

# THE CREATION MYTH OF THE BORNEO HEAD-HUNTERS

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## Introduction

In 1920, The Southern California Academy of Sciences sponsored an Expedition to Borneo - Land of the Head-hunters, which was led by W F Alder.

During the expedition, Alder received an aural account of "The Myth of The Creation" as understood by the natives of Borneo.

The Creation myth would be chanted at night in an interminable rhymed blank verse, when the people gathered in the long gallery that forms the social hall of their community dwellings.

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## The Creation Myth

*In the beginning the earth was a barren rock on which rains fell, and this gave birth to slimy moss in which worms and beetles lived and made soil by their castings.*

*Then the handle of a great sword fell from the sun and became a tree.*

*Later the moon cast off a creeper, which caught upon the tree and, with the aid of the wind, mated with it.*

*Out of this wedlock there came the first two human beings, who were called Kaluban Gai and Kalubi Angai, who were man and woman.*

*The leaves dropping from the tree became birds and insects, and the pigs and beasts of the jungle came from the resin that oozed from the trunk of the tree.*

*The two humans were incomplete, having no lower limbs, but from their union came others who were perfectly formed and who gave birth to all the first tribes that lived upon the island.*

*Because of petty grievances the people became estranged, and each man and wife went away from the place they were born, and later they made war upon one another.*

*They decorated their war shields with hair cut from the heads of the ones they killed in battle.*

*One time during the progress of a tribal battle, one of the warriors was sorely wounded and went to a stream to wash his hurts.*

*While bending over the edge of the stream he heard a voice speak to him and, upon looking in the direction from which the sound came, saw a frog, who commiserated him upon his misfortune.*

*The frog warned him that he would never succeed in battle until he took the head of his enemy and hung it from the roof of his house. Then all would fear him, said the frog, and, because of that fear, would fall easy victim to his sword.*

*The man lay in the cool water until nightfall; then when the jungle was dark he made his way to the house of his enemy and, creeping upon him, killed him with a blow of a club.*

*He then silently dragged the body of his victim into the jungle and cut off the head and at daybreak placed it upon the roof pole of his own house.*

(W F Alder, *Men of the Inner Jungle*, 1923)

After the telling of the creation myth, if he is in the mood, the native narrator will run down the whole length of their tribal history to the present time.

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In their book, "*The Pagan Tribes of Borneo*", 1912, Charles Hose and William McDougall recount a similar creation story:

*In the beginning there was a barren rock. On this the rains fell and gave rise to moss, and the worms, aided by the dung-beetles, made soil by their castings. Then a sword handle (HAUP MALAT) came down from the sun[159] and became a large tree. From the moon came a creeper, which hanging from the tree became mated with it through the action of the wind.[160] From this union were born KALUBAN GAI and KALUBI ANGAI, the first human beings, male and female. These were incomplete, lacking the legs and lower half of their trunks, so that their entrails hung loose and exposed. Leaves falling from the tree became the various species of birds and winged insects, and from the fallen fruits sprang the fourfooted beasts. Resin, oozing from the trunk of the tree, gave rise to the domestic pig and fowl, two species which are distinguished by their understanding of matters that remain hidden from all others, even from human beings. The first incomplete human beings produced PENGOK NGAJ and KATIRA MUREI; the latter bore a son, BATANG UTA TATAI, who married AJAI AVAI and begot SIJAU LAHO, ODING LAHANG, PABALAN, PLIBAN, and TOKONG, who became the progenitors of the various existing peoples. ODING LAKANG is claimed as their ancestor by the Kayans, and also by the Kenyahs and some of the Klemantan tribes.*

*TOKONG is claimed as ancestor by the Sebops (a tribe of Klemantans) and by the Punans. The former attribute to him the introduction of head hunting. The story goes that once upon a time, when TOKONG and his people were preparing to attack a village, he was addressed by the frog, who called out, "WONG KA KOK, TETAK BATOK." This fairly represents the cry of this species of frog (BUFO); and TETAK BATOK in the Sebop language means "cut through the neck." At first the people, who hitherto had taken only the hair of their enemies to adorn their shields, scoffed at this advice; but the frog assured them that the taking of heads would bring them prosperity of every kind, and demonstrated the procedure he advised by decapitating a small frog. TOKONG therefore determined to follow the frog's advice and carried away the heads of his enemies; this was followed immediately by increased prosperity. As the party returned home and passed through their fields the PADI grew very rapidly. As they entered the fields the PADI was only up to their knees, but before they had passed through it was full-grown with full ears. As they approached the house their relatives came to meet them, rejoicing over various pieces of good fortune that had befallen them. The words of the frog thus came true, and Tokong and his people continued to follow the new practice, and from them it was learned by others.*

(Charles Hose and William McDougall, "*The Pagan Tribes of Borneo*", 1912)

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