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Dynamics of cultural heritage development in Sarawak

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Abstract
This paper discusses contestation and legitimization in the heritage process in the Malaysian state of Sarawak. Since 2011 the authors have assisted the Rurum Kelabit Sarawak (RKS) to plan a community museum. The museum is envisaged as an anchor for the preservation and representation of the Kelabit culture. In particular, through consultation and capacity building, the project is seeking to incorporate heritage values into development and cultural tourism plans. The paper considers the roles of historical and contemporary agents in the awakening of heritage consciousness in this community. This process has facilitated questions about priorities including, heritage, tourism, representation and the expression of identity through contemporary design, which this paper will contextualize within the discourse of cultural heritage and development in South East Asia. Apart from the RKS and their range of partners, important agents include the Sarawak Government, with jurisdiction over native customs; the Sarawak Museum Department, an official custodian of cultural heritage; UNESCO, through its promotion of the rights of indigenous people and the integration of culture and development; and the WWF, assisting with the Heart of Borneo conservation project. The authors see this case study of a community museum development process as an opportunity to reflect on the interrelated and contested roles and responsibilities of local, national and trans-national agents in a heritage project that contributes to an understanding of cultural politics and heritage-making.
Introduction: heritage from fragments

This paper reports on the development process of a community museum led by the Rurum Kelabit Sarawak (RKS), which is a peak-body that represents the least populous indigenous ethnic group of the Malaysian state of Sarawak. The Kelabit Highlands Community Museum Development Project (KHCMDP) is located in the village of Bario, 1000 metres above sea level in the Kelabit Highlands of North Central Borneo. This is an example of heritage-making that incorporates conservation and development aspirations and is being shaped by historical legacies and contemporary issues and developed through negotiation with local and international actors.

The Kelabit Highlands Community Museum Development Project (KHCMDP) was conceived in 2011, when a Deakin University team from the Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific was invited to assist the Rurum Kelabit Sarawak (RKS) in the process of developing a community museum. The RKS is a cultural organisation that was registered in 1994 under the Law of Malaysia, Societies Act, 1966. This organization is closely aligned with the traditional system of village governance through longhouse Headmen, which is maintained and respected by the community. Additionally, the Kelabit community is currently represented in local government in the Baram District Council. Thus, a network exists that provides the community with an internal source of professional resources, and perhaps influence. To date a number of campaigns have been jointly conducted in the Highlands that have involved extensive community consultation and capacity building. An assets and resources scoping exercise has been completed, and architectural designs are being developed.1

The Kelabit are an indigenous people whose traditional homelands straddle the Malaysian and Indonesian border of North Central Borneo. There are approximately 6000 people who identify as Kelabit worldwide, with the majority currently living at the mouth of the Baram River in the oil rich coastal city of Miri. Some locally based members of the community are associated with the Shell Oil Company, which has an historic century-long tie to the city since the drilling began there in 1910. Others in Sarawak are distinguished

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politicians, academics, medical practitioners, lawyers, and businessmen and women, with experience in negotiating the economic landscape of Sarawak and Malaysia.

Over the past few decades the multi-lateral international agenda concerning the rights of indigenous peoples has enhanced confidence in the local community and indirectly supported the interest in heritage initiatives. A number of key United Nations (UN) resolutions–supported by Malaysia–have provided some encouragement. For example, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007, provides in Article 5 a principle that asserts the right of indigenous people to pursue the preservation and development of distinct cultural institutions, whilst continuing to participate fully in the nation state. And, the Second International Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples (2005-2015) lends ongoing support for the promotion of effective indigenous participation in the decisions that directly or indirectly affect their lifestyles and the values of traditional lands and territories. Following on from this, UNESCO is pursuing initiatives in understanding local and indigenous knowledge systems, which have implications for sustainable development.

