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### PLACE, PERSON AND POWER: LUNDAYEH/LUN BAWANG PRE- AND POST-CHRISTIAN NARRATIVES<sup>1</sup>

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#### ABSTRACT

This article explores how modernity for the upland peoples of north central Borneo provided new opportunities and presented new challenges to the cultural construction of place, person and power. To the traditional migration tale, which had authenticated both the distribution of communities and their relationships, was added the mission tale, which authenticated membership of individuals and communities into the kingdom of God. In recent years Pentecostal revivals have collapsed the distinction between these types of tales. Tales of spiritual visions deriving from these revivals link place, person and power in ways which transcend the tension between traditional and modern versions of power. Below, we describe and discuss some features of continuity in three narrative texts, the themes within these textual constructions politically embedded discourses. Our analysis situates these narratives within the colonial and post-colonial discourses about Lundayeh/Lun Bawang society.<sup>2</sup> We then compare varying constructions of place, person and power in pre- and post- Christian spiritual narratives and discuss how these narratives are enacted as various forms of social practice.

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**D**uring the past 60 years Lundayeh/Lun Bawang oral tradition has undergone three transformations. Pre-Christian oral traditions expressed themes of creation, migration, and the relationships between communities. Mission tales followed the arrival of the missionaries and expressed themes of authenticating the membership of individuals

and communities in the Christian church. Lastly, recent Pentecostal tales – which relate encounters with the Holy Spirit – foreground the trials and tribulations of individuals seeking a path to salvation. Each of these narrative traditions exemplify forms of moral imagination linking person, place and power (Beidleman, 1993). Today – as both oral performances and written texts – these tales (which we here label pre-modern, modern and postmodern) have become contemporaneous with each other and constitute alternative media through which people both construct themselves, their communities and pursue differing goals within these communities.

### Pre-Modern Period and Oral Literature

The Lundayeh/Lun Bawang consider the remote highland valleys and tablelands of north-central Borneo their homeland from which they have been migrating into the surrounding lower valleys during the last three hundred years. Numbering approximately 40,000, they today reside in the states of Sabah and Sarawak (Malaysia), the province of East Kalimantan (Indonesia), and Temburong District (Brunei Darussalam) (Crain, 1978; Datan, 1989).

In the colonial era, the geo-political situation of the Lundayeh/Lun Bawang was unique (Crain and Pearson-Rounds, 1997). Although many tribal groups in Southeast Asia found themselves straddling European-drawn state and international boundaries, the communities of the *Apad Wat* were divided by a remote border separating two rival colonial systems – the British and Dutch. These communities had lived for centuries in the upland plateau region of north central Borneo where they possessed salt springs, grew vast surpluses of rice, and were capable of living without the reliance on or interference of other tribes. Living above the limits of navigable streams, these interior communities were beyond the reach of the usual raiding parties which terrorised the existence of so many Borneo communities in the past. Their highly centralised and quite efficient system of irrigated fields sustained communities of some size, located near one another.<sup>3</sup>

Traditional oral literature reflects the nature of the basic structural features of Lundayeh/Lun Bawang society; competition for influence – traditionally in the form of sponsoring great feasts and work projects associated with marriage and death – was the engine driving this society. This was especially the case in the *Ba'* areas, those intensively cultivated upland interior valleys. There, large surpluses of rice and water buffalo, combined with relative freedom from marauding outsiders, provided both the means and opportunity for motivated families to compete for influence. These families interacted within a system of competition over the control of people, by sponsoring elaborate marriages involving large-scale exchanges of labour and valuables or labour intensive mortuary monuments such as *nabang* or *kawang* (Crain, 1992). These relationships were defined, described, and reflected upon in the pre-modern oral literature.

Langub divides Lundayeh/Lun Bawang traditional oral literature into three overlapping categories: *serita mon*, *laba'* and *buek*. *Serita mon* comprise both Lundayeh/LunBawang myths and legends, narratives of supernatural or imaginary persons grappling with natural or social phenomena (Langub, 1992). *Laba'* span the entire range of Lundayeh/Lun Bawang oral literature (Maxwell, 1989: 173), take from half an hour to two hours to complete, and are stylistically earthly and humorous.<sup>4</sup> *Buek* comprise the majority of the sung or chanted literature, long sung pieces which contain both history and myth, the performer using a specialised and archaic vocabulary.

There are three types of *buek*: *mumuh*, *arin* and *dadai Upai Semaring* – Lundayeh/Lun Bawang epics, taking more than eight hours and spreading over many days or nights. *Mumuh* characterise war expeditions, historical and mythical heroic adventures of men and women, and are told using an archaic, rhyming, metaphorical vocabulary. *Arin* subject matter is the same as *mumuh* but the characters' names differ as well as the tune. *Dadai Upai Semaring* (the song of *Upai Semaring*) refer to the adventures and exploits of the



hero and first Lundayeh/Lun Bawang *Upai Semaring* and also contain specialised and archaic vocabulary (Langub, 1992: 6-7).<sup>5</sup> Shorter *buek* forms, taking less than half an hour to perform, are the *sigá'*, *benging*, *ukui* and *tidum*. The *sigá'* is sung about a person, place, event, situation and courtship and could be serious or humorous; some texts pass from generation to generation while others are improvisational. The *benging* are similar to *sigá'* regarding subject matter, the difference found in the tune and presentation style. The *ukui* was sung when raising the ceremonial pole, *nui ulung*, at a feast held for the taking of a head to recount a man's bravery, and were created at the event. *Tidum* are children's lullabies.<sup>6</sup> People performed *sigá'* or *ukui* at *irau* held to celebrate the return of a headhunting party from a successful raid or when a person wanted to hold a big celebration for any reason. When *sigá'* was organised, an image of a crocodile was carved in earth and an *ulung* pole was raised. Any man or woman could sing the *sigá'* or *ukui* supported by the chorus of the participants, but only a person competent in *sigá'* or *ukui* would be the lead singer. Contents of the narrative would depend on the occasion. For instance, if a man wanted to *ngalap ngadan* ("make a name") for himself, he would organise an *irau*, carve a crocodile and raise an *ulung*. Singers who came to the *irau* would sing *sigá'* or *ukui* to praise the person for his deeds and greatness. At celebrations to welcome a successful raid, singers would sing praise to the warriors and create verse condemning the victims (Langub, 1998).

During pre-modern times Lundayeh/LunBawang oral literature functioned as a major form of entertainment. *Mumuh*, *arin* and *dadai Upai Semaring* were sung to entertain farmers working in cooperative work groups. Many types of *buek* and *laba'* were told on the longhouse gallery to pass away the evening while people wove mats, carved *parang* handles and cared for children, when the old could pass stories on to the young. Their oral literature encompassed their norms, values, history, social mores, their ethos – mediums expressing ideas and talents (Langub, 1992: 9-10).