

Re-Situating the Sa'ban Ethnography: A Reflection on the Notion of Representation

Menyusun Semula Etnografi Sa'ban: Pandangan dari Konsep Representasi

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ABSTRAK

Makalah ini membincang konsep representasi dalam etnografi Sarawak. Dalam makalah ini dibincangkan bahawa adanya kekurangan ulasan secara kritikal dalam wacana etnografi Sarawak walaupun banyak penulisan tentang masyarakat di Sarawak telah wujud sejak pemerintahan Brooke dan bahawa penghasilan teks melalui penyelidikan etnografi dapat juga mengubah realiti masyarakat tersebut sekarang. Penulisan etnografi mengenai golongan Sa'ban yang ada setakat sekarang banyak bergantung pada penulisan yang dihasilkan oleh para antropologis, mubaligh Kristian dan pegawai kerajaan yang pernah bertemu dengan kaum Sa'ban sejak 1950an. Walau bagaimanapun, setakat sekarang, teks-teks etnografi golongan Sa'ban belum lagi ditinjau secara kritis. Oleh sebab itu, representasi tentang golongan Sa'ban telah dipinggirkan dari konteks masyarakat Malaysia secara menyeluruh. Makalah ini menghuraikan dua penulisan penting tentang golongan Sa'ban yang ditulis oleh Ose Murang dan kedua-dua penulisan ini diterbitkan dalam Sarawak Museum Journal dan bulletin Borneo Research Council. Makalah ini juga cuba menyarankan agar para etnografi, antropologis, sejarah, sosiologis dan ahli sains sosial mengulas semula penulisan tentang budaya Sarawak secara kritis. Makalah ini mengatakan bahawa jika isu ini tidak diendahkan dalam etnografi Sarawak, ada kemungkinan teks etnografi yang tidak diulas secara kritis dapat mempengaruhi keadaan realiti sosial dan politik subjek yang terlibat.

Kata kunci: Sa'ban, representasi, etnografi, peminggiran, identiti

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the notion of representation in Sarawak ethnography. It suggests that critical reviews on Sarawak's ethnographies are lacking despite the numerous ethnographic accounts of its peoples since the Brooke era. Also, the production of text through ethnographic research can alter the realities of the communities in the present time. The scarce ethnographic accounts of the

Sa'ban have depended primarily on the writings by the anthropologists, missionaries and few government officers who have been in contact with the Sa'ban since the 1950s. However, these ethnographic texts have not been critically reviewed. As a result of the methodological distortion in the production of the text, the Sa'ban representation is marginalised from the wider Malaysian society. Borrowing Mookerjea's (2003) term in describing the Subject as a 'conceptual personae', the Sa'ban becomes marginalised from participating in their own socio-political realities. To illustrate this, this paper examines the Sa'ban ethnography based on two brief but important accounts of the Sa'ban by Ose Murang, which were published in the Sarawak Museum Journal and Borneo Research Council special bulletin. This article challenges the ethnographers, social anthropologists, historians, sociologists and social scientists as a whole to critically review the existing writings on cultures in Sarawak. It argues that if this issue is not addressed in Sarawak ethnography, there is a danger that ethnographic texts in the absence of critical review may influence the social and political realities of the subject. If anything, this article hopes to offer the ethnographer an alternative but critical strategy of writing and reading ethnography.

Keywords: Sa'ban, representation, ethnography, marginalise, identity

INTRODUCTION

There have been dramatic theoretical shifts in South East Asian anthropology as a result of de-colonisation processes that began to take effect throughout the region in the mid-20th century. These shifts were not purely coincidental especially if we take into account the political values that anthropology contributed in the colonial office at the time (Pels 1997; White 2003). The colonial administrators at the time needed to familiarise itself with the people it governed – i.e. their social behaviours, kinship system, customary rites, religious affiliations, relationship with other 'tribal' communities – and anthropologists seemed to possess the methodologies in providing such knowledge. Talal Asad also proposed that during the colonial period anthropologists contributed, sometimes indirectly, towards maintaining the structure of power represented by the colonial system (King & Wilder 2003: 26). In the colonial era, these colonised communities were conveniently termed 'the Other' as opposed to 'Us', the colonisers, and it was the ethnographer's job to study 'the Other'. Once this information on 'the Other' was neatly categorised in the form of texts (e.g. books, journal articles, reports), it then became the main source of knowledge on the subjugated native masses. This source of knowledge also provided the colonial administrators the necessary information in managing its citizens according to their colonial laws (Pels 1997). In the Sarawak historical context, for instance, the colonial accounts of its

indigenes are neatly categorised according to their geographical, political and ethnic categories – either its actual representation or otherwise – in the Sarawak Gazettes, Sarawak Government Gazettes and district ‘information books’, especially the records prior to the 1960s. In other words, colonial texts which include ethnographic records became not only a tool of knowledge but also a practice of power by the colonial administrators. As a result of this relationship between anthropology and colonisation, anthropology has been labelled as a “child of colonialism” (Gough 1968).

