



## THE ‘UNSEEN’ AS POWER: EXPLORING INDIGENOUS IDENTITY OF THE LUNDAYEH *LUBA BUAYEH* IN LONG PASIA SABAH, MALAYSIA

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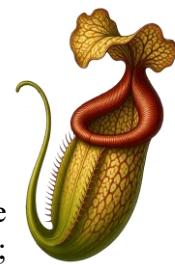
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**Abstract** In this article we investigate the emergence of a modern indigenous identity among the minority Lundayeh residing in Sabah, Malaysia by examining one of the community’s foods, *Luba’ Buayeh* (Crocodile Rice). In the past, the Lundayehs used to practice headhunting and every successful headhunting expedition was followed by the ritual celebration of *Nui Ulung*, where an earthen crocodile mound was built with the head-hunter making cuts on the effigy to mark his prowess as a cultural hero. We argue that the *Luba’ Buayeh* is an appropriated form brought by both imperial and nation-state changes, where, the act of severing the head before consumption, while resembling the past *Nui Ulung* celebration associated with headhunting, is in fact a cultural value associated with the rhetoric of power related to the “unseen.” It is through the continuous reverence for the “unseen” powerful force that the native agency continues to survive at present.

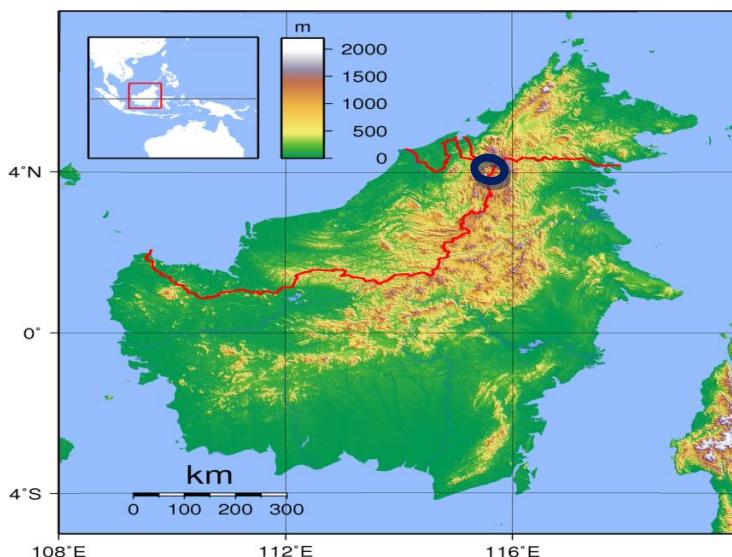
**Keywords:** Lundayeh, *Luba’ Buayeh*, Sabah, Modern Identity, Headhunting

### INTRODUCTION

This article examines one of the traditional foods, *Luba’ Buayeh* (Crocodile Rice), of the minority indigenous community, Lundayeh, in the Malaysian North Bornean state of Sabah by situating it within a historical context, where, through imperialism, the once animistic tribe was converted to Christianity, permanently altering the group’s cultural practices and belief systems. In this article, we examine how, through the construction of *Luba’ Buayeh*—boiled rice arranged to resemble a crocodile—the Lundayehs have appropriated and adjusted to a new modern way of living, where we argue that the act of severing the head of the *Luba’ Buayeh* before consumption, exemplifies values associated with the past cultural practice, hence providing an avenue for the community to preserve its indigenous identity, albeit in a small way.



The Lundayeh are a remote indigenous community who are believed to have originated from the Kerayan-Kelabit Highlands of East Kalimantan (Schneeberger, 1945; Harrisson, 1965). Both as inlanders and highlanders, they migrated and settled along river basins often in search of fertile lands for cultivation. It is due to such migration and settlement pattern that, in present-day, this community is found in all the four political units of the Bornean Island. As the inhabitants of Borneo, in the past, the Lundayehs, occupied a borderless region (see Figure 1) and shared a close kinship until the expansion of British and Dutch empires as these colonial powers' territorial interests permanently divided the natives. The Bornean indigenous groups' fates were altered through the signing of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty in 1824 (Andaya and Andaya, 2017). This is because each of these colonies eventually became independent nation-states belonging to Indonesia (Kalimantan), Malaysia (North Borneo/Sabah and Sarawak), and Brunei, which permanently changed the natives' sense of indigeneity. To the Lundayehs, it meant that they would eventually be known through varying ethnic labels, even in the States of Sabah and Sarawak which belong to Malaysia, they are known as Lundayeh and Lun Bawang respectively. In Kalimantan, Indonesia they are Dayak Lundayeh while in Brunei they are Murut Lun Bawang. Such varying labels were made further problematic by the mass religious reshaping of the Bornean communities including the Lundayehs. We will be returning to the discussion on ethnicity and religion in the later sections of this article.



