Ethnicity is in the mind ... food is on the table

The Christmas meal among the Kelabit of Sarawak and the Poles in the United Kingdom

MONICA JANOWSKI

I have two aims in this paper: to describe the way in which the Christmas meal is used in the construction of ethnicity by the Kelabit of Sarawak and by the Polish community in London; and to suggest that this illustrates the potential of using the study of food as an entry point for deriving abstract concepts such as ethnicity.

As a framework for the paper, I have used the way in which my thinking about what I am doing as a social anthropologist has changed since I began my Ph.D. fieldwork in 1986. This builds on the current concern within social anthropology to 'situate' the anthropologist in relation to the object of research.

In deciding on a field site for my Ph.D. research in 1985/86, I was governed by an interest in the way in which people interact with their environment to produce food, and particularly in why they make the decisions they do to concentrate on the production of certain foods. Since completing my first degree in 1976, I had lived in Poland and in Malaysia, and I considered both of these as field sites. I decided finally on the Kelabit Highlands in Sarawak, East Malaysia. My interest in Polish culture remained, though, and I have recently returned to it in carrying out research among the Polish community in London. In both field sites, I have used food, its production and consumption, as my entry point to analysing these societies.

The rice meal in the Kelabit Highlands

The Kelabit Highlands are at the headwaters of the Baram River in a tableland area at about 3500 feet above sea level which is still mainly covered in forest. The Kelabit[1], like other tribal groups in Borneo, cultivate rice in clearings in the forest – not only in dry swidden fields but in wet fields as well. Although they also cultivate other starch crops, including cassava – which is much less labour-intensive to grow – rice is the focal crop, and the only starch eaten at proper

meals. I was interested in exploring Kelabit rice cultivation and their attitude to rice as a crop and as a food.

My attention was soon directed towards the hearth where the rice meal is cooked, because it was clear that Kelabit life revolves around it. The Kelabit live in open-plan longhouses which are made up of a row of hearths, which are the focus of what might be described as 'slices' of the longhouse built by different families, or 'hearth-groups', as I term them.[2] These 'slices' consist of a section of the longhouse which contains the hearth, which is called the *dalim*, or 'inner' area, and a section of the parallel part of the longhouse, the *tawa*, which contains a public gallery and private sleeping and storage rooms. I went on fieldwork with my husband and baby, and it became clear that since we had a child we could not be dependant on another hearth-group but had to establish and maintain our own, which included cooking our own rice meals. I became aware of the importance of the hearth-group and of the significance of the rice meal in constituting this unit, which is focused on the hearth where the meal is cooked.

My thesis (Janowski 1991) was an analysis of the way in which proper human life, as the Kelabit see it, is generated through the complementary relationship between the male and female heads of hearth-groups via the rice meal which they provide for dependants. While everyday rice meals are shared by hearth-group members, occasional large scale rice meals are shared by broader, more inclusive groups than the hearth-group. I looked in my thesis at the role of *irau* feasts, which are the derivative of pre-Second World War naming and death feasts of merit, and which are focused on huge rice meals. I argued that these large scale rice meals, and particularly *irau*, are explicit statements of what is implicit in everyday meals. I also suggested that they are the basis for the generation of relative social status among the Kelabit. I have written a number of papers which derive from the thesis and build on the argument in it (e.g. Janowski 1995, 2000).

Being Kelabit: Christianity

As is common during first periods of fieldwork, I suffered from a degree of myopia during my Ph.D. fieldwork. I tried, as do so many anthropologists by inclination if not by deliberate decision, to retrieve vestiges of the past rather than looking forward into the future. This fairly common phenomenon among anthropologists is, I would suggest, partly due to a desire to distance one's data from oneself by siting it at a temporal distance. It is also particularly likely to be present if there are aspects of one's data which one finds personally difficult to accept. In my case, I found it difficult to accept something which is, nowadays, absolutely fundamental to the Kelabit: evangelical Christianity. The Kelabit were converted after the Second World War and are now devout evangelistic Christians. I have to admit to trying initially to ignore this, concentrating on vestiges of 'traditional' beliefs insofar as I looked at the area of religion.

