The Documented History of the Kelabits of Northern Sarawak

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Abstract

The Kelabit tribe of northern Sarawak are a small ethnic group whose published history is, to date, limited. This paper seeks to redress this to some extent by reviewing documentary accounts of historic contacts with the Kelabit. The period covered is roughly 1850 to 1950, a time when British administration and exploration first came into direct contact with the Kelabit. This is also a period of population movements, resolution of traditional conflicts, and enormous changes to belief systems, all of which and more, are illuminated by the documents of the time.

Introduction

Being a relatively small ethnic group, the history of the Kelabit has not been given the same degree of attention as other larger and more famous Bornean groups. Literature dealing with historic contacts in Borneo is heavily biased towards the coastal regions and contrasts markedly with the dearth of information relating to the interior. For a place such as the Kelabit highlands, early published information is sparse, lacking detail and sometimes contradictory. In gathering together these disparate and fragmentary sources, I hope this paper will add to the ethnography of the Kelabit in providing a reasonably comprehensive summary of their early historic contacts with the incoming European explorers and administrators. This is a paper written from an outsider's perspective: as a British anthropology student my knowledge of the Kelabit is less than intimate, but more than passing. The information and attitudes gleaned from documentary sources are explicitly those of my archaic compatriots and so do not represent a Kelabit viewpoint. For that, may I direct readers to the excellent thesis by Robert Lian Saging (1976/7), which to date sadly goes unpublished.
The Kelabit heartland is a highland plateau, roughly bounded by the Apad Uat mountain range to the east (also marking the international border with Kalimantan), and the Tama Abu (sometimes Pamabo) range to the north and west (see Figure 1 below). The extent of historic Kelabit settlements fluctuated in ways that will be discussed below, but stretched out to the north and west in the river valleys of the Madihit and Seridan, and over the (then poorly defined) international border with Indonesia to the east (Amster 2006; Janowski 1988:8; 2003:10-11; Lian-Saging and Bulan 1989:89). During the 'Confrontation' with Indonesia in the 1960s, substantial parts of the rural population were re-located, sparking a wider movement of Kelabit people away from their rural homeland. Present day distributions therefore go far beyond the highland plateau to include towns, especially Miri and Kuching, where younger Kelabit have set up home and entered the wage economy, so that the urban Kelabit now outnumber their rural counterparts. (Amster 1999:184; Lian-Saging and Bulan 1989:92).

In the period covered by this paper, roughly 1850 to 1950, the Kelabit people were still almost exclusively a rural and traditional Bornean society, and at the risk of oversimplifying a complex culture, but by way of introduction, certain distinctive Kelabit cultural traits are worth noting. In common with most traditional societies in Borneo, the Kelabit are longhouse dwellers, albeit with uniquely open-plan architecture. Commenting on this, Harrisson writes that “to the Kelabit, privacy is unknown and unwanted” (1946:21). The Kelabit are renowned today for their skills in rice agriculture, especially wet padi cultivation. The well-developed systems of irrigation in the northern Kelabit wetlands (noted at an early date, e.g. Hose 1892:131), and consequent potential to provide excess, guarantee a generous and hospitable welcome, something frequently commented upon by historic sources (e.g. Chong 1960:117).
Figure 1: Northern Borneo, showing Brunei, northern Sarawak and western Kalimantan. Places of interest mentioned in the text are located.

As a population richly engaged with their environment, the Kelabit were able to procure a variety of forest products for trade and exchange. Notably, the Kelabit highlands is one of the rare natural inland sources of salt, something which they exploited until relatively recently. In return they sought prestige objects, particularly large Chinese dragon jars, as well as brassware and glass beads. The jars were used in primary burial rites, to contain a decomposing body before the remains were interred in a forest cemetery.
As part of the system of funerary rites, the Kelabit held a tradition of erecting large stone monuments, and cutting clearings on ridgetops (kawang) and ditches by river channels (nabang). The megalithic monuments form the most prominent testament to their past, a practice which died out in the 1950s, but intrigued many early visitors and remains a compelling attraction.

**Regional Context**

Although any substantial contact between the Kelabit and Europeans is relatively recent, there is a far longer history of external governance, beginning with Brunei. The history of Brunei is chequered, largely dependent on its relationship with China, and its somewhat peripheral position on the lucrative trade routes between China and India (Healey 1985:4-12). Chinese records indicate increasingly important trade with Brunei as early as the 5th century AD. The emergence of Islam led to an elite Malay culture supported by control of Chinese trade essentially with coastal communities (Colchester 1992:11). Regular envoys and tribute were sent to the Chinese emperor, resulting in a substantial exchange of Chinese prestige goods for Bornean products. In particular, Indo-Chinese brassware, porcelain and textiles were exchanged for luxury forest goods. These included edible birds’ nests, gold and gems (from south and west Borneo), aromatic woods, rattan, rhinoceros horns, hornbill ivory, camphor and gums (Healey 1985:4-12; Sellato 1989:17-18; Rousseau 1978:79). By the early 16th century, Sarawak was a dependency of the Sultanate of Brunei, incorporating much of the west of the island of Borneo. However, political control of the interior remained tenuous, and depended on indigenous power structures, which was to remain true for another 300 years (Healey 1985; Ward 1927).

This is also the time Borneo, and particularly Brunei, became known to European travellers as a significant port on the margin of the Indo-Chinese trading system. In 1521 the Italian explorer Pigafetti
reached Brunei as part of Magellan's Portugese round the world expedition (Sellato 1989:16; Ward 1927:1), to be followed shortly afterwards by a series of Portugese explorers. By the 17th century it was the British and Dutch vying for control of regional trade, stimulated by the expansion of trade with the Spice Islands, and European domination of the Malay peninsula, culminating in the establishment of Singapore in 1819.

