From China to the Kelabit Highlands

Dragon jars were first produced in Song Dynasty China (AD 960-1279). With the expansion of trade during the 14th century they reached the coastal towns of Southeast Asia. These large stoneware vessels are often referred to as Martaban jars in the literature. The port of Martaban or Martaban in Myanmar (Burma) played a significant role in the distribution of stoneware jars in the Southeast Asian area.

Originally these objects were used to store commodities and fresh water on trading ships. Martaban jars were produced in many sizes, with various glazes and designs. One of these was a pair of dragons, hence the label.

This type became sought after on the island of Borneo, favoured by many indigenous groups such as the Kelabit.

Soon after James Brooke brought Sarawak under British rule in 1841, migrant Chinese craftsmen started to set up their workshops to satisfy local demand for dragon jars. Preliminary data show that these vessels were traded from the coastal towns of Brunei and reached the Kelabit Highlands by the waterways of inner Borneo.

Questions and methods

The primary aim of the project was to survey, document and protect known and previously unknown dragon jar cemeteries in the southern Highlands area. Detailed typological data was collected in the field which then was compared with museum collections in Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei.

Old heirophant dragon jars of family possessions were also described from longhouses. Building up a typological database will help in the analysis of the distribution of different vessel types. By looking at these patterns we are aiming to answer questions such as:

What types of dragon jars were favoured by the Kelabit people? What makes a jar 'valuable'? How did the tradition of dragon jar cemeteries become established in the Kelabit Highlands?

The Cultured Rainforest Project

The Cultured Rainforest Project investigated long-term and present-day interactions between people and rainforest in the Kelabit Highlands of central Borneo (Malaysian Sarawak), so as to better understand past and present agricultural and hunter-gatherer lifestyles and landscapes.

The project had three main strands:

**Anthropology** Studied oral histories and collected information on present-day relationships between people, the landscape, and the past as people remember or imagine it.

**Archaeology** Surveyed and excavated selected monuments to reconstruct the lives of people living in the highlands in the past.

**Palaeoecology** Analysed fossil pollen in sediment cores and from archaeological sites to document the long-term history of the rainforest and human impacts upon it.

The core study area was the Upper Keppelang valley. The fieldwork took place between 2007 and 2011, and was based mainly in and around the village of Pa’ Dalih.

Acknowledgements and Further Information

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The Cultured Rainforest Project: long-term human ecological histories in the highlands of Borneo will be available from the Sarawak Museum and international bookstores.

www.culturedrainforest.com Leaflets, articles, view archive photographs, illustrations and audio-video recordings.
Heirloom Jars

These large stoneware jars represented exceptional technical skill and had a very different appearance to locally produced earthenware. As it was difficult, expensive and often dangerous to acquire them, these vessels soon became prestigious and highly valued items by local communities.

Dragon jars were used to brew rice wine in large quantities for feasts and funerals, and became ossuaries for the bones of the dead. They also served to display status and wealth together with bronze gorgets and glass beads. The most prestigious jars were handed down for many generations.

Following the conversion of the Kelabit to Christianity in the 1950s, dragon jars lost their high rank among material objects and were regarded as mementos of the past. The majority of these vessels were sold to antique dealers in coastal towns. However, many families in the Highlands kept them for their sentimental value and for storing rice and fuel.

Siaa Effie of Pa’ Dalih with her heirloom jar.

Myths and Legends

Myths and legends were associated with certain objects; some dragon jars were believed to have their own, sometimes unpredictable personalities.

The oldest jars were believed to be ‘alive’, and to possess spirits (adsa). They were said to roar, and stories were told about jars eating leaves.

Some of them were considered dangerous, and capable of eating children. One jar in the longhouse of Long Lellang used, according to Telona Bala of Pa’ Dalih, to be kept in a separate building because it possessed a dangerous spirit. Such jars were also, however, linked with the prosperity of the family who owned them. Only very high status - very ‘good’ - families possessed such powerful jars.

Family with their heirloom jar in the 1950s.

Jars might be passed down either to daughters or sons, but more often to sons.

Distribution of Dragon Jar Cemeteries

Dragon jar cemeteries are mostly located in the vicinity of old longhouse sites. Many are within walking distance of current villages. The vessels were either placed in clusters or in rows, each burial ground consisting of around 15-25 funerary jars. A single jar normally contained the remains of one individual. As the vessels’ neck was too narrow to allow the body to be introduced whole, the tops were usually cut off before use as coffins and later re-sealed. The jar then was placed in the burial ground in the forest. From then on nature took its course, with falling branches smashing the jars. They would slowly deteriorate and eventually disappear under the lush vegetation.

Dragon jar cemeteries in the southern Kelabit Highlands surveyed by the Cultured Rainforest Project 2007-2010.

Help protect and preserve the cultural heritage of the highlands.

When visiting cultural sites act with respect.

It is illegal to disturb, damage, or remove material and cultural remains (Sarawak Cultural Heritage Act 1993).

Dragon Jar Cemeteries

People in the Kelabit Highlands practiced secondary burial rituals for some of the dead until the mid 20th century, when they became Christian and changed their burial practices. When a person died, the body was placed in a wooden coffin or a sealed dragon jar and kept in the longhouse for a year or two until the flesh decomposed and only the bones remained.

During this time, relatives of the dead family member prepared for the funeral, organising a lavish feast for the larger community. After the necessary rituals were carried out, certain bones of the deceased - the skull, the big toe bones and the thumb bones - were selected and placed either in the same or in a new dragon jar. The vessel then was taken to the burial ground for its final resting place, sometimes accompanied by other locally made or trade ware ceramics.

The Cultured Rainforest Project surveyed eight dragon jar cemeteries in the southern Highland area.

The majority of vessels in the cemeteries date to the late 1800s or early 1900s. Metatabar jungles were produced in many styles, a pair of dragons appears to be the most represented among funerary vessels.

Dragon jars were usually placed in clusters in the forest, mostly near large rock outcrops and/or stone jars and slabs in the cemeteries called menatak.

Sometimes dragon jars were found within stone slab-structures or even tied to the branches up in a tree, as it can be seen in this photograph taken in the 1940s near to the village of Long Bawan, just over the border in Kalimantan.