However, the Kelabit themselves wanted us to participate in their church, and eventually my family and I were almost bodily carried into the church one Sunday and we began to participate every week in the main Sunday service. In fact, I ended up being quite attached to Kelabit Christianity because it is, nowadays, such an important part of the Kelabit psyche and identity, but my thesis does not address the question of Christianity as an issue, merely describing the history of conversion.

Another area I did not explore explicitly was the notion of what it means to be Kelabit. Rather than asking questions about this, I took it for granted. My thesis does not address it, despite the fact that the widespread currency of the term Kelabit as an ethnonym nowadays is rather interesting, given that it derives from a misunderstanding and that the people now called Kelabit were not described by any inclusive term before the early part of this century.

I began to be uneasy about the fact that I had neglected these areas a couple of years after completing my thesis, and I have begun to address them since then. I gave a paper on Kelabit Christianity in 1996 (Janowski 1996) and on what it means to be Kelabit in town in 1997 (Janowski forthcoming b). However, I was concurrently developing a desire to relate my fieldwork to myself more intimately and both these issues – Christianity and identity – were ones which I had a desire to address in a way which would touch me more closely than was possible, I felt, in studying a faraway tribe in Borneo.

'Fieldwork' among Poles in London

After my Ph.D. fieldwork, when I returned to London to write up my thesis, my husband, daughter and I went to live with his mother. My mother-in-law is a Pole from a small town near Lwow, now part of the Ukraine, but which was part of Poland before the Second World War. She had been displaced to Kazakhstan and then to Uganda by the invasion of Poland, ending up in the United Kingdom, where she was reunited with her husband, who is from Inowroclaw in NW Poland. They had been separated for nine years. My husband and his elder brother were born in a refugee 'hostel' in the Essex countryside. There, they lived with my mother and father-in-law, my mother-in-law's mother, and her elder brother, moving in 1960 to the house in Ilford into which we moved in 1988 to join my mother-in-law. In Ilford, the family became part of the Polish community which had grown up in the area, joining a Polish parish based in Goodmayes nearby. My mother-in-law's mother died in 1969, my father-in-law in 1973 and my mother-in-law's brother in 1986, just before we returned from the Kelabit Highlands, leaving her finally alone in the house. It was partly in order that she should not be alone that we moved in.

Although I had spent two years in Poland with my husband in the 1970s, I had not been immersed in a Polish household during that period, as I was after 1988. From this time on I was thrown into a kind of participant observation within the Polish community in London, which has, so far, lasted twelve years.

Because we moved in with her, and because in any case my husband feels himself to be profoundly Polish, the household has retained a strongly Polish flavour, remaining part of the Polish parish (with visits from the Polish priest etc.) as well as of the local Polish community. Since we moved in, my mother-in-law has cared for our daughter and has cooked much of the food we have eaten, which has meant that we have eaten quite a bit of Polish food. Festive occasions have been decidedly Polish in flavour; food at these occasions has always been Polish, even though everyday food is becoming less so as my mother-in-law becomes more elderly and finds it more difficult to cook. Because I was born a Catholic, I was drawn to some extent into the Catholicism of the household. I had not anticipated all of this, and indeed did not, at the beginning, consciously think about the fact that it was happening except (to be quite honest) to find it rather irritating that I was not able to run my own household as I would wish!

A Polish Christmas

At this point let me offer you a short ethnographic vignette of the Polish Christmas meal as it was celebrated in Christmas 1998 in a (semi-?) Polish household in London – ours:

> My mother in law has spent the past week preparing all the dishes for the *wigilia* Christmas Eve meal both for our household and for that of her other son. He is married to a woman of Polish origin, but she does not prepare the food for the meal, but leaves this to her mother in law, perhaps believing that she knows how to do it better. The old lady is, by now, exhausted but content and there is an atmosphere of excitement and expectation in the house. Polish Christmas carols are playing on the cassette player, put on by my husband to create the proper atmosphere. Although the meal is supposed to start at the appearance of the first star, and my husband would prefer that this should happen, in practice we usually eat at about 6 o'clock, and preparations are still underway at 4 o'clock, when the meal should really begin. Finally, the table is ready, with the proper hay under the tablecloth and the communion host (*optatek*) sent from relatives in Poland on a plate in the centre of the table. We all gather around the table, with the Polish Christmas carols still playing, and my mother in law, who is considered the head of the household by my husband, at least in this context, says a prayer and begins the sharing of the host. This involves kissing and wishing the best to each person for the following year, and I go through with the ritual with some embarrassment. After this we sit down and begin on the series of courses which constitute the meal – beetroot soup with mushroom dumplings, pickled herring with bread, dumplings stuffed with cheese and potato and with mushroom and pickled cabbage, fresh fish (in our case salmon, although it's 'supposed' to be carp), *kutia*, a sweet made of wheat, poppy seed, nuts and honey and finally stewed dried fruit. A good deal of vodka is drunk – including by 13-year-old Molly – although I insist on having some wine as well. There are supposed to be 12 courses to symbolize the 12 apostles, but in practice there are simply 'lots' of courses. After the meal my mother in law is picked up by her other son and goes to mass with his family at the Polish church in Islington. My husband says, as always, that he intends to go to Midnight Mass at our local church but does not, in practice, make it.

As I emerged from the cocoon of my thesis-writing, and began to interact with the real world around me after 1991, I began to observe this English-Polish cosmos I had been thrown into, and was particularly interested in the way in which food was prepared and consumed. The *wigilia* meal struck me as having two salient characteristics. Firstly, it is highly ritualized, much more so than everyday meals. Secondly, the dishes of which it consists are not the same as in meals eaten on an everyday basis. It consists of a large number of courses, for a start – and while some of these are courses that might be eaten as part of a meal, none of them is the same as the main course of which a meal normally consists and many of them are snack-like, the sort of food which might be eaten with vodka. It is a 'fasting' meal, meaning that it does not include any meat. It is made up of foods which are considered specifically Polish and which are not eaten by the British. It is, then, marked as 'Polish' and as 'out of the ordinary'. It is also marked as 'religious' both through the exclusion of meat and through the fact that it starts with the sharing of communion host. This might be said to make the meal equivalent to a mass, which is of course focused on shared bread. The fact that it also involves the drinking of vodka by all present, at the same time, in the Polish ritualistic fashion, adds to this impression, since the mass involves the shared consumption of alcohol as well as bread.

Although I did not immediately relate my anthropological work to my musings about Polish food and my participation in Polish Catholicism, these had an effect on the way in which I conducted my second period of fieldwork in the Kelabit Highlands in 1992-3. They made me more explicitly aware of the significance of food in understanding a culture, something which had been latent rather than explicit in my mind up to this point, and they made me more willing to be accepting of Kelabit Christianity.

A Kelabit Christmas

When my husband, daughter (by then seven years-old) and I returned to the Kelabit Highlands in 1992, my aim was primarily to gather material on attitudes to the forest, forest spirits and culture heroes associated with the wild areas beyond the settlement, since I was interested in exploring notions of life force from the forest. However, in addition to working on this I also ended up gathering a lot of data on the Kelabit way of celebrating Christmas. This was

not planned, but I was drawn into it because my husband decided to film events at Christmas, which was to involve the hosting and feeding of two neighbouring communities for a period of three days.

Another ethnographic vignette, this time of the Kelabit Christmas in 1992:

> The church is the scene of constant services and prayer meetings, with the usual mixture of preaching, reading from the Bible and out-loud praying, everyone at once but saying different things, a babel of loud voices, punctuated by ecstatic shouts and sometimes by 'talking in tongues'. Announcements from the central SIB church in Lawas on the coast are made. The services go on for hours, evening ones until 11 or 12 at night – when the usual time for bed is 7 or 8. The children come and go, playing in the aisles. Groups of children, young people, and adults from the different communities give performances of hymns for the congregation. Drinks and snacks are eaten in church. During the three days, two rice meals are held, in the shorter of the two longhouses, that in which the chief deacon and his wife live. These meals are described as *kuman peroyong*, or 'eating together'. They are, like all festive, shared rice meals including *irau* meals, laid out the length of the open-plan longhouse, utilizing the space of all the hearth-groups. They take place late at night, by the light of hurricane lamps and brass candlesticks from Brunei. People sit in a hugely extended oval. Rice, which has been provided by all the hearth-groups of Pa' Dalih and pooled, has been cooked in the specific Kelabit way – which involves the mashing of the rice into a paste – at a number of different hearths by groups of women and packed in the huge leaf packets usual for festive meals. The men of the community distribute the meat from the wild pigs, carefully making an equal allocation to all present, including children. A leading light of the Sidang Injil Borneo church, to which all the Kelabit belong, says a prayer thanking God for the meal and people eat it in silence, as is usual for rice meals.

