

A 'Really Good' Couple in an Upland Group: Tuked Rini and Aruring Menepo Boong

This exhibition includes paintings of Aruring Menepo Boong and Tuked Rini, who feature in tales told among the Kelabit people who live in a mountainous area in the far interior of Sarawak on the island of Borneo. These paintings were commissioned for use in a book centred on a version of the tale – 'Tuked Rini Cosmic Traveller: Life and Legend in the Heart of Borneo' by Monica Janowski (NIAS Press and Sarawak Museum 2014).

Aruring Menepo Boong ('Aruring who Gathers together Huge Beads') and Tuked Rini ('Rini Who Supports his People') lived long ago, in a time before time. Together, they led a group of longhouses at Luun Atar ('On the Flat Land'). The couple were 'really good' people (*lun doo to'oh*) who looked after their people well. They had so much cosmic power that they shimmered with it! Theirs was the central hearth in the central longhouse at Luun Atar.



A young Borneo couple in festive dress. Photo: Hose and McDougall 1912

Tuked Rini led his kinsmen on many war expeditions to bring back ever more cosmic power in the form of heads brought back as trophies.

Here is the tale of one of these expeditions, as told by Balang Pelaba of Pa' Dalih to Monica Janowski in 1986:

Early one morning, Aruring Menepo Boong rose as usual at 4 and prepared the morning rice meal. She called Tuked Rini and his kinsmen to eat. Both Aruring Menepo Boong and Tuked Rini shimmered with cosmic power! After breakfast Tuked Rini called his kinsmen, the other heroes of Luun Atar, to go and make war – and take heads. They sprang off the rock in the river and flew to Above the Sky, with the lesser people hanging from the sword sheath of one of the heroes.

They landed at the Great Waterfall. Here they found traces of the Spirit Tiger Rock – who was a man, a spirit tiger and a rock all at once! They did battle with the Spirit Tiger Rock and

defeated it, tying it down, and then they entered the Rock, flying like eagles down to the longhouse inside.

Here, they did battle with the people living in the longhouse, who were spirits and very powerful. However, Tuked Rini's close kinsmen had special powers to help them in battle – such as Agan Spirit Tiger Tree Trunk with Bones of Wood who could drive his enemies into the ground! Even so, after fighting for aeons, Tuked Rini and his kinsmen were getting tired – after all, fighting and taking heads is an exhausting business!

Fortunately, at this point Tuked Rini's great-grandmother Mother Supadau, who lived at the Gate of the Sky, called others of his kinsmen to come and help them. Eventually, with their help, Tuked Rini and the other heroes from Luun Atar had slaughtered all of the heroes from the other side except two – Sewan the Spirit Tiger with Breath of Walking Fire and Siok the Spirit Tiger who Distributes Powerful Smoke with his Fingers. These two were proving difficult to defeat! What should they do?

Then another powerful lady, the Great Spirit Mother, intervened, explaining that Tuked Rini and his kinsmen were related to Sewan and Siok! So Tuked Rini made peace with them and the heroes all set off, with their new-found kinsmen, to return to Luun Atar. They took with them all the heads that they had taken in the battle inside the Spirit Tiger Rock.

Unfortunately, all of the lesser people of Luun Atar had been killed in the battle. They were living in the world of the spirits. However, Balang Katu, Tuked Rini's brother, fortunately possessed a 'water of power' and with this he brought the lesser people back from the world of the spirits. So they too returned home with the heroes.

When Tuked Rini and his kinsmen reached Luun Atar, Aruring Menepo Boong and the other heroines welcomed them and received the heads they had brought back with great ceremony. The heroines had made enormous quantities of rice beer and everyone drank all night.

The next day it was time for the rice harvest and everyone went out to help. When they had finished the harvest, the men went hunting and brought back lots of wild pigs. Then the people of Luun Atar held a huge feast to celebrate the successful headhunting expedition and the harvest. They enjoyed barbecued meat, new rice – and lots and lots of rice beer!

Aruring Menepo Boong and Tuked Rini are said to have been giants. Tuked Rini's enormous sharpening stone can be seen even today near a longhouse called Pa' Mada. He and the other heroes and heroines had so much cosmic power – *lalud* – that when they touched stone they left a mark on it. There are many stones in the highlands bearing Tuked Rini's handprints and footprints.