The Forest, Source of Life: The Kelabit of Sarawak.

By Monica Janowski.
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Reviewed by Jeff Oliver

Introduction

The Kelabit are an indigenous people that live deep in the forested highlands of Borneo. Before Tom Harrison parachuted into the region in 1945, to organize resistance against the Japanese, the west had very little empirical knowledge of this ‘tribal’ society’s existence. As Brian Durrans of the British Museum suggests in the preface to this volume, Borneo was largely an imaginary concept, brokered by ‘white rajas’, traders and travellers. Since WWII however, Borneo has fallen increasingly under the lens of anthropologists. Monica Janowski’s new book endeavours to add to this growing literature.

The culmination of several years of what must have been exhilarating ethnographic fieldwork plus well over a decade of painstaking academic research, Janowski sets out to provide an ‘exegesis’ for two collections of artefacts that she made during field research between 1986 and 1988. However, her book offers more than this. It illustrates how the uses of materials from the local environment work as mediums through which the Kelabit structure their social worlds. Like most indigenous societies the world over, the affects of globalisation and modern economics are significantly challenging past social orders - linoleum, DDT and O’Neill sports wear have all made inroads - and Janowski attempts to show how these currents are dealt with at the local scale of Pa’ Dalih, a small Kelabit village in the southern Highlands where her research is based.

The text

The monograph is separated into nine chapters, a section of beautiful black and white plates plus considerable appendixes. After her introduction, the first five chapters describe in detail the material culture of the Kelabit and the social practices to which they are tied. There are chapters on personal adornment, the residential longhouse, the cooking hearth, agriculture and the use of the ‘wild’ forest. The last three chapters offer an interpretation. Chapter seven deals with the topic of lalud: the life force of the wild forest. Chapter eight develops the ideas of status and argues how the production of rice and its redistribution is fundamental to the reproduction of both family groups and family heads. Chapter nine, employing a type of structuralist argument, suggests that that older forests, forest products and activities associated with the forest are associated with men, while rice fields, rice production and the domestic activities of rice consumption are associated with women. In her conclusion Janowski includes a catalogue of photographic plates referred to in the text. Arguably one of the best features of this book, they include a range of reproduced archival images from the Sarawak Museum as well as photos taken by the author and her associates. Most appear to be candid shots that depict activities surrounding the production of the various artefacts she discusses in the text; although a few striking and posed photographs bring to mind the classic and stoic anthropological images of Edward Curtis. For the non specialist, the appendices include a useful glossary of Kelabit words and expressions particular to Pa’ Dalih, a breakdown of materials and techniques used in the manufacture of artefacts, a list of botanical names used in the text and perhaps most importantly, a catalogue of all artefacts procured by the author for the British Museum and Sarawak Museum. Strangely as one might expect in a work of this nature, there is no index for easy reference.

This is authoritative work on the manufacture, function and social relations that are bound up with everyday artefacts, settlement features and landscape.
features in recent historic and contemporary Kelabit society. Moreover it exemplifies how artefacts and features were used against the backdrop of subsistence practices and domestic activity. While many of the early chapters are fairly descriptive, Janowski does manage to weave an element of narrative into her prose by connecting artefacts with social change at both local and broader scales. Crucially, because it focuses specifically on the community, Pa’ Dalih, she attains a degree of resolution unavailable in more general overviews. On the down side, while occasional references to the outside world are made, this same local scale approach tends to obscure the very real global connections that increasingly define the Kelabit.

For my money I found three main deficiencies with this book. In parts I detected something of a subtext implying that Janowski is more interested in finding a distinctive and authentic Kelabit culture. This is why there is an emphasis on ‘traditional’ aspects of Kelabit social life such as the communal longhouse versus individual modern family dwellings, and why photographic plates focus on rattan weaving rather than chainsaws and modern logging. Moreover, considering most Kelabit now live in towns and cities in Sarawak it is surprising that Janowski only gives them little more than a passing mention. Another problem is related to the subject of status, which is discussed in several chapters. Not only does status remain undefined, she seems to uncritically map a western materially productive understanding of status onto her analysis without considering other ways in which status might be produced and conveyed. Lastly I was disappointed that that the author did not engage more thoroughly with the significance of the forest landscape to which she attributes the title of the book. Her interpretation here I think is less convincing as the forest, and its antithesis the rice field, is treated rather monolithically as larder and as a symbol reflecting maleness and femaleness respectively. How might the significance of place, history and various practices complicate this rather essentialist dualism?

Conclusion

There are clearly some issues that remain to be worked out. While, I rather doubt I am in a position to assess the overall contribution made by this study, Janowski’s book will undoubtedly make an important mark on the literature of indigenous society in Borneo more generally and specifically of the Kelabit. While the approach at times is dated, none of the remarks above should seriously detract from the value of this work as a starting point for anthropologists and ethno-archaeologists interested in Kelabit ethnography.

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