The data that I gathered on Kelabit Christmas celebrations during my second period of fieldwork did not contradict the analysis which I had made of the role of the rice meal in my thesis; but it added a new, more dynamic dimension to it. I began to think about the differences between the festive rice meals held at Christmas, and at other occasions in the year which are both ritual and Christian, and the *irau* meals which I had analysed in my thesis. This meant that I was, in fact, orienting my analysis towards the future as well as the past.

Kelabit festive meals – generating different notions of 'togetherness'

In contrast to the Polish *wigilia* Christmas meal, the Kelabit Christmas rice meals, like meals at *irau* feasts, involve the consumption of the same elements as those eaten on an everyday basis – rice and wild foods (or cultivated vegetables treated as though they were wild)[3] – but, like *irau* rice meals, they are larger scale and there is an emphasis on the consumption of meat. What makes the Christmas meal different from either an *irau* meal or an everyday rice meal is the fact that no couple is responsible for providing the meal and hence, at least in theory, no prestige, and hence no social differentiation, is generated.

I came to realize that the two types of large-scale Kelabit rice meal generate two different notions of community, of belonging. The Kelabit were, until the Second World War, a group with explicit, and supposedly inherited, status differentiation – and an *irau* generates, temporarily, a social pyramid founded in social hierarchy with, at its apex, the host couple, who provide all the rice and the meat. These are from domestic pigs and buffaloes rather than, as is usual on an everyday basis, from wild pigs. This pyramid has specific members who are named as kin to the focal couple's first co-resident grandchild. However, it is not, itself, a named group. A *kuman peroyong* (literally, 'eating together') meal such as that eaten at Christmas, on the other hand, generates a picture of an egalitarian community of Kelabit SIB church members; the elements of the meal are provided by the community as a whole, which means that there is no host couple, no apex, in fact no pyramid. The idea that Christianity is associated with an egalitarian community of church members is extremely important to the Kelabit, and is something that is constantly emphasised. This community, unlike that generated by *irau* meals, is named – it is called either 'SIB' or 'Kelabit'. Although the Christmas meal at Pa' Dalih in 1992 was shared only by the members of the three neighbouring communities, the lack of emphasis on named participants generated a sense of it being inclusive of all of those who are 'SIB' or 'Kelabit', including those not present. This group is described as *lun tau*, 'our people'.

There is a tension between the two notions of community which are generated by the two types of festive meal, *irau* and *kuman peroyong*, one associated with a hierarchical group of named individuals and the other with a broader, Christian, Kelabit community. Each can be seen asserting itself in the context of the other – for example, the chief deacon in Pa' Dalih is someone seen as being of high status within the Kelabit system of status differentiation.

I have argued elsewhere that rice meals generate groups described as *lun royong* or 'people together', and I gloss the relations between members of these groups as being between 'rice-based kin' (Janowski forthcoming a). The rice meals at Christmas, like other rice meals, generate rice-based kinship, but without the clear hierarchy which is part of the kin structure generated through other rice meals. Being *lun tau*, 'us people', for the Kelabit, is the same thing as being kin.

Beginning explicit fieldwork 'at home'

My second period of fieldwork in the Kelabit Highlands made a link, for me, between my anthropological work and my personal position, through the way

in which it sensitized me to my prejudices. In opening up to aspects of 'being Kelabit' which I had been reluctant to look at during my first period of field-work, I began to feel a desire to make my anthropological work more personally significant to my own life. One way to do this seemed to be to carry out fieldwork 'at home'. In my case, I realized that I had the possibility of taking this very literally. Carrying out fieldwork in the Polish community would involve a context which was physically very near but culturally quite distant from my own culture of birth (American/Canadian) or residence (British). I felt that it would be interesting to contrast two very different types of participant observation: the kind which I carried out in the Kelabit Highlands, where I am an outsider and can walk off and leave the scene of the crime; and the kind into which I have been thrust willy-nilly within the Polish community in the UK. I have, therefore, begun to extend my casual participant observation within our own household in London to some explicit fieldwork.

