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LUN BAWANG AND KELABIT POTTERIES OF SARAWAK

Suresh Narayanan and Stephen Chia

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, an ethnographic study of the Lun Bawang and Kelabit potteries in Sarawak was undertaken by the authors and staff of the Centre for Global Archaeological Research (CGAR), Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang and the Sarawak Museum Department, Kuching in the district of Lawas and the Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak (Fig. 1). The primary objective of the study is to locate the few remaining Lun Bawang and Kelabit potters in these regions in order to gather data and information on traditional pottery technology, types and functions. It is also hoped that the findings of the study can provide some useful insights into the connections between the past and present pottery-making traditions in Sarawak.

The Lun Bawang and Kelabit potteries have been studied since the mid-1950s by a number of researchers such as Harrisson (1955), Morrison (1955) and Janowski (1991). Harrisson's (1955: 301) work, however, was focussed mainly on the distribution and general characteristics of native pottery in Sarawak and Sabah. He made brief mentions of the possible links between the traditional and prehistoric pottery of Borneo. Morrison (1955) reported briefly on the Lun Bawang pottery-making in Ba' Kelalan, Lawas. Between 1986 and 1988, Janowski (1991) studied and reported in detail about the Kelabit pottery-making at the village of Pa' Dalih in the Kelabit Highlands. Although these previous studies have provided useful records of traditional pottery-making of the Lun Bawang and Kelabit, they are too brief and not comprehensive enough for understanding the traditional pottery-making of Sarawak. This study is therefore an attempt to fill the gaps in knowledge about the traditional pottery-making of the Lun Bawang and Kelabit which is now a dying tradition.

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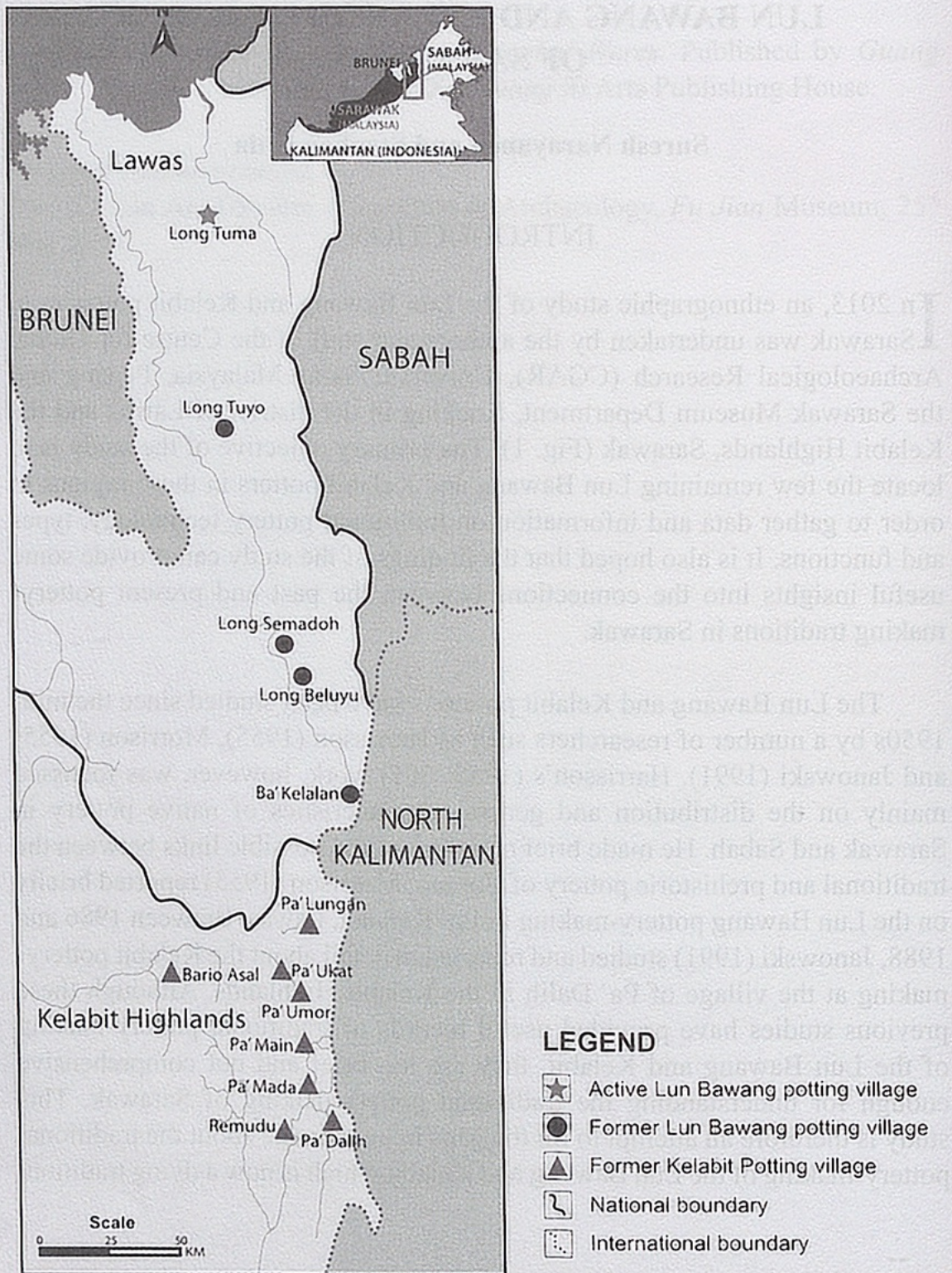


