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# RESHAPING ANCESTRY - REVEALING WHAT HAS BEEN HIDDEN

**Valerie Mashman**

## INTRODUCTION: A COLLABORATIVE METHOD

"...Anthropology should not only be demystified ...people-oriented and popular, it should be representative and reciprocal" (Wazir, 1996: 135).

For anthropology to be "reciprocal" as Wazir puts it, the people studied should derive as much benefit from the anthropological encounter as the anthropologist. Further to this, Wazir states that it should be participatory, equitable and accessible to southern (or indigenous) scholars and audiences. This echoes Peacock's plea for anthropology to be relevant to wider publics (1997: 9), which is supported by Lassiter (2005: 83).

In addressing these issues, I have opted to embrace the notion of collaborative ethnography. This is defined as "the collaboration of researchers and subjects in the production of ethnographic texts, both fieldwork and writing" (Lassiter, 2005: 84).

Collaboration is not new in fieldwork. It is a result of its antecedents, the notion of rapport, espoused by the reflexivity of the 1980s and the notion of dialogue, promoted by interpretative ethnography. Collaboration has, as Lassiter claims, moved from the background to the fore with the development of critical ethnography.

Ethnography today involves a critical and reflexive process whereby ethnographers and their interlocutors regularly assess not only how their collaborative work engenders the dialogic emergence of culture (and the verity of their shared understandings) but also the goals and audiences of the ethnographic products these collaborative relationships produce (2004: 93).

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*by*

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Collaboration to me means accepting the idea that the goal of the paper is not just my goal, but also that of the *collaborators*. I use the word collaborator, instead of *informant* as this conveys a sense of parity between the anthropologist and her informants, as colleagues,

so to speak, in the ethnographic process. The first goal of this paper is shared by both the collaborators and the anthropologist: to publish the narrative of their ancestry, for it to be circulated and known, in Sarawak. At the same time, the collaborators' interpretation of what has happened may be something new, of interest to anthropologists of Borneo and insular South East-Asia. We might be in some way responding to Wazir's (1996: 125) call:

> It is imperative that ethnographies are recast and written for the overall objective of uplifting indigenous knowledge to the level of social theory.

The second goal of this paper is that of the anthropologist: to write the story in a way that will also stimulate an "anthropological" audience. I select extracts of the collaborators' narrative to show how some features are common to Austronesian narratives (Fox 1996: 5).

Collaborative reading and editing is what ultimately makes a text collaborative (Lassiter, 2005). In this project, this has been made easy for a number of reasons. Firstly, the collaborators are passionate about telling their story and they have a fluent command of English and are able to read and analyze texts. Moreover, they are computer literate, so joint revision has been easy. They have read and commented on my writing, space has been created for their revisions and deletions and this has defined the course of the text. This has meant that some aspects have not been included, and some things have been left unsaid. Some questions are left unasked, because to answer them would mean revisiting painful recollections of the past. Taking on the perspective of the collaborators and their narration means that the anthropologist is not pushing to obtain a complete picture, but one that remains elusive. The final product is therefore is an open one. To quote Marcus (2009: 28):

> That partial knowledge, so to speak, which is the product of first fieldwork, is partial in relation not to some unknown or vaguely conceived larger whole [...], but to a known and carefully conceived incompleteness, a ground or terrain of possible ethnography that is deeply imagined as such and in terms of which the partial results of fieldwork are specifically argued.

## Background: the Long Peluan narratives

My involvement in this project came about by chance, through a

series of coincidences and surprises. I have been visiting the Kelabit longhouse, Long Peluan, in the upper Baram river for thirty years. One evening in 2010, I was researching baskets, when the headman Melian Tepun gave me a cassette placed in a recorder, complete with batteries, for me to listen to. It was a three-part narrative recorded in Kelabit by him, for his children, relating to early alliances with their Kenyah neighbours, the Ngurek; the founding of the longhouse; and the role of a focal ancestor Tai Iwan. Tai Iwan was the first Penghulu of the Kelabit based in Pa Diit (Barker, 2008: 131). He worked with the Resident and helped to establish the fort at Lio Matu in 1909 (*Sarawak Gazette* June-July1909: 154). Resident D.A. Owen visited him in 1912 (Owen, 1919).