In this paper, the authors, who are participants in the museum development project, see the development process of this museum in the context of the cultural heritage discourse in South East Asia, which has been facilitated in part by UNESCO. In particular, two theoretical ideas commonly discussed in this discourse are important. The first idea, which is relevant to the management of heritage, is also pertinent to the project as it asserts that heritage values and expressions of cultural identity need to be prioritized by actors within the local community but recognizes that this does not occur in isolation. This is especially so in these circumstances, where heritage politics is critical to the fabric of the nation state of Malaysia, into which minority ethnic communities have been placated. For the Kelabit the definition of ethnic identity is complex: in law it is most sharply defined as ‘native’ but most are also practicing Christians, a minority religion in the predominately Islamic Malaysian state. The location of their home village, Bario, close to the border of Kalimantan, further accentuates the perception that they passively exist on the peripheries of the modern Malaysian nation

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state, even though many Kelabit are active in contemporary Malaysian society. As a result, critical factors concerning the dynamics of cultural heritage development in Sarawak include the survival of some traditional indigenous values, the overlay of Christianity and Western epistemology, the impact of land management and the need for economic development in their homeland.

The second proposes that local conservation processes and practices ought to arise from a continuity of traditional activities and resist the imposition of Western models that may not be appropriate. This has antecedents in the post-colonial Malaysian political heritage discourse in the 1970s during which there was a strong government push for locally derived conservation systems and practices.\(^5\) More broadly, this principle is plainly negotiable according to particular circumstances but in this case it may be at odds with a strategy to create a museum in the Kelabit highlands. This is especially so when, as in this case, the heritage-making process naturally flows out of an internalized experience of modernity, which responds to a major rupture with the continuities of the past and in which a global discourse of cultural heritage conservation has been increasingly influential over at least two generations. The Kelabit experience sits in contrast to circumstances where traditional activities survive through the continuity of long-maintained structures and practices and can be integrated into conservation management systems, such as for example in the case of Buddhist monasteries of South and South East Asia.\(^6\)

While local approaches are desirable, this project asserts the need for greater sensitivity to the diverse experiences of indigenous cultures and thus of appropriate conservation strategies in the region. Furthermore, it may be the case that the resources for heritage-making may not be available within the local community and may indeed need to be developed through strategic partnerships. The process of heritage-making being undertaken by the Kelabit knowingly incorporates trans-national and global strategic approaches to heritage conservation, cultural and economic development and appropriate design representation. It responds ever-so diplomatically to local political circumstances, through engaging with a range of agents outside the community.


Conservation and the cultural landscape in Borneo

A heightened sensitivity to the perceived threats to Kelabit identity is one of the immediate antecedents of the quest for a community museum. In the last 30 years there has been contestation over access to and control of natural forest resources in Borneo. Consequently Kelabit intellectuals have been active in seeking to establish the community’s traditional connections to the land.

In this respect, the importance of UNESCO to Kelabit heritage-making can also be felt in a tangible way. Stretching up-country beyond the palm oil plantations that dominate the hinterland around Miri is the Gunung Mulu National Park that in the year 2000 was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List for its biodiversity and karst features. This is in close proximity to traditional Kelabit lands and approximately 100 kms south east of the park is the highland town of Bario, which is regarded as the base of the Kelabit spiritual homelands. Additionally, the village of Bario has great personal significance to a generation of Kelabit because during the Confrontation in the 1960s many surrounding longhouses were relocated to the valley under the protection of Commonwealth military forces. Subsequently, from a single longhouse community Bario is now a constellation of seven longhouses that has grown into a regional depot serviced by an airport, telecommunications and the Internet, and since 2012, an unsealed road to the coast. There is currently a Government of Sarawak town-planning proposal to develop the town as a major regional centre.

In the highlands the Kelabit are famed for their rice production and are active forest hunters. While there is a diversity of personal circumstances evident in this small community, the urbanized and professional Kelabit comfortably maintain an affinity with rurally based longhouse communities – many maintain their interest in their traditional longhouses. This is rooted in the convention of communal longhouse structure and extended family associations. Thus, many Kelabit residents of Sarawak maintain very strong cultural and spiritual attachments to Bario, and significantly, for the interest in heritage-making, this is very much the case with the influential members of the RKS executive, some of whom were children growing up in and around Bario in the 1950s and 1960s.