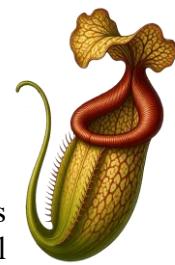
**Figure 1**

The highlighted area depicts the Lundayeh borderless ancestral homeland in Borneo

Adapted from: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Borneo\\_Topography.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Borneo_Topography.png)

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This article makes a claim that, following the abolishment of Lundayeh cultural practice vis a vis headhunting during the colonial rule, its food tradition in the form of *Luba' Buayeh* is one way in which the community continues to exercise its past therefore safeguarding whatever is left of its indigenous identity. The need to preserve the cultural identity through food forms is also a result of the community becoming devout Christians since the 1970s. This is because, besides the cultural erasure during the height of colonialism, in present-day, deforestation, rapid urbanisation, migration to city centres in search of better opportunities, and the demise of native languages, which, collectively belong to the process of nation-formation, continue to challenge the indigeneity of the people even in remote highland locations such as Long Pasia (Ganesan et al., 2020). The *Luba' Buayeh* is also a reminder of the community's adaptability to changes, especially through development, which,



in the case of Long Pasia, is in the form of a logging route. It is for this reason that in this article, we approach *Luba' Buayeh* as a tradition that has undergone a long process of colonial and postcolonial adaptations with strong religious sentiments drawn not only from Christianity, a by-product of imperialism, but also from Islam, which is the religion of the Federation.

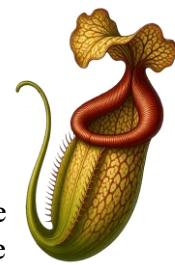
This ethnographically situated article draws from Michel Foucault's (1975) conceptualisation of power as discursive. He claims that language, knowledge and cultural practices are created through discursive power structures thus resulting in the social realities of the community. It is for this reason that, in this article, the construction of the *Luba' Buayeh* is problematised as a postcolonial cultural practice resulting from hegemonic structures of past colonial history as well as present-day national reality.

Most importantly, and perhaps most intriguingly as well, the image of the crocodile in the cultural consciousness of the Lundayehs is a point of interest in this article because, despite religious regulations and total eradication of the practice of headhunting during colonialism in Borneo, the image of the reptile has continued to survive through food adaptation mechanism, bringing to question what is so significant about the buayeh vis a vis crocodile that it has remained in the collective imagination of the Lundayehs? And, since the Lundayehs were both inlanders and highlanders, how did the group's encounter with the reptile occur, and why among all other Bornean habitats, this animal was associated with headhunting? Intriguingly also, what is it about the image of the crocodile and imperialism that even long after the formal end of colonialism, and following numerous changes after Sabah and Sarawak joined the Federation of Malaya in 1963, the image of the animal continues in the community's cultural imagination as a food form? And, as we brought to light earlier, what does the symbolic representation of "slaughtering" the *Luba' Buayeh* mean; could the act of severing the head of the crocodile before consumption be interpreted as a form of cultural exercise rooted in the native belief system? This line of questioning will lead to the main discussion of this article which is, how does *Luba' Buayeh* represent an emerging modern Lundayeh indigenous identity? It is with these questions in mind that we approach the rest of this article.

Before we proceed, the village of Long Pasia (see Figure 2) warrants further explanation. The word Long Pasia, spelt as Lung Pa' Sia in the Lundayeh language, refers to the convergence of the Sia and Padas Rivers (Hoare, 2002). Vaz (2006) describes that the word 'Long Pasia' means 'mouth of the red river' referring to the colour of the water due to the tannin leached from littered forest leaves. The current population estimate of the village is 400 and with its neighbouring village, Long Mio, they are both perceivably the only remaining heartlands of the indigenous Lundayeh within the Ulu Padas region. Even though Long Pasia is a remote highland location at an altitude of 1,000 metres, the encroaching logging activities continue to threaten the indigenous people's way of life. In fact, until the logging route (see Figure 3)

<sup>1</sup> The non-hyphenated spelling for the word "postcolonial" is used to highlight that, in this article, the word does not merely represent a linear, historical sequence but rather focuses on the values/effects associated with colonialism that last long after formal colonialism has ended.

<sup>1</sup> Article 3 of the Malaysian Constitution states that "Islam is the religion of the Federation, but other religions can also be practised safely and peacefully in any part of the Federation". Ethnic diversity and multi-culturalism promoted through a secular nation-state during the immediate post-independent years were replaced by Malay Muslim ethno-religious nationalism during Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamed's premiership, because in 2001, he openly declared Malaysia an Islamic State with far-reaching consequences as Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo are predominantly Christian states. See Riddell, "Islamization, Civil Society and Religious Minorities in Malaysia' *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2005.



was constructed in 1998 by Sabah Forest Industries (SFI) Sdn. Bhd. to transport timber to the nearest township in Sipitang, the village remained largely inaccessible. It was only from the 1980s that an air strip was used in the village to transport necessary provisions as well as to get medical assistance through the service of Flying Doctors. The forest was so dense that many of such remote regions remained inaccessible during the Japanese Occupation (Marles et al., 2016).



