

I have yet to come across Kadazan and Dusun dragon tales, where they seem to be scarce (even though the Dusun do have a word for dragon, *toboukar*); however, the Rungus are very much acquainted with dragons, who are some kind of 'tuan', that is masters. "The dragons are the real masters of the Chinese," the Rungus know.

Dragons are everywhere, especially in mountains, and hills, where other spirits live. Only recently (June 2000) two children and an old man near Kampung Muhang (Terengai Laut) sighted a dragon as it made its way down to the sea. It was during a stormy and rainy night, as dragons only leave their hideout during such weather. Lightning is also important.

The dragon the three saw looked like an enormous, black snake with horns on its head. It came from the hills and followed the river, bringing with it a strong current and floods. Sometimes dragons make their way to the sea very much like earth worms, digging through the soil. But since they are much bigger, they leave havoc in their path.

The dragon that passed the area of Muhang followed the river, widening and deepening it in many places (isn't the Mekong River too the result of a dragon on its way to the sea?). Fact: the night of the sighting was indeed accompanied by a very strong thunderstorm, and the main river in the valley overflowed...

When the Rungus see a dragon, they should ask it for one of its scales, with the following formula: „Antad po guldu ainsan tikan ki'mot. Baai ko totongonon kodo tulun. Mokiaanu kudikau do sisinu, Aki.“ A translation would render the sense of the formula thus: „Dragon (Aki – Grandfather, a title of respect), as long as I have lived, I have never seen one of you. It is only through stories that I know about you. Please give me one of your scales!“ To those who ask the dragon will grant a scale, which will make the bearer invulnerable, very much like the dragon is itself invulnerable too (in German mythology, Sigfried bathed in the blood of the dragon he slew – dragons are vulnerable after all – and became invulnerable). In the area of Muhang there is an old man who is in possession of a dragon scale, and apparently he is, despite his age, of perfect health and, people claim, invulnerable.

The Rungus know about the origin of dragons: they come from the sky, where there is another world we cannot see. There they are born. They will descend to earth and look for some place to sleep and grow strong. The dragons acquire power as they grow, but they do it in their sleep. Contrary to medieval stories of terror and fright, 'Rungus Dragons' hide peacefully, and are generally only seen when they are big and leave for the sea, from where they go back to their world in the sky, beyond the clouds.

When they erect themselves, Dragons are somewhat taller than coconut trees. They do that before they disappear into their world, and with such an awesome spectacle in view, most people forget to ask the dragon for the coveted scale.

However, even if one forgets to ask for a scale, the sight of a dragon is a good omen, and always followed by good fortune in the future. People who

have seen a dragon usually 'make it' in their life. They are rich, perhaps not with superfluous money, but they will be able to have a boat, a nice house, a lot of gongs, and always enough to eat.

There are no specific appeasing ceremonies with regards to dragons, which might be due to the fact that they are real in the understanding of the Rungus. Offerings are being brought to the spiritual world and its inhabitants, in order to be able to profit of their services. However, during the Moginum Ceremony, when all the spirits will be given offerings, a part of sacrifices will be vowed to the dragons.

#### A Short Story on Dragons

Once upon a time there was a rich Rungus. He had a lot of gold and precious heirloom. He also had a little pet-dragon, very much like other people have dogs or cats. One day, the rich man wanted to go travelling, but he feared that while he was a way, someone might steal his treasured possessions. Finally he decided to hide them in a cave. To make sure nobody would go and steal anything from the cave he told his pet dragon to watch over the treasure and scorch everybody with his fire, should anybody approach.

After many, many years, the rich Rungus was already married and had grown up children. One day he decided that it was time to get his riches back and distribute them amongst his children. He went to the cave, where he hid the gold, but as he approached he saw himself confronted with a fiercely fire-spitting dragon. No imploring and no explanation could move the dragon to let the old man in. The dragon was now grown up, and only remembered his mission: to guard the treasure and not to let anybody near it.

There was no way to get to the treasure. The rich man employed men from far and near, promised them huge rewards, even his daughter, but nobody could overcome the dragon. In the end, there was nobody left who would dare to approach the dragon, despite the promised rewards.

But there was one single man left. He was thin and fragile, without any particular skill, and generally made the people laugh. He was known as the Joker. One day he approached the rich man and assured him that he would get the treasure back. „But, do you have any experience, or any mystical power to protect yourself?“ the rich man enquired. The only answer the Joker had was 'no'.

Nevertheless, he went about to get the treasure. First, he went hunting, and he killed a great deal of swallows, the dragon's favourite food. He roasted them and then went to the hide-

out of the dragon.

You must understand that dragons are not the furious creatures we are often made to believe, of course, they are huge and look fearsome, and they can spit fire and are invulnerable. But they also can listen, and if you bring a present to a dragon, like his favourite food, the dragon will be greatly happy. Yes, you even can become the dragon's friend, and that is a very useful friendship.

As the Joker approached the cave, the dragon sensed someone coming, and he came out. He expected someone to come because of the gold, and he snorted annoyingly, exhaling hot fumes. „What do you want?“ the dragon asked the Joker sternly. „I have brought you something to eat. You haven't eaten in a long time!“ the Joker replied innocently. „That is right,“ admitted the dragon, and they sat down together to eat the swallows. „Now, don't you want to go for a walk?“ the Joker asked after the meal, „it is so long since you have had an opportunity to leave this cave and have a look around.“ „That is only too true,“ uttered the dragon, but then he considered: „but while I am away, won't you take my gold?“ „Never!“ swore the Joker, „Aren't we friends already? I have brought you food! I will take care over the treasure while you are away. You won't be away long anyway, will you?“ This sounded very logical to the dragon, and off he went for a walk, not without a threat though: „If you steal the gold, I will kill you!“ „Don't worry,“ the Joker replied, but as soon as the dragon was out of sight, he entered the cave and emptied it, and carried the treasure to the rich man.

The people of the village were of course very much astonished. How could this fragile, powerless Joker possibly have taken the treasure without killing the dragon? Then, a big fear overcame them: the dragon would certainly come and avenge this deed, and kill everybody.

However, the Joker was without concern. He went back to the cave to wait for the dragon. When the snake came back from its walk, and saw that its treasure was gone, it wanted to kill the Joker. „Wait a minute, dragon,“ the Joker exclaimed, „I have just taken a massive burden from you! What were you doing all your life? You were guarding a treasure that was not even yours. Have you ever had the possibility to go out? I have just set you free, you are a free dragon now! Besides, I only have brought the treasure back to its rightful owner.“

A dragon might be strong and powerful, but they are, with all due respect, also a bit dull in their mind. Dragons have a tendency of hitting first, and then thinking – if at all. But after the Joker's speech, the dragon started considering the facts. Yes, he was indeed free, now he finally could do whatever he wanted! In the end, the dragon thanked the Joker very sincerely. The both became even very good friends. The Joker married the daughter of the rich man, and together they lived a happy life. And whenever the Joker was in danger, his friend, the dragon, would come and help him.

by HERMAN SCHOLZ, The Flying Dusun

# DRAGONS

## Myths & legends about dragons in Sabah