Although ethnographic texts exist as the source of knowledge for the colonial administrators, it is not their only primary function. It also determines who should or should not have access to this knowledge. This access would ensure the colonial government maintain its political power structure in relations to ‘the Other’. For instance, universities, museums and various government institutions were built as a repository of knowledge of ‘the Other’. However, these are accessible only to the few privileged elites such as academic scholars, colonial officers and at best, the local elites within ‘the Other’. Consequently, ‘the Other’ lacked access to their own stored knowledge and therefore, unable to address their (mis)representation. In her critique, Spivak (1988) said

... according to Foucault and Deleuze (in the First World, under the standardisation and regimentation of socialised capital, though they do not seem to recognise this) the oppressed, if given the chance (the problem of representation cannot be bypassed here), and on the way to solidarity through alliance politics (a Marxist thematic is at work here), *can speak and know their conditions*.

Here, Spivak (1988: 25) criticises the ways Foucault analyses India’s colonial history from the ...“perspective of the discontinuous chain of peasant insurgencies during the colonial occupation”... She considers analysis as problematic because it tends to homogenise the needs of the colonised ‘Other’ when in fact ... “the colonised subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous”... (ibid: 26). The homogenisation process as a way to represent ‘the Other’ can also be deceptive especially when the historiography of India (and most of the British colonies at the time) has often been dominated by the colonial powers and the country’s local elites, thus marginalising the majority of the colonised ‘Other’ from their own histories.

The question is, in the context of being marginalised from their own representation in historical and ethnographic text, can ‘the Other’ speak? Writing ethnography as a method of representing the knowledge of ‘the Other’ cannot simultaneously escape from this tendency to marginalise ‘the Other’. Once marginalised, ‘the Other’ – or using Spivak’s term, the ‘subaltern subject’ – becomes invisible not only in the ethnographic text but more importantly, in the daily construction of their own socio-political and economic realities. As such, the dynamism of this reality is silenced by the reality constructed in the text. This in itself can adversely affect the political, economic and cultural situations of ‘the Other’, as shall be seen in this article.

The issue that is being raised in this article is the lack of critical review of previous ethnographic representations of the indigenous communities in Sarawak. More importantly, I also argue that in the postcolonial Sarawak anthropology, the issue should not merely concern the knowledge discrepancy between the Eurowesterncentric and local Malaysian anthropologists' view of 'the Other'. The issue that needs to be critically addressed is the ethnographic approaches that we – 'the Other' anthropologists – are adopting today. Although there have been an increasing number of local anthropologists and ethnographers studying 'indigenous peoples' of Sarawak, the scope is purely limited to the subjects of socio-economic development, social structure transformation or purely descriptive ethnography. Apart from Lindell's (2008) recent critique of Geddes' anthropological representation of the Bidayuh, for instance, anthropological studies that concern the reviewing of past ethnographic literatures, development of 'localised' anthropological theories and critical analysis of ethnographic methodology in Sarawak have been insignificant. As Appell (1976: 15) said, ... "there is much urgent research that needs to be done in Sarawak not only to fill in the ethnographic map but also because of its relevance to the development of social anthropology theory"... Thirty years on, there have not been much changes toward this trend of social anthropology in Sarawak.

Some of the methodological issues in conducting ethnographic research with the Sa'ban communities in the upriver Baram, Sarawak are stressed. These methodological issues concern the idea of representing 'the Other' as a subject in the form of ethnographic texts, which in turn, constructs the political and socio-economic realities of the communities involved. Here, I will specifically discuss the ethnographic representations of the Sa'ban in two ethnographic texts entitled "The Sa'bans of Sarawak" and "Kelabit, Sa'ban, Kenyah and their Penan Neighbours: Partners in Development". Both articles were written by Ose Murang and published by *The Sarawak Museum Journal* and *Borneo Research Council* respectively. In saying that, however, this article neither privileges the narrative history of the Sa'ban as the best version of history nor does it necessarily attempt to dissent the previous writings merely by describing 'what really happened out there'. Instead, it aims to illustrate how an explanation and narrative of reality is established as the normative one, and in doing so, provides another 'reality' of the Sa'ban.