Fig. 1: Distribution of former and present Lun Bawang and Kelabit potting villages in Lawas, Ba' Kelalan and the Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak.

THE FIELDWORK

Two seasons of ethnographic fieldwork were undertaken in 2013. The first season of fieldwork was done in Lawas for one week in July 2013 while the second season was carried out in the Kelabit Highlands for about 10 days in October 2013. In Lawas, the fieldwork was mainly concentrated on Ba' Kelalan and other potting villages located in the southern part of Lawas town. These villages include Long Langai, Buduk Bui and Buduk Nur in Ba' Kelalan as well as Long Tuma and Long Beluyu in the Lawas District. The ethnographic surveys were done with the assistance of Mr. Sigar Datan, the headman of Kampung Natad Musu, five kilometres from Lawas.

The ethnographic fieldwork in the Kelabit Highlands was mainly focused on the eastern and southern areas of the Bario town. Six potting villages, namely Pa' Umor, Pa' Ukat, Bario Asal, Pa' Remudu, Pa' Dalih and Pa' Mada, were surveyed with the help of our local guide from Bario, Mr. Lian Terawe. The former potters at these villages were interviewed in order to collect data on pottery technology, types and functions. Some of these potters also demonstrated to us the process of traditional pottery-making which we documented.

The following discusses the findings of the ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the district of Lawas, Ba' Kelalan and the Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak in 2013.

RESULTS OF STUDY

The ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in the district of Lawas and the Kelabit Highlands revealed that the Lun Bawang and Kelabit people no longer make traditional pottery. All the potting villages in Ba' Kelalan and Lawas had practically stopped producing pottery since the 1960s. These villages include some of the well-known potting villages in Ba' Kelalan such as Long Langai, Buduk Bui and Buduk Nur as well as those situated north of Trusan in Lawas such as Long Semadoh, Long Tuyu, Long Tuma and Long Beluyu. At present, there is only one local craft-making centre in Long Tuma (lat. 04°48. 141' North and long. 115°24. 514' East, 885 metres above sea level), located about six kilometres from Lawas town which is still producing miniatures *kuden* and *tuning* pottery for sale to the local and foreign tourists. The owner of this craft-making centre, Litad bt. Mulok and her assistant, Lieksie Asin, kindly demonstrated the traditional way of Lun Bawang pottery-making.