The influence on the Kelabit can be seen in their historically recorded dependence on Chinese ‘Dragon Jars’ for burials, large brass gongs, ear ornaments, and the highly-valued glass beads. These came from some way distant, via trading links that ultimately stretch to the coast and not least, the Brunei bay area. Conversely, the interior regions around Brunei were sources for many of the forest products highly prized by the Chinese. Within the Kelabit highlands, the Kelabit themselves and their cohabitants the nomadic Penan, were renowned for their ability to source substantial quantities of rattan, rubber, salt, resins and aromatic woods, all of which were used in trading with neighbouring tribes (Rousseau 1978). The importance of this area ensured that through indirect links, highland communities became enmeshed in continental systems of trade and exchange.

As a mountainous and heavily forested region, the Kelabit Highlands are difficult to access, even with the recent advent of deforestation and logging roads. Although several large rivers originate in the area, including the Trusan, the Limbang and the Baram, navigation is notoriously time-consuming and difficult due to sudden changes in water level and perilous rapids. Schneeberger reports of his 1939 trip that six weeks to two months is required for a round trip to the Kelabit highlands (Schneeberger 1945:545). Therefore the extent and scope of different influences on the Kelabit highlands are complicated by the substantial efforts required to get there (Harrisson 1949:133). Despite the relatively short distance, the passage of goods between this region and Brunei would have depended on social relations with neighbouring trading partners each with knowledge of, and unencumbered access to,
local territories. J.C. Moulton, in his 1911 expedition to the famous twin-peaked Mt. Batu Lawi, passed through lowland Kelabit territory around the Madihit river, and reported that the Kelabit “come through this area” to move and trade buffalo with the Bruneis and Bisayas (Moulton 1912:17). It seems that the area outside the highlands acts as an important middle ground for the Kelabit, a border territory in which they make contact with other groups for trade and exchange.

A New Administration

The romantic and adventurous story of the first White Rajah, James Brooke is well-known and has been described in detail many times. However, for those not familiar with the episode, a short summary is in order (taken from Green 1911; Ward 1927; Colchester 1992).

In the early 19th century, Sultan Omar Ali Saif-Udin came to the Brunei throne, and appointed Pangiran Makota as Governor of Sarawak. Makota abused the local population to the extent that in 1836 they revolted and declared their independence. In response, the Sultan sent his uncle, Rajah Muda Hassim, to quell the situation whilst leaving the deeply unpopular Makota in place, causing political and military chaos. Thus when James Brooke arrived in 1839, aged 36 with the backing of his inheritance, his aristocratic background and his daring nature, he had chanced upon an opportunity. Rajah Hassim and Brooke struck up a close friendship, to the extent that Brooke agreed to assist in the military struggle. After much political manoeuvring, Makota was deposed and Hassim, despairing of the ceaseless quarreling, ceded control of the southern areas of Sarawak to Brooke. After agreeing to pay an annual fee to Brunei, Rajah Brooke was eventually installed in 1841. Brooke proceeded to exert control over the truculent natives by delegating some responsibilities (especially for religious affairs) to local leaders in return for their support, and wielding substantial force against his opponents. His policy was in essence to protect native culture whilst controlling native society.
In 1845 he was appointed Her Majesty’s (British) agent in Borneo, acquiring with the appointment some protection from the Royal Navy against the local pirates, and the means to restrict the scope of influence of Brunei. Until his death in 1868, James Brooke was engaged in an almost endless series of raids and expeditions attempting to quell unrest and resolve disputes between various groups of local people. For his successor and nephew, Charles Brooke, this continued. He extended the territories of Sarawak by accepting from the Sultan of Brunei areas in chronic conflict, and then suppressing them by military force. This included areas of Kelabit territory: in 1883-4 the Baram and Trusan river basins, and in 1890 the Limbang. Thus by 1890 the region including the Kelabit highlands had, at least nominally, switched governance from Brunei to the British run state of Sarawak.

The Brooke regimes recognised that governing such remote areas was at best difficult, and to do so effectively they offered military protection in return for local cooperation. Particularly, the Brookes put an end to the practice of headhunting, which had been seen as responsible for the continuation and escalation of minor feuding. However, they were remarkably reluctant to enforce European morals and beliefs on the local populations, allowing them to pursue their own lifestyles on payment of tax in the form of farmed or collected produce. At this stage therefore, Kelabit engagement with encroaching British colonialism was indirect and slight, but nevertheless local networks of trade and social contact would have provided information as to the nature of the new administration. It seems safe to presume that since the Kelabit had a similar relationship with the Brunei government, little effect would have been felt, at least until about 1880.

**First Contacts**

The earliest European to venture far enough inland to come within touching distance of the Kelabit, was Spenser St. John in 1858; a remarkable journey recorded in his book *Life in the forests of the Far East*. St. John, the British Consul at Brunei, spent 55 days travelling from Brunei to the headwaters of
the Limbang river. In doing so, he came across abandoned settlements in the Madiihit river basin in the foothills of the highlands, and seems to record the first meeting with a Kelabit (St. John 1974 [1863]:126). Many groups of interior peoples were in the late 19th century referred to by the generic term ‘Murut’, something now restricted to distinct groups in the northern state of Sabah, however St. John met specifically a ‘Main Murut’. This cagey encounter established that the man was from a group living beyond Gura (possibly Mt. Murud). They reportedly collected and traded salt from springs (*mein* ‘tasty’- is a term used in describing salt) and harvested two crops of rice per year, both things for which the Kelabit are uniquely noted (the latter not without controversy: Janowski 1988). Since the Brooke regime was in its infancy at the time, and this area had yet to come under its control, St. John would have been a curiosity rather than a portent of great changes about to come.

The identity of the individual St. John encountered is complicated by the lack of a specific ethnic group name. As the first European in the area, no doubt communication was difficult, but it raises the question of the origins of the term 'Kelabit'. The most widely recognised account (e.g. Harrisson 1959:182) describes a meeting between Charles Hose, the celebrated colonial officer, and a group of people from Pa’ Labid (the area around the river Labid). British administrators were notoriously efficient at neatly dividing up the natives for their own purposes, thus with some disregard for local subtleties, everyone living in that area became 'Kalabit', (later Kelabit).