THE SA'BAN AS ETHNOGRAPHIC TEXT

Academic research on the Sa'ban community in Sarawak is lacking. In the existing literatures, the Sa'ban is often mentioned in passing and most of the time referred to as a sub-ethnic group of the Kenyah or even the Kelabit (Harrison 1959). The Sa'ban comprises of small communities in Long Banga and Long Puak, settling in the Baram headwaters. Although their cultural history originates from the

Bahau watershed in East Kalimantan, they have traversed the invisible political Sarawak-Kalimantan boundaries for centuries. Today, the total Sa'ban population is about 1,100 but due to the increasing outmigration into the urban areas, about 80 households still live in Long Banga and Long Puak. All of these households are involved in diverse agricultural activities, while fishing and hunting for wild games is also a common activity for some individuals in the village.

Some existing literatures compare the Sa'ban to the Kelabit especially in terms of their linguistic similarity, that is, the Sa'ban shares about 70 percent of their language with the Kelabit and Lun Bawang (Harrison 1959; Clayre 1972). Other references to the Sa'ban relate them culturally to the Kenyah especially the Lepo Ke and Ngurik (Rousseau 1990; Jalong 1989). While these cultural similarities are no doubt important in determining the Sa'ban relationship with the other ethnic groups, it does not necessarily mean they are a sub-group of a larger ethnic group. Like all the other smaller ethnic groups such as the Seping, Sihan or Baketan, the Sa'ban as an ethnic group possesses its own history and cultural identity.

The following section will present the gist of Ose Murang's articles "The Sa'bans of Sarawak" (Dec 1989) and "The Sa'bans of Sarawak" and "Kelabit, Sa'ban, Kenyah and their Penan Neighbours: Partners in Development" (Aug 1993). These texts are ethnographic text in their own rights as they concern the people and describe their cultures. ... "The goal of ethnography, as Malinowski put it, is to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world" ... (Spradely 1979: 3). However, as can be seen later, the idea of grasping the "native's point of view" may not be as straight-forward as it seems. This will be discussed in the next section.

Ose Murang is a Kelabit from Long Peluan and is very familiar with the Sa'ban cultures and history. With regard to Ose Murang's texts on the Sa'ban, there are several reasons for selecting these two specific articles: (1) the writer's knowledge (or possible ignorance), these are the only articles¹ that comprehensively albeit briefly describes the Sa'ban history and their relationship with the neighbouring communities; and (2) To question the argument that ethnographic (mis) representation of 'the Other' – in this case, the Sa'ban – only occurs within the Eurowesterncentric versus 'local' ethnographer framework. 'Local' ethnographers², due to several factors, are also susceptible to committing the 'Us-Them' polarisation in representing their 'own communities' as ethnographic texts. Similarly, there is also a need not only to revise the articles, but also conduct a methodologically systematic research (Ose Murang Dec 1989: 188).

ARTICLE 1

THE SA'BANS OF SARAWAK, THE SARAWAK MUSEUM JOURNAL, VOL. XL:61
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As mentioned earlier, Ose Murang provided a comprehensive overview of the Sa'ban ethnic group in Sarawak. The topics in this article can be divided into

four main parts: first, the ethnic identity and migration patterns of the Sa'ban. Second, the brief historical and present relationship of the Sa'ban with their neighbouring communities such as the Kelabit, Penan and Kenyah Lepo Ke. Third, Ose Murang explains the social organisation of the Sa'ban specifically looking at the leadership patterns and religion. The last part of the article describes the 'modernisation' processes via Christianity, education, agriculture and provision of government facilities. Focus will only be on the first section of this article.

In the first part of his article, Ose Murang primarily cited the ethnographic accounts of Harrison (1947, 1959), F.C.S.I Clayre (1970), B. Clayre (1972) and Robert Lian (1977). The discussions cited from these authors range from the linguistic relationship of the Sa'ban with other groups such as the Kelabit, Lun Bawang and Ngurik (or Murik); to the various ethnic taxonomies claimed by and given to the Sa'ban such as Lun Pa' Nar, Ulun Berau or Pie' Biew; and to the brief description of legend, folklore, origin and migration of the Sa'ban. Citing Robert Lian (1977), the Sa'ban and Kelabit lived together in the Kelabit Highlands before the former migrated into the headwaters of Bahau river in Kalimantan due to overpopulation. There, the Sa'ban ... "lived in the upper Bahau Region for a very long time"... although he did not specifically mention the length of the time. However, Ose Murang claims that the earliest Sa'ban settlers are known to have settled in Sarawak around the 1900. The first settler was Sat Laing who came through Long Kelit in the Kelabit Highlands to settle in Long Peluan. At Long Peluan, Sat Laing was welcomed by a person by the name of Araya Keao, who gave him the permission to live in Long Peluan. Following Sat Laing's routes were a band of families led by Erang (the father of Jawa') and Anyi Lohong of Long Kelit and his Sa'ban wife from Pa' Nar. Later, and together with Sat Laing, they moved to Long Pulong.