The contestation over access to natural resources necessitated a response in which some members of the community have argued the case for land ownership. Leading this has been Dr Ramy Bulan, Senior Vice President of the RKS, a lawyer and academic based at the

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University of Malaysia. As Bulan pointed out in 2003, the Kelabit traditionally navigated the Highlands using established paths and local knowledge, but in the 1990s they were obliged to secure border agreements where access to land and resources were negotiated with their neighbours. This process required a formal process of defining territory, and the methodology for doing so foregrounded ‘the issue of the place of maps and mapmaking in a culture that not long ago knew only of mental maps’. ⁸ Due to the lack of written records, Bulan argued the case that the Kelabit have long cultural and historic connections to the land and needed to draw upon ‘factors of history, oral traditions, cultural practices, [and] permanent and semi-permanent marks on the physical landscape’; these ‘constitute records [that] must be taken into account in considering the question of the Kelabits’ connection to an occupation of the land’. ⁹ Recently too, survey and documentation fieldwork carried out by the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge, under the leadership of Graeme Barker, has sought to identify Highland cultural sites. Seeking to document the landscape as a ‘cultural and historical artefact’ has given more weight to understanding land usages in the Kelabit Highlands and provided additional possibilities for cultural tourism programs. ¹⁰

The global interest in forest exploitation in Borneo has also had some impact in promoting conservation. In 2006, after facing-down a proposal for the world’s largest palm oil plantation, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Governments of Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei committed to the Heart of Borneo declaration to conserve and sustainably manage the intact forests of central Borneo, which include the traditional lands of the Kelabit. The Heart of Borneo project has therefore facilitated the implementation of a range of transnational tourism programs that have focused attention on a range of cultural heritage issues. ¹¹

The Kelabit Highlands Community Museum Development Project (KHCMDP) represents the efforts of a minority indigenous community to harness heritage-making to assert their agency in a conservation process where the key priority is to retard the further erosion of distinctive forms of communication essential to identity, such as language, dance,

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¹⁰ K.L. Coates, ‘Forest of broken Urns. Borneo’s unexplored past is dying by the chainsaw’, Archaeology, March/April, 2007, p.34.
food gathering and other intangible heritage practices. As well the devaluation of these critical cultural practices the Kelabit Highlands is also subject to developments such as the mechanization of farming practices and growth of roads and traffic, which is following the exploitation of natural resources. This is challenging the heritage values associated with the cultural landscape in and around the town, as there has been no overarching systematic documentation of heritage values and no discussion of a heritage overlay to assist the development process. Thus, the museum project has gained cohesion in the community through reflecting a vision within the RKS that is being informed by deep community concerns regarding a number of important changes and respect for the integration of natural and cultural heritage values.

**Impact of Christianity**

In considering heritage-making in this context there is a need to be clear that the traditional cultural practices of the Kelabit have been significantly impacted by historical circumstances of the 20th century. This has implications for the prioritisation or privileging cultural heritage and the process of shaping the museum concept and its programs. Two dominant ideas – Christianity and epistemology – have tussled for authority in the prioritisation of heritage values and the representation of Kelabit culture. During the decades that followed WWII there was a cataclysmic rupture to the continuity of beliefs with the past which saw traditional heritage values submerged in favour of Christianity.

