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TRADITIONAL EARTHEN CROCODILE EFFIGIES OF THE LUN BAWANG IN SARAWAK: Functions, Origin and Significance

Ipoi Datan

INTRODUCTION

The presence of huge outlines of monsters, snakes and crocodiles was notably widespread in central and west Borneo (Harrison, 1958). However, not much academic attention was afforded to these features as compared to literary documentation on the more obvious features like the megalithic structures such as dolmens (*batuh nangan*), menhirs (*batuh sinuped*), stone mounds (*perupun*) and engravings (*batuh narit*) or the ridge clearings (*kawang*) and big ditches (*nabang*) as reported by St. John (1863), Banks (1937) and Harrison (1958). The former outlines referred to were possibly the mud images of crocodile (*ulung buayah*) and of serpents or dragons (*ulung darung*) made by the Lun Bawang (formerly Murut) of Sarawak and the Lundayeh of Sabah and Kalimantan Timur (Kaltim) in connection with their ancient head hunting rituals (nuwi ulung buayah/darung).

In 2004, the Sarawak Museum initiated preliminary surveys on the mud effigies of the Lun Bawang in the Lawas District where a few sites were located and inspected. From 2007, intensified surveys were carried out in collaboration with the Centre for Global Archaeological Research, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang to investigate the sites. This article presents the findings of these surveys and will focus primarily on the functions or reasons for the construction of the mud effigies made by the Lun Bawang, the origin of the tradition and their significance in the present context.



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Admittedly, earthen crocodile effigies were also traditionally made by the Iban community in Sarawak, and perhaps in other parts of Borneo as well, mainly in connection with rituals to get rid of paddy pests called *mali* or *ngemali umai*. The effigies made by the Iban and other communities will be discussed in a forthcoming article.

Ulung Buayeh of the Lun Bawang community

The Lun Bawang are one of the oldest indigenous groups who have inhabited the central northeastern region of Borneo, the world's third largest island, for several centuries. There are about 18,000 Lun Bawang in Sarawak, especially in the Lawas District of the Limbang Division and around 3,000 Lun Bawang in neighbouring Negara Brunei Darussalam (Crain, 1978; Datan, 1989). In Sabah (Sipitang District) and Kaltim (Kerayan District) the same communities are known as Lundayeh, who number around 5,000 and 40,000 respectively (Crain, 1978; Datan, 1989). Generally, the Lun Bawang were traditionally agriculturalists; practised dry and wet paddy cultivation, reared livestock, exploited jungle produce and were animists.

During the pre-Brooke era (*i.e.*, before 1905) headhunting raids and blood feuds were rife among the Lun Bawang. Headhunting expedition could be spurred by revenge, spite, spurned love, to prove manhood and to enhance status or reinforce alliance. After a successful expedition, the warrior would make preparation to hold the *nuwi ulung buayeh* (lit. erect the ceremonial crocodile poles) ceremony. Large amount of rice would be stored to be cooked and brewed as wine (*borak*) and a variety of animals would be stocked and then slaughtered to be served to numerous guests from far and near. The guests comprised relatives and allies whose respective leaders would have been given a *tebukuh* (rattan string tied with knots) as time piece.

A huge crocodile effigy would be constructed from mud around it. The soil was pummelled to harden it so that the effigy would last

for a considerable period. Pebbles were used as its scales and eyes. After ceramics were available, its sherds were used instead. Two wooden posts (*ulung*) adorned with decorative wood shavings (*kelulung*) were erected flanking the reptile's mid section. Old head trophies (*perupuk uluh*) would be hung from a bamboo pole placed vertically one apiece atop the two posts.

The ceremony began with the host cutting notches from the tail end of the effigy, one notch for every head he had taken while boasting loudly (*tengadan*) the details of each deed. He then cradled the latest trophy wrapped in broad leaves (*itip*) and led *ukui* and *sig*a procession (name praising) around the effigy. Other men who had similarly proven themselves in previous raids followed the host. While encircling the effigy the men would ritually slash, spear or shoot (when muzzle-loading guns became available) it affirming their prowess and bravery over a fierce and strong foe which was eventually overpowered. The climax of the ceremony was the symbolic slaying of the crocodile effigy by the host with his sword (*pelepet*). All the while, food and drink would be liberally served to everyone, including the women and children who were forbidden from directly participating but watched from a distance. The ceremony would last for several days until the food and drink were exhausted.

FUNCTIONS OF THE LUN BAWANG/LUNDAYEH EFFIGIES

From the preceding paragraphs it can be seen the main objective of making the Lun Bawang crocodile effigy was in connection with headhunting ritual: to publicise his heroic feat and by hosting the feast he would reinforce the support of his allies and enhance his prestige. In the past, the Lun Bawang society was divided into three main classes; *lun ngimet/nguyut bawang* (leaders), *lun do* (commoners) and *demulun* (slaves). As leaders were normally hereditary, one of the recourses for an ordinary *lun do* to elevate his social status was to excel in the battle field and attain the *lun mebala* (renowned person) or *lun mesangit* (fierce warrior) labels. This could be achieved by the