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Citation:
Sweet, Jonathan, Horman, Toyah and Rowe, Jennifer 2015, The community museum and the heritage of conflict in the Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. In Reeves, Keir, Bird, Geoffrey, James, Laura, Stichelbaut, Birger and Bourgeois, Jean (eds), Battlefield events: landscape, commemoration and heritage, Routledge, Abingdon, Eng., pp.189-199.

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Available from Deakin Research Online:
http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30080966
13 The community museum and the heritage of conflict in the Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo

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The Kelabit Highlands in the heart of Borneo are the traditional lands of the indigenous Kelabit people. In 1944, ‘Z Special Force’ member Major Tom Harrison (anthropologist, archaeologist and a member of Mass Observation) parachuted into the Plain of Bah, where, from the village of Bario, he organised and led the Kelabit people in a campaign against the Japanese. The isolated tropical highlands of Borneo had become part of the theatre of modern warfare. The memories of the events of World War II and later on the experiences of The Confrontation with Indonesia in the 1960s are still with the Kelabit people, vividly manifested in intergenerational stories shared between members of the community. As the elders with knowledge of life prior to and during these conflicts pass on, there is a strong desire to document the history of the Kelabit and to review the management of cultural landscapes associated with the memories and experiences of these conflicts in the Kelabit Highlands. The community sees the sustainable management of the landscape as essential to the preservation and representation of heritage values; values that are integral to Kelabit identity. They are also concerned to create a tangible facility through which to express their cultural heritage values. This chapter will contextualise and discuss initiatives that are being undertaken to document and prioritise the heritage of the Kelabit people, with particular reference to the legacies of these wars. It will consider how the decisions being made by the community are being shaped by the influences of the past, the perceived need to ensure the preservation of a distinct culture and the potential economic benefits of cultural tourism. This account is based on source material drawn from archival research and from fieldwork, during which the authors have worked directly with members of the Kelabit community in the process of developing a community museum and cultural centre.

When the heritage values of the World War II experiences of the people of Sarawak were discussed at the ‘Workshop on War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore’, in 1995, the emphasis was primarily on the experiences of the Malay, Chinese and Indian residents of the capital Kuching. The experiences of indigenous people received little attention, despite their engagement with wartime events. Furthermore, it is evident from more recent research that the experience of the
Kelabit during The Confrontation in the 1960s has added another layer of significance to the cultural landscape of the Kelabit Highlands.

This chapter addresses this by discussing the efforts of the Kelabit people of North Central Borneo to incorporate heritage values into a community development model that includes conservation and educational goals, and has been informed by the ideals of sustainable cultural tourism. This is seen as a way of building a meaningful and engaging means of managing a complex and contested landscape. Within this broader objective, this chapter highlights the intersections that have emerged between heritage values and the memories and legacies of remote, jungle-based warfare. The methodology is guided by the understanding that heritage construction is a process informed by the social, cultural and political contexts in which it is occurring. In this chapter, we argue that, since World War II, heritage awareness has been shaped in the community through the participatory process of dialogue and exchange between the Kelabit people and their friends and allies. As Gegner and Zino have asserted recently, 'the heritage of war... is not natural but contingent, and dependent on the work of those agents, who bring it into being and sustain it' (Gegner and Zino 2012: 2).

In Malaysia, the representation and memorialisation of experiences of war is evident in museums, and Ahmad (2015) has discussed some interpretations of the Japanese occupation. However, in the main the experiences of the Kelabit appear to be absent from this representation. The Kelabit people are a Christian minority in the multifarious Malaysian political system in which they are represented by the Rurum Kelabit Sarawak (RKS). In recent years this community organisation has sought to address the representation of their culture. They have facilitated collaborations with resource-rich partners in Sarawak and beyond who share development and conservation interests. These partners have included the University of Malaysia (Sarawak), with which the RKS has worked to utilise communications technology for educational purposes (in particular the e-Bario project); the Sarawak Museum, which has supported efforts to research and document movable cultural heritage; and the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge, which has surveyed and documented highland cultural sites under the leadership of Professor Graeme Barker. Barker’s interest in understanding the landscape as a ‘cultural and historical artifact’ (Barker cited in Coates 2007: 34) has very real ramifications for land rights claims and for cultural tourism in the Kelabit Highlands, and dovetails with the work of Dr Ramay Bulan (2003), who has argued for an analysis that takes account of intangible heritage traditions, to recognise in law the long-standing Kelabit connections to the land. Heritage-focused research and associated projects have therefore been supported by the RKS as a key way of fostering the development of the town of Bario and its surrounding villages. The Kelabit Highlands Community Museum Development Project, for which Deakin University, has provided assistance, is part of this loose constellation of heritage programmes. Evaluation has suggested that the success of these kinds of heritage management programme may be contingent on the degree to which they are incorporated into social networks and help to sustain relationships within the community. This community involvement underpins the conceptuali-
The community museum and cultural centre, which is intended to have a key role in the commemoration of the community’s experiences of war.

**World War II heritage values**

This research adds a new dimension to the discourse addressing the management of the heritage of war by considering the agency of a fragile community that is attempting to address the fragmentation and submersion of