In understanding how the heritage-making process has absorbed Christianity the work of Poline Bala, a sociologist based at the University of Malaysia, Sarawak (UNIMAS) and a member of the Kelabit community, is most insightful. Bala has reported how between the 1950s and 1970s through embracing Christianity people were able to free themselves from the tyranny of evil spirits.\(^\text{12}\) This resulted in the transformation of values and attitudes from an indigenous pagan context into a concept of modernity, in which Kelabit identity was closely bound up with being both Christian and progressively modern. Anthropologist Matthew Amster has similarly investigated the community’s relationship with Christianity.

arguing that it profoundly increased the mobility of members of the community to urban areas and also altered the spiritual meanings of the landscape in the Kelabit homelands.\textsuperscript{13}

The Kelabit felt the impact of religion profoundly because of their relatively small population. The emphasis on education and progress embedded in western culture led the Kelabit to become more familiar with other organisations, such as schools, universities and museums, but it also meant that profound connections with the world of their ancestors were compromised. Unfortunately, in the process of embracing Christianity and vanquishing evil spirits, a great number of artefacts that had survived from before WWII were simply disposed of. So much so that in many longhouses there are now relatively few keepsakes that have been handed down through families.

**Heritage awakenings in the Kelabit community**

Before the 1940s, the Kelabit were for the most part isolated and they lived, according to the testimony of Tom Harrisson (a foremost source of documentation from this period) ‘in the least accessible area at the headwaters of the Baram River’.\textsuperscript{14} Although established trade routes were active to the coast, and this meant that foreign goods were traded up through to the highlands. Notably these goods included Chinese ceramics and ornamental beads derived from Southern India, things that gained high social significance in pre-contact Kelabit culture and still embody tangible and intangible heritage values for longhouse communities. In the main, however, Kelabit mobility was largely restricted to the highlands because the route to the coast was obstructed by the lack of navigable waterways - meaning that it took a month to walk to the coast. The Kelabit were further constrained by ‘the intricate pattern of head-hunting’, which Harrisson reported in 1949, may have included not only conflict with different tribes but also with adjacent longhouses.\textsuperscript{15} For at least a century, contact with the colonial government was limited. This was noted by Robert Pringle who researched the status of indigenous people during the Brookes Dynasty (the so-called ‘White Rajahs’ of Sarawak

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who governed between 1841-1941). He found that while members of the Iban tribes were actively involved in the administration the Kelabit ‘remained beyond effective contact’.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus, the Kelabit were amongst the last of the indigenous tribes of North Borneo to have any profound contact with the colonial government. This means that with a few exceptions during the 1930s, contact between the Kelabit and outsiders was limited, and much of the documentation about traditional practices begins from the middle of the twentieth century with WWII. British Commander Colonel John Chapman-Walker, commented in 1949 that Harrisson who led an allied commando force operating in the Kelabit Highlands during 1944 and 1945 established ‘a greater degree of control and administration of the natives than had ever been established in the interior of Borneo before the war, or was ever likely to be established for many years to come.’\textsuperscript{17} This had important ramifications for heritage conservation after WWII when Sarawak operated as a fully-fledged British Colony between 1946 and 1960. During this period Harrisson was appointed to the position of Government Ethnologist and Museum Curator at the Sarawak Museum in Kuching, and he became both an important advocate for the conservation of indigenous tangible and intangible cultural heritage in Borneo, and an important agent in promoting the role of museums for cultural development in the South East Asia. He and others applied systematic processes of anthropological and archaeological research to the highlands and this in turn influenced local (and international) attitudes and approaches to cultural heritage conservation.

It was during this period that Harrisson wrote extensively about his personal engagement with Kelabit culture, in particular in his memoir, \textit{World Within. A Borneo Story}, which provides an absorbing account of the wartime operations and describes Kelabit longhouse culture in detail.\textsuperscript{18} The museum was established in 1892 and it had substantial interaction with the Raffles Museum in Singapore and was active within the wider British museum system. Already by the end of the 1930s, the Sarawak Museum had established a reputation for facilitating scientific research in Borneo and disseminated this through the publication of the \textit{Sarawak Museum Journal}. The museum had also built substantial collections of indigenous artefacts, archaeological material and natural history specimens. In


\textsuperscript{17} Lord Rennel of Rodd, John Chapman-Walker, Woodrow Wyatt and E.A. Shackleton, Explorations in Central Borneo: Discussion, \textit{The Geographical Journal}, Vo.114, No.4/6, 1949, p.150.