The Baram district, (covering the Kelabit territory) ceded to Brooke administration in 1883/4, was described by Rejang District Resident, H.B. Low in 1882 thus: “The Baram, however is so uninhabited, except by the aborigines, and has been looked on as so dangerous, that considerable time must elapse before there is any marked activity of trade” (Low 1882b:67). Low had just returned from a tour of duty collecting taxes and resolving disputes in his district, bordering on the south of the Baram. However, despite this obvious lack of penetration into the interior by colonial administration, Low was
able to list a number of tribes living in the area, including the “Kinniah” and their various subsidiaries, including the “Klabit”, identifying their location as north of the “Ba Sepieng” (Low 1882a:65). The Seping river flows south from the Usan Apau plateau, which itself lies south of the Kelabit highland area. At this time, the Kelabit were in conflict with their southerly neighbours (see below) and the area was experiencing considerable population movements as a result of these hostilities, so it seems reasonable that Low was indeed referring to the Kelabit. Yahya Talla also feels the term Kelabit was in use prior to British colonialism, suggesting that the Pa' Labid group would have been the most southerly, and hence the first point of contact with the Kenyah and Kayan, so the name may be derived indigenously from them (Yahya Talla 1979:5-6).

**Disease**

As with other parts of the world, advancing Europeans were preceded by their diseases, usually new to indigenous people. Since there had been coastal European contacts for 300 years by the time St. John made his epic journey, it is difficult to know the extent or effect of diseases on the Kelabit (Lian-Saging and Bulan 1989:90-91). Population levels were fluctuating in the region, due to migrations and hostilities, but it seems likely that introduced diseases would have had differential effects on indigenous groups for socio-cultural reasons (attitudes to illness, travel, outsider contact etc.) In the last 200 years or so, the Kelabit would have had regular contact with neighbouring groups, through headhunting sorties, trade (especially the rare interior salt supplies), and social gatherings. Furthermore, their traditional relations with the nomadic Penan exposed them indirectly to other groups, as the Penan communities provided scanty but widespread trading links over much of northern Sarawak (see Harrisson 1949 and Sellato 1989 for distribution maps). As outlined in the following section, the modern Kelabit value innovation, including the adoption of other cultural ideas. If this is a long-standing tradition, the consequent push for travel, trade, and external contact may well have subjected them to greater than average levels of introduced diseases, hinted at by later travellers. Douglas reports
a smallpox epidemic from 1875 (1911:146) and Mjoberg, in his 1922 expedition, came across a vine
strung across the Lemuduk river to warn off travellers. On investigating he found a village in crisis, as
70 or 80 people had recently died of influenza (Mjoberg 1925:415,427). Missionaries from the Borneo
Evangelical Mission reported that the Lun Dayeh, the Kelabit neighbours to the north and west,
suffered a smallpox epidemic around the turn of the 20th century, and whilst they were in the area, an
outbreak of pneumonia in 1933 (Lees 1979:41). Such episodes are not uncommon from the earliest
records of the Kelabit, and must surely have had an effect on their social and cultural organisation,
prior to their acquaintance with European colonialists.

**Conflict and Migration**

After St. John's meeting with the itinerant Kelabit, he travelled across land and via the Adang river to
what he felt was close to the source of the Trusan river, near Mt. Murud (see Figure 1). To reach this
area, occupied by the ‘Adang muruts’ took three weeks of arduous travel. He notes several times that
occupation of the area seems recent, with local people apparently adamant that they were not ‘Adangs’
(St. John 1974 [1863]:123). He suggests there have been constant movements of people, in part at least
as a response to the aggressions of the Kayan (ibid:106). St. John’s comments, along with others
described later, suggest Kelabit occupation to be relatively recent and in part enforced by the
migrations and hostility of other ethnic groups.

Relationships between the Kelabit and their neighbours were complex, and deserve more attention than
I can give here. As described above, the social requirements of successful Kelabit demand that they
acquire rare imported goods. Traditional Kelabit society was based on a stratified hierarchy (Lian
Saging and Bulan 1989), affirmed in part by the exhibition of prominent status symbols, in particular,
large Chinese 'dragon' jars, Indo-Chinese brass gongs and various types of glass beads. The presence of
these things demonstrates the connections of leading Kelabit with wider regional systems of trade and
exchange, through local allegiances ultimately stretching to the coast. As well as this, social prestige was also garnered through the taking of heads, which necessitated an altogether different set of relations with the same neighbouring tribes. Negotiating the variously congenial, political and hostile relations with neighbours can be illustrated with an example (mentioned briefly in Hose & McDougall 1912:281).

A Kelabit named Tingan from Long Masso, had sometime in the late 1880s attacked and killed 7 Baram Kenyahs, which had gone without reprisal until 1892 when the powerful local leader, Tama Bulan demanded retribution. In March of that year, Hose resolved the dispute by fining both parties, and ordering them both to place valuable brass gongs as surety in the District office in Marudi (Hose 1892:110-111). Tingang was, by all accounts, ever-ready to resort to violence, having killed a neighbouring Kelabit from Lepu Potong (sic) earlier that year (Hose 1892: 33), which seems to have spurred Tama Bulan into action. Despite Hose's intervention, by May Tama Bulan was again on the warpath, gathering together a combined force of 700 Kenyah and Kayan warriors. These were assembled at the foot of the Pamabo mountain range, less than a day away from the Kelabit plateau. Hose was forced to intervene once more and managed to disperse Tama Bulan's army (Hose 1892:131).

