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THE CULTURED RAINFOREST PROJECT: THE SECOND (2008) FIELD SEASON

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ABSTRACT

The paper describes the second season of fieldwork in the Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak, East Malaysia, by the Cultured Rainforest Project, a team of anthropologists, archaeologists, and geographers investigating the long-term and present-day interactions between people (Penan hunter-gatherers and Kelabit farmers) and rainforest. Further data have been gathered about Penan and Kelabit genealogies, settlement histories, attitudes to forest spirits, and on the complicated ways in which the acquisition, use, and discard of material culture, including plants, mediates relations between people and forest, and between people. The archaeological fieldwork concentrated on further investigations of settlement and cemetery sites shown to be promising in the 2007 exploratory fieldwork. At Long Kelit in the Upper Kelapang valley, geophysical survey, complemented by excavation, revealed a pre-modern longhouse at Ruma Ma'on Dakah and an adjacent palisaded enclosure (Ruma Ma'on Taa Payo) likely to date to the first millennium AD and of a form for which there are no contemporary or recent (historically- or orally-documented) analogues. Excavation also demonstrated the complex construction and use history of a perupun or ceremonial stone mound at Long Kelit and of a megalithic stone jar cemetery at nearby Menatoh Long Diit used by Kelabit in living memory as well as in an earlier, pre-recorded, past. Palaeoenvironmental fieldwork established a preliminary geomorphological framework of landforms and their likely relationships to land use histories being constructed from pollencores.

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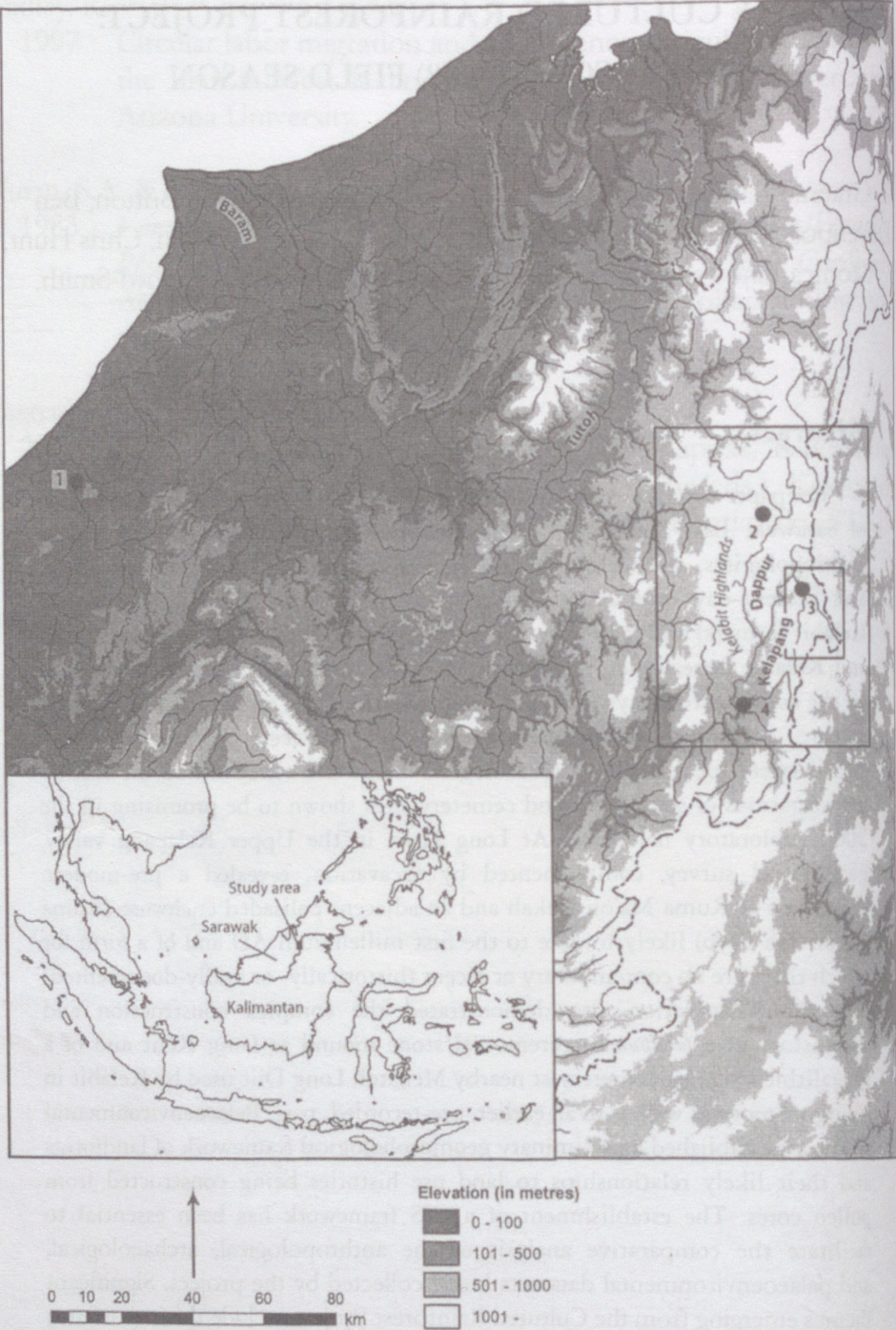


