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THE CULTURED RAINFOREST PROJECT: THE FIRST (2007) FIELD SEASON

Graeme Barker, Huw Barton, Daniel Britton, Ipoi Datan, Davenport, Monica Janowski, Samantha Jones, Jayl Langub, Lindsay Lloyd-Smith, Borbála Nyíri and Beth Upex

ABSTRACT

The paper describes the first season of fieldwork by a team of anthropologists, archaeologists, and geographers investigating the long-term and present-day interactions between people and rainforest in the Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak, East Malaysia. The anthropological fieldwork focused on the collection of genealogies and ethnohistories in Pa' Dalih, including the identification of 'apical' (primary) ancestors and stories about them, and on gathering data on Kelabit and Penan perceptions and beliefs of their environment. Anthropological fieldwork was closely coordinated with the archaeological fieldwork carried out during the field season, which allowed for informative discussion with locals about finds, aiding identification of artefacts and anthropogenic features of the landscape. It was also possible to record the ways in which people re-engaged with this now archaeological material culture. Some early key findings include the fact that both the Kelabit and the Penan see forest spirits as protectors of the forest environment that will punish humans who harm it; and new data on the pre-Christian burial of the dead. A range of archaeological sites was surveyed and test excavated, including rock shelters, historically-recent settlement sites, megalithic sites, and Dragon Jar cemeteries. Cores for sedimentological and palynological analysis were taken in peat sequences in the northern and southern Highlands. Radiocarbon dates from the archaeological sites and pollen cores hint at settlement in the Kelapang valley stretching far beyond the Metal Age, and further evidence in the later first millennium AD, with widespread evidence for riverside settlement and agriculture through the past 500 years, and for ridge-top settlement through the same period, considerably earlier than reliably predicted by folk memory. Excavations also enable a tentative sequence to be proposed for various forms of megalithic site, with stone jar sites probably amongst the oldest, followed by slab-cist structures.

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Ceremonial stone mounds (perupun) continued to be made until the early 20th century for the disposal of valuables by childless individuals, but early examples, which may have had different functions, are likely to pre-date standing stones. Perupun are often associated with Dragon Jars cemeteries that date from the 17th century AD onwards.

INTRODUCTION (GB)

We present here the initial findings of the first season of fieldwork (June and July 2007) by an interdisciplinary team of anthropologists, archaeologists, and palaeoecologists investigating the long-term and present-day interactions between people and rainforest in the Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak, East Malaysia (Fig. 1). The fieldwork initiated a project entitled 'The Cultured Rainforest: long-term human ecological histories in the highlands of Borneo' that was selected for funding in 2006 by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council within their 'Landscape and Environment' strategic programme. Past theories of landscape have often made a separation between people and their physical environment, but one component of the AHRC Landscape and Environment programme is an interest in new notions of 'social ecology' that aim to break down and understand the divisions made by many societies between culture and nature, and concentrate instead on the mutual shaping of people and the physical world. Within this research agenda, in which 'landscape' encompasses the relations between human beings, other life forms, and the land itself, the Cultured Rainforest Project aims to investigate long-term and present-day interactions between people and rainforest in interior Borneo. Rainforests are commonly imagined as pristine environments which have survived for millions of years and which are relatively untouched by human intervention, but recent work in Amazonia, Southeast Asia, and Australasia has demonstrated that humans are a vital and dynamic element of rainforest ecologies, and have been so for tens of thousands of years. In the case of Borneo, archaeological research at Niah Cave on the coastal lowlands of Sarawak has found evidence of forest burning, sophisticated hunting practices, and plant manipulation, as far back as the first modern humans using the cave

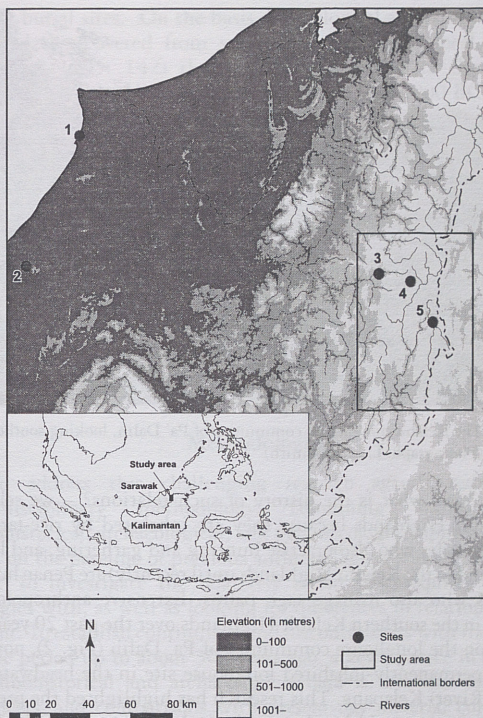


Fig. 1: The Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak, showing major sites and locations mentioned in the text: 1. Miri; 2. Niah Caves; 3. Kubaan; 4. Bario; 5. Pa' Dalih. (Illustration: L. Farr)

at least 45,000 years ago (Barker *et al.*, 2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2007).