A month later, whilst Hose was on leave and the Baram district was temporarily under the control of G. Pratt Barlow, Tama Bulan was able to gain an audience with the visiting Rajah, and was given permission to “take a force of Kenniahs (sic) into the Kalabit country and attack those tribes who have constantly killed Baram people” (Pratt Barlow 1892:155). He may have achieved this by promising to convert the Kelabit into accepting the authority of the Brooke regime, which the Kenyah by then had done (Hose 1892:111). The expedition was duly organised in August, and by September had returned. Details of the attack are unclear, but it was evidently a significant event. Douglas writing some years later, says that the attack resulted in the destruction of 30 villages and the death of 200 offenders
(Douglas 1912:18). Pratt Barlow received reports that up to 70 Kelabit returned with the Kenyah to re-settle and accept the protection and demands of the Brooke administration; Tingan himself, apparently escaped (Pratt Barlow 1892:202). A more detailed report came from Tama Bulan in a visit to Pratt Barlow in November, which was forwarded on to the Rajahvi (Pratt Barlow 1893:30). In May 1893, Tama Bulan travelled to see the Rajah along with two Kelabit chiefs, at which meeting “nothing of any importance was brought forward” (Pratt Barlow 1893:135). Hose returned from leave a few months later. Despite his absence, Hose was able to present to the Sarawak Museum the earliest Kelabit object in their collection, a “large Chinese jar” (accession number 792), in July 1892.

The historic tensions between Kelabit and Kayan are described by a Kelabit in 1968, recounting stories from his grandfather (Usun Ngau 1968). In it, he portrays them as “bitter enemies, despite the fact that they migrated together from Kalemantan”. He tells how a Kelabit, denied entry to the Telang Usan (Baram region), tricked a Kayan to fight on his behalf to avenge his father’s murder. The Kayan slaughtered and enslaved unsuspecting Kelabits, who retaliated by hanging Kayan women, a sequence of events which spiralled into a chronic feud. This is reported to have happened “shortly before James Brooke came to Sarawak” and one of the captured Kelabit women is said to have lived until about 15 years ago (i.e. about 1950).

It may be that these aggressive relations are the cause of the present extent of Kelabit habitation, as it seems that conflicts with the larger Kenyah and Kayan populations have enabled them to expand into territories previously occupied by the Kelabit (Harrisson 1954:105; Lian-Saging and Bulan 1989:89). This is the view postulated by Harrisson in his introduction to the reprinted book of Spenser St. John’s 1858 expedition (St. John, 1974 [1863]:xi). According to Douglas, the Kelabit migrated to their present location from Indonesia (Douglas 1912:27), correlating the Kelabit view expressed above. Similarly, Arnold in 1955 recorded stories from his Kayan and Kenyah porters, describing how they lived in the
Plieran valley (south of the Baram) until “early in the 1880’s when a great Iban raiding party went up from the Rejang and drove them out with considerable bloodshed” (1957:10). The Kenyah as a result moved further north into the Tinjar and Baram river valleys, currently to the south of the Kelabit heartland, implying support for the suggestion that the Kelabit themselves were squeezed north into the area they currently occupy, by this account in the 1880s. Both the Kayan (Rousseau 1978:78), and the Kenyah (Whittier 1978:93) have myths and memories which describe their migrations from surrounding plateaux towards the Baram river basin, something which was very recently still seen as a cultural tradition. Crain, similarly suggests that the Lun Dayeh, a tribe closely related to the Kelabit living in and around the headwaters of the Trusan river, were checked in their movement south in the 17th century by the Kayan and Kenyah (1978:124).

It seems likely that in the latter part of the 19th century, there was considerable movement of indigenous populations, which had some effect on the Kelabit. Whether this constitutes the so-called 'Kayan push' forcing the Kelabit further and further north ultimately into the Kelabit plateau, is open to some doubt however. As St. John was able to discover, the Kelabit were in 1858 renowned for their skills in irrigated rice farming and were well-established in trading salt, a product which originates in the Kelabit plateau, especially around Pa’ Mein. In 1892, Hose looked down from the Pamabo range over “one vast plain, covered in small houses” (Hose 1892:131), suggesting substantial and deep-rooted occupation (see also Haddon 1932:157 from the 1899 Torres Straits expedition). Lian-Saging, a proud Kelabit, also refutes the idea that the Kelabit were forced north against their will, and points out that at the same time, the Kelabit were also moving south and west, occupying the area around Long Lellang for example (Lian-Saging 1976/7:59-85)

Making Peace

The expansion of Brooke's Sarawak came as a result of the capitulation of Brunei in the face of
continued warfare between indigenous groups. The disruption caused by Kayan aggression in the Baram district in the late 19th century was the catalyst for cessation to Brooke (Lian-Saging 1976/7:68). In taking on such apparently troublesome natives, Brooke recognised that these were areas rich in natural resources, which could be plundered if he could deal with the ongoing violence. He did this by outlawing traditional forms of warfare, including headhunting, backed up by large scale military action (e.g. Ward 1927:10; Pratt Barlow 1892), before instigating peace agreements between the various native groups. As British military power came to dominate the interior, local groups were more willing to accept their rule, with the benefits of access to markets and prestige goods as well as protection, at the expense of taxes in the form of locally collected produce.

For the Kelabit, this came about as part of a major series of peace treaties in 1898. Hose, in his first meeting in 1898, estimated that 1500 Kelabit “have come in” (i.e. accepted the terms of the Sarawak government) with a group of a further 1000, in conflict with the first, yet to commit. As part of the ceremonies welcoming the Kelabit, Hose arranged a feast and peace ceremony for the Kelabit, the Kayan and the Kenyah. Along with the aggressively expansive Kayans and Kenyahs, the Kelabit were the subjects and instigators of substantial unrest, illustrated by reports of colonial expeditions sent to placate them (Amster 2006:211; Hose and McDougall 1912:vii; Douglas 1912:18; Owen 1918:122).

In his letter to the Rajah, Hose writes:

“I am expecting a large party of Kalabits [sic] here shortly, people who live between the headwaters of the Limbang and Baram on the mountain.