Following my instinctive interest in food consumption, and based on my conclusions with regard to the Kelabit – that the consumption of food together generates groups of different types – I decided that I would begin some field-work among the Polish community looking explicitly at food. Because of the fact that Catholicism is clearly a fundamental aspect of 'being Polish' in London, as Christianity is in 'being Kelabit', I decided to focus particularly, in the beginning, on the *wigilia* meal at Christmas. I began part-time explicit field-work in December 1997, interviewing people following kin and friendship networks stretching outwards from my own household.

The Polish community in the United Kingdom

There were very few Poles living in Britain before the Second World War. Most of the emigration from Poland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was to the USA. The core members of the Polish community in the UK today either came to Britain themselves during the decade or so after the Second World War or have parents or grandparents who did. At that time, the members of the Polish Forces who fought with the British were given the opportunity of remaining in the UK, and of bringing their families over to join them, and some of the Polish 'European Voluntary Workers' who had come to Britain also remained. 157,300 Poles were living in Britain in December 1949, not including children under 16 (Zubrzyski 1956: 62).

Most of the ex-members of the Polish Forces belonged to the Second Corps, what had earlier been Anders' Army, raised in Russia among ethnic Polish deportees from the Eastern areas of Poland as it then was (ibid.: 52-53). This means that the core of the Polish community in Britain today is from the Eastern areas of Poland, which are no longer part of Poland. These people or their ancestors have a history of maintaining Polishness in a context which is multi-ethnic. Indeed the whole of the part of Europe to which Poland belongs has been in ethnic flux over the centuries and the sense of ethnic identity is derived not only from place but also from other factors including language, culture, religion and kinship. Thus the situation in which Poles in Britain find themselves, where they express their ethnic identity *vis-à-vis* other co-existing ethnic groups, is not novel for them.

Some emigration continued to Britain from Poland after the war. This emigration came from all over Poland. However, it was difficult for Poles to remain permanently and most came to visit relatives for short periods, to study English or to accumulate money to be spent in Poland. A few stayed because they married English citizens, often members of the existing Polish community in the UK. In the early 1980s, with the rise of Solidarity in Poland, it became easier to get permission from the British Government to stay in Britain. I have been told anecdotally that there a significant number of Poles in Britain have come since then, although I have not been able so far to get details of numbers from the Home Office.

Being Polish in the United Kingdom

For pre-Second World War and immediate post-war Polish immigrants to the UK, there has been a strong sense that their presence in the UK is not meant to indicate that they have left their Polishness behind but rather that it is strengthened, that their emigration is a statement of the particular devotion which they have to being Polish. The few Poles who did settle in the UK before the First World War were political emigres from a partitioned Poland, and it has been argued that the Poles who chose to remain in the UK after the Second World War (when there was the option of being repatriated) were also political exiles, whose whole identity was focused on the forthcoming return to the motherland when she was again free (ibid.: 119). In fact, because the majority of Poles who settled in the UK after the war came from places which were no longer, after the Yalta agreement, part of Poland, for them, there was nothing to return to, since their homes had in most cases been ethnically cleansed of Poles. They had, in fact, no real decision to make. However, it is true that leading members of the Polish community in Britain have, at least until 1991, emphasised the political basis of their presence in the UK. This is rooted largely in the fact that during the war the Polish Government in Exile was in London and its members remained there after the war and continued to see itself as the legitimate government of Poland despite the fact that the British Government transferred its recognition to the Government in Warsaw. The leaders of the Polish community in Britain after the war were very disapproving of any signs of recognition of the post-war Warsaw government on the part of members of the Polish community in Britain. Few even took up British citizenship (on the basis that they would be returning to the homeland one day when it was free) let alone Polish citizenship. This in effect left them stateless, a condition in which my mother-in-law remains.

