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### THE LIVING KELABIT LANDSCAPE: CULTURAL SITES AND LANDSCAPE MODIFICATIONS IN THE KELABIT HIGHLANDS OF SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

Sarah Hitchner

#### ABSTRACT

Although the area of the Kelabit Highlands is relatively small in size (~2500 km<sup>2</sup>) and the population of the Kelabit people living in the Kelabit Highlands is also relatively small (~1500), this landscape is highly anthropogenic and contains a substantial number of megaliths, landscape modifications, and other cultural sites. In the mid-1950s, Tom Harrisson (1954: 107) said that "no other Bornean people (as far as we know) have such an active megalithic life today or in the recent past. In- deed the whole area is rich with a vigorous mythology of culture heroes and monsters and with complicated social competition and material exchange, centered on the inheritance priorities of those who pay for the monuments, which are superficially no more than 'loving reminders' of the late great." He was the first Westerner to systematically study (and often excavate) these cultural sites, and he published widely on his findings in *The Sarawak Museum Journal*. Many Kelabit living today know which sites he visited (as is sometimes visually obvious when visiting the sites today by the excavation pits near burials, under erected stones, or within rock piles), and often, with a tinge of resentment, they know which artefacts he took from them. Since then, Kelabit have had a wary approach to foreign researchers, quite a number of whom have expressed interest in studying various aspects of the culture and ecology of the Kelabit Highlands (see Bala, 2002: 2-7). The community has had mixed experiences with them since Tom Harrisson, and although the Kelabit are well-known throughout Sarawak for being hospitable and accommodating toward visitors, they also want more control over the types of research carried out in the Kelabit Highlands as well as possession of data produced as a result of such studies.

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INTRODUCTION

Although the area of the Kelabit Highlands is relatively small in size (~2500 km<sup>2</sup>) and the population of the Kelabit people living in the Kelabit Highlands is also relatively small (~1500), this landscape is highly anthropogenic and contains a substantial number of megaliths, landscape modifications, and other cultural sites. In the mid-1950s, Tom Harrisson (1954: 107) said that “no other Bornean people (as far as we know) have such an active megalithic life today or in the recent past. Indeed the whole area is rich with a vigorous mythology of culture heroes and monsters and with complicated social competition and material exchange, centered on the inheritance priorities of those who pay for the monuments, which are superficially no more than ‘loving reminders’ of the late great.” He was the first Westerner to systematically study (and often excavate) these cultural sites, and he published widely on his findings in *The Sarawak Museum Journal*. Many Kelabit living today know which sites he visited (as is sometimes visually obvious when visiting the sites today by the excavation pits near burials, under erected stones, or within rock piles), and often, with a tinge of resentment, they know which artefacts he took from them. Since then, Kelabit have had a wary approach to foreign researchers, quite a number of whom have expressed interest in studying various aspects of the culture and ecology of the Kelabit Highlands (see Bala, 2002: 2-7). The community has had mixed experiences with them since Tom Harrisson, and although the Kelabit are well-known throughout Sarawak for being hospitable and accommodating toward visitors, they also want more control over the types of research carried out in the Kelabit Highlands as well as possession of data produced as a result of such studies.



Although the Kelabit Highlands are physically remote<sup>1</sup>, the Kelabit people are now widely dispersed throughout Sarawak, Malaysia, and the rest of the world, and the people living in the Kelabit Highlands now are linked to the outside world by family members who have out-migrated and also by a pioneering new telephone and internet communications centre called e-Bario (see Bala *et al.*, 2003; Gnaniah *et al.*, 2004; Harris, 2001; Songan *et al.* 2004). Many have attained high levels of education (including doctorates in a number of fields), and they understand the processes of academia, many of them being academics themselves or working closely with researchers that have studied in the Kelabit Highlands. In demanding that researchers now immediately repatriate data collected in the Kelabit Highlands and requesting that all studies carried out there be of practical use to them, they have joined with many indigenous groups all over the world in turning the tables on the conventional way that studies are done in “exotic” locales by foreign researchers. This is evident in the recent creation of Community Research Steering Committee in Bario (the administrative centre of the Kelabit Highlands), which is responsible for overseeing the research carried out in the Kelabit Highlands and collecting hard and soft copies of all data and final reports.

Concurrently, there has been a turn in modern anthropological practices toward “decolonizing methodologies” (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999 ) that seek to implement truly participatory research projects, where local people are not simply hired as “guides” and “informants,” but actively help determine the course and the outcome of research proposed by outside academics (and guide their own research projects as well). In the Kelabit Highlands, the dovetailing of these progressive ideas within the academic community of how anthropology “should be done” and the rightful expectations of the Kelabit community of how anthropology “should be done” in the Kelabit Highlands have led me as a graduate student in anthropology to slightly modify the focus of my research in the beginning stages. While adhering to my original research plan, I was asked by the community to focus on documenting the sites of cultural interest to them: megaliths such as *batuh sinuped* (menhirs or erected stones), *batuh narit* (carved stones), *batuh nangan* (dolmens or stone “tables”), and *perupun* (large rock piles); *binatub* (graveyards); *lungun belanai* (grave sites with Chinese burial jars); *batuh nawi* (hollowed stone burial urns); landscape modifications such as *kawang* (notches cut into tree lines on ridge tops), *nabang* (ditches cut into the ground or through ridge tops), *taka* (oxbows of rivers); *ruma' ma'un* (old longhouse sites); and other areas of cultural importance such as *main tudtu'*



(salt springs), *rupan* (swampy areas where animals come to drink), *ra'an* (mountain passes), and *lubang* (caves). Many of these sites have mythological, genealogical, historical, or cultural significance, and although the Kelabit are now enthusiastic Christians, they are anxious to preserve these sites for future generations.

The first step was simply to list them, as no one person knows of them all – their existence, as well as their history and location – and I have spent a good portion of my time in the Kelabit Highlands doing this. By visiting each village in the Kelabit Highlands and seeking interviews with the most knowledgeable people in each place, I have helped the Kelabit create a working list of cultural sites in the Kelabit Highlands (see Index 1) and have personally visited and documented (using GPS) many of these sites. I have typed a number of lists and distributed them, asking for comments, suggestions, additions, and corrections, hence enlarging and improving (and complicating) the lists each time. A focal aim in my research project has been to transfer the skills necessary to document these sites to the Kelabit, so that they can continue this work after I have finished my own project. Since all the data that I or they have collected has been immediately repatriated to the community, it has become a truly participatory project; together we have listed over 540 sites of cultural importance, and visited and documented almost half of these (see Index 2). As this is also a collaborative project in a larger sense, I have also submitted various stages of raw data to the Sarawak Museum, the Sarawak Forest Department, and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and received support and suggestions from these institutions as this project has developed, for which I am greatly appreciative.

## DESCRIPTION OF CULTURAL SITES

This is an ongoing project (began in May 2006, after two months of preliminary fieldwork in 2005), and the listing and documentation of sites are far from complete. This list now is biased toward the places in which I have spent the most time (and had the most assistance from people in the particular villages), and I hope to remedy this imbalance during the remainder of my time in the Kelabit Highlands. In the next phase of my research, I will also elaborate on the past migration patterns of the people now living in the small village of Pa' Lungan, which is the focal area of my original study (a synopsis of preliminary findings will be discussed in the section of this paper on *ruma' ma'un*), and will more elegantly tie