**Figure 2**

A view of Long Pasia village. Photograph: fieldwork August 2018



**Figure 3**

The logging route to Long Pasia made accessible by a four-wheel drive (Photograph: fieldwork August 2018)

In the past, the villagers' livelihood depended on the surrounding forest through hunting, foraging, and cultivation activities because the journey to the nearest town would take 3 days by foot; now, with the non-tarmac logging route it takes only about 4-6 hours with a four-wheel drive vehicle. Due to such easy access, store bought meats and even fast foods have found their ways into the Lundayeh diet. Hoare (2002) observed that the villagers' realisation regarding deforestation activities in the late 1990s as a continuous process and that they have no power to stop it resulted in new adaptive strategies ranging from finding employment opportunities with the logging company to using these companies to clear lands for cultivation purposes. Even as recently as 2018, Ganesan et al. (2020) noted that the fast-dwindling forest land continues to witness adaptive strategies among the Lundayeh villagers.

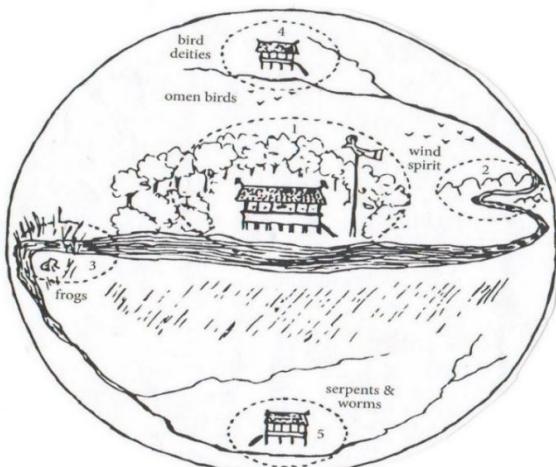


where many hunting techniques have been modified to suit the current depletion of games. Such adaptive nature is a point of interest in this article as we argue that the creation of the *Luba' Buayeh* occupies a negotiated space between colonial and postcolonial values—not to mention modernisation—where the indigenous identity is constantly recreated and reconstructed.

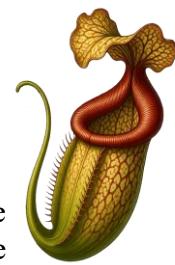
The majority of the village occupants in Long Pasia are Christians even though there is a small number of Muslim border scouts and school teachers who reside there. It is to suit this minority Muslim population's dietary requirements that the *Luba' Buayeh* is prepared in two different versions, one consisting of wild boar/pork vis a vis non-halal meat, while the other, is prepared with halal meat that is slaughtered according to Muslim religious practices—we discuss this as yet another form of adaptive mechanism that straddles the delicate platforms of religious sensitivity in Malaysia's nation-state—and as an emerging modern Lundayeh identity. We now turn to a brief discussion on tribal cosmology that may shed light on why animal imageries vis a vis crocodile was important to the natives of Borneo including the Lundayehs.

## BORNEAN TRIBAL COSMOLOGY AND ANIMAL IMAGERIES

In order to better understand the Bornean native groups association with animal imageries, it is necessary to first explore their tribal cosmology. Robert McKinley's article relates the native cosmos of South East Asian groups to the practice of headhunting. According to McKinley (1976), whose work draws from various oral narratives of the native groups in the region, villages were set up by river basins. This is because rivers were perceived as the centre of the universe; such way of understanding the universe was common among the natives. Nonetheless, what makes the South East Asian headhunting groups different is that, the way in which the river is located in relation to the cosmos, and the distinctive understanding that the river connects the village, i.e. the centre of the universe with the outside worlds, especially the upstream (upperworld) and downstream (underworld) regions (See Figure 4). This is why McKinley elaborates that in tribal cosmology, the upperworld is perceived as the dwelling for birds and sky deities, whereas the underworld is the home for serpents, dragons, and agricultural deities. In other words, the tribal cosmology is a form of worldview that essentializes animal imageries.



**Figure 4**  
Southeast Asian tribal cosmology  
Adapted from: McKinley, 2015 (455)



When death occurs in the homogenous tribe vis a vis the village/the centre of the universe, boats and coffins are built with the motifs of feathered serpents that represent the hornbill or dragons (*naga*) as the mediums through which the soul of the dead person is carried to all region. The river—is believed—to carry the dead person's soul to all regions. The cultural heroes, who are often times head-hunters, have the power to travel between the earth and upperworld because they possess the soul force to partake in such cosmic journeys. This is why it is important to understand that the head-hunter and his raiding group members were not commoners but people who possessed the soul force and special ability to engage in such dangerous expeditions. As a matter of fact, headhunting among the natives of the region was not done often since the raiding expedition, that involves travelling deep into the dense Bornean rainforest, warrants specific cultural reasons ranging from drought, infertile agricultural cycle to mourning the loss of a recently passed life, and outbreaks of serious illnesses that affects all occupants of a village. Due to such varied reasons among the headhunting tribes, scholars like Janet Hoskins provide a broad definition to the practice of headhunting in the South East Asian region. In the introduction to her edited volume, she explains as follows:

headhunting [was] an organized, coherent form of violence in which the severed head is given a specific ritual meaning and the act of head taking is consecrated and commemorated in some form (1996: 2).