his years as Curator between 1946-1961, Harrisson was personally involved in interdisciplinary fieldwork in the Kelabit Highlands, which included the mapping of cultural sites and fostering the documentation of Kelabit poems and songs. He also recruited new curators and with an aim to build capacity in museology locally. Museum curators that followed him continued to promote an awareness of indigenous culture. They included Benedict Sandin who in the late 1960s oversaw the installation of a reconstructed Iban longhouse in the Sarawak Museum, and Lucas Chin, who authored the book *Cultural Heritage of Sarawak*, published in 1980.19

In the traditional language of the Kelabit the word *teripun* means a safe storage place for food or possessions and it is the word that they believe most approximates the preservation activities of a modern museum. Despite the evident loss of material culture in the Highlands, resident communities do maintain long held attachments to various kinds of objects including ancestral heirlooms of social significance, some of which maybe very old indeed, and that these are affectionately cared for by individual families. Thus, there is little doubt that artefacts maintained significant meanings and functions in Kelabit society. There is, for example, historical evidence concerning the transaction of cultural material that supports this claim. The anthropologist and collector A.C. Haddon reported in 1900 that the local people had vested spiritual significance in stone implements for which they had a ‘high regard’, and which by his own account, made then very reluctant to part with them.20 Similarly, Harrisson, reported in 1968 that ‘it was big thing’ for him to have been gifted a rare Chinese ceramic vessel (c.15th century) by the Kelabit Headman, T.K. Anvi, of Pa Bengar, which was used in the ritual drinking of rice wine.21 In a number of longhouses artifacts are currently proudly displayed. In Kelabit culture prior to European contact we may assume a resemblance to those activities in Dyak longhouse communities in Kalimantan described by anthropologist Kristina Kreps, who has argued that these activities resemble a form of ‘curatorial practice’, which embodies a finely grained intangible heritage consciousness.22

Why a museum in the highlands?

The generation of Kelabit intellectuals pursuing the museum concept are not naive to the role of museums or the conservation aims of the curators, anthropologists and archaeologists that have been associated with them. Indeed, some community members had contact with Harrisson, which has been described to the authors as familial. The encounter and cooperation between the Kelabit and Harrisson and his colleagues during WWII is critical to the awakening of heritage that came later and represents a counterpoint to the influence of Christianity. These intellectuals began to reflect on the heritage values of their own pre-contact culture and to begin to find ways of incorporating them into a conception of contemporary Kelabit identity. The genesis of this process of rediscovery is expressed here in the words of the RKS Council Member and former Bario secondary school principal, Lucy Bulan:

I remember in the sixties when we started going to school, when almost everything was gone, that we discovered that even our dances were no longer being practiced, and then we started saying ‘surely not every thing Kelabit is wrong, it cannot be that every thing western is right, it cannot be that everything western is Christian and everything Kelabit is non-Christian, it can not be, there must be something in our culture that surely can be considered still good, not un-Christian, in particular’. So, very consciously, we bought back the dancers, which we had thrown away, and there were discussions, I remember, about what are the things that we could still keep doing and what are the sorts of things we must not do anymore …

Two key factors as they have been discussed in this paper, support the development of the KHCMDP. The first of these is the facilitation of the Kelabit community to take back ownership of their heritage and the representation of their identity. The second is to use this facility to contribute to development in the region, raising issues of sustainability and inclusivity.

To begin with, museums can play a role in the existing power structure of a society holding the responsibility for creating knowledge and representing the community, assisting the community in asserting its authority over the representation and commodification of heritage and associated knowledge of their region. More specifically, the KHCMDP provides the community with a medium to present tangible and intangible heritage as a representation of their cultural identity. However, cultural politics and contestation over the nature of the representations and differences between the notions of history as understood by the curators, policy makers and other stakeholders presents innumerable challenges.

