The Cultured Rainforest Project

Settlement Histories of the Upper Kelapang Valley
Archaeological, Anthropological and Historical Approaches

Ruma Ma'on

Across the valley bottoms and ridge tops of the Kelabit Highlands are hundreds of sites known as ruma ma'on - 'past longhouses'. Many sites have names and are associated with known ancestors in the recent past. For other named sites, it is not recorded in the oral histories who lived there or when. Many are simply known as ruma ma'on.

How long have people lived in the highlands, how were they living and what impact did they have upon the rainforest landscape?

Linking the present to the past we combined palaeoecology, archaeology, history and anthropological approaches.

The Mytical Past

From the mythical past is the mountain ridge called Ruma Batu - 'stone longhouse' - which is said to have once been a longhouse, turned to stone when people living there laughed at a frog. This is associated with Kelabit origin stories which say that people first lived on a flat plateau above the Dit waterfall.

Ruma Batu 'stone longhouse' in the far background with the present village of Pa Dalih

Ancient past

Changes in sediment cores with signs of burning and the pollen of wild rice and fruit trees suggest that people may have been living in the highlands for at least 6,000 years. From 2,800 years ago, there were repeated forest burnings, and from 2,300 years ago there is evidence of intensive exploitation of sago trees probably in order to harvest the starch from them, although their young hearts are also eaten as a vegetable or snack.

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.
Ruma Ma'on Taa Payo

The earliest archaeological settlement sites are 2,300-1,500 years old. One large open-air site close to the Kelapang River has unique remains of what appear to be stone walls of houses or enclosures - the name of the site means 'Old Settlement of the Deer Enclosure', as people say deer were once kept here.

The Remembered Past

Until the early 1970s, longhouses were moved to new sites every five to ten years. Built mainly of rattan and bamboo, they needed frequent replacing; or a dispute would result in one group moving away to build a new house. A run of bad harvests or illness could also prompt a move.

Genealogies can be traced back to the early 1800s, and one Pa’ Da’ih family history has been traced back through ten longhouse sites stretching back to the late 1800s.

Longhouses left marks on the landscape and rainforest. Large stands of useful plants like giant bamboo and da’un iap (for roofing and wrapping cooked rice) are often found at old settlements. Fruit trees were also planted. The same locations were repeatedly used with intervals of decades or up to one hundred years.

Henry Lagang with a da’un iap stand planted by his grandfather

Ridge Top and River Terrace Settlements

Longhouses were built in two locations: on river terraces or ridge tops. River terraces were close to river channels used for wet rice cultivation. Oral histories say that when head-hunting raids were rife, the longhouse would be moved to the top of the high ridges for protection.

The end of the 1800s was a particularly troubled time with many raids between the Upper Kelapang and the Karayan over the Apad Uat range. After peace was established in the early 1900s, longhouse sites were moved down to the rivers again.

Old and modern settlements in the southern Kelabit Highlands surveyed by the Cultured Rainforest Project 2007-2010.

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~ 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).

Recent Settlement Patterns in the Highlands

The second half of the 20th century saw many changes to life in the Kelabit Highlands. An airstrip opened in Bario in 1962 and radically changed life.

During the 1962-1966 Confrontation between Malaysia and Indonesia, longhouses close to the border were encouraged by the government to move to Bario.

In 1972-73 the Pa’ Da’ih longhouses were built, bringing together people from the communities of Lain Saog, Pa’ Da’ih, Pa’ Da’ian and Batu Patong.

Longhouse Life Today

Kelabit settlements, longhouses and architecture continue to change. Kelabit longhouses are notable for being very open-plan. They now incorporate private rooms where people sleep, store the greater number of possessions they have, and increasingly use as sitting rooms and watch TV.

While longhouses were rebuilt regularly only the huge hand-made planks were re-used. Nowadays, longhouses last decades and more permanent materials including planks cut with chainsaws and zinc roofing is used.