This is to say that, headhunting was practiced more for ritualistic purposes than for any other reasons which is why every successful headhunting expedition was followed by an elaborate celebration, another point of interest in this article that directly links the image of the crocodile to the native belief system through the *Nui Ulung* ceremony, and we will take this up in the next section.

What is necessary to bear in mind here is that the indigenous belief regarding the cosmos was based on animal imageries found in the surrounding environment such as birds, serpents, and hornbills. Omen birds and deer were deemed as messengers to mankind that gave warnings or conveyed messages to men and women on earth. Interestingly, the dragon/naga or dragon-like mythical creature that was associated with the underworld was widely present in the native spiritual pantheons which is why, in the past, traditional jars decorated with Chinese-style dragons were so popular among the locals (Nyiri, 2022). Some local groups such as the Kelabits and Lundayehs even link such mythical dragons to the powerful guardian spirit of the crocodile bringing to question whether the two were somehow interconnected. We answer this in the succeeding paragraphs.

As early as in 1922, the geographer and anthropologist, Owen Rutter, gives a vivid description about the crocodiles in the Bornean riverine. He writes:

The Borneo crocodiles are very savage; they do not scruple to attack their prey and many has been the tragedy of a solitary bather upon the river bank... Natives naturally have a very wholesome awe of these man-eaters and in many places will not attack them until they have shown themselves the aggressors.  
(16)

<sup>1</sup> The term “soul force” (*lallud*) is used by Monica Janowski in her article about the Kelabits, who shared the same ancestral homeland in the Kerayan-Kelabit Highlands with the Lundayehs, whose belief systems regarding headhunting and animal imageries about the cosmos were also similar. See “Journeys in quest of cosmic power: Highland heroes in Borneo” *Austronesian Paths and Journey*. 93-126.



This means that, while the dragon was a powerful creature in the mythology, the existence of the crocodile in the native culture, on the other hand, was purely due to its regular presence, which, to quote Rutter, “infest[ed] the rivers and [were] not infrequently found in salt-water creeks, [and] also found close to the seashore” (16). The association between the dragon and crocodile could have resulted from the understanding that they represented the underworld. That the two were connected to water, not to mention, the perceived resemblance in body structure and size, could have all contributed to a similarity in the belief regarding the two creatures, which over time, became viewed interchangeably. Nevertheless, the dragon remains “unseen” therefore its dangers unpredictable. The reverence of the unseen is also part of the native cosmos that is formed in relation to the dense Bornean rainforest; this is also why the rhetoric about the unseen head-hunter used to spread faster among the locals creating a deep fear rather than the real attacks by his raiding group. The fear of the unseen but prevailing power has been the common narrative among the locals that Richard Drake (1989) terms this as “construction sacrifice (275).” This is to say that it is through rumours and stories that the fear for the unseen continued, which, in turn, kept the belief in the animistic native cosmology alive among the locals.

The closest associate to the dragon, but also unlike the dragon, due to its visibility, is none other than the crocodile. It has to be kept in mind that even though in comparison to the dragon, the *buayeh* was a “seen” creature, it was nevertheless elusive thus in line with the rhetoric of fear, often times finding its way into the local proverbs and oral literature (Ganang, Wong, and Ganesan, 2018). Since many Bornean groups—including the highland Lundayehs—were often on the move in search of fertile lands for cultivation and travelled along river basins, their encounter with the reptile would have been unavoidable; its prowess admired. It is not surprising then, the agility and attacking technique of the crocodile was associated with the head-hunter, who, in the native cosmology, already possesses the soul force to partake in cosmic journeys. As a matter of fact, one of the early accounts of the Bornean indigenous groups, through the observation of a priest, Father J. Staal (1928), mentions that, while there were some tribes such as the Dusuns who built mud effigies of the crocodile, some others like the Kayans made feasts with images of crocodile from cooked rice, but more importantly, there were even tribes who claimed familial relationships with the crocodile hence calling it Aki (grandfather) thus contributing to the apt title of Staal’s short write-up, “Crocodile (grandfather)-culture in Borneo.” This is to say that, in one way or another, owing to its survivability in “all waters” even “far up above the rapids” (1928: 320), and due to its formidable nature, the idea regarding the crocodile has been appropriated in the native collective imagery in numerous ways, chiefly as the symbol of strength, bravery, mystery, and aggression, qualities necessary for a head-hunter, which, in turn, stand as a testament to his masculinity, a domain of fertility.

