

# **INTERETHNIC TIES ALONG THE KALIMANTAN SARAWAK BORDER IN HIGHLANDS BORNEO: THE KELABIT AND LUN BERIAN CASE IN THE KELABIT-KERAYAN HIGHLANDS**

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## ***Abstract***

This paper aims to explore ways in which regional culture and economic disparities affect people's everyday lives and ethnic interactions between different communities living in the frontiers of the international boundaries. Looking specifically at the Kelabit people of Sarawak and their interactions with the neighboring Lun Berian people of Kalimantan this paper considers the workings of kinship relations especially of family and ancestry relations across a political and ethnic boundary. These two groups of people living in two different side of the Malaysian/Indonesian border in the Kelabit-Kerayan Highlands were arbitrarily divided by the imposition of international boundary lines in Borneo in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, subsequently separating the two communities in two separate nations. This paper argues that despite the political division, the Kelabit people and Lun Berian people of Kalimantan managed to maintain their political, social and economic networks that have defined these highlands communities and their interactions with each other. However, although are often linked by their cultural and historical connections and economic interdependencies, the nature of these linkages especially of the importance of kinship relations between these border communities have gradually shifted by the emergence of the unequal development between the two neighboring states Indonesia and Malaysia.

## **INTRODUCTION**

My paper today has two aims. Firstly is to highlight some key features of ethnic interactions between two main groups of people living in two different side of the Malaysian/Indonesian international border in the border region of the Kelabit-Kerayan Highlands. Secondly is to call for an understanding that takes into account local socioeconomic and sociopolitical dynamics that have existed at the border region particularly when creating a regulatory framework to monitor, manage and regulate cross border activities along the international borders. Here I would like to emphasize the need to understand "the ethnic and historical dimensions" to which cross-border movements

meant to those who live and work in the Highlands of Borneo. My proposal is based on the need to understand from a sociological and human development perspectives that take into consideration the social and cultural integration which define the Highlands communities and their interactions with each other. This I propose to include the understanding of (among other things) how regional culture and economic disparities affect people's everyday lives and interactions between different communities living in the frontiers of the international boundaries. This I suggest plays an important role in assessing and defining the ground rules of transboundary micro-diplomacy to achieve the objectives of various interstate efforts for economic regional integration such as the formation of BIMP-EAGA.

Most of the information presented in this paper comes from personal recollection of events and secondary sources about the local folks living in the highlands. The information is highly "subjective" and reflective taken from the time I was brought up in the highlands and my regular visits there.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF BOUNDARY LINES IN THE HIGHLANDS: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

### **The Lun Kelabit and Lun Berian**

The Lun<sup>1</sup> Kelabit and the Lun Berian are two closely related ethnic groups; in fact they often view themselves as one common group ---the *Lun Dayeh* or "Upriver People" or *Lun Lem Bawang Inan* or "People of the Country." This fact was supported by other scholars who have classified these two groups of people under one common term. For example, LeBar 1972 (pg.153) has grouped these two groups and other closely related groups under one common term – the Kelabitic Murut group. Others like Douglas, Harrison and Hose (Talla 1979:9) on separate accounts have classified the Lun Berian as well as the Lun Kerayan as Kelabit people in their writings. They confirmed the existence of close cultural, linguistic and kinship ties between these groups in highlands Borneo. In fact these ties are not limited to cultural and social ties, but also would include strong

political and economic ties, whereby each played very important roles to the livelihood and existence of these groups since time immemorial (Bala 1999).