I have persuaded them to come in under the Baram government and I have just heard that a number of chiefs and a hundred followers are on their way here to see me, and that they have brought their tax with them. I am told that they have over a hundred pikuls of gutta also.

I am very pleased to have got these people in, we shall eventually get the whole of them, I have
no doubt. Their houses are more than a month from Claudetown [now Marudi] and they number many thousands.” (Hose, 1898:76)

He reported a few days later, that twenty-six Kelabit chiefs plus their entourage duly visited Claudetown on the 25th April (Hose 1898:121-2).

This peace treaty seems to have been only partially successful, as there continue to be sporadic reports of violence, and led to the expedition of R.S. Douglas to conduct a major peace ceremony in the Kelabit plateau in 1908. In doing so, Douglas made what appears to be the first European visit to the Kelabit highland plateau (Douglas 1909; 1912). Following the government sponsored raid of 1892 to quell Kelabit aggression (Hose 1892, 1893; Pratt Barlow 1892, 1893; Douglas 1912:18), and the 1898 peace agreement (Hose 1898; 1926:148-155), Douglas, as Resident, was asked to instigate a treaty between the Kelabit, Kenyah, Kayan, Pa Kabak, Pa Brian and Pa Utak tribes (Douglas 1912:21-22).

With an impressive entourage of 200 natives and 2 chiefs he left Claudetown (Marudi), travelled up the Baram river and into its tributary the Tutau (Tutoh). They then marched overland to the Magoh river, close to the Seridan he had visited the previous year, reaching the village of Pa' Anglah, where he was joined by either 100 (Douglas 1909:29) or 200 (Douglas 1912:19) Kelabits. Some two weeks after leaving, they reached the highlands proper, stopping at Pa' Mein where chief Ballang Maran (“a notorious headhunter” - Mjoberg 1934:53) hosted the ceremonies required to conduct the peace treaties. By this stage there were 7-800 people gathered together (Douglas 1912:22), all of whom congregated in the longhouse, to participate in the ceremonies. A pig was slaughtered, and the various chiefs exchanged blood in the ceremony of _berpirit_, swearing to abide by the terms of the treaty. Subsequent reports of the area contain few details of aggression between those tribes present, particularly the Kelabit, Kayan and Kenyah, which suggests that it was essentially successful. In fact later reports concentrate on more friendly cultural exchanges: The Kelabits borrowing Kenyah / Kayan
hairstyles, the use of leopard’s fangs in the upper ear, women’s leg tattoos, social hierarchy and so on (Pollard 1936:5; Hose and McDougall 1912:134; Banks 1937:428).

Other feuds in the region were also being settled. Owen reports on a peace treaty between the Brian and Belawit tribes, and their neighbours the Bah Muruts of the Trusan headwaters (Owen 1919), which he visited in 1912. His route took him via the Kelapang, north across the Kelabit plateau, past salt springs which may well be those at Pa' Mein. He describes typically Kelabit irrigated wet rice fields of the older style\textsuperscript{viii}, with mud banks and bamboo water channels (Owen 1919:107), claiming they are able to harvest 3 crops of rice per year. Having travelled the length of the highland plateau, he then reached the source of the Kelalan river and moved south into Dutch (now Indonesian) territory, where he joined the Karayan river staying in a Kelabit settlement. The international border at this time, although nominally agreed as being along the prominent ridge of the Apo Duat mountain range obviously had little impact on the lives of the Kelabit: Owen’s travel was so unhindered, that border crossing goes without even a mention.

**Officers and Collectors**

As the Bornean interior lost its sense of mystery and danger, it opened up areas such as the Kelabit highlands to more frequent visits by Government administrators. With the inauguration of the Sarawak National Museum in Kuching in 1891, there was also a keen recipient for native artefacts, and the beginnings of systematic collection. In 1898/9 the Torres Straits expedition from Cambridge passed through Sarawak, and at the invitation of Hose made a journey into the interior, reaching the edges of Kelabit territory. This was one of the first outside attempts since St. John to penetrate the interior this far, with the exception of O.F. Ricketts who travelled down the Trusan in 1889, and punitive raids, such as that of 1892 described above. Hose escorted Messrs. Haddon, Seligman, Myers and Ray on a journey skirting the northern and western edge of Kelabit territory, down the Limbang and Madalam
rivers, crossing by land to the Malinau, a tributary of the Tutoh, then returning via the Tinjar river to Claudetown (Marudi) (Haddon 1932:131-213). Some of the expedition (Haddon himself was absent due to illness) reached the south western edge of Kelabit territory, going as far as the longhouse at Long Lellang. Whilst this expedition made little contact with the Kelabit, they did collect some of the earliest Kelabit artefacts. Haddon was also able to carry out anthropomorphic measurements of 7 Kelabit men and 3 Kelabit women, published as an appendix in Hose & McDougall 1912. Hose himself never managed to reach the heart of Kelabit territory, his planned expedition being scuppered when his boat was damaged in navigating rough waters (Hose 1929:190).

