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THE HIGHLAND DRAGON: FEARSOME PROTECTOR OF NATURE

Monica Janowski

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.

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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

about dragonish beings appear to derive partly from the Chinese dragon (龙 or *long*), which is closely associated with *chi* (氣) – cosmic power or life force – and the water cycle (Carlson 2006; Pankenier 2013; Schafer 1973; Visser 1913); partly from the Hindu *naga*, a powerful being which is part-human and part-cobra and which lives in the water and under the earth; and partly from indigenous beliefs, some of which appear to be pre-Austronesian and to be related to beliefs in the Rainbow Serpent in New Guinea and Australia (Janowski 2019).

Dragons are regarded as powerful; as protective; as dangerous; and are sometimes associated with hierarchy. Different qualities come to the fore among different groups. I have recently discussed beliefs about the *nabau* among the Iban, one of the largest groups in Sarawak (ibid), examining the ways in which, among the Iban, this dragon being is regarded as protective. In the present article I explore beliefs about dragons among the Kelabit and Lundayeh, whose heartland is in the interior of the island, close to the headwaters of a number of rivers. These two groups are closely related culturally and speak closely related and mutually intelligible languages, which belong to a bigger language group, which Hudson described as the Apo Duat (Hudson 1977).¹ Among the Kelabit and Lundayeh, as we shall see, the dragon as fearsome comes to the fore; and among the Lundayeh the dragon is associated with the Great Spirit and with protection of the natural environment.

What I present here is based on discussions held over many years with people living in my main field site in the Kelabit Highlands, Pa' Dalih, and during visits made in 2017 and 2018 to Bario and Pa' Dalih; and on discussions with people belonging to the Lundayeh communities of Sipitang, Ba' Kelalan and Long Pasia, during visits made specifically in order to carry out interviews about dragon beliefs and experiences.

Kelabit and Lundayeh Beliefs about Dragons: the Impact of Christianity

As the Kelabit and Lundayeh are very closely related peoples, one would expect them to have similar cosmological and religious beliefs and practices. In many respects this is true. However, it is notable that Lundayeh informants told me about a much wider variety of watery spirit beings that can be described as dragons than did the Kelabit.