More recent Polish immigrants to the UK have a different attitude to the significance of their emigration, since the political motive for exile has been lost. Even the post-war wave and their descendants can no longer argue that their absence from the motherland is an expression of Polishness now that Poland is no longer Communist, although this is an area which is difficult to question informants directly on since it is potentially sensitive.

Catholicism is a profoundly important part of the expression of their Polish identity for Poles in Britain. This was particularly true during the Communist period since being Catholic was an explicit statement of opposition to the Government in Poland, which was considered to be a puppet government working on behalf of the Soviet Union. Polish Catholicism has been distinct from English Catholicism from the start. Separate parishes were created for the Polish community after the war, some administered directly from Rome through a special arrangement, others administered through a Polish Vicar General who advised the British bishopric on the appointment of Polish priests. Polish parishes were set up as 'personal' parishes, with a personal rather than geographically-based relationship between parishioners and their priest (ibid.: 124-125). The parish to which our household belongs is such a 'personal' parish.

Immediate post-war migrants had and retain a strong sense of solidarity with each other because of their experiences during the war and because most came from the same area of what was once Poland – which is now in the Ukraine. More recent immigrants from Poland come from all over the country, and thus have less in common. Most of them have come to better their economic situation. Informants from the post-war migration wave and their descendants have told me that more recent immigrants have less of a sense of solidarity with other Poles, and have criticised them for this. They sometimes speak as though the post-war migration wave and its descendants are more 'Polish' than Poles in Poland proper. There are, then, tensions between earlier and later immigrants around what it means to be 'Polish' (see also Sword 1996: 149-219).

The *wigilia* meal: projecting Polishness

Just as Polish Catholicism is distinct from English Catholicism, the Polish Christmas meal is very different from the English Catholic Christmas meal. While the former is held on Christmas Eve and is meatless, the latter is held on Christmas Day and is focused on the consumption of meat. The *wigilia* meal is a ritual supper (*kolacje/wieczeza wigilijna*) which, informants say, should consist of twelve courses to symbolise the twelve apostles (although in practice I have never observed this many courses). It is eaten after the first star is sighted, at about 4.00 in the afternoon. It is believed by Poles in the UK to be a peculiarly Polish meal. However, this is arguably mythical. The *wigilia* meal is one example of a set of transformations on a theme throughout central Europe, where a special, ritual meal on Christmas Eve which probably has its roots in pre-

Christian times is extremely common. It appears to be common that it should be a meatless, 'fasting' meal. The Ukrainians, at least, share the goal of having twelve courses at the meal, and it would seem from interviews with first generation Polish immigrants from the Ukraine in the UK that the Ukrainians actually had a similar set and order of dishes for the meal. Indeed, the main sweet at the meal in a UK Polish household, *kutia*, is said by my mother-in-law to be of Ukrainian origin, and as far as I know it is not eaten in Poland proper. Thus the meal could be argued not to really be a Polish meal at all. However, it is treated as such and is regarded by Poles in the UK as not only an explicit expression of their religion, but also of their Polish identity

There are different attitudes to the *wigilia* meal on the part of members of different generations of Poles in the UK deriving from the post-war immigration wave. This seems to be related to a gradual transformation of the meal from a purely religious event to one which is both religious and 'Polish'. While the first generation appears to be largely focused on recreating the meal of their childhood, subsequent generations display a strong belief that there is a 'proper', truly Polish form for the *wigilia* meal which they try to approximate.[4] This seems to be leading to a standardization of the meal among Poles in the UK, despite differences in origin within Poland. For example, one couple who do not come from the Ukraine or even from the part of Poland near the Ukraine, and who do not have a tradition of eating dumplings (*pierogi*) for the meal, told me that they now include these in the Christmas Eve meal. It would seem that food, and particularly the *wigilia* meal, is being used to unite all Poles, to establish a common 'Polish' identity which transcends regional differences. This identity co-exists with latent tensions between immigrants from different areas and/or who have arrived at different times and for different reasons.