According to Ose Murang, in 1910 another group of Sa'ban from Pa' Nar took a different route from Sat Laing's and came across the Apo Duat, the mountain range that separates East Kalimantan and Sarawak. This group comprises Lang Tajit and his family, that is, the first group that used this route to settle in Long Pulong. Again, ... "the headman of Long Peluan, Araya Keao" (ibid.) welcomed Lang Tajit and his family to live in Long Pulong. One year later, Lang Tajit's group moved downriver to Long Arur Ra', near to the present Long Banga settlement. Another group that came the same way as Lang Tajit Right before the Japanese occupation in 1942 was Sina Jau Liran and Erang Lihan who stayed in Long Peluan for a while before moving to Long Arur Ra'. After the Japanese occupation, ... "there was a migration from the Bahau to the valleys of the Puak and Balong Rivers" (ibid.). The Sa'ban settled along the Puak and Balong rivers before some of them began moving to Long Banga in the 1960s. Some had also moved downriver to Long Balong, led by Gan Apoi, in 1950. Long Puak was settled in the 1980s as the population left Long Balong.

The above chronology is just a brief summary relating to Ose Murang's accounts of Sa'ban migration patterns, thus their historical origin prior to their

present settlement in Long Banga and Long Puak. His source of information, apart from the ethnographers he cited in the earlier section of the article, was obtained from elderly Sa'ban and Kelabit individuals. Since there has not been any resistance or dispute to this version of Sa'ban representation – at least not in any published text that the writer is aware of – this ethnographic account of the Sa'ban duly becomes a representation of the Sa'ban cultural history. 'Dispute' is specifically referred to the other texts or written documents to nullify or discredit Ose Murang's claims.

ARTICLE 2

'KELABIT, SA'BAN, KENYAH AND THEIR PENAN NEIGHBORS: PARTNERS IN DEVELOPMENT', IN SUTLIVE, V.H. (ED.) CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT IN BORNEO: SELECTED PAPERS FROM THE FIRST EXTRAORDINARY CONFERENCE OF THE BORNEO RESEARCH COUNCIL – AUGUST 4-9, 1990.

In this article, Ose Murang attempts to narrate the relationship between the three main ethnic groups living in the Punang Kelapang region, namely, the Kelabit, Sa'ban, Kenyah and Penan. Punang Kelapang is the local vernacular referring to the headwaters of Baram River. Unlike in Article 1, the primary source of information in this article is derived from his interview with the protagonist himself, Lahang Apoi, a Sa'ban who migrated to Sarawak from the Bahau region in 1946. Although the title of this article seems to suggest the description of the relationship between the Kelabit, Sa'ban, Kenyah and Penan of Punang Kelapang region, the content predominantly revolves around Lahang Apoi and how he almost single-handedly 'developed' the Penan of Long Lamei. This article can generally be divided into three sections. The first section deals with Lahang Apoi's first encounter and subsequent experiences with the Penan in the area. This section is based solely on the author's interview with Lahang Apoi. Second, Ose Murang attempts to sketch the origin of the Penan and their later settlements in Long Lamei, Long Beruang, Ba' Lai and Pa Berang. The last section of the article deals with the Penan relationship with their neighbours, particularly the Kelabit with regard to land, forests, agriculture and trade.

Based on this second article by Ose Murang, the writer has described specific sections for analysis. In the first section, Ose Murang presents the story of the Long Lamei Penan based on Lahang Apoi's narration. The story begins with the spreading influence of Christianity via Borneo Evangelical Mission (BEM) into the Baram region. Most of these missionaries came from Australia and a few from Kalimantan. According to Ose Murang (1990: 86), the first to preach here was Mr. Tunip from Kalimantan. Then, throughout the 1940s to early 1970s missionaries began streaming into this region. Due to the success of these missionaries, the local Kelabit and Sa'ban followed suit. One of them was Lahang Apoi. In 1949, he was sent to Lawas to attend the BEM Bible School and graduated in 1951. After his graduation, Lahang Apoi returned to Long Peluan where he started adult education among the Kelabit. Two years later, he

moved to Long Banga to preach and started adult education. He continued this with the Penan who lived along the Balong river.

The following narration briefly describes Lahang Apoi's accounts of the Penan and his contribution to their overall development. Lahang Apoi began his narration with his first encounter with a Penan by the name of Lejau Jabu in the jungle. Lahang Apoi invited Lejau Jabu to his place and the Penan stayed with him for two days, in which during that time, Lahang Apoi learnt the Penan language. He persuaded Lejau Jabu to meet him again in five days, which the latter did a week later. This time, Lejau Jabu brought along his family and Lahang Apoi showed his hospitality to the Penan. Lahang Apoi (Ose Murang 1993: 87) said:

I gave them food, bananas and papayas to eat. I gave them all that I had. I did not treat them any differently from our own people. Of course they did behave in a very strange manner but that was their way of life, their customs and traditions. I never told them off nor told them to do this and that...