By the early 20th century, a series of colonial administrators began visit the region, often accompanied by members of the Sarawak museum, some of whom collected cultural and natural artefacts. O.F. Ricketts for example, Resident of the Trusan and Limbang district, visited the same area as St. John had done 30 years previously, with G.D. Havilland who was later to become curator of the Sarawak museum. A.B. Ward, another long term Sarawak official, visited the Adang and Limbang headwaters in 1903 including a trip to the Madihit river, where he stayed in a Kelabit longhouse (Ward 1934:86), collecting 2 skulls. R.S. Douglas, assistant and subsequently successor to Hose as Baram district Resident, made his first visit to the Kelabit in 1906 (Douglas 1907), travelling to the Seridan river, adjacent to the Madihit visited by St. John in 1858 (at which time it was abandoned - St. John, 1974 [1863]:xi). Douglas reports that he stayed at the longhouse of chief Ili Bawang, which had been newly constructed and housed 200 Kelabit who had just moved to the area (Douglas 1907:55). Other villages he visited nearby consisted of “horrid dirty hovels” and in searching for something positive to say about them, concluded they made “ingenious rat traps” (ibid:57). In this trip, or more likely his 1908 trip to conduct a regional peace treaty, Douglas collected a number of spears, some of which had been used in recent tribal violence.
The first significant collection of Kelabit artefacts came from J.C. Moulton, in 1911 curator of the Sarawak museum, who travelled to Mt. Batu Lawi with a team of experienced botanic and zoological collectors, following at least part of Spenser St. John’s 1858 route (Moulton 1912). He also reports passing an abandoned Kelabit house which A.B. Ward had used in his 1903 travels (ibid:28), and used the same river route as several previous expeditions, the Madihit, Seridan, Magoh and Tutau (Tutoh). On the Seridan, he spent some time with Kelabit chief Balang Katou, and was informed that Douglas had on two occasions stayed with the same chief in his old longhouse. He was also told of one old Kelabit who knew of Spenser St. John’s visit to the Adang 60 years previously, from his grandfather (ibid:47). With help from the Kelabit he was able to make a substantial collection, to be deposited at the Sarawak museum (see Figure 2 below). Unfortunately, his attempt at a photographic record was unsuccessful as many exposures failed due to damp (ibid:42-45), and those which did not remain to be located.

As with many of the expeditions before about 1940 (with the notable exceptions of Douglas in 1908, and perhaps Mjoberg in 1922), this area in the foothills of the highlands to the west and north serves as the main source of objects and documentary evidence relating to the Kelabit prior to significant
European influence. This seems to be largely due to the pioneering expedition of Spenser St. John, who provided the only reliable knowledge of the region for at least 50 years, and created a template for travel. Even those expeditions which went further, such as Douglas in 1908 tended to follow the same trail, as far as possible, that St. John had blazed in 1858. This may give us a skewed snapshot of early Kelabit culture, as this area is outside the Kelabit highlands, with its cooler climate and in the north, expansive rice padi farming.

This is supported by Mjoberg, who in his 1922 trip, reported that the names of Douglas and Adams were in constant circulation among the Kelabit. (Adams had visited the Kelabit plateau in around 1911-13, but his travels went unpublished; Mjoberg 1925:414). The names of other Europeans are not mentioned: The 1898 Cambridge expedition who made contact with lowland Kelabit, as had Ward in 1903 and 1907 and Moulton in 1912.

Mjoberg stayed at the Kelabit longhouse of Pa' Anglah, near the Tutoh river on the flanks of the Pamabo range, which mark the western edge of the Kelabit plateau. This was probably the same village that Douglas passed through on the way to his 1908 peace gathering, and also the place where Andreini the previous year had recorded his putative ‘Chinese’ megalith, subsequently disputed by Banks (see below). He comments of his time at Pa' Anglah “the Kalabit people seem to be badly off in respect of domestic implements, weapons, garments and decorative art” (Mjoberg 1925:416), which may explain why he seems not to have collected anything. After receiving assistance from a group of 55 Kelabit sent from the highlands to assist, they climbed the Pamabo (Tama Abu) range, and reached the village of chief Tapo Boan. Here, Mjoberg reports visiting the largest longhouse he had seen, over 200ft in length, in a grass clearing with a small herd of buffalo (ibid:418). He then heads east, crossing the Kabaan river to reach the village of Pa’ Trap. This apparently locates the longhouse of Tapo Boan some 25km west of present day Bario, in an area without a present day settlement, possibly the
abandoned village of Kubaan, near the current Penan settlement of Pa' Tik. It becomes apparent once again that population instability is a persistent social feature.

Mjoberg was succeeded as curator of the Sarawak museum by E. Banks, who made a series of visits to the Kelabit area in the 1930s. He had “sent museum collectors there previously” (Banks 1936:158) and made a point of disputing the rather fanciful claims by Andreini\textsuperscript{xii} of Chinese carved stones and megaliths (Banks 1937:422). Banks' main contribution to Kelabit historical records was his report of a 1936 trip, the seminal 1937 article \textit{Some megalithic remains from the Kelabit country}. In it he follows up the brief mention by Douglas of an ongoing megalithic culture (in 1912) and his own brief encounters with these objects in a trip in 1930 (Banks 1931). He describes in more detail some of the megalithic remains to be found in the Kelabit area, of particular interest is the fact that this seems to be unique in Sarawak, and was at the time still practiced\textsuperscript{xiii}. This has implications for a study of historic Kelabit occupation, as well as providing them with a direct association between the landscape and their traditions. Stone monuments that can be reliably associated with one ethnic group provide some proof of continuity and evidence of appropriation of the landscape. This is becoming more relevant now as the Kelabit begin to come into conflict with other agencies over claims to land use (Bulan 2003; Amster 2006).

A year after Banks’ 1936 trip, the District Officer, Donald Hudden, accompanied by medical dresser Chong Ah Onn, visited the Kelabit plateau, described in some detail in Chong Ah Onn's unpublished autobiography written in 1960,\textsuperscript{xiv} and more briefly in the Sarawak Gazette (Chong Ah Onn 1954). They travelled to Long Lellang, Bario, Ramudu, Pa' umor, Pa' Dalih, Long Peluan and Pa' Puak, dispensing medical services along the way. Chong writes of the conditions at Long Lellang that living conditions were particularly bad (compared to previously visited Kenyah longhouses). Unhygienic food preparation areas had left dysentery and diarrhoea rife, with the inhabitants ignorant of the causes, but
keen to take his advice. Despite this, he writes fondly of his hosts, saying “The hospitality that one meets there is equal to anything I have met within Sarawak. They will give you anything you wish.....they will stay by you when things do not go well. They will make you one of themselves” (Chong Ah Onn 1960:117).

