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LOBANG KUDIH: The excavation of a Ming Period burial cave, near Beluru, Miri Division, within the Baram basin

Charmian C. Woodfield

SUMMARY (CW)

This report covers the total excavation of a 'burial' cave near Beluru, in the Miri Division of Sarawak [Figs. 1 and 2]. It was excavated as it was threatened by quarrying activities, and the breakdown of *adat* due to a change of population, which had hitherto preserved it from damage.

The cave is high above a river, in a limestone outcrop [Figs. 3, 4 and Plate IX]. It contained the remains of some 170-180 persons of mixed sex and age, accompanied by grave goods in the form of personal effects and pottery, together with evidence of ceremonies in the form of dog and pig mandibles [Figs. 5-24, and Plates XI-XIII].

The date of deposition has not been scientifically established, and is based on the notoriously difficult to date imported south Chinese and Thai ceramics, but its estimated date is within the early Ming period, 1300-1500, with slight evidence of added offerings to c. 1600. The people are locally claimed to be the ancestors of the settled Punan Bah still living in the area, since c. 1910 as Muslims. However, certain features are characteristic of other peoples, such as the Kedayans and Kenyahs.

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Significance

This is the only significant site so far known of archaeological value between the Subis/Niah complex (48 km to the W) and Kota Batu in Brunei (150 km NE), with the exception of Bukit Kubor, near Miri and Lobang Angin (Fig. 1). It is c. 40 km inland from the sea,

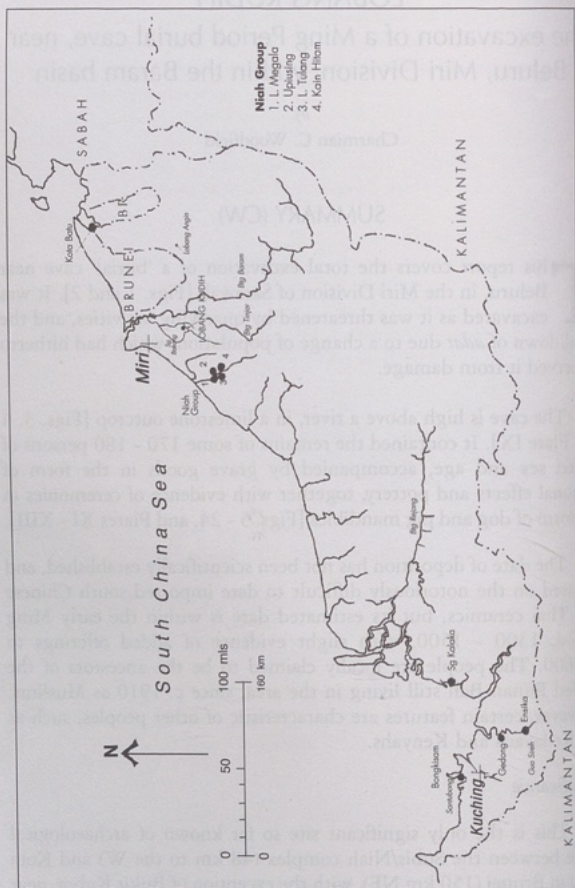


Fig. 1: Sarawak; Lobang Kudih and comparable archaeological sites.

isolated in swamp forest. Limestone outcrops are most unusual here, thus it is a very important window on this large area at a given point in history.

The cave, approximately 37.2 m² (400 sq. ft.) in area, was completely excavated, thus this report is as comprehensive as it could be, given the fact that modern disturbance had already taken place. It was not 'contaminated' by earlier human occupation, and appeared to have been little disturbed by human intrusion since the last interment, until recent vandalism, thus it is a time capsule of its own, an opportunity to see both pottery, small finds and the remains of people and animal offerings in context, representative of the life in this part of Sarawak in the 13th - 16th centuries. A close association with sites at Niah has emerged.

The report has not been 'cherrypicked' or items seemingly commonplace to the excavators edited out. This comprehensive approach, which has rarely been adopted in the history of Sarawak archaeology, may provide a way forward to a better understanding of archaeological sites in the country. The principle adopted is to present the information in such a way that it could be re-interpreted at any time in the future, following the normal scientific method.

