

Cosmic Power Flowing through Art: The Paintings of Stephen Baya

Stephen Baya is an artist from the Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak, on the island of Borneo.

The ten paintings shown here were included in the book *Tuked Rini, Cosmic Traveller: Life and Legend in the Heart of Borneo* (NIAS Press and Sarawak Museum, 2014) by Monica Janowski and they have previously been exhibited at the Cultured Rainforest exhibition in Sarawak and in Cambridge. Four were specifically commissioned for the book.

The legend of Tuked Rini and Aruring Menepo Boong is one of the central Kelabit legends about heroes and heroines. The myths and legends of his ancestors have inspired Stephen's art, and he was delighted to be asked to paint scenes from the legend. He was given free rein to paint whatever he wished, and he produced four paintings, all of which are included here.

The other paintings exhibited here, which were also used in the book *Tuked Rini, Cosmic Traveller*, express the spiritual and emotional connection that he feels with the highland landscape of rugged mountain ridges clothed in verdant forest, interspersed with fast flowing streams and rice fields, and the presence and flow of cosmic power (*lalud* in Kelabit) through nature. For the people of Borneo, cosmic power accumulates in living beings, particularly big, old trees and powerful animals, especially spirit animals such as the spirit tiger, *balang*, and the spirit crocodile, *baya*. The *baya* is depicted in one of the paintings. The people of the highlands often include the names of spirit animals in their names, suggesting that an individual may possess the cosmic power of that spirit animal. Stephen's own name includes *baya*, which was one of his father's names.

