



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LIV No. 75

December 1999



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Matthew H. Amster. (1999). "Tradition", Ethnicity, and Change: Kelabit Practices of Name Changing. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LIV (75): 183-200

"TRADITION", ETHNICITY, AND CHANGE: KELABIT PRACTICES OF NAME CHANGING

Matthew H. Amster

INTRODUCTION

As we reach the end of the twentieth century, anthropology has come to embrace the fluidity of cultural forms. Ethnographic analyses today are often framed in a manner in which serious consideration is given to the movement of people and ideas through space and change over time. In treating "cultures", "communities", and "ethnic groups", as continually shifting entities, we face new challenges in terms of the range and scope of ethnographic investigation. Along with this heightened focus on spatiality and temporality, increasing attention is being given to the various "identities" by which people experience and articulate their personal and group affinities among them religious, class-based, gendered, ethnic, occupational, political, and national sentiments. These present concerns of anthropology are also marked by a heightened interest in global social forces, transnationalism, the globalization of culture, and understanding how local trends relate to influences coming from a global sphere. As such, anthropologists are grappling with the problem of how to examine ethnicity and group affiliation as ethnic groups become increasingly mobile and deterritorialized.

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A new vocabulary is emerging. Terms such as "ethnoscapes", "mediascapes", "imagined communities", and the "global ecumene", are appearing in our literature, an outcome of our seeking to describe the diverse processes and social consequences wrought by global influences operating at the local level (Appadurai 1996, Hannerz 1996, Anderson 1991 [1983]). Among the questions being asked by anthropologists today, are: "How do people construct and reconstruct their ethnic identities in the face of globalization and transnational processes and how is group affiliation maintained (abandoned or transformed) as people become deterritorialized in the social spaces of the nation, state, and worldscape?" The case at hand offers an example of how one small ethnic group in Sarawak, the Kelabit, seek to maintain ethnic identity in the face of rapid sociocultural change.

For the Kelabit, maintaining and elaborating upon practices of name changing, in particular, have come to serve as important markers of ethnicity. Name changing serves many purposes and provides one key mechanism for

group participation as people become dispersed throughout Sarawak and beyond. With the community threatened by fragmentation and loss of "traditional" culture and language, mainly as a result of urban migration and intermarriage, name changing and the holding of name changing ceremonies (*irau*) provides a counter weight to a perceived loss of culture. Simply put, it offers a means for people to come together within a family and reunite in the longhouse communities from which many people have departed.

The reasons these particular practices have come to stand as a focus of "traditional" authenticity, while other aspects of ritual practice have been abandoned, relates to many things. First, it is one of the few practices from the past to have been retained in post-Christian conversion Kelabit society. More importantly, name changing satisfies many desires for contemporary Kelabits living in town areas – for ethnic unity, family honour and tradition, and personal growth – while, at the same time, not posing any contradiction to the strong Christian belief most Kelabit share. It can also be argued that name changing satisfies nostalgic impulses created by the loss of traditional culture itself, providing a sense of historical continuity with past practices. An examination of how contemporary practices relate to those of the past is one of the main concerns of this paper.

NAME CHANGING IN THE CONTEMPORARY SETTING¹

The Kelabit people come from the interior highlands of north-eastern Sarawak along the Indonesian border, a region known as the Kelabit Highlands. The total Kelabit population in the mid-1990s appeared to be somewhere in the vicinity of five thousand people, making them one of the smaller ethnic groups in Sarawak. Rural Kelabit today are mainly wet-rice farmers and continue to live in small longhouse-based communities, each of which has a headman. Church is a focal point of rural Kelabit life and the congregation is mainly responsible for the organization of communal work groups and steers much of the social interaction of rural life. Based on survey data collected between 1993-1995, I estimate that roughly three quarters of the total Kelabit population have taken up semi-permanent residence in town areas – the largest concentration being in Miri where they have sought work and educational advancement. A new generation of Kelabit are being raised in town, following extensive outmigration beginning mainly in the 1960s and continuing to the present-day.² Among Kelabit town-dwellers, approximately two-thirds have intermarried with members of other ethnic groups, mainly to other Christians (Amster 1998). For Kelabit living in town areas, ethnic associations provide an important forum for maintaining ethnic ties (Tan Chee-Beng 1994), as do strong family-based social networks which continue to link Kelabits throughout Sarawak. Rural outmigration and the high rate of

intermarriage have led to a situation in which the Kelabit language is gradually losing salience and an overall context in which there are a shrinking number specifically Kelabit practices. Among these, the use of formal Kelabit terms of address, greetings (*paburi'*), and the holding of name changing ceremonies, are of central import.

Although not everyone chooses to have a name changing ceremony – *irau naru' ngadan* (lit. - name making ceremony) or *irau makaa ngadan* (lit. - name changing ceremony) – many Kelabit adults, once they have had children, will begin to make plans to return to their home community to hold this event. To many (but not all) Kelabits, this practice is viewed as key aspect of tradition and an important life event. There is considerable flexibility as to when and how this event can be held and often the holding of these *irau* will depend on the economic ability and desire of a family to host a large gathering. It is also common today for a number of people in a family to change names at a single event.

Although the practice of name changing appears quite old – going back further than anyone can recall – the holding of large-scale celebrations to commemorate name changing appear to be a relatively new phenomenon. Nonetheless, most Kelabit are unaware of the recent history relating to these practices, marked as they are by an on-going series of innovations. In this paper, I outline the historical processes by which practices relating to name changing have been reinterpreted and adapted over time and provide a concise discussion of contemporary name changing practices and their meanings in the present-day. A central aim is to highlight some of the reasons why name changing has come to stand as a key “tradition”.

The Kelabit people initially converted to Christianity around the time of World War II. In the wake of conversion there was a rapid and widespread abandonment of traditional ritual practices as well as to an array of changes in Kelabit thought and society, much of it brought on by the intense culture contact caused by military occupation during the time World War II (Harrison 1984 [1959]), subsequent missionary activity, and an array of educational and socioeconomic changes. This transformation not only affected notions of religious identity, but resulted in contestations of traditional notions of class and gender, issues which remain somewhat controversial today. During this period of transformation after World War II, the ritual and celebratory practices that had always been held in longhouses were transformed into something new: what emerged was the name changing *irau*. To a certain extent, name changing *irau* filled a void left by the abandonment of former traditional practices, providing a smoother transition and offering a selective reinterpretation of “traditional” practice. It provides a means to continue hosting large-scale longhouse feasts, a practice formerly