The standardization of the *wigilia* meal and the fact that it is eaten after the first star is sighted mean that in effect there is a kind of commensality to the celebration of the meal – everyone eats the same foods at the same time, although in different houses.[5] Core participants in the meal are close family members, but Poles who have nowhere to go – often relatives from Poland who are short-term residents in the UK – are often included and there is an invisible presence of the related people who send communion host from Poland to be shared by those in the UK. My husband also tells me that he strongly feels that ancestors are also present, through the memory of participants at the meal, and that this emphasises the kinship of all Poles, who ultimately all see themselves as sharing the same ancestors. Thus, the meal is shared, on a symbolic level, by the broader community of Polish people, who not only share ethnicity but are kin. Among the Poles in the UK, then, like the Kelabit, ethnicity and kinship are related.

The *wigilia* meal, then, generates a sense of belonging and kinship with a wider Polish community, consisting of Poles all over the world, in Poland and elsewhere, a community which may even be said to include ancestors. However, its enactment may be said to mask latent tensions within that community, although it projects, both internally and externally, a monolithic group of kin.

Conclusion: food and abstract concepts

In my thesis, I looked at the role of the rice meal in generating proper 'humanity' for the Kelabit. Later I focused on its role in generating what I have described as 'rice-based kinship'. Most recently, as my approach to my research has matured and broadened, I have begun to link the consumption of food with the generation of ethnicity, of the notion of *lun tau* ('our people' in Kelabit), and to relate this directly to Kelabit Christianity. In my more recent fieldwork among the Poles in the UK, I have begun by focusing on food and Catholicism and specifically on the Christmas meal, which, like the Kelabit Christmas meal, is an expression of a notion of what it means to belong to a certain group. In both the Kelabit and the UK Polish case, I have suggested that the way in which food is produced, prepared and consumed projects, both externally and internally, a sense of kinship and shared ethnicity but also expresses tensions and suggests complexities relating to the construction of emic notions of 'belonging' and 'ethnicity'.

The study of the consumption of food is not, of course, new. Indeed, it is an area which is of fundamental interest to all human beings and as such is almost always included in some way in ethnographies, historical studies and sociological analyses. For the anthropologist, while it is often difficult to persuade informants to talk at length about their kinship systems or religious beliefs, it is never difficult to get people to talk about what they eat, where they get food, how they prepare it and why they eat what they do. Perhaps because of its very accessibility, however, I believe that the study of the consumption of food is not seen often enough as a route into the understanding of abstract concepts. Rather it tends to be used as an illustration of concepts which are derived from other sources – including unrealized prejudices on the part of the scholar. Anthropologists struggle with what 'marriage', 'kinship' or 'religion' mean in a given society, as though the concepts somehow existed a priori, and look for their expression in areas such as the consumption of food. I would suggest that instead of starting with and seeking out abstractions which may not exist in the local philosophical vocabulary – which may, in fact, exist only in the mind of the observer – it is often better to start with something like food. Food is not only a basic human need and is central to social and religious structures and beliefs, but also has an undeniable physical existence – on the table or, in the Kelabit case, on a mat on the floor. It seems to me that this kind of approach has the potential to allow the anthropologist to derive abstractions relevant to the society in question (rather than to that of the anthropologist), whether this be in Europe or in the middle of Borneo.

Notes

1 This term is a recent one which arose from a misunderstanding (Harrisson 1958) but which has been adopted as an endonym by the people of the area now described as the Kelabit Highlands. There were estimated to be 5,059 Kelabit in 1987 and a growth rate of 4% from 1970 to 1980 (Ko 1987), so it is probable that the total is now about 7,500, with about 3500 in the Kelabit Highlands and 3500 in Miri at any one time, with the rest distributed around other towns in Sarawak (Martin 1994).

2 While most tribal peoples in Sarawak live in longhouses (King 1978), these are usually divided up internally by partitions between the areas inhabited by different hearth-groups. Kelabit longhouses are not divided up in this way; there is only a very minimal partition reaching out a few feet from the end wall between the areas built and used by different hearth-groups.

3 While rice is explicitly owned and the consumption of rice which has been produced by someone else implies dependance, cultivated vegetables, like wild vegetables and meat, are freely shared without any implication of debt or dependance.

4 Informants would often, in interviews, consult with each other or even ask people who were not present about this 'proper' form.

5 This parallels interestingly the way in which Kelabit eat rice meals consisting of the same elements, at the same time, creating a strong sense of community. On an everyday basis, this is at their separate hearths, but in visual contact. At festive events such as the Christmas meal, it is more explicitly a shared meal, with rice and meat pooled.