In my thirty years' experience at Long Peluan, there has never been an occasion when such a narrative was recited to the whole longhouse community. In recent years, speeches and the singing of evangelical Christian songs have celebrated social occasions, such as homecomings or name-changing *irau*. In fact, I was told that the singing and narrating of events relating to rituals and warfare, before the coming of Christianity, ran counter to practising the Christian faith. So it was an honour and a surprise to be unexpectedly given this narrative by Melian Tepun, without my even asking for it. Moreover, Melian Tepun's narrative refers to alliances with the Ngurek, another minority group in the upper Baram area and as a result, I'm now engaged in researching joint Kelabit-Ngurek histories, genealogies and migration stories.

I had expected it to be a challenging task to find elders who would still remember these narratives and I had even wondered whether the task of following up and translating this narrative was a redundant one. So, I was pleasantly surprised to meet by coincidence two Kenyah Ngurek Long Sebatu brothers who were in the active process of also researching their relationship to the Kelabit focal ancestor Tai Iwan, who features in part of the narrative I was researching.

At this point I should stop to fill in a few details. The Long Peluan Kelabit originally came from the southern Kelabit settlement of Pa Diit. The majority of the descendants from this settlement were more recently based at Pa Dalih, Remudu, Pa Mada, Batu Patong. Long Peluan is in the headwaters of the Baram river and the Kenyah Ngurek Long Sebatu are at Long Semiyang downriver (see Fig.1). They originally came from the Sebatu river in the upper Baram and they also live at Long Ikang and Long Banyok. All these communities

are ethnically mixed. In the past, both communities were hierarchical and the community leaders were from the nobility, and marriages were arranged to maintain alliances between the nobility. With the coming of Christianity and education, the class system has become more fluid, and it is deeply offensive now to discuss the divisions that once classified the community as nobles, commoners and slaves.

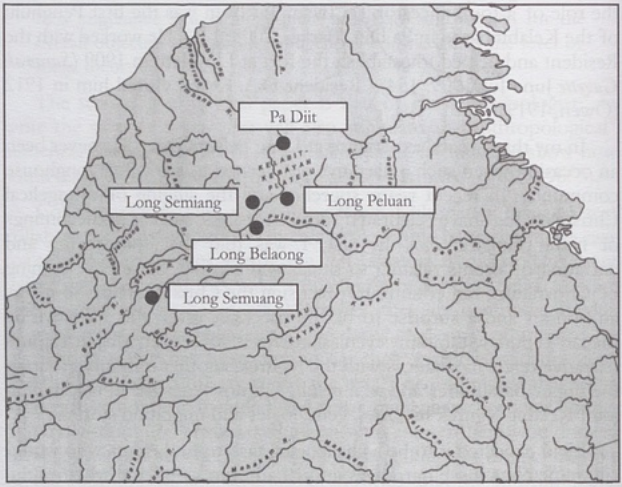


**Fig. 1**: Map showing places mentioned on the Baram and Balui rivers (map adapted from Rousseau 1986: 4).

## The telling of the narrative of Tadem by the Ngurek

It was in September 2011, at the Baram Regatta, that I met Peter Jalong Usang, a Kenyah Ngurek Sebatu. He immediately started to talk about his kinship links to Long Peluan in a very emotional manner, in particular about his ancestor Tadem and his connection in turn to the Kelabit headman Melian Tepun, and his ancestor Tai Iwan. This led to the sharing of Peter and his brother, Philip's narrative about Tadem. Their narrative was the result of the quest for a new perspective of a history of ancestry by the two brothers. I met Peter, who works in