Contact with Christian Missionaries

With the greater influence of European administrators, traders and adventurers from the late 19th century, the suppression of headhunting and the instigation of various peace agreements, interior Borneo became a target for Christian missionaries. Remote and difficult to access regions such as the Kelabit highlands were however still a daunting prospect. This, along with the Brooke administration attitude to preserving indigenous belief systems, made life awkward for the first missionaries heading inland. The missionaries portrayed the government as backward, in for wanting to see the Kayan and Kenyah for example “preserved in their old ways” (Lees 1979:87).

In the Kelabit region, the first missionaries on the scene were from the newly established Borneo Evangelical Mission (BEM). Formed in 1928 by three Australians, Hudson Southwell, Frank Davidson and Carey Tolley, they began working to win converts in the Limbang area. This was one of the last areas to be available for Christian conversion thanks mainly to the Brooke policy of widely spacing missions to reduce the potential for overwhelming impact on indigenous views (Lees 1979:31-32). They concentrated on the Lun Bawang, occupying an area to the north and west of the Kelabit, but Davidson travelled south and met his first Kelabit in the Medihit river area in 1929. This is outside the Kelabit highlands and may explain why he had little success in finding converts, so that by the time he left in 1932 he “spoke of his disappointment that he could not see some harvest (i.e. converts) before leaving” (Lees 1979:41). For some advocates of the Christian faith however, such slow progress was symptomatic of the attitudes of the government, illustrating again the conflict between a paternal
governor (by the 1940s Charles Vyner Brooke, the son of Charles Brooke, himself James Brooke’s nephew) and enthusiastic evangelists. Kawato writes, somewhat excessively, “Governor Brooke, blinded by his hatred of the Lun Bawangs, refused to extend the territory of the BEM”. And “He wanted this people group (sic) to die off so their land could be given to other tribes” (Kawato 2004). Rajah Brooke aimed to control the expansion of Christian influence by authorising the first Anglican missionaries (his own denomination) only in 1848, and Roman Catholics in 1855. His successors maintained this attitude of limited religious interference, using it as a ploy to expand their moral codes when effective governance of an area seemed possible (Colchester 1992:20). However local conditions undoubtedly played an important part in slow uptake, with a variety of missionaries staying for a few years before departing for reasons of lack of funds, health, pessimism or local discontent (Green 1911:101-120). The first 60 years of Christian efforts made little impact on interior tribes.

By the mid 1930s, Southwell and Tolley of the BEM were beginning to have some success among the Lun Bawang, who were themselves spreading the Christian message, including to the Kelabit (Lees 1979:101). Davidson returned in 1934 to a more amenable audience and set up home among the Medihit Kelabit, where St. John in 1858 had seen his ‘Main Murut’. His wife Enid joined him the following year, and they remained for four years (Lees 1979:50; Cutfield 1936:115). In the following years, up until the Japanese invasion of 1941, the combination of BEM missionaries and indigenous converts began to make significant headway into the belief systems of groups such as the Kelabit. This was rudely interrupted by the Japanese decision to inter as many missionaries as they could capture, and for the following four years, the Kelabit were to see the more secular lifestyle of a rather different group of Christians – British and Australian paratroopers.

**World War II**

Tom Harrisson is perhaps the most charismatic and influential European in this historical sketch of the
Kelabit. His initial contact was indirect, through the University of Oxford Expedition of 1932, which skirted the lowland Kelabit area around the Tutoh and Malinau rivers. Some of his Kayan assistants mimicked the ‘orang Kalabit’ in dances, one middle class man having visited Kelabit country (Harrisson 1938:109,127). During the Second World War, Harrisson was responsible for perhaps the most significant intrusion into Kelabit life, by choosing their highland plateau as the ideal base for resistance against the Japanese. This meant in 1945 a group of British and Australian paratroopers descending on the area along with their supplies and ambitions, to influence and educate the Kelabit in a curious way of life, both religious and secular (Harrisson 1949; 1959).

Up until this time the typical European as far as the Kelabit were concerned was either a colonial officer intent on collecting tax and adjudicating in disputes, or an evangelical Christian. Harrisson’s attitude was contemptuous, particularly towards efforts to convert the Kelabit and get them to give up their traditional way of life. A Kelabit, Robert Lian-Saging writing in 1976, well after this period of religious turbulence, resents Harrisson's efforts to maintain traditional ritual beliefs and sees the uptake of Christianity as a wholly positive move (Lian-Saging 1976/7:251, 277). Christian missionaries dismayed of the Kelabit habit of extended alcoholic feasts (hence Shirley Lees’ history of the BEM in the area being called *Drunk before dawn*), but their association of abstinence with successful Christianity was soon called into question by the hard drinking troops. Despite his reservations as to the overt religious pressure put on the Kelabit by missionaries, Harrisson was full of praise for their efforts to introduce systems of hygiene, the importance of education, and a moral code (1947:42).

It is certainly the case that the presence of Harrisson, his troops, and the logistical support from the army that they enjoyed, opened up a world of potentials to the Kelabit. Harrisson himself remained in the area after the war, living for long periods with the Kelabit (Belong 1971:210-211; see also References for some of his numerous publications), making a record of the people and their traditions,
collecting stories and artefacts\textsuperscript{XV}, setting up an education system (Belong 1971:210-211) and subsequently becoming curator of the Sarawak Museum.