Later, Lahang Apoi impressed the Penan with the gramophone and gradually, he managed to conduct prayer meetings with the Penan in the jungle. In 1958, a missionary, Kenneth Nightingale, suggested to Lahang Apoi to do missionary work with the Penan. Lahang Apoi's job was to locate a school and recruit ... "his own students preferably among those roaming along the Balong River" (1990: 88). Lahang Apoi accepted the challenge by suggesting that the Penan should first start learning to farm before going to school. The Penan then built their temporary shelters at Long Belaka, which they eventually moved to the present Long Lamei settlement several months later. Upon the request of Kenneth Nightingale, Lahang Apoi was also responsible in getting the Penan to elect among themselves a leader that came in the form of Belare Jabu, who until today is still the headman of Long Lamei.

Lahang Apoi's credentials in educating the Penan by building schools (with the help of the Sa'ban of Long Banga), opening farm areas, and building a permanent settlement, had impressed the Sarawak Administrative Officer, Roland Galang, at the time. Roland Galang said (Ose Murang 1993: 90):

I am impressed with the improvement in the work of Guru Lahang (BEM) among them and the development of social relationships between the local civilized people...

In 1960, the BEM-supported school was taken over by the government. Lahang Apoi continued teaching at Long Lamei until 1963. After this section, there was no more mention of Lahang Apoi until at the end of the article. Lahang Apoi's mission was to live and have direct relationship with the Penan, mainly to prevent the Penan from ... "cooling off in the faith" (1990: 97). Ose Murang believed that the success of the Long Lamei story is due to Lahang Apoi, whom he considered 'as the Chief Executive' in his roles and responsibility in developing the Penan.

In the second section, Ose Murang presented the of Penan settlement patterns over time. According to the author, the first Penan settlement along the Balong river was in Long Lamei in April/May 1958. In 1960, a group of five

families decided to move to Long Beruang due to the scarcity of wild games in the Balong area. A couple of years later, another group of Penan moved away from Long Lamei to Ba' Lai due to some disagreements among them concerning the death and burial of one of their traditional elders. In 1983, few more families left Ba' Lai to settle in Pa' Berang due to the availability of health facilities in Bario at the time.

Ose Murang also sketchily presented the origin of the Penan. Although he admitted that he could not determine the ... "earlier homeland of the Punang Kelapang Penan" (1990: 91), he believed that they originated from the Selungo river near Lio Matu. Lahang Apoi also mentioned that the Penan were from Jawi river whose watershed is from the same mountain range of the Balong river. The author obtained these information from the narration of the Kelabit and Sa'ban village elders of Long Peluan and Long Banga. Despite that uncertainty, however, Ose Murang said (1990: 91) ... "[w]hat seemed quite certain is that they came to this region well after the Kelabits had settled at Long Peluan and the Sa'bans at Long Banga".

NATIVES ARE TALKING BACK?

However, it is imperative that one should not adopt these historical narratives and ethnographic accounts at face value. In the two articles that had been summarised, the writer can only deduce that the interviews were conducted without systematic, critical cross-checking of information. The interviewer was dependent on the notion that the interviewees are the undisputed repository of knowledge. In the context of ethnographic text – or as Geertz said "writing culture" – the ethnographer must critically review not only the information obtained but also, the informants that are created in the ethnographic text. More importantly, the ethnographer must also seriously reflect on his/her roles in the process of conducting fieldwork and representing its Subjects as text. Marcus (1998) also asserted the need for ethnographers to go through the process of 'estrangement and defamiliarisation', that is, to go beyond the comfortable description of one's subject of study. In the case of Ose Murang's two articles, these representations of the Sa'ban, Kelabit and Penan relationship is dependent on the selection of particular narratives in order to maintain the existing power structure and meanings. As Bending (2006: 13) said

What is more, we can say in this case that these meanings rely less on contested facts with regard to what happened, the main events are not in dispute, as on constructions of subjectivity. This is the question of who is attributed the status of the subject of history, the maker of history, and who is not; the question of who is presented as a free agent and who is not.

