

# **The Rejang of Sumatra: Exploring Culture Through Literary Journalism**

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# Statement of Original Authorship

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Signed .....

Date .....



Previous page: Pak Taher generously provided introductions to his family in the village of Kelopak, Bengkulu Province, Sumatra, to facilitate this research project.

## Abstract

This thesis is about border crossing. Literary Journalism is a border-crossing writing genre claiming ground in fields as diverse as science, mathematics, memoir, travel and culture. The established academic discipline of anthropology is also crossing borders as styles of writing ethnography are changing and being challenged. This work is situated at the meeting point of these two genres. It examines how literary journalism can be used to write about culture for a wider audience beyond the academic community.

The defining characteristics of literary journalism – documentable subject, exhaustive research, novelistic writing techniques, voice and attention to underlying meaning – signal strengths and possible limitations to its use in writing about culture when measured against the demands of academic ethnographic writing. The requirements for research and writing about culture are examined from the perspectives of literary journalism and ethnography in Part 1 of this thesis.

To explore literary journalism's suitability to write about culture, research was conducted among the Rejang people of Sumatra. Part Two of the thesis, titled *Family Strength*, is presented as an example of a literary journalist approach to recording culture. It is the result of five fieldtrips to Sumatra to gather data about members of four generations of Pak Taher's family group in the village of Kelopak in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Each section of *Family Strength* tells the story of Pak Taher's relatives, highlighting changes within the lifetime of family members, including gender roles, religious values, the influence of education, generational change and farming practices. The work is not an exhaustive treatment of Rejang culture but records culture as several "slices of life".

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# Thanks

The news report announced another earthquake centred just off the coast of Bengkulu. I waited several hours, then dialled Pak Taher's mobile phone. "Ibu Jill, where are you? Are you coming back to see us again?" "Not yet, Pak. I was just wondering if you are all OK. We've had reports of a big earthquake." "We're fine, no problems."

At times this research project has consumed my life - house cleaning suffered badly, we ate scrambled eggs more than ever before, and our joint study is cluttered with research notes, books and draft copies layered from floor to desk height in an arc around my computer. Entertaining and visiting were curtailed dramatically while this has been a work in progress for almost four years.

Some significant people have supported me through this learning experience:

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Brad and Sherri with Bijou and Jules and Sara, with Grace and Bailey: What a privilege to be encouraged by your sons and their families to press on for the goal, even when that means less help with their own young families. *The baby sitting calendar is now wide open!*

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