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23 Interview with Lucy Bulan recorded in Bario, Sarawak, June 2012 by Simon Wilmott. Our italics.
The issue of the representation of Kelabit identity and heritage interpretation in the museum has also been discussed within the community aiming to reach a consensus on identifying key heritage values. Historically, the Kelabit have been represented in ways in which they have no real agency. For example, this was the case with the photographs of Hedda Morrison whose revealing pictures were taken within an anthropological tradition in Sarawak during the 1950s, when she gained privileged access to communities because her husband was stationed there as a government district officer. These photographs have circulated widely through publications and the Internet offering a view of the Kelabit longhouse rituals and practices. In one respect the museum project is applying contemporary museology to redress this imbalance and to harness the cultural heritage within the development process. Interestingly, it was recognized through consultation that because Kelabit history since the mid twentieth century has been profoundly shaped by external influences that have redirected the priorities and beliefs of the community, it was felt that this historical process required documentation and evidencing. It was suggested that museum programs should acknowledge the transformation that was influenced by the unique political, social and environmental conditions of Bario.

The process to conceptualize and plan the museum and therefore to represent Kelabit culture to a broader audience, is underpinned by the strong sense of a shared destiny, as well as the evident need to preserve cultural heritage and control representation. In part the process is providing a framework for the self-reflective articulation of Kelabit identity, but the community at large is also increasingly seeing the museum concept as a development opportunity. The potential of the community museum to strengthen and enhance the relationships between heritage preservation, education and tourism has emerged as a key motivation for the project. This has built upon previous cultural development work that has occurred in the town. The community museum is being considered as an additional component that fitted with the desire to develop the town centre as a commercial and cultural precinct. It is anticipated that it will enhance the existing complex used for congregation and recreation, incorporating the town hall, specialist shops and cafes. Conceivably the museum will become a symbolic representation of Kelabit identity while acting as an endorsed agent for strengthening social cohesion and cultural identity within the community.

The synergies between cultural tourism and heritage conservation are seen as a means through which to counter some of these changes, and to incorporate meaningful cultural and educational experiences into the processes of development. This is a global phenomenon. As noted by Canadian academic Lara Hill there is a broader take-up of this strategy across many indigenous peoples, where ‘cultural development has been fuelled by both the growing interest in heritage and diversity and the relevance of culture as a valuable commodity in an expanding global tourism market’. The RKS too believes that the KHCMDP offers a framework that provides a useful and appropriate model for rediscovering, documenting and celebrating Kelabit stories and experiences. As a physical entity and cultural organization the museum is conceived as anchor for heritage conservation and interpretation that has the potential to enhance the community’s agency in the representation of Kelabit identity. The museum and its associated activities are also seen as a means through which the heritage-making process can deliver much more than the one-dimensional commodification of indigenous culture that is sometimes associated with tourism in the region and that is commonly feared by critics such as Lindsay Weiss. In the process, however, the Kelabit are required to negotiate within an often-compromised social, economic and politically difficult context.

Therefore, the museum concept has come to be seen as having a key role in cultural tourism, as a destination to help orientate and shape the experiences of visitors and provide a centrally located gateway to other cultural sites and related services in the town and surrounding longhouses in the Kelabit Highlands. It complemented existing advancements made towards the growth and sustainability of the Bario region in recent years through tourism focused infrastructure in the form of homestays and guesthouses. Additionally, it could support the market for locally made traditional craft objects and souvenirs and the preservation of cultural heritage evident in the work of specialist multi-lingual interpretation guides. There is in other words a sense that the initiative will, essentially, invigorate the advancements already at play in the region as well as facilitate new opportunities. As Richard Sandell has argued museums have the potential to contribute to regeneration and renewal initiatives and assist a community to address its own needs. In this museum development

project extensive community participation and consultation has been critical to the process, with a view, as Robert Janes has argued, to fulfill a museums potential to create social capital, trust, empathy and meaning in the community.\textsuperscript{29} This means that it has a greater chance of making a sustainable contribution to community development and heritage conservation.