While not all of the details will be provided in this article, some examples will be cited for this argument, in response to the 'facts' contained in the two articles. In Article 1, Ose Murang describes the separate routes taken by Sat Laing's and

Lang Tajit's groups into Sarawak. The year provided by Ose Murang to indicate the arrival of the Sa'ban at Long Banga was around 1900 while the Kelabit arrived in Long Peluan sometimes in the late 1890s (Ose Murang 1993: 85; Ose Murang, Dec 1989: 195). Whether the author had deliberately produced the definite historical year of arrival, it presents a significant dilemma to the "people of the text", who in this case are the Sa'ban, especially concerning who first arrived in the Punang Kelapang area. From the group interview conducted with 11 persons at Long Banga in June 2006, the participants suggested that the time sequence indicated by Ose Murang may not be accurate. Almost half of the informants were either mentioned or were the descendants of those who were mentioned in Ose Murang's articles. Some even suggested that it was distorted. While the participants did not dispute the year of arrival presented by the author neither did they provide an alternative year, they adamantly asserted that Ose Murang have altered the migration sequence of the Sa'ban. For instance, Ose Murang (Dec 1989: 187) wrote:

Sat Laing was the first to come in about 1900. He came through Long Kelit in the Kelabit Highlands, then walked down-river along the Kelapang River. On arrival at Long Peluan on the fourth day, he was welcomed to settle there by Araya Keao. Although he lived and farmed at Long Peluan, later he occasionally moved to Long Pulong when other Sa'bans have settled there.

When this section was read to the 11 participants, they did not wholly agree with this statement. It was not the year 1900 that bothered them as much as the facts that were presented in this statement. According to the participants during the focus group interviews, although Sat Laing did use the Long Kelit route to go to Long Peluan, there was no one inhabiting Long Peluan at that time. In other words, Araya Keao was not in Long Peluan to ... "welcome him to settle there"... as Ose Murang had claimed in Article 1.

Another disputed fact in Article 1 was the claim that Sat Laing eventually moved to Long Pulong from Long Peluan to join the other Sa'ban (*ibid.*). This, again, did not happen because Sat Laing lived and died in Long Peluan. Together with Sat Laing in Long Peluan were the Penan, who had always wandered in that area. This was confirmed by the Penan of Long Lamei several days prior to the group interview at Long Banga. The participants also stated that Sat Laing's wife died after six years living in Long Peluan. It was only two years after her death that the others came to settle in Long Peluan. They were Kelabit from Long Kelit, namely Pun Maha, Araya Keao, Lirah Ajin, and from Sa'ban from Bahau, East Kalimantan, namely Tamen Ulan Kiyai and Bilung Panggot. What is also interesting to note here is that the Sa'ban did not emphasise on 'which ethnic group' first arrived here. Rather, they mentioned the names of individuals – both from the Kelabit and Sa'ban communities – who came to establish their settlements in Long Peluan.

Similarly, this historical interpretation also extends to the case of Lang Tajit and his group, the first group that settled in Long Banga. As mentioned earlier,

Lang Tajit and his group used another different route from Sat Laing's i.e. through Batu Kalong into the Long Banga area. However, according to Ose Murang in Article 1, Lang Tajit came to settle in Long Pulong and again, they were "... warmly welcomed by the headman of Long Peluan, Araya Keao..." (p.187). When asked about this, the participants vehemently disagreed with the statement that Araya Keao was the headman of Long Peluan at the time, and he did not welcome them at Long Pulong as mentioned in Article 1. Furthermore, their settlement at Long Pulong was temporary while they surveyed the Long Peluan area. After a couple of years, Lang Tajit himself settled in Long Arur Ra' despite the persuasion of his relatives who have decided to settle in Long Peluan.

In Article 1, there is a clear dispute of facts between the article written by Ose Murang, a Kelabit from Long Peluan, and the claims made by the 11 participants, all of whom are Sa'ban. As Mookerjea (2003) claimed, ethnographic texts such as these are a 'political act' in itself. Whether it is a coincidence that the author is a Kelabit and hence, the narration tends to tilt towards favouring the protagonist Araya Keao, cannot be ascertained. However, Ose Murang did say that the relationship between the Sa'ban and Kelabit is a tenuous one and that ... "the Sa'ban are trying to dissociate themselves from the historical leadership control by the Kelabits" (p.189). The assertion of Araya Keao's authority in the area, for instance, is also debatable as the Sa'ban do not recognise his authority. In fact, they neither consider Araya Keao nor the Kelabit as the first settler in the area.

In Article 2, Ose Murang attempts to describe the relationship between the Penan, Kelabit, Sa'ban and Kenyah, and how they have become "partners in development". However, the gist of the article did not seem to portray this partnership. The predominant feature of this article describes the noble deeds of Lahang Apoi, who was the first Sa'ban Christian missionary and a teacher among the Penan of Long Lamei. According to Ose Murang, the development of Long Lamei is indisputably attributed to Lahang Apoi.