Nonetheless the imposition of international boundary lines in Borneo in the 18th and 19th century has somehow arbitrarily divided these groups and in this case the Lun Kelabit and Lune Berian into two separate people. This process of separation began with the Convention of 1891 and culminated with the signing of the Basic Agreement between Malaysia and the Republic of Indonesia in 1967, whereby the international boundary between Sarawak and Kalimantan has separated the two communities, families and clans into two separate nations. The political boundary gradually has altered relations between the two groups or members of the communities, which Talla claims to have created a difference between the Lun Kelabit and Lun Berian. He writes:

Today however with the growing of the modern political border separating Kalimantan and Sarawak, these two groups [Lun Berian and Kerayan] are becoming increasingly differentiated from the Sarawak Kelabit. The Kelabit themselves regard them [Lun Kerayan, Lun Berian and Lun Kelabit] them as separate, though closely related people. (1979:4)

For me, the differentiation that Talla pointed out refers to differences in the quality of life, national social and economic identities, between the Lun Kelabit and the Lun Berian. I become very conscious of these through my research process in cultural and social dynamics at the border region for the past few years. At the end of 1994 until mid-1995, I was pursuing research on the Kelabit's genealogy and kinship system for my M.Phil in Anthropology at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. One of the things that I found out from the research was that the highland communities have previously and variously from time immemorial not only inhabited the area, but were very mobile and were involved in many exchanges or interactive linkages in the form of trade and intermarriage, as well as headhunting activities. There seemed to be a fluid movement of people despite the rough and tough terrain, and this situation continue to exist until the arrival of the colonialists in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

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<sup>1</sup>*Lun* here is a short form to Kelabit word for *lemulun*, which means “people”, but also to mean ethnic or racial background. I will therefore use the word *lun* throughout the text when refer to the Kelabit people and the Berian people as ethnic groups.

Even though some of these movements are still in existence today, the nature of these movements has changed or was affected due to state policies imposed at the border. This is where I encounter the reality of Edmund Leach's claim that "boundary can violently, arbitrarily, divide ethnic peoples into different nationals". The political boundary in Borneo, like in many other parts of the world, has cut across cultural and groupings and relations. As such communities like the Kelabit and Berian, and various other ethnic groups in Borneo such as the Iban, Kenyah, Kayan, Bidayuh and many others are separated into two different nation states (or even three if one wants to take Brunei into account)---Malaysian and Indonesian. Members of various cultural and social groupings- or even family members were separated due to the imposition of boundary lines. As a member of a community that inevitably affected by the process, it has produced certain emotions in me against the violence and unfairness of the borderline on these communities.

I was particularly saddened by the impact of unequal development between the two neighboring frontier regions. But allow me first to explain what do I mean by unequal development here. There are many interpretations as to what does "unequal development" means. Common sense's interpretation of the term usually refers to the existence of differences in levels of economic development between two or more regions. There are also debates among sociologists and economists to explain the concept. For example, while the neoclassical economists suggest it serves as a self-correcting mechanism where less-developed areas with low costs for land and labors would attract investment from high cost areas, the Marxists on the other hand proposed that the more developed areas tend to concentrate economic resources in one region, which subsequently lead to future investment being largely placed in favor of those in highly developed areas. Thus the cumulative advantage is vested in the more developed areas. This has implications on movement of labors, creating migration patterns that tend to move towards the developed areas. No matter what the descriptions and explanations are for unequal development, the implications not only on local economies but also their social activities are significant. This is because the local at the border regions are often

caught between two different political and administrative systems and yet linked by cultural and century of traditions.

In highlands Borneo, for instance the Kelabit on the Malaysian of the border are relatively prosperous with better quality of life, while the Lun Berian on the Indonesian sides of the border are economically less well off. And this I propose has great implications on the nature of social relations and in this case kinship and familial relations, which exist between these two groups across the border. I consider this situation to be arbitrary for the people since they have not asked for the boundary to be constructed. It was constructed out of colonials' competition for sovereignty in the area<sup>2</sup>.

However, it was in my attempt to understand through my research the implications of the unfairness of the boundary, I became more conscious of the conceptual reality of the border and its significance to Lun Kelabit and Lun Berian's economic, political and interethnic relations in the highlands. I realized that the process of research and writing had required me to put into words a taken-for-granted experience at the border. This process produced in me a spatial and a historical consciousness towards the boundary, which caused me to internalize the reality of the boundary. It has caused me to be more conscious of, than previously, the existence of the boundary that separates in the highlands. The reality of the irony hit me when I went back to the highlands in December 1997. I was alarmed to find myself looking at my relatives from the Berian area that were working in my family's rice fields more as Indonesian laborers than as my *lun ruyung* or relatives.

