

## PROGRAMME

3.00 pm – 3.10 pm	Introduction by moderator & welcoming remarks:
3.10 pm – 4.10 pm	Seminar by Dr. Elena Gregoria Chai Chin Fern
4.10 pm – 5.00 pm	Q & A Session Closing

### About KITA Discourse Series

KITA Discourse Series provides a platform for interested scholars and graduate students to present his or her ideas on any social issues pertaining to ethnicity which may be subsequently published in UKM Ethnic Studies Paper Series. For further information, please email [rachelchansuetkay@ukm.edu.my](mailto:rachelchansuetkay@ukm.edu.my).



**KITA**  
INSTITUT KAJIAN ETNIK  
INSTITUTE OF ETHNIC STUDIES

## KITA Discourse Series 6/2023

### *Living Together: Spirit 'Guardians' and People in Singkawang*

#### Presenter:

**Dr. Elena Gregoria Chai Chin Fern**

Head of Section for Arts, Culture and Heritage,

Ministry of Tourism, Creative Industry and Performing Arts Sarawak

**4th August 2023 (Friday)**

**3.00 pm – 5.00 pm**

**KITA Meeting Room,  
Level 4, Kolej Keris Mas,  
UKM**

**This seminar will be  
broadcasted via: Zoom  
& KITA Facebook  
Live**

## ABSTRACT

*Sebelum ada agama, adat sudah wujud ('Before religion, there was tradition') is an expression commonly heard among traditional medical practitioners in Singkawang, West Kalimantan. This saying hinges on the belief in penunggu, or 'guardians'. Locals from different ethnicities – Chinese, Dayak and Malay – believe in the presence of penunggu in their surroundings. If these spiritual beings are disturbed, they will cause sickness or discomfort. To appease penunggu and cure sickness, the help of tatung or spirit mediums is called upon. Tatung, through the passage of spirits into their bodies, cure sickness and negotiate ways to bring about a peaceful relationship between penunggu and people. This paper looks at the relationship between these spirits of nature and humans.*

## PRESENTER'S PROFILE



**Elena Chai** is a senior lecturer at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UNIMAS. She is currently seconded to the Ministry of Tourism, Creative Industry and Performing Arts Sarawak. She heads the Arts, Culture and Heritage Section of the ministry.

She received her doctorate degree in Area Studies from the Institute of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. Her

doctorate thesis was about marriage rituals and identity of the Chinese Hakka in Sarawak, East Malaysia. She wrote her Master dissertation based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Houayxai, northern Laos, on Vietnamese Lao community and Identity through Soul Calling Ceremony. She also conducted fieldwork in Laos, namely Paksan (central Laos) and Vieng Chan (capital) for soul calling ceremony known as Soukhuan.

Dr Elena has conducted various international research projects such as temple research funded by Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation (Taiwan) for International Scholarly Exchange; Hakka studies in Borneo Sarawak by National Tsing Hua University of Taiwan; Social Transformation in Borneo funded by One Belt One Road Program of Beijing Foreign Studies University; Social Changes studies with Japanese researchers funded by Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), and a few others related to social changes, identity of multiethnic society. For national and local grants, Dr Elena is engaged actively as the head of a disaster studies project funded by Ministry of Higher Education (FRGS grant). Her present studies include empowering local communities with their intangible heritage and indigenous knowledge. She has a few ongoing projects such as the Sarawak Tua Pek Kong Heritage and Fort Trail of Sarawak.

Heritage to Dr Elena is a treasure that belongs to the people which must be protected and identified. Heritage bonds people with their past and gives them a sense of 'place' within the present 'time'. It will bring them to a future with pride and confidence if the importance of heritage is properly instilled. Thus, heritage awareness must be promoted throughout the country.

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