As this writer is of the opinion that the article is more concerned with the relationship between Lahang Apoi and the Penan of Long Lamei, the writer had decided to conduct a group interview with the Penan mentioned in the article. There were four Penan participants during the interviews. Through an interpreter, the story of Penan origin and migration written by Ose Murang in Article 2 was narrated to the four participants. As mentioned earlier, the migration accounts of the Penan in Article 2 was sketchy and according to the Penan responses many of the details have been left out. For the sole purpose of this article, the writer will only briefly state the leadership lineage of the Penan in Long Lamei. The participants claimed that the Penan have always lived along the Balong river vicinity. Below is the summary of leadership lineage:

Jaleng → Muai → Sawen → Jabu → Belare → Wilson

During the times of Jaleng and Muai, the Sa'ban, Kelabit and Kenyah have not arrived in the area. It was during Sawen's time that Lio Mato and Long Peluan were occupied. Here, they mentioned of Sat Laing occupying Long Peluan before anyone else. However, they did also mention about Long Peluan was settled slightly earlier before the arrival of the Sa'ban but Long Peluan was not totally populated by the Kelabit either. There were a mixed group of people who lived in Long Peluan at the time. This was the time the Penan established their relationship with the other groups in the area. Then, Jabu replaced Sawen as the leader and their relationship with the Sa'ban of Long Banga was established. In fact, according to the four participants, it was the Sa'ban who asked Jabu's permission to live in Long Banga after World War 2. He died immediately after World War 2 but before Long Lamei was established in 1958. His son Belare took over as the *ketua kampung* of Long Lamei until he died in 2007. Belare's son, Wilson, is now the headman of Long Lamei.

When the Penan participants were asked about their relationship with Lahang Apoi, their narration dramatically differed from Ose Murang's description of the same man in Article 2. While they acknowledged Lahang Apoi as a respected pastor in the Long Lamei and as a teacher who taught them to plant rice and maize in school, the four participants also said that many Penan were terrified of Lahang Apoi because of his short temper and his tendency to "enslave" the Penan to do hard labour for him. In fact, when Long Belaka was cleared for farming, it was not intended for the Penan to use but for Lahang Apoi to build a settlement there. Hence, Lahang Apoi did not open the farm for the Penan at Long Belaka. Instead, it was the Penan who opened the area for his own settlement. Lahang Apoi even went to the extent of inviting six other Sa'ban families to live with him in Long Belaka and appointed himself as the *ketua kampung* of Long Belaka. Furthermore, to the Penan of that area, the name 'Long Belaka' is not a Penan-given name. It was a name that Lahang Apoi himself chose. The name of the place as Penan named it is Ba' Tekeled.

According to the Penan, Lahang Apoi is far from the noble Sa'ban individual that Ose Murang portrayed him to be in Article 2. It is very common that during his stay with the Penan in Long Lamei, he often quarreled with the Penan especially when people refuse to work for him. As one of the participants described Lahang Apoi's behaviour in Bahasa Melayu:

Kalau dia lama-lama di sini, Lahang akan minta semua barang yang di ambi oleh kaum Penan seperti damar, buah-buahan...

According to the Penan, Lahang Apoi lived with them as if he wanted to be their king. He refused to return to Long Banga even after the government no longer needed his service as a teacher in Long Lamei. It even went to the extend that the *ketua kampung* of Long Banga at the time, Liban Apoi @ Tamen Lihan, went to Long Lamei to persuade Lahang to return to Long Banga. Lahang Apoi remained adamant and told *ketua kampung* Liban Apoi that he wanted to settle

at Long Belaka with the Penan. As aptly stated by the SAO Roland Galang (Ose Murang 1993: 98), who echoed the Penan's concern,

I am afraid that if the Guru is allowed to stay with them for the longer period, the Penan would become more of less like his slaves. As I have seen during my stay with them, he seems to be their lordship.

REFLECTION

In the context of the two articles presented by Ose Murang on the Sa'ban communities, there seems to be a contradiction in interpreting the Subject's experiences in ethnographic text. This interpretation of experiences does not always accidentally occur. As Mookerjea (2003) had clearly stated, the writing of ethnographic text is essentially a "political act" and therefore, there is no one single truth in representing experiences of the Subject (or 'the Other'). In his argument, Pels (1997) provides a critique on ethnographers narrating the cultures of the "people of the text", referring to the subjects of ethnographic writings. The people as text is a construction of the ethnographer and therefore, is susceptible to distortion. Along a similar argument, Denzin (Oct 1998: 406) said that

[t]here is nothing outside the text; that is, a thing is only understood through its representations. Representations are gendered constructions... Together they create the conditions that locate the social inside the text.