Also, the idea of symbolic representation in relation to the crocodile has been forwarded by Victor King (1985), who, in examining the indigenous groups’ material culture to mark differences in social ranks, found that, various paired symbols of binaries such as the “hornbill/dragon”, “hawk/crocodile”, “sun/moon”, and “weapons/textiles”, were used as items and designs highlighting that, to the natives, these were “dual symbolism” (126).

<sup>1</sup> Janowski’s article, “The highland dragon: Fearsome protector of nature” (2019), details that native Lundayehs even as recently as 2018 shared their ancestral stories and personal encounters with the dragon in its transformed form either as powerful river creatures or logs which is when it becomes “seen”. While Janowski’s informants recount that there are numerous transformed forms of the dragon, their accounts do not associate the dragon with the crocodile.

<sup>1</sup> Even though the Kayans—according to Staal—seem to have practiced the tradition of Crocodile Rice, it is our contention in this article that, among the Lundayehs, it was adapted as both a colonial and postcolonial practice demonstrating the values that have been appropriated as a means of continued cultural survival.



It meant that the native cosmos was made of opposing forces such as the upperworld versus underworld and male versus female; in fact, such dual symbolism of binaries was a widespread idea in Borneo. It is this idea of complementarity comprising of opposites that can be seen in the division of labour practiced by the Lundayehs in relation to the *Luba' Buayeh* because, its construction is a female domain including the sourcing of the rice that makes up the body of the *Luba' Buayeh* as it is cultivated by the women, while the meat that is kept inside the belly of the *Luba' Buayeh* is a male domain because it is sourced by the men. Since King's work demonstrates that the image of *buayeh* carried a figurative meaning, in the following section on *Nui Ulung*, we investigate the values/themes that linked the head-hunter to the image of the crocodile with lasting consequences even to the present-day when the Lundayeh ancestral land had been intra-ethnically divided through the emergence of new nation-states in Borneo.

## HEADHUNTING, THE CROCODILE IMAGE, AND *NUI ULUNG* CEREMONY

The Lundayehs were a hunter-gatherer group whose belief systems were founded on superstitious animistic beliefs, naturally, the images of various animals filled their understanding of the cosmos that affected their day-to-day practices. Nevertheless, the place occupied by the *buayeh* was relatively more superior than other animals because it was viewed as a ferocious animal capable of living both on land and in water. Even though it is a large animal, its ability to camouflage and submerge deep into the rivers without showing any traces of its existence to the naked eye, is a necessary skill for the survival and continuous success of the head-hunter and his raiding group in the dense rainforest. This means that, quite literally, the head-hunter was not dissimilar to the crocodile: elusive, strong, brave, and aggressive—in short—extremely dangerous.

At this point, it is necessary to recall Hoskins' (1996) defining keywords—“consecrate” and “commemorate” (2)—regarding the practice of headhunting which highlights a cultural compliance that is shaped by rituals. It is such ritual significance that McKinley (1976) refers to when he describes that the severed head (face) was brought back (and not simply discarded) to the village/centre of the universe because it was believed that it contained the soul force and personality of the dead person. This meant that, when the raiding group was successful, the *Nui Ulung* ceremony, which was celebrated through the construction of an earthen crocodile mound (*ulung buayeh*), was held to mark the triumphs of the head-hunter and his men. According to McKinley, at the heart of such celebratory rituals is the native cosmology because, a stranger in the “unseen” parts of the Bornean rainforest is deemed as non-human as he/she does not belong to the homogenous village/centre of the universe therefore perceivably dangerous, thus calling for an act of intervention, which manifests as headhunting. Nonetheless the heterogenous non-human head/face is brought to the village in order for the severed head to be symbolically incorporated into the tribe as a “social person” where “the former enemy [is turned] into a friend” (McKinley, 1976: 461) through ritual acts. The question is, over the years, following the abolishment of headhunting, how and why did the crocodile mud effigy celebrating the success of the head-hunter turn to a food form, i.e. *Luba' Buayeh*?

<sup>1</sup> According to Langub (2016), *ulung darung* (serpent mound) was also built to celebrate the triumphs of the head-hunter. Both *ulung buayeh* and *ulung darung* are used in archaeological researches about the early settlements of the Lundayehs/Lun Bawangs; there are more of the former highlighting that the practice could have lasted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Besides these two, there was also *ulung agung* (gong mound) though little is known about its origin and significance.



We answer this by looking at the specifics of the *Nui Ulung* as well as the religious reshaping and intra-ethnic division of the group.

The following is detailed by Ganang et al. (2018) about the *Nui Ulung* practice among the Lundayehs:

A huge image of the crocodile was carved in earth and flanked by two decorated wooden poles (*ulung*). A hornbill icon (*menangang*) would be hung at the top of two bamboo posts mounted on top of each of the vertical wooden posts, decorated with spiral wood shavings hanging at the top. [...] The leading warrior would make cuts on the effigy, representing the number of heads he had taken and indulge himself in an ostentatious boast (*nengadan*) about his prowess, and followed by others.

