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DISCOVERY OF THE MONUMENT AND HERITAGE SITES IN NANGA PUTAI, BALEH, KAPIT

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to record and document the monuments and heritage sites found within the Baleh Hydroelectric Dam Project, specifically the archaeological site, the ancient Iban cemetery, and the Iban earthen crocodile effigies (baya tanah). It also sought to record the surrounding communities' oral histories and the rituals carried out by the Baleh Iban communities. In accordance with the Cultural Heritage Management Plan, an archaeological survey was carried out at an archaeological site in late 1974 to conserve and preserve the site. In order to locate and examine the abandoned sites, a survey was carried out using test-pit excavation and archaeological records dating back to 1974. Based on the study's findings, the Iban communities in Putai have abandoned their long-standing tradition of building earthen effigies of crocodiles. They also began to recognize and cherish old sites' historical and cultural significance.

Keywords: earthen crocodile effigies, archaeology, ancient tradition, culture, heritage



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INTRODUCTION

The Baleh Hydroelectric Dam Project under the Ministry of Utility and Telecommunication is implemented by Sarawak Energy Berhad, and supervised by the Economic Planning Unit. The Sarawak Museum Department is indirectly involved in the project by establishing the Cultural Heritage Management Plan, which focuses on conserving and preserving monuments and heritage sites around the dam. The Cultural Heritage Management Plan also includes conducting archaeological surveys and documenting the oral histories of the local communities.

Several monuments and heritage sites have been identified within the project's area, namely:

1. The ancient cemetery of the Iban community
2. Archaeological sites
3. Iban's earthen crocodile effigies (*baya tanah*)

A social-environmental impact assessment has been carried out on all these sites. The next phase is conservation and preservation work to keep the monuments and sites intact during dam construction. The survey and awareness program were carried out on March 21st, 2023. It involved a team from the Sarawak Museum Department (SMD), Sarawak Energy Berhad (SEB), Kapit Resident Office, the District Office of Bukit Mabong, the Chief Community Officer and Head of Bukit Mabong, and the local communities of Nanga Antawau, Baleh, Kapit.

As a continuation of the program, the SMD team has conducted another site visit from January 20th to January 24th, 2024, at Nanga Putai, Baleh. The purpose of the visit was to document the *miring* ceremony led by residents from the longhouse in Nanga Antawau, Baleh, before the maintenance and conservation works on the above site are carried out. It will then be gazetted as a monument and heritage site.

The sections involved in the Sarawak Museum Department are the Monument and Site Conservation Section and the Enforcement Section, in collaboration with the Central Zone Regional Office.

Hitherto, the Cultural Heritage Management Plan has achieved its results, in which Sarawak Energy Berhad has moved some of the old Iban cemeteries per the established guidelines. Improving the restoration of monuments and heritage sites is still ongoing. Once completed, the monument and site can be used as one of the Heritage Trails on Baleh's hydroelectric dam. The completion of the project is expected to attract tourists and promote the cultural significance of the region.

HISTORY OF THE CROCODILE EFFIGIES AT THE SITES OF NANGA PUTAI, ULU BALEH KAPIT

From 2008 to 2013, the Sarawak Museum Department staff, led by the then Director of SMD, Mr. Ipoi Datan, carried out several survey works on the earthen crocodile effigies in the Iban areas of different regions in Sarawak. In 2011, Ulu Baleh was identified and documented during the survey work on the crocodile site at Nanga Putai. Based on the report stated in the Sarawak Museum Journal (SMJ), a pair of crocodile effigies were discovered in 1974 by Robert Nyandoh and Lucas Chin during the excavation works. This discovery sparked a renewed interest in understanding the ancient history of Sarawak (Datan *et al.*, 2012).

In the finding, the local informants said that the pair of effigies were likely made by an earlier inhabitant, *Kayan* (Lugab), who had moved away from the area. However, during the survey work conducted in 2011, the headman (*Tuai Rumah*) Nabau anak Tutong of Rumah Antawau, located about 20 minutes downriver by boat, informed us that the effigies were made by the people of his longhouse in 1954. He was personally involved in constructing the effigies, which were used in the *Mali Umai* ritual. The effigies were measured between 7.54 and 7.47 metres long and 1.4 and 1.26 metres wide. Sherds of white and blue porcelain were used as their scales, while river pebbles were placed as part of the body and tail sections (Datan *et al.*, 2012).

The crocodile effigies located at Nanga Putai and Ulu Baleh Kapit site represent Iban beliefs and traditions. These effigies serve as a testament to the richness of the culture in Sarawak.



Figure 1: The two crocodile effigies situated at Nanga Putai, Ulu Baleh, when first inspected in 1974. (Source: Datan, I. (2022). *The Earthen Crocodile Effigies of the Lun Bawang and Iban of Sarawak: An Ethno-Archaeological Study*)



Figure 2: The two crocodile effigies located at Nanga Putai, Ulu Baleh, Kapit during survey work in 2011. (Photo taken by Nicholas Daby in 2011)



Figure 3: The two crocodile effigies at Nanga Putai, Ulu Baleh, Kapit after the conservation works were done on January 23rd, 2024. (Photo taken by Seellren Anthony in 2024)