is not liked by the Great Spirit. I was told by my Kelabit informants that the teeth of the Great Spirit tingle if you put food on the fire to heat it up while in the forest. The consequences of doing this are, potentially, death. This echoes the fears expressed to me by Kelabit and Lundayeh about the consequences of taking cooked food near the river where a dragon is known to be, or even, among the Lundayeh, of talking about cooked food near the river.

The Great Spirit and the dragon are closely associated, even conflated. The dragon who caused the flood that followed Tadem's non-compliance with the demand that he leave cigarettes as an offering appears to have been a manifestation of the Great Spirit. The conflation of the Great Spirit and the dragon is particularly explicit in the story of Nooh Dawa. Nooh Dawa (see Fig. 4) has for many years been looking after a part of the forest near Long Pasia known as the Payeh Maga, which means 'swampy area near the Maga river'. The Payeh Maga, which extends into both Sarawak and Sabah, has in recent years been found to be very high in high biodiversity, particularly in terms of bird life (Forest Department Sarawak 2013). It was in the past the subject of a logging concession but has now been made into a national park, following representations by environmentalists and local people, including Nooh Dawa, who told me that he stood up to the loggers physically. This is the story Nooh Dawa related to me in February 2018 about how it came about that he began looking after the Payeh Maga. I have translated the story from the Lun Bawang language with the help of Lait Lakong of Long Pasia:

'My name is Nooh Dawa. I live in Long Pasia and I was born here. I like to go hunting and exploring the forest far away from the village. I once went



**Fig. 4:** Nooh Dawa (Illustration for magazine article about his protection of the Payeh Magah forest).

hunting to a place we call Maga. I heard my dog barking because he had found a wild boar. I chased after it as far as the Maga Falls and I speared the wild boar. That night I made a shelter and slept near the mouth of the Maga river, which is a bit below the Falls. I made a fire and barbecued some of the meat from the wild boar. That night when I went to sleep I dreamt that I met an old man. He said ‘Nooh, wake up and go down to the Falls. I’ll be waiting for you there.’ I woke up with a start. I sat and thought about what the old man had said. Should I do what he asked or not? I went back to sleep and I dreamt again. It was the old man again. He said, ‘Why didn’t you go to meet me? Just now I told you to come.’ Early the following morning I went to the Falls but I didn’t see anything there. I sat near the Falls for about ten minutes and then returned to my camp. The next night I slept in the same place and I dreamt of the old man again. ‘You should go down to the Falls tomorrow morning. I’ll be waiting for you.’ I woke and thought and thought about what the old man had said to me. Then I decided to go down to the Falls again. It was about five in the morning when I went. When I got there, there was a lot of spray on the water. I saw something on the rock, something big and black. I went right up close to have a good look. I realised that it was a *kamekar* – a dragon. It was the dragon which looks after the forest. He was trying to give me a message that I should take on the job of looking after the forest. The dragon looked like a snake, but much bigger than a snake. It was black. It was coiled up on a rock shelf that formed part of the waterfall. It looked at me. I took a small stone and threw it at the dragon. It hit the dragon’s head but the dragon didn’t move

an inch. It just blinked its eyes at me. I felt very scared. I wondered if the dragon was going to attack me for throwing a stone at it. But it didn't. I stayed there for about ten minutes. Then I went back to my camp. At about seven in the morning I went back to the Falls. I looked at the place where the dragon had been coiled up but there was nothing there – only some big flies flying around in the area. I stayed at my camp the following night too. That night I had a third dream. I met the old man again and he told me that it had been he who had met me in the shape of the dragon at the Falls. 'I'm a dragon who has become a human in order to come and talk to you. Now you know me, go to the swamp forest, the *payeh*, and uproot two small trees called *aru'*, and go and plant them both on the rock near the Falls.' I went and uprooted the two trees as the dragon instructed and planted them on the big rock. After I did that I went to sleep and I had another dream and met the old man again. He told me that he was not only a dragon – he was the Ada' Rayeh, the Great Spirit of the Forest. That was our agreement, between the dragon who was also the Ada' Rayeh and myself – that if those two trees should be damaged or destroyed, I would become the Guardian of the Forest. Thirty years later, those *aru'* trees had become bigger. I found when I visited the Maga Falls that the trees had been uprooted by floodwaters. That night again I dreamed of the old man, who told me that I had become the Guardian of the Forest. That is the story I have to tell about the Ada' Rayeh who is also a dragon. I have a tattoo of a dragon on my arm. I had this done to remind me that I had met the dragon. That is my story.' (see Fig. 5)



**Fig. 5:** Tattoo of *galau* dragon on Nooh Dawa's arm (Photo: Author, Feb. 2018).

## Highland Images and Imaginings of the Dragon

The highland peoples have not, as far as I know, traditionally crafted images of the dragon, unlike some other peoples in Borneo – such as the Iban, who have woven them into cloth (Janowski 2019), and the Melanau, Kayan and Kenyah, who have carved and painted dragons. However, the Kelabit and Lundayeh collected and treasured artefacts from outside the highlands that carried images of the dragon, particularly large jars (see Fig. 6). These jars, which were used to make rice beer (*burak*) and to dispose of the dead, have been believed to be inhabited by powerful spirits and have been known to roar.