... [The villagers] would build bon-fire and performed the *fekuab* or the song of praise to the heroes who brought home heads of their enemies. They would then skin the heads to get rid of the flesh and smoke dry the skulls over the fire before handing them over to the *Lun Ngimet Kuran* or the keeper of the basket, *kuran*, where skulls were kept. While the men were doing that, his family members and guests would perform the *fekuab* while circling the effigy to praise him for his bravery. (174-175)

The description while on one hand evidences that during past animistic cultural practices animal images were central, on the other, it shows that *Nui Ulung* was used to “stage” the act of severing the head among the villagers because they did not have the privilege to witness the deed first-hand. While it was mentioned earlier that the attributes ascribed to a head-hunter were drawn from the crocodile, the cuts made on the effigy may seem conflicting, why would a crocodile mound be erected only to be cut if its prowess was greatly admired and likened to the triumphant head-hunter? This is because, by making those cuts, the head-hunter is demonstrating that he is far more powerful than the reptile, and, as a matter of fact, more powerful than the non-human (enemy) whose head had been severed because he had survived the raid and is successful to recount the expedition through the elaborate *nengadan*. *Nui Ulung* is a ceremony that not only celebrated success but was also an avenue to show power, status, and prestige of the still living head-hunter thus making him a hero of his village/the centre of the universe.

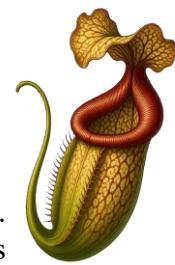


**Figure 5**

Example of a crocodile mound (*ulung buayeh*), usually built to commemorate a successful headhunting expedition. Source <https://www.penangfoodforthought.com/2018/12/mari-mari-cultural-village.html> Accessed on 16 February 2023

Intriguingly, scholars like Mashman (1991) claim that, while headhunting was a male domain, the ritual that followed highlighted a gender complementarity. This is because, the ritual was led by a female priestess, where, the village women came together as a tribe to indulge in a long process of taunting and mocking the head before nursing it as a baby to show that it has now become a member of the tribe, or to use McKinley's term, "social person." In short, the women were the receivers of the severed head and source of encouragement for the men to go on headhunting raids. *Nui Ulung* was therefore as much complementary as it was communal. In fact, De Raedt (1996) who witnessed such celebration first-hand among the *Buaya* of Northern Luzon in the 1960s claims that headhunting ritual was an event filled with frenzy, exhilaration, and debauchery. His observation was based on the fact that, numerous behaviours, which were otherwise prohibited or frowned upon among members of the group, were permissible during the ritual, especially adulterous sexual relations, going as far as terming it as a "period of erotic license" (176). Drinking locally brewed wine added further frenzy to the celebration. This is also why such rituals were often associated with the idea of fertility.

The kuran where the severed head/skull was kept is the key to our discussion, because, in line with the rhetoric of the "unseen" but powerful force, even when there were no heads especially following the abolishment of headhunting by the colonial government, such rituals continued in secrecy with the imagined idea that there was a severed head in the basket providing opportunities for communalism and ritual celebrations to continue. This is why Janet Hoskins' edited volume, mentioned earlier in this article, was aptly titled as "Social Imagination" as the collective idea among headhunting groups regarding the head in the basket, which came from ritual practices, were central to the shared cultural identity of the natives. The fact that the imagined idea was so strong that it could continue even in the absence of the head is crucial to our discussion because it shows that *Nui Ulung* did not merely have a literal significance but symbolic as well; the latter had survived for generations, even long after the abolishment of headhunting, religious conversion during imperialism, and formation of nation-states.



We now turn our discussion to the values associated with headhunting and its rituals. While the reason for headhunting may vary, its cultural significance can be summed as following: (i) an act that highlighted gender complementarity; (ii) construction of power through the fear for the “unseen” and is associated with status and prestige; (iii) an imagined idea that translocated from the real act of headhunting to the re-enactment on the crocodile effigy, then from the *kuran* to the whole village that gave a sense of belonging and shared cultural identity regarding the indigenous worldview; and, (v) an elaborate celebration of success that marked communalism.

In the next section we discuss how, as a result of numerous changes during the height of colonialism, and through the birth of Malaysia as a nation-state, the cultural significance associated with headhunting and its rituals, over the years became a food form in order to keep the native agency alive among the Lundayehs.