However, the ability of the Kelabit to define its heritage priorities is only one aspect of the program because a museum is a means of communication that is designed to engage visitors in an understanding of the community’s values, and the success of this is not given. The visitor may not necessarily passively accept the messages of the museum. Instead, visitors have a greater expectation to participate in meaning making through the acquisition both cognitive knowledge and the aesthetic experience of viewing and engaging with the art or artefacts on display.\textsuperscript{30} Defined as the ‘transaction’ of how visitors relate to the displays and the experience of engaging with the objects and artefacts, including the building, the interaction between the visitor and the museum is ‘capable of containing very significant meanings through the power of association and the semiotic power of the visual languages which shape them’.\textsuperscript{31} The aesthetic and social elements of the museum are essential to facilitating an active interchange with the visitor and for influencing their experience, thus theoretically providing the Kelabit with an effective means of gaining agency in the representation of their culture and identity. This is a difficult process that benefits (in our view) from a cross-cultural, interdisciplinary approach to contemporary museology.

**Conclusion**

In this paper we raise some methodological issues around heritage-making that have arisen from this case study, which are relevant to this conference discussion: Firstly, this project casts a hot light on the co-existence of indigenous and national identities, and in addressing its political dimensions it is necessary to discern the extent to which a disparity exists between the heritage values being articulated on the extreme edges of the nation and the


prioritization of central heritage values and development policies being pursued by state and federal governments.

To understand the effects of this process of post-colonial transformation requires understanding the legacies of colonial heritage policy as well as the events and actions that influenced policy formation, and this necessarily requires placing contemporary events in an historical context. In this contextualization we have drawn upon our own archival and field based research into the history of cultural heritage policies and practices in Sarawak and Malaysia and we have also consulted compelling analyses, including some published by academics and leaders from the Kelabit community.

Secondly, the genesis of a museum raises issues of sustainability and inclusivity. Integral to this heritage-making process is the operational planning of a geographically remote site museum, where currently conservation is the responsibility of a relatively poor agrarian community. The harnessing of local knowledge and traditional practices are critical. Nevertheless, it is hard to envisage a sustainable museum in circumstances where there are limited and inadequate resources available for the range of activities necessary for the conservation of cultural heritage, and where currently some of these are located within the private means of elite families or in dwindling long-house communities.

It is perceived that conservation efforts will be made more buoyant with the local integration of cultural tourism and natural resource based management and infrastructure development projects, including overlaying a modern town-planning scheme on the village. This reflects Bala’s observation that ‘for the Kelabit, their incorporation into Malaysia as a nation-state means engaging with Malaysia’s identity projects of modernity’.32 This suggests that while the Kelabit community has some agency in this process of heritage making there is also a raft of matters, including the ‘prism of religious discourse’ that necessarily require negotiation with parties outside the community.

To enable outcomes that respect local heritage values means that consensus within the community is essential, and at present it would not be unfair to say that this is undermined to certain extent by a lack of capacity beyond the leadership to adequately engage and participate in the project. Thus, the leadership of the RKS is tasked with managing the relationship between community consultation and policy development, and is the decision-making body that drives the project. Furthermore, there is sense gained from community

consultation that the younger generation are not as wedded to the Christian framing of traditional values that underscores Kelabit identity as their parents or grandparents may be. Therefore the extent to which the whole community can be bought into the museum development process and the ways in which the future programs of the museum will seek to be inclusive raise important issues concerning the sustainability of the museum.

Underpinning this project is an accelerated drive to conserve the cultural heritage of a fragile community, which is very clearly born of the community’s self-expressed need to address the continuing erosion of its identity. This means that because there is need to define and disseminate heritage values, questions concerning agency and influence necessarily impact on the processes of heritage interpretation and communication. To realize the representation of their identity it is likely that the museum will utilize site based and global digital technologies, but these too need to be considered and designed with audience and visitor engagement in mind, and this creates a circular process of moderation and evaluation that may slowly shape representation. Lastly therefore it is timely to question the extent to which multi-lateral and cross-cultural communications are seen to be critical components of contemporary heritage making in this context.