This friction among ethnographers have always existed especially within the 'Western-versus-local' debate. The critique against the apotheosis of Captain James Cook by the Sri Lankan anthropologist, Gananath Obeyesekere (1997) is one of the renowned examples whereby ethnographers and anthropologists do not agree with each other. In his book, Sahlins (1995) interpreted Capt. Cook's journey and eventual death in Hawaii in the 18th century as a symbolic reincarnation of the Hawaiian god of fertility, Lono. This debate between Obeyesekere and Sahlins – both non-Hawaiians – has received scathing criticism from native Hawaiian scholars, particularly anthropologist Haunani-Kay Trask. As an activist against cultural imperialism, Trask (June, 1999) added to the debate by accusing non-Hawaiian scholars, in particular historians and anthropologists, as distorting the many histories of Hawaii for the purpose of their own academic requirements.

The above examples are within the usual 'Western-versus-local' framework that has been debated for the past two decades among social scientists especially in social anthropology in Europe. However, in the context of Sarawak ethnography, this friction is seldom – if ever – addressed, let alone a critique on 'local ethnographers'. One of the major issues in ethnographic methodology is the relationship between reality and description. If this sort of issue is not addressed in the Sarawak ethnography, there is a danger that ethnographic text in the absence of critical review may influence the social and political realities of the Subject. Mookerjea (2003), states that the Subject described in any

ethnographic account is a “conceptual personae”. This notion of “conceptual personae” refers to the Subject as fictional characters created by the ethnographer to satisfy his/her academic requirements, theoretical framework or even political motives. In saying this, however, Mookerjea, adopting Spivak’s subaltern deconstructionist approach in literary critique, did not attempt to speak for the native informant. By treating the Subject as ‘conceptual personae’, it provides the ethnographer an alternative but critical strategy of *reading* ethnography (Mookerjea 2003: 133).

Taking Mookerjea’s approach, I would argue that the failure to recognise this “conceptual personae” would lead to the misrepresentation of ‘native’s point of view’. Even more so, this could lead to the distortion of their history, which in turn could adversely affect the Sa’ban socio-political and economic realities. The political ramifications are great. For instance, many of the Sa’ban individuals who have been living in Long Banga and Long Puak do not possess Malaysian identity cards. This is mainly based on the common assumption that ... “they are from Indonesia, living illegally in Sarawak” (personal communication, 2006). From my initial phase of fieldwork, many of these so-called ‘stateless’ individuals are born in Sarawak. Either this is a deliberate act to deprive them of their nationality or a matter of geographical inconvenience in obtaining one, the issue at hand is that due to their representation at the “authority-defined reality” (borrowing Samsul Amri’s framework), the Sa’ban are marginalised from participating in their own political and economic realities. The authority-defined reality in this context includes the local political organisation structure, scholarly written materials, ethnicity according to the national constitution, among many others. The consequence of this is that it is almost virtually impossible for the ‘stateless’ Sa’ban to find ‘legal’ employment in the urban area, attend secondary school or obtain tertiary education. Following White’s (March 2003) argument, ethnographers and historians tend to have the ... “ability to make certain stories real, true, public, and collective, [and this does] not only empowers some political futures and disables others but also discursively creates the very subjects of history”.

CONCLUSION

The main issue highlighted in this article is the question of representation. The impetus for this research stems from the fact that almost all ethnographic literatures on the Sa’ban have not been critically reviewed, at least not in writing, and therefore, there should exist different versions of representation. For a small community such as the Sa’ban, the representation of their cultural history and ethnic identity can easily be distorted based on the predetermined social reality of the ethnographer. It is this distortion that would inevitably lead to the marginalisation of the Sa’ban from the history of Sarawak, thus their lack of participation in the state’s political-economic settings. As a result, the Sa’ban

identity and community is usually sidelined from the wider spectrum of the social and political world outside their geographical landscape (e.g. absence of national identity card among the villagers). Here, the assertion of their identity in the face of social change is even more crucial today.

The task of this research is not merely meant to update the Sa'ban ethnography, but rather present a critical analysis of the previous texts written on the Sa'ban communities by other scholars. It does provide a critique on the texts hitherto depicting the Sa'ban history and culture. This includes a critique on the methodological validity applied by previous authors conducting research on the Sa'ban. In other words, this research is concerned with the acts of representation marked as historical, hence 'the truth'. However, it is also imperative to note that this research does not merely dispute the ethnographic work of the authors. Rather, it concerns the construction of the Sa'ban cultural identity through ethnographic text, which is a methodological representation of the community in itself.

NOTE

- ¹ In saying this, however, I am very aware that the linguist Beatrice Clayre and her husband, missionary F.C.S.I Clayre have written numerous accounts of the Sa'ban in the 1970s but apart from their texts found in the *Sarawak Gazette* and *Sarawak Museum Journal*, I have yet to gain access to many of their other texts. I was also informed that Beatrice Clayre is currently working on the Sa'ban dictionary. Since this research is still at its infancy, the literature on the Sa'ban will undoubtedly pile up at the end.

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