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## THE HIGHLAND DRAGON: FEARSOME PROTECTOR OF NATURE

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### INTRODUCTION

Following more than 30 years of research among the Kelabit of the upper Baram river in Sarawak, I began, in 2017, to carry out research into beliefs about the powerful watery beings which I will describe in English as dragons. As I discuss elsewhere (Janowski 2019), I use this term because these beings are almost always glossed as dragons when they are discussed in English, by informants from all ethnic groups. This is because they are regarded as related to, if not identical to, the Chinese dragon (Jk or long). I began this research as part of a one-year research fellowship (2017 - 2018) at the Sarawak Museum on the topic of 'Animals in Indigenous Cosmologies'. I continue to pursue this research.

My interest in dragons is rooted in an interest in the way in which the peoples of Sarawak perceive their interaction with the natural environment. For all of the peoples of Borneo - indigenous peoples, Malays and Chinese - this interaction is not just a matter of practicality or...

### Keywords:

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## **The Dragon in Borneo**

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My interest in dragons is rooted in an interest in the way in which the peoples of Sarawak perceive their interaction with the natural environment. For all of the peoples of Borneo – indigenous peoples, Malays and Chinese – this interaction is not just a matter of practicality or of ‘making a living’; there is a widespread perception that there are innumerable sentient spirits surrounding humans, which express themselves through the phenomena of nature. Humans cannot avoid relating to these spirits; and there are widespread beliefs that it is important to have the right relationship with these spirits in order for humans to thrive.

Dragons are closely associated with water, a central element of the natural environment and of cosmological beliefs worldwide (Strang 2015), and are thus an important category of spirits in terms of the human relationship with that environment. Indeed, as we shall see here, dragons are sometimes even conflated with the entire natural environment. They are associated with springs gushing out of mountains; streams coming down mountains; rivers; the sea; and rain. Beliefs in beings that may be called dragons are present among all ethnic groups, including Chinese, Malays and indigenous groups. Borneo ideas