A number of questions remain. If the cave is indeed the funerary repository of the Punan, as originally anticipated, then why are they so apparently rich in material wealth, reflected in the number of imported Chinese pots and jars, whilst having hardly any native pottery? [Fig. 17]. If they had been nomadic then would the deposit represent various phases or seasons of deposition – although no evidence for this was recovered? And to own domestic pigs strongly suggests that they were settled. To obtain alien ceramics, they must have been trading *ulu* products, more so swamp forest products. What were these?

This report was originally submitted for publication in *JMBRAS* Vol. 45, Pt. 2 in 1973, the authors believing it would not be accepted by the then editorship of the *SMJ*. Most unfortunately the completed drawings were lost or misappropriated after being

received safely by the Royal Asiatic Society in Kuala Lumpur, and it has not been possible until now to re-visit the finds and to reassemble the report. It is sincerely hoped that the intervening 40 years has not in any way diminished the value of the report and its conclusions.

INTRODUCTION

Geographical Description

The cave under consideration in this paper lies some 9 km (5.6 miles) above Beluru on the Sg. Bakong, a tributary of the Batang Baram, at coordinate $3^{\circ} 59' 20''$ N and $114^{\circ} 9' 50''$ E. Access is gained by *perahu* along a small balancing river, the Sg. Terus, to where a discontinuous ridge of limestone protrudes above the extensive swamp forest of this region (Fig. 2). Caves formed by both leaching and running water occur in this formation and are noted by the Geological Survey (Haile, 1961: fig. 64, Pl. 9). The limestone outcrop occurs in the Lambir formation [La], in a coralline crescent, approximately 4 km (2.5 miles) in diameter, and is of the Middle/Later Miocene date. It consists of generally pure dolomite and dolomitic limestone. As a result of the geological survey, an attempt was being made at the time to utilise the Kudih hill deposit for roadstone, thus creating a threat to the cave's long term survival.

A total of three groups of caves occur in this particular outcrop, (Fig. 2, G1, G2 and G3) of which Lobang Kudih is in the most eastern group. A further cave group is known in the southern limb of the crescent, accessible from the Sg. Urong (Group 2), and a further cave in the western arm (Group 3) is accessible only from the headwaters of the Sg. Lapan. The caves of Kudih are recorded as having been visited by Dato A.R.G. Morrison in 1953, as District Officer for the Baram, who collected some broken material from (Gua) Lobang Kudih, and sent it to the Sarawak Museum, and again by R. Nyandoh, for the Sarawak Museum in about 1956 when despite damage, some unbroken jars were recorded. Nyandoh reported that the local Iban said that burial jars were standing visibly in the cave windows 'during the Japanese War'. Kudih, or Kudi', is

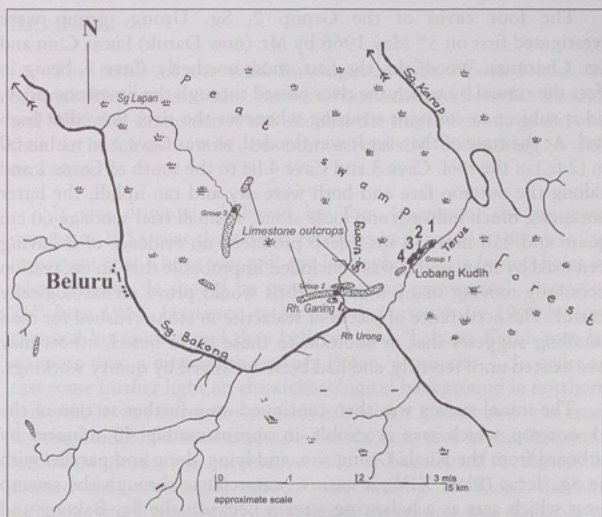


Fig. 2: The Beluru area, Miri Division, showing limestone outcrops and caves.

an Iban word, indicating a violent storm brought about by a violation of some taboo (Sutlive, 1994); in this case, it is said that the limestone ridge was once a longhouse, whose inhabitants had defied tradition by laughing at animals, and thus, by a strike of lightning, their house was turned to stone. It is also said that the unusual balancing river, the Sg. Terus, whose waters flow both ways at different times, was caused by the flooding of a sunken trackway formed by pigs running between the two river systems. Another story describes how the local people, angered by severe taxes and oppression, sent a carefully wrapped pig's head to the Sultan of Brunei, with instructions that it should be unwrapped when at prayer in the mosque. This blasphemy angered the sultan and he created a herd of pigs which he sent in revenge to harass the local Punan. It is their passage backwards and forwards to Brunei that created the Sg. Terus.