**Conversion to Christianity**

With the end of the war, those missionaries who had survived imprisonment returned, and resumed their activities. By 1947 “many Kelabit had burnt their skulls, charms and fetishes, but they were still drinking heavily” (Lees 1979:86; those at Pa' Lungun were burnt in 1941 – Yahya Talla 1979:464). The disposal of what were rapidly becoming archaic ritual artefacts was at the behest of the indigenous groups themselves as much as the Christian missionaries. Hudson Southwell, working for the BEM among the Kayan, found them to be keen to lose the shackles of their superstitions but still afraid of the powers of these ritual objects. He organised a ceremony in which all ritual artefacts were carried into the jungle and left there to rot, after which, since no adverse effects were experienced, the Kayan were convinced of the power of Christianity (Lees 1979:89). By the 1950s, Christianity was widely accepted, and taken up with extra enthusiasm by the Kelabit in an effort to shed their regional reputation for backwardness (Amster 1999:195; Lian-Saging and Bulan 1989:89; Harrisson 1947:56). Arnold describes his Kelabit guide, Lian Labang, as being Christian on the basis that it freed him from archaic traditional customs which had dictated and restricted his daily activities. But according to Arnold, Lian “had little idea of the positive side of the Christian faith” (Arnold 1957:92). In 1955 a Christian convention took place at the Kelabit village of Pa Mein, where the 150 villagers were swamped by 1200 delegates, and in 1959, the BEM set up an indigenous church, the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB), which continues to this day (Lees 1979:105-109).

It is clear that this period of time, shortly after the end of the Japanese occupation, was a time of great change in the belief systems of the Kelabit. Relations with the environment were more direct, the concept of the forest was far more than simply a resource base, but also represented a framework for
cognition. If people saw the forest as a source of inspiration for cultural action, then the conversion to Christianity represents a point of fracture, separating cultural action from the environment. In an ironic twist, this process is now being acted out in reverse, through encroaching deforestation. Commercial logging is removing the environment no longer seen as a vital source of raw materials, but is instead being seen increasingly as the basis for cultural continuity and cohesion among the Kelabit. In the 1940s the Kelabit shed their cultural dependence on the forest and put their faith, literally, in apparently progressive European ideals. For 60 years, having placed their trust in the industrialised world to provide more and more basic materials, they further reduced their dependence on the forest. Now the Kelabit find the need to rejuvenate their relationship with the forest as a way of protecting the cultural world that they currently inhabit.

**Conclusions**

Through this historical sketch it is possible to see some of the influences acting on the Kelabit. Early trade and contact with Chinese and Indian ideas and objects came through Brunei via a series of tribal intermediaries, engendering a variety of relations (Harrisson 1949b). As the Kayan and Kenyah expanded, they encroached into Kelabit territory causing a complex sequence of population movements northwards, towards what is now the Kelabit heartland of their upland plateau. This probably occurred within the last 200 years or so, but lack of information on historic occupation of the region reduces any conclusions to conjecture. When the British, under James Brooke, replaced Brunei as the nominal administrator, life changed slowly and it was not until the 1890s that any great administrative influence was exerted. Peace treaties, clamping down on headhunting, new diseases, payment of taxes and greater access to external trade then trickled up to the Kelabit. A series of colonial officers began to make their way into Kelabit territory, opening the door to greater exploration and early collections. Ideology and belief systems went essentially unchallenged until the advent of Christian missionaries in the 1930s, a process disrupted by the Japanese occupation of Borneo. Through contact with British and
Australian troops, especially Tom Harrisson, the Kelabit were exposed to western beliefs and resources and after the war dropped many of their traditional beliefs in favour of what was seen as the more progressive Christian religion. The Malaysian/Indonesian confrontation of the 1960s and more recently the activities of commercial logging have brought the Kelabit different aspects of the western world: migration, paid labour, monetary exchange, new avenues of access to prestige goods and different raw materials to name but a few. The Kelabit we see today, even those who remain in their rural heartland, are the product of their interpretation, adoption and denial of these influences.

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iii As well as desk-based research, the author spent a month with the Kelabit of Pa' Dalih in August
2008, and is returning several times over the coming year.

iv A copy is held in the Sarawak Museum library in Kuching, along with the equally impressive thesis by Yayha Talla (1979). An attenuated version is, however, more readily available, see Lian Saging (1979).

v This brief and inadequate sketch of Kelabit culture is intended only as an introduction. Far more detailed and interesting information is available in some of the literature in the bibliography. In particular, I suggest Harrisson 1959; Yahya Talla 1979; Lian-Saging and Bulan 1989; Janowski 2003.

vi That report remains elusive, absent from the archives of the Sarawak Museum library.

vii The details of this important event are sometimes confused. Mjoberg 1925:412 uses the date of 1911, as does Bulan 2003:22 and Lian-Saging 1976/7:79-81. Harrisson 1949:129 says that Douglas visited the upper Baram, but not the Kelabit plateau, dating the visit to 1913 (Harrison 1946:43). In fact Douglas visited the upper Baram in 1906, published 1907, and visited the highland plateau conducting peace ceremonies in 1908. This was published briefly in 1909, and in more detail in 1912, both referring to a leaving date of October 25th from Marudi, the 1912 publication not specifying a year.

viii Each padi was made up of a series of smaller pang – water filled squares a few metres across, created by piling up each season's rice stalks into dividing vegetation bunds.

ix Sarawak Museum accession nos. 1673 and 1682, dated 1908.


xi These must be the objects accessioned in 1914, approximately 35 in total, numbers 2065 to 2103. Most of the objects are small and decorative – body ornaments, bamboo containers etc.

xii E.V. Andreini, a Baram district civil servant, visited the Kelabit of the Baram river in 1921 and collected baskets (Swayne 1933) and a few other artefacts. He described a series of megaliths (Andreini 1921) which he suggested were of Chinese origin. Banks re-visited these sites and found many of them to be simply illusory or natural, with the possible exception of one carved, standing megalith near the village of Pa' Anglah.

xiii Banks also made a collection of artefacts, including a series of stone tools, Sarawak Museum accession nos. 2451 to 2465, some directly related to the purported 'Chinese megalith'.

xiv Available in the Sarawak Museum library. He seems to have led an unhappy life, sacrificing his family for his travels, and putting himself at great risk by co-ordinating the medical needs of the guerilla units during the Japanese occupation of the 1940s.

xv The Sarawak Museum accession books bear testament to Harrisson's boundless energy. His spidery scrawl covering page after page for 20 years from 1947. Many of the objects accessioned during this time are Kelabit, largely due to Harrisson personally.