Fig. 1: Sarawak and the Kelabit Highlands, showing the principal locations mentioned in the text. Numbered sites: 1. Niah Caves; 2. Bario; 3. Pa' Dalih; 4. Long Peluan. See Fig. 3 for a detailed location map of the Southern Highlands. (Illustration L. Farr)

INTRODUCTION (GB)

New notions of social ecology and landscape history critique the traditional divisions between nature and culture, and emphasise instead the mutual shaping of people and their physical world. Taking such a perspective, the Cultured Rainforest Project (CRP) is attempting to chart the long-term and present-day interactions between people and rainforest in the Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak, so as to better understand past and present agricultural and hunter-gatherer lifestyles and landscapes. To realise this objective, the project is applying an interdisciplinary methodology, using anthropology and ethnobotany to explore human ecological relations today and in the recent past, and archaeology and palaeoecology to establish sequences of long-term landscape change. The overarching goal of the project is to provide a robust case study about the time-depth and complexity of human interactions with rainforest in Southeast Asia that will be of utility for modelling future human-rainforest interactions. This paper presents the results of the second season of fieldwork (Fig. 1).

As described by Barker *et al.* (2008), the anthropological fieldwork in the first season of fieldwork (June/July 2007) focussed on three activities: constructing Kelabit genealogies; identifying 'focal' and 'apical' ancestors, and gathering stories about them; and gathering stories, perceptions, and beliefs about Kelabit and Penan relationships with the natural environment. The archaeological fieldwork was able to establish the range of archaeological sites and monuments in the southern Highlands, concentrating on the catchment of the upper Kelapang river, in the environs of the modern settlement of Pa' Dalih. In total, eighteen archaeological features or structures were investigated at thirteen site locations, most of them with test excavations: rock shelters; settlement and 'settlement-like' sites; megalithic sites; ditch cuttings; and stone jar and 'Dragon Jar' cemeteries. The palaeoecological fieldwork obtained a series of sediment cores, including a 4 m core in peat swamp near Bario in the northern Highlands and shorter cores in fallow wet-rice fields in the southern Highlands. Radiocarbon dates subsequently obtained from the archaeological sites and pollen cores hint at human occupation in the Kelapang valley stretching back far earlier than the Metal Age, the earliest date from an archaeological context being from a buried soil horizon at the riverside settlement of Ruma Ma'on Dakah, of 3770 ± 40 BP or 2310-2030 cal. BC (Beta-237849). Further dates indicated settlement in the