### RELIGIOUS RESHAPING, VARIED ETHNIC LABELS, AND LUBA' BUAYEH

We begin this section with the effect of territorial division as a result of colonisation and the emergence of a postcolonial nation on the Lundayehs’ sense of identity. What is now known as Southwestern Sabah, North-eastern Sarawak, and North Kalimantan was once part of the Lundayeh heartland. As it were slowly colonised or influenced by three different colonial powers and one local Sultanate, namely the British North Borneo Company, the Sarawak Raj, the Dutch East India Company, and the Brunei sultanate, the Lundayeh people became dispersed into disparate territories. The 1915 Boundary Treaty Agreement between the Netherlands and the Great Britain effectively divided the Lundayeh heartland into two permanent different spheres of influence, which eventually formed the modern Malaysia-Indonesia border. The political division did not just happen between two different countries but it was further compounded by the interstate division between the two Malaysian Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak. The Lundayeh people are now defined by the inter-state and intra-state division in which they reside: Brunei, Indonesia, and the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. It is due to this territorial division that the cohesive intra-ethnic identity of Lundayeh is diluted. The Luba’—as we explain shortly—is one way through which the weakened Lundayeh cultural thread is held tight.

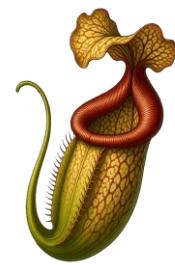
The Lundayeh—at present—are found in all the four political units of Borneo. The name Lundayeh is not without a problem because, until today, those in Sabah are known as Lundayeh, while those in Sarawak are known through the self-referent Lun Bawang. In Brunei they are known as Murut Lun Bawang and in Kalimantan, Indonesia they are Dayak Lundayeh. This varied ethnic labels according to the four political units of Borneo has been the cause of much confusion and anxiety. To make matters worse, the community that once shared a borderless land area, has become divided with lasting consequences; in Sabah, they are a minority and even in the area that is widely perceived as a Lundayeh heartland such as the village of Long Pasia, the children do not speak the native language following Malaysia’s language nationalisation policies, and numerous native practices have been totally abandoned or adapted to suit the village’s Christian way of life. This, in addition to the development brought about by the logging route, continues to threaten the natives’ identity despite the village’s remote location in the Ulu Padas region.

<sup>1</sup> For an account on why the self-referent “Lun Bawang” came to use among those in Sarawak even though they were part of the same nation, i.e. Malaysia, refer to Langub. “Ethnic Self-Labelling of the Murut or Lun Bawang of Sarawak” (1987): 289-299.



Even though large-scale religious conversion had occurred by the 1930s, it was only since the 1970s that the Lundayehs became devout Christians following the teachings of the Borneo Evangelical Church. One of the reasons for this change is due to the derogatory status suffered by those classified as Muruts; the Lundayehs were labelled as Muruts during the colonial period with lasting consequences. As early as 1913 the British North Borneo Herald had used the name Sarawak Murut to refer to “drunken, dirty, and indolent” people (36). Ricketts (1963) noted that Murut people were associated with drunkenness, unhygienic way of living, filthy habits, and customs that were repulsive. As the community became devout, it meant that their lifestyles changed extensively that it prompted the President of the Borneo Evangelical Mission to claim that “the Christian gospel preachers saved the Lun Bawang community from the destruction of alcoholism by turning a sickly and dying tribe into a flourishing people today” (Dayak Daily, November 25, 2019). This means that, all animistic practices were abandoned for religiously-accepted behaviours; even the consumption of alcohol was given up because it was associated with past unwarranted behaviours such as disputes, tribal wars, and sexual promiscuity that caused the group to be viewed derogatorily. In order to shed the negative label and to distinguish themselves through the self-referent “Lundayeh” (people of the upriver), when Sabah and Sarawak joined the Federation in 1963, the Lundayehs stated that they are a different group compared to the Muruts and that their languages were different; Lundayeh have thus been officially recognised as an ethnic community by the state.

Even though numerous factors continue to erode the Lundayehs’ indigenous identity, it may be said that the Christian teachings directly affected *Nui Ulung*. It will be naïve to conclude—at this point—that Christianity waned the natives’ indigeneity which lived through animistic practices, because, it is only through Christianity that education and, to a large extent, empowerment reached many of such native groups. Nevertheless, according to Ganang et al. (2018), in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Lundayehs’ were officially recognised as an ethnic group in Sabah, and following the realisation that numerous rapid changes were affecting the community’s indigenous identity, crocodile effigies made of cement were built in Lundayeh villages such as Kampung Kaban and Kampung Mendulong in Sipitang, Sabah. But there was a widespread idea that squabbles and conflicts among Christian-villagers were arising soon after the effigies were built as it was deemed that the spirit of the crocodile was lingering in these villages. It resulted in the demolition of these structures. It is for this reason that according to Ganang et al. that the Sabah Lundayeh Cultural Association and communal leaders came together to navigate religious sensitivities, chiefly, through the construction of the crocodile rice. In fact, during our fieldwork between 2018 and 2020, we noticed a crocodile effigy in front of the Sabah Lundayeh Cultural Association, that, to our surprise, was still intact and well preserved. We were told by the villagers that it marked their identity and was the central symbol for the Irau Rayeh Lundayeh, because, Lundayehs from various parts of Borneo, better known as “Lundayeh ancestral land” will attend the celebration, and the crocodile image provides them with a sense of identity especially since many of them, notably the younger generation, do not speak in the native language anymore. When they attend the *Irau* held at the Cultural Association their shared sense of collective imagination continues through the cement effigy. When asked whether they feel threatened or uncomfortable with the presence of the structure, they informed that it was not near to any villages and was therefore not dangerous. It was understood as a communal symbol hence its place at the front yard of the Sabah Lundayeh Cultural Association building was readily accepted—however, it is the only cement fixture of the river reptile in the whole of Sabah.