References

Harrison, T.

1958 'The Peoples of Sarawak VII and VIII. "The Kelabit and Muruts"', *Sarawak Gazette* 84, 187-191.

Janowski, M.

1991 *Rice, Work and Community among the Kelabit of Sarawak* (London: London School of Economics, University of London).

1995 'The Hearth-Group, the Conjugal Couple and the Symbolism of the Rice Meal among the Kelabit of Sarawak', in: J. Carsten & S. Hugh-Jones (eds.), *About the House: Levi-Strauss and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 84-105.

1996 'Gender, Power and Christianity among the Kelabit of Sarawak'. Paper presented at the ASEASUK annual meeting, SOAS, 25-27 April.

2000 'Where both Men and Women are Sacred Custodians of the Earth – the Kelabit of Sarawak', in: S. Tremayne & A. Low (eds.), *Women as Sacred Custodians of the Earth?* (London: Oneworld).

forthcoming-a '"To Have a Strong Life": "Big People" and the Generation of Rice-Based Kinship and Status among the Kelabit of Sarawak', in: M. Janowski, L.-B. Trankell & F. Kerlogue (eds.), *The Alimentary Structures of Kinship in South East Asia* (probably London: Curzon Press).

forthcoming-b 'Heirlooms, Status and Identity in Town among the Kelabit of Sarawak', in: M. Johnson (ed.), *Hotting-Up: Economy and Society in the New Consumer Cultures of South East Asia.*

King, V.T. (ed.)
1978 *Essays on Borneo Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the University of Hull).

Ko
1987 'Minor Indigenous Groups in Sarawak', *Sarawak Gazette* 113, 31-35.

Martin, P.
1994 'Linguistic Research in Brunei Darussalam: an Overview', in: P. Martin (ed.), *Shifting Patterns of Language Use in Borneo.* Papers from the Second Biennal Conference of the Borneo Research Council, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, July 1992. Borneo Research Council Proceedings Series, 3 (Williamsburg, Virginia: Department of Anthropology, College of William and Mary).

Sword, K.
1996 *Identity in Flux. The Polish Community in Britain* (London: School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London).

Zubrzyski, J.
1956 *Polish Immigrants in Britain. A Study of Adjustment.* (Studies in Social Life, 3). (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff).

The forbidden masquerade

Ethnicity and the management of ritual in Senegal[1]

FERDINAND DE JONG

Traditional rites were expected to disappear in the ungoing process of modernization. But with modernity comes variety and the paths through modernity are multiple (Clifford 1988, Comaroff & Comaroff 1993). Not only do old rituals persistently survive, ancient rites also receive renewed attention. These observations do not only pertain to practices of rural dwellers who – one might argue – live on the fringe of modernity. Traditions are kept alive in urban areas as well. It has been argued that traditions survive precisely in cities as valued forms of folklore (Bausinger 1990). In this paper, I examine a traditional ritual that received renewed attention among the urban population of a town in Senegal.

The *Kankurang* masquerade is part of the cultural traditions in Casamance, the southernmost region of Senegal. In Ziguinchor, the lengthy school holidays offer young men an excellent occasion to perform the *Kankurang* mask.[2] The *Kankurang* mask has a peculiar physical appearance. The *Kankurang* does not wear a wooden face mask, but consists instead of a costume of multiple pieces of bark, fixed in such a way to render identification of the masker impossible. The *Kankurang* carries cutlasses in both hands, adding a terrifying aspect to his mysterious appearance (see picture 1). During his performance the mask is accompanied by around ten young men in the age of fifteen to thirty. They carry sticks and threaten to beat the numerous bystanders in the audience. Usually, these companions are more dangerous than the mask himself, their behavior being attributed to the mask that can act with impunity. This may have far-reaching consequences: the mask performance can result in physical punishments and, ultimately, execution of transgressors. The mask is usually performed at the occasion of a boys' circumcision or initiation. The mask is then held to protect the circumcised and initiands against the evil forces of witches. Other occasions for his performance comprise public work tasks during which the workers are surveyed by the mask, thus guaranteeing their disci-