**Fig. 6:** Close-up of dragon jar (*belanai*) belonging to Tse Aren of Pa' Dalih, Kelabit Highlands (Photo: Author, 2010).

Although they do not craft images of the dragon *per se* as do other peoples, the Kelabit, like many other peoples in Borneo, do create flowing designs in woodwork (see Fig. 7) that are arguably dragons or at least proto-dragons. Similar designs, when they have points regarded as eyes, are described as *aso'/asu* among the Kayan and Kenyah (see Fig. 8). The term *aso'/asu* is a term which is used to refer to carvings of all sorts, some of which are very abstract and some of which present as animals, including dogs and tigers. Such designs arguably represent the flow of life and power. I would suggest that this flow of life and power is expressed strongly in beliefs about dragons; the swirling lines



**Fig. 7:** Carvings on wooden panel in Bario Asal longhouse, Kelabit Highlands (Photo: Sarawak Museum photographer, 1940s).



**Fig. 8:** Lawe Padan trimming Balang Muned's hair, Pa' Dalih, Kelabit Highlands. Balang Muned wears earrings in the shape of *aso'asu* (Photo: Kaz Janowski, 1987).

which the highland peoples carve can be regarded as expressing something which is expressed more explicitly in a 'dragonish' form by other peoples in Borneo (see Figs. 9 and 10). The peoples of the highlands also gather natural objects which are regarded as expressions of, as representing, perhaps even as





**Fig. 9:** Brown Menegeg Eye (Painting by Kelabit artist Stephen Baya, 2019).



**Fig. 10:** Menegeg with Moon (Painting by Kelabit artist Stephen Baya, 2019).

actually being snakes and dragons. Nooh Dawa has a snakeskin jerkin which was his father's (see Fig. 4); and a number of 'snake' bracelets (see Fig. 11).



**Fig. 11:** Naturally occurring piece of creeper gathered by Nooh Dawa or his father in the forest near Long Pasia. Nooh Dawa regards this as representing a snake and wore it as one of a number of similar bracelets until he sold it to the author in Feb. 2018 (Photo: Author).

The way in which the highland peoples imagine the dragon has recently been represented by the Kelabit artist Stephen Baya, who in 2019 made five paintings of dragons (see Figs. 1, 2, 3, 9 and 10). These vary from the literal to the highly figurative. Stephen Baya is in his 50s, and has spent much of his life in the highlands. In the paintings *Roaring Menegeg* (Fig. 3) and *Menegeg with Mountain* (Fig. 1), he represents the dragon as an actual snake-like (and scary) creature. But in the other three paintings the dragon is more of a dynamic, a flow, than an actual creature. *Menegeg with Moon* (Fig. 10) and *Brown Menegeg Eye* (Fig. 9) express the dragon as sentient flow, very much like the *aso 'asu* of the Kayan/Kenyan. In *Menegeg transforming into Deer* (Fig. 2) we see the dragon as transformation, as potential to be almost anything.

## CONCLUSION

We have seen that dragons, known as *menegeg*, *lalau/galau*, *fanid tana*<sup>1</sup> and *rayap* by the Kelabit and Lundayeh, are regarded as both powerful and very frightening. They are closely associated with the power of the natural environment and are sometimes explicitly conflated with the Ada' Rayeh, the Great Spirit of the forest and mountains. Through the Great Spirit, the dragon is protective of the natural environment upon which the Kelabit and Lundayeh depended entirely until quite recently. This is particularly strongly reflected in the story of Nooh Dawa, related above. The conflation of the dragon, so closely associated with water, with the Great Spirit arguably reflects the fact that the flow of water is the central dynamic of the natural environment.

With Christianity, the dragon has been demonised, as has the Great Spirit. This is associated with a separation between humans and the natural environment. In the past, the fear of retribution from the Great Spirit was considerable, with very severe consequences to be expected if humans misbehaved. With Christianity, this fear has abated. The SIB Church, to which almost all Kelabit and Lundayeh belong, views all nature spirits as evil, as *saitan*, and it couples this with a belief that Jesus is much more powerful than any of these, including the Great Spirit. This implies that humans no longer need to worry about retribution from the Great Spirit. However, while among the Kelabit I found that there is, indeed, little worry about what will happen if humans cut down large trees or use deep pools as rice fields, among the Lundayeh there continues to be both a belief that one has to be careful about how one behaves *vis-à-vis* the natural environment because of possible retribution; and a belief that the Great Spirit, and the dragon closely associated with it, are not necessarily to be regarded as entirely evil, as the story of Nooh Dawa demonstrates.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hudson named (and misspelt) the language group after a range of mountains in the highlands. This is known among the Kelabit and Lundayeh as Apad Wat, which means 'root range'.

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