**Figure 5**

A view of the Sabah Lundayeh Cultural Association with the cement crocodile effigy at its front. Photograph: fieldwork February 2019

In order to keep the native agency alive—as mentioned—*Luba' Buayeh* (see Figure 6) became the crucial symbol of ethnic identity thus distinguishing the Lundayehs from the other native groups in Sabah, at the same time, it extended a call for solidarity through cultural gatherings and food sharing among other Lundayehs varidly labelled from other parts of Borneo. The construction of *Luba'*—owing to its size and occasion—required careful planning. This is why during our fieldwork, we came to know that in anticipation of the arrival of a political dignitary to Long Pasia, the female of every household had discussed on the quantity of rice that will be sponsored a few weeks ahead of the event. There was also an important discussion to construct the *Luba'* in two different versions, one to suit the dietary requirements of the Muslim villagers and visitors, and the other, in accordance to the indigenous practice. While the *Luba'* was constructed with boiled white rice, red chillies pointing outwards to mark that the crocodile was “alive” were used to represent the claw, and boiled fowl-eggs were used as the eyes and scale of the crocodile. The meat inside the belly differentiated between a halal and non-halal *Luba' Buayeh*. Traditionally, hunted wild boar meat is included in the *Luba' Buayeh*; nevertheless, over time, with the depletion in forest land when hunted meat became scarce, the Lundayehs resorted to pork meat. This is why the decision to include halal meat in the belly of *Luba' Buayeh* to respect the dietary requirements of Muslim dignitaries is perceived as the community’s move towards religious adaptation.



**Figure 6**

*Luba' Buayeh* served at a communal ‘irau’ in the village of Long Pasia. Photograph: fieldwork August 2018



We contend here that, the native adaptive nature, ranging from the practice of *Nui Ulung* that translocated as cultural values, and eventually became a food form, provided another avenue for adaptation, this time, by being compliant with Islamic religious teachings. This brings our discussion to another crucial issue especially because, even though two different versions of the *Luba'* is constructed, cuts are still made representing the act of “severing” the head before consumption, that brings to question the significance of the act. We noticed during our fieldwork that the politician—the representative of the nation-state—was told to make the cuts highlighting that, despite large scale conversion during imperialism and the nation’s contemporary Malay-Muslim state-defined identity, the Lundayeh native agency continued to survive. While in the past the cuts made on the crocodile mound were representative of the number of heads severed by the head-hunter, the current practice of getting the political dignitary to make the cuts, resonate with the rhetoric of fear for the “unseen.” Even though as state representatives such politicians are “seen,” the state remains an abstract notion thus “unseen;” its power, status, and prestige constantly felt but remain “unseeable.” Malaysia’s continuous nationalising narratives and state discourses provide avenues for the rhetoric to be constantly revisited, which in itself is a form of native agency. This is to say that, the emergent modern indigenous Lundayeh identity, despite having to navigate numerous challenges, is both appropriated and adjusted from the changes brought about by colonialism and nation-state, because, through the food form, the indigenous culture and belief system is safeguarded even if it means that it involves elaborate occasions such as the *Irau* (some Lundayeh weddings, depending on the affordability of the families, construct the *Luba'* that is cut by the newly wedded couple).

## CONCLUSION

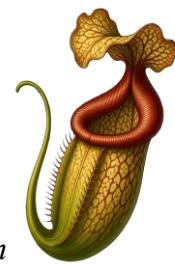
In this article we examined the past animistic history of the Lundayehs in Sabah, where we argued that, as an indigenous community emerging from the colonial clutches and navigating new horizons through the birth of the nation-state vis a vis postcolonial complexity, the Lundayehs emergent identity is fragmented by numerous factors yet their native agency continues to survive through *Luba' Buayeh*, a food form. The key to such survivability is the fluid and adaptable nature inherent in the community that may have originated from its hunter-gatherer history which required constant moves/ changes in search of fertile lands for cultivation. What is most notable here is that, despite the rapid changes that threaten the community from the inside out and vice versa, especially through deforestation activities and the demise of the native language in Lundayeh heartlands such as Long Pasia, the simple act of reconstructing the crocodile through the *Luba' Buayeh* and then crucially making the cuts, demonstrate that, two decades into the twenty-first century, the indigenous native agency still has an avenue, albeit a small one, to exercise and revisit its past cultural practices.

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