Given our central research questions – how do people living in rainforest environments act in and think about the world in which

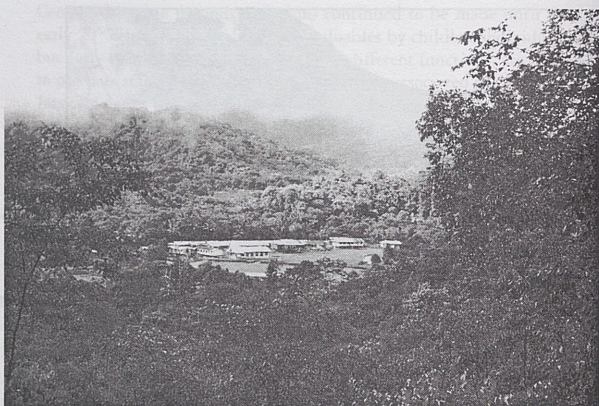


Fig. 2: The Kelabit 'longhouse' community of Pa' Dalih, looking southeast.
(Photograph: L. Lloyd-Smith)

they live, and what is the history of such relations? – we selected the Kelabit Highlands because they are inhabited by rice-farming Kelabit peoples who also practise hunting and gathering, and living nearby (and in the Kelabit Highlands until recently) are Penan hunter-gatherers who also manage sago palms. Extensive anthropological research in the southern Kelabit Highlands over the past 20 years has focused on the longhouse community of Pa' Dalih (Fig. 2), now the farthest permanently-inhabited longhouse site in the headwaters of the Pa' (River) Kelapang. This research has highlighted the present-day and recent practical and cosmological significance of the forest and mountains for Kelabit farmers, and of the transformation of the forest into rice fields (Janowski, 2003a). The ethnohistory of the Penan has been comparatively well studied (Sellato, 1994), but little is known about the ethnohistory of the Penan living in and around the Kelabit Highlands, nor on how they construct and imagine their landscape.

The region is comparatively rich in archaeological monuments such as 'megalithic' stone structures, rock carvings, stone mounds,

and jar burial sites. On the basis of typological analysis of polished stone adzes recovered from subsurface deposits by local farmers, Harrison (1965: 142) thought that occupation of the Kelabit Highlands could well have dated back to at least 5000 BC, though in reality the antiquity of rainforest habitation by hunter-gatherers and/or farmers in this region is unknown. Given this platform of past research, we reasoned, the Kelabit Highlands appeared to be an ideal study area in which to attempt to chart the continuities and discontinuities between the ways in which present-day hunter-gatherers and farmers 'construct' and 'imagine' their relationship with rainforest, as well as use it to extract their livelihood, and the ways in which their ancestors and predecessors did. Drawing on a range of disciplinary perspectives, and in ways which take seriously Kelabit and Penan philosophies and cosmologies, can we construct a series of histories in central Borneo from life in the present back to when people first entered the region?

Methodologies

To address this challenging research agenda requires an inter-disciplinary methodology, combining anthropological, ethnohistorical, archaeological, and palaeoecological approaches that build on the baseline of previous anthropological and archaeological work. To investigate the relatively recent past requires drawing analogies with, as well as looking for differences in relations to, the present. To establish continuities and discontinuities with the present for the period up to about 300 years ago, a key resource in addition to ethnohistorical and archaeological data is museum collections of objects, and comparisons with present-day material culture. As we look further back into the past we will be ever more reliant on archaeology and palaeoecology. A critical tool within the latter is palynology or pollen analysis, as the fossil pollen in sediment cores, together with other plant microfossils such as silicate phytoliths, has the potential to reveal the development of the forest not only in response to factors such as climate change but also in terms of 'anthropogenic' factors such as burning and clearance by hunter-gatherers or agriculturalists. To link these records with the present, investigations of 'recent archaeology' (abandoned structures used in