Changing Material Culture

Access to Global Products

In the second half of the 20th century, getting to the Kelabit highlands became much easier. The airport at Bario began operating in 1962, allowing people to travel much further afield, and more recently logging roads have connected the remote interior regions to larger towns on the coast, such as Miri.

For the modern Kelabit, it is now possible (although sometimes very difficult) to drive all the way to Miri by 4WD truck, and load up with almost anything the world has to offer.

Access to global products led to some traditional things falling out of fashion, and being replaced by modern alternatives. Instead of spears and blowpipes, guns are now used for hunting; instead of clay cooking pots, now there are factory-made metal pots; Manchester United T-shirts, and petrol scooters are becoming a common sight. Gongs and jars are no longer seen as prestige objects (although there is still the suspicion that they might roar).

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 Kelapang 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.
Changing Material Culture

Exotic Goods in the Past

For traditional Kelabit society, acquiring imported goods was a sign of importance and wealth. Brass gongs and dragon jars from other parts of Southeast Asia or China, and beads from as far away as Venice have all been found in the Kelabit highlands.

These items reached the highlands via the kingdom of Brunei. Archaeology has shown that most date to the last 700 years when trade between Brunei and China was at its height.

A valuable carnelian bead in the possession of a family in P’Dalaih

Travel across the mountainous terrain and through neighbouring groups was difficult and time-consuming, bringing in things from outside the region was complicated to organise, and expensive.

This meant that owning exotic objects was rare and a way of demonstrating status - only the most senior families were able to do this.

Kelabit man showing his collection of dragon jars in the 1950s

Materials from the forest included wood for building and craftwork, wood bark and animal skins for clothing, leaves of various plants for thatched roofs as well as for wrapping and cooking food, animals to provide clothing, ornaments and food, clay pots and最重要ly bamboo and rattan.

These two versatile materials were used in many different ways - woven into baskets, backpacks, and rice-winnowing trays, carved into domestic objects such as water holders and cooking utensils, as well as for larger things like shelters, rafts and bridges.

Mixing the Old and the New

The Kelabit pride themselves on being innovative, and have always been keen to experiment with new ideas. Since the 1960s, the rate at which new materials, skills and ideas have been arriving has increased dramatically, but the Kelabit have used these things in their own particular way.

While most households have objects made from plastic and glass, there is still a thriving tradition of skills being used to work imported materials.

Sometimes this is because they are more durable; electrical wire sometimes replaces rattan in making temporary bridges for example, and it is common to see a basket made of bamboo but bound with nylon.

Traditional hat-making with modern materials

And sometimes this is because they are functional and attractive: the traditional hat used as sun protection when working in the fields, can now be made waterproof and colourful by tailoring and stitching on an empty washing powder packet.

Shah Siem Paran wearing a sun hat

Completely new tools and skills have come in too: while the jungle knife (tongko) is still carried by most men almost all the time, there are now many experts and frequent users of the chainsaw.

Changing Material Culture

Traditional Use of the Forest

Kelabit society was until recently heavily dependent on the immediately surrounding environment as a source of materials for the production of everyday objects. Without much access to the mass-produced materials and commodities of the industrial world, almost everything had to be made from what was available nearby.

Not only was the forest a source of useful substances and materials, it was also a site of iyal - life force or power. The ‘big forest’ was almost entirely the domain of men, who confronted and brought back that power, through craft materials, wood and above all meat.

Map of the southern Kelabit Highlands showing logging roads connecting the highlands to the coast and the location of a new footbridge connecting P’Dalaih with Indonesia.

Longhouse in the 1950s with palm leaf roof

New house being built with a zinc roof

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Kelabit man showing his collection of dragon jars in the 1950s

Beads were seen as natural rather than man-made, and strung into necklaces or woven into caps.

Brass gong

Dragon jar

Along with brass gongs and dragon jars, they were believed to carry special power - iyal - and were kept in the same family for many generations. These objects were thought to be alive - jars were sometimes heard to roar!

Ladies inspecting bead necklaces