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<sup>2</sup> It is in this context that many frontiers were developed for the convenience of colonial administrators, in this case emerging from competition in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries between the Dutch in Kalimantan and the Brooke rulers in Sarawak, whose methods included organizing expeditions, building of forts and border outposts, gaining control over trade and by imposing taxes on those in the interior. Nonetheless, it was only during the later period of 19<sup>th</sup> century that the two colonial powers saw the need to have a clearly demarcated and delimited boundary to divide their administrative power over the area. At a meeting in June 1891, the boundary line was set along the watershed between the Dutch territory on one side and Brunei and Sarawak on the other side. In 1912 a joint Anglo-Dutch survey team was formed to establish the division between the British Colony of North Borneo and Indonesian Borneo (Irwin. 1955:206). Additional treaties were signed in 1915, and in 1928.

I still remember occasions when my late grandmother narrated to me our family genealogy. Often times the narration will include how my late great grandfather (my father's father's father) has migrated many years ago from Pa Kabak, a village located in the Dutch Borneo (today's East Kalimantan). He has left his home and relatives in Pa Kabak to live in Pa Umur, a village on the Sarawak side of the border and which was his wife's former village. My great grandfather's relatives after he left, also migrated from Pa Kabak to Lembudud and Long Tugul, both in East Kalimantan and about 8 hours walk from my village, Pa Umur. Therefore my family still has many relatives or *lun ruyung* living on the other side of the border.

As a child I used to look forward to these *lun ruyung*'s visit because they brought along different gifts such as chicken and duck eggs, baskets, mats, rice or machetes that they presented to my family whenever they came. Besides that they were always ready to help with the farming activities especially during seasons when hard work is required in the farm, for example during slashing or clearing, the planting and harvesting seasons in the *late* or "rice fields". They usually come in groups of four to five persons, and stay for a night or so at my village before proceeding to other villages in the area. Normally these relatives would stay with my family as their close relatives in the village. It was during these many visits that I got to know some of my *lun ruyung* or "relatives" from Berian.

Just as our *lun ruyung* or "relatives" do take some time to visit us in Bario, members of my family occasionally visited them in Berian too. I still remember my first visit in 1980 to the Berian area when I was about 11 years old. I went with one of my sisters and a few other children from my village to Lembudud, a village located about nine hours walk from Pa' Umur. We hiked up high mountains and climbed down deep valleys. When we reached the peak of Raan Mekang, a man in his 50s pointed somewhere on the peak and said, *neh rang tana lem erang Indonesia and Malaysia* or "that is the boundary line between Indonesia and Malaysia", but all I could see was trees.

We were much welcomed and were showered with hospitality when we arrived. I was amazed to know that we have many relatives and that they were very happy to host us.

Since we had so many *lun ruyung* or "relatives" in the area, my sister and I had great difficulty trying to decide where to stay. We finally decided to stay with a relative who frequently visited with us at Pa Umur. But, our other relatives frequently invited us for meals. Unlike the Kelabit, the Berian have a custom that required their relatives on visiting to eat at each single household (households of relatives) at every meal. I can remember trying very hard to finish my breakfast at a relative's place when another relative appeared at the door waiting for us to proceed to his family's apartment. As soon as we were done at the second place, another relative came by to invite us to her house. We received more than six invitations that morning. I was told that it was a custom that the Kelabit used to practice but which has disappeared over the years.

It is argued that exist very little cultural differences between the Kelabit and the Berian except in terms of economic differential and the relative strength of the Malaysian Ringgit compared to the Indonesian rupiah. And here I would like to suggest that in recent years economic differential has increasingly become eminent between these two groups. This I proposed is mainly as a result of the imposition of boundary lines in the highlands environment that enables economic dependency and interdependence between the Kelabit and Berian ( Bala, 1999 and also supported by Amster, 2000). This I argue did not only redefines political and economic, but also their social interactions in the highlands.

The imposition of international borders created an economic difference and regional inequality that had encouraged particularly the Lun Berian to cross international border to Bario in search of employment opportunity and seasonal wage laborers. This is crucial to the Highlands economies because the boundary creates opportunities for economic interdependencies between the two groups across the boundary. And this is especially important for the sustenance and maintenance of rice farming as an important activity amongst the Kelabit in Bario (Amster, 2000).

The Kelabit numbered approximately at 7,000 people is one of the smallest ethnic groups in Sarawak but only about 1200 still remain in their traditional home, the Kelabit

Highlands. Most (approximately 75%) have migrated out to live in town areas in Sarawak or in other parts of Malaysia, or even overseas. There are few interconnected reasons for Kelabit migration out of the highlands. One of the major reasons is the quest for higher education, which caused many to leave the highlands. Subsequently many younger generations stay on in the urban centers like Kuching, Miri, or Bintulu in the coastal region for better job opportunities. Eventually they married and settled in the urban areas. The Kelabit migration pattern (out migration and intermarriages) inevitably has great implication on farming activities in the highlands. It has caused a shortage of labor in the Highlands due to a reduction in the availability of family members to work in the rice fields.

For generations, rice farming amongst the Kelabit has been dependent upon family members as its main source of labor. Each member of the family, man and woman, young and old alike, is expected to contribute their labor during all stages of the farming cycle to ensure the success cultivation and subsequently harvesting of the family's farm. For example, I still remember the hard work that my siblings and I had to endure when helping our parents in the farms. My parents, my mother in particular, would demand everyone to participate in accomplishing any tasks in the rice field. This is particularly so during the season when most work needed to be done, for example, during clearing, planting and harvesting seasons. During these seasons, especially the harvesting period, every family member was expected to help in order to complete the task as fast as possible. If the tasks are not completed in time, when the ripe crops are left unattached, they are susceptible to damage and vulnerable to pests.

But as mentioned earlier on, most young Kelabit men and women left the Highlands. As a result the older folks who are left behind had to farm and care for their lands to keep the family heritage and the cultural obligation alive for the coming generations. As the older folks continue to work on their farms, they also faced shortage of labors in maintaining the family farms. Thus, they had to look for alternative means to fill in the labor shortage.

Fortunately for many Kelabit families in the highlands, the labor shortage in the rice fields is “filled” with the availability of cheap labor from the Lun Berian communities in East Kalimantan. The Lun Berian people become an important alternative source of labor supply to the Kelabit, and increasingly becoming important to the highland economy through the informal service they have provided. In fact, a household survey of one of the longhouse communities in the highlands suggests that 80 percent of the households rely on hired labors to work on the rice fields, and almost 80 percent of the labor hired came from the Berian area in East Kalimantan (Kalang 2000). This survey indicates a change of labor structure in the Highlands from a family-oriented labor structure to a hired-labor structure in the rice fields. Thus, it shows the dependence of the Lun Kelabit of Lun Berian laborers in rice production in Bario. And because they are relatively cheaper<sup>3</sup> when compared to the local labor force, the Lun Berian labor is increasingly important<sup>4</sup>.

Contrary to the general believe that the immigrants from the Indonesian side are taking the jobs away from the locals or even illegally harboring themselves before moving inward to the bigger cities, the unequal development actually provided mutual economic benefits to both nationals in the Highlands. The situation conditioned the Kelabit (Malaysian) and Lun Berian (Indonesian) communities to meet their economic interests in seasonal employment and shortage of labor during harvesting season. This is crucial for many Kelabit farmers because rice farming carries various significance and cultural meanings to them. Besides producing rice for domestic consumption, family farms also generate supplementary incomes to family members through the sale of rice, and also have some relations with prestige system that defines family’s role in the community

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<sup>3</sup> Kalang (2000) indicates that wages differential between a local person and a Lun Berian exists clearly in daily wage. While a local person is usually paid RM15 as a daily wage, a Lun Berian is paid RM10. Although paid relatively lower than the local laborers, the wage level is more attractive and economically advantage to the Lun Berian since the relative strength of the Malaysian Ringgit to the Indonesian Rupiah is favourable. Home remittance (ready cash) by relatives and children in particular to their parents in Bario makes it easy for parents to hire Lun Berian (Hew Cheng Sim and Sharifah Mariam Al-Idrus 1997) to work on their farms.

<sup>4</sup> Having said this, local laborers are still used although it is difficult to make certain the supply of their labor. This is because within the local employment structure, the financial costs for local laborers to go and work in the Highlands are difficult to envision since the wage or economic return would not be high enough to justify them working in the rice fields.

(Janowski 1988). Subsequently, family farms are to be kept as part of the family heritage and not sold.

The Lun Kelabit and Lun Berian economic interdependencies at the border regions is not solely limited to rice farming activities, but also to include other forms of economic activities as well as social functions and political interactions. The Kelabit in particular are very dependent on the Berian people for local products, which are useful for everyday use in the Kelabit Highlands. For instance, my family receives its supply of *ugam* or "mats, *binen* or "baskets", *bu an* or "big baskets", *tungul* or "machete", and *ba o* or "beads" from our *lun ruyung* from the Berian area<sup>5</sup>. My parents and late grandparents usually obtain these goods from them either by barter exchange or by cash. These trade exchanges are very important. In fact, I can remember my mother receiving five strings of glass beads from a relative in exchange for a male buffalo, which was worth about RM1800 (US\$450).

Transnational marriages, partly as extensions to rice-farming activities in the Highlands, between members of the two communities are also on the increase (Amster 2000). My own personal experiences in the Highlands reaffirmed Amster's observation. For example, often marriages involved Kelabit men marrying Lun Berian women, and less involving Kelabit women marrying Lun Berian men. In fact, out of six marriages in my village to Lun Berian people, four of them are Kelabit men and two women. Similar situation was also reported by Amster (2000), when he relates two marriages incidence where arranged marriages were initiated, and how these ceremonies created relationships that center on seasonal wage labor activities in the rice fields. Moreover, the Kelabit dependence on the Lun Berian laborers is not limited to their need for seasonal labor

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<sup>5</sup> I have also observed the same situation in Ba Kelalan in September 2000. While sitting on a veranda overlooking the route leading to Pa Midang in Kalimantan, few Lun Berian passed by with huge baskets full of goods purchased in Ba Kelalan and carried back to Kalimantan. Other researchers such as King (1985) and Rousseau (1990) have also indicated that there is ongoing trading between people across the border. For instance King (1985:43) noted that the Maloh in West Kalimantan, although have to journey two to three days on foot from the Embaloh River to the bazaar at the Sarawak border settlement in Lubok Antu, often travel into Sarawak for trade to purchase consumer goods and to find paid seasonal work. This is because the range of services and goods that are traded there tend to be more attractive and cheaper on the Sarawak side than the Kalimantan side.

during harvesting seasons, but also to perform other services including building houses, hauling firewood, and repairing paddy dykes among others. In a way the emergence of unequal development as a result of the imposition of the boundary lines is a blessing in disguise for the Lun Kelabit and the Lun Berian in the highlands. While it helps in maintaining and sustaining rice farming in Bario, it provides a range of opportunities to generate income for the Lun Berian in the Highlands.

In other words the boundary is no more a political, social and cultural boundary than it is an economic boundary. This brief and simple analysis on interethnic ties at the border reflects how unequal development affects quality of life, which in return affects people's social and familial interactions and their experiences at the border. This complex dynamics needs to be taken into account when considering social, political and economic dimensions in the border regions of Borneo. The tendency is to look at the border area as "problematic" because international borders, especially between less developed and developed regions are often regarded as gateways for, and homes to migrant populations, cross-border crime and most likely illegal entries. As a result there are moves by the state to enforce immigration laws, rules and regulations to facilitate cross border movements as a mean to restrict and impede illegal activities such as drug trafficking, illegal logging and so forth. As this paper tries to highlight, not all movements and interactions at the border can be categorize as "illegal" for exist other forms of linkages such as familial relations and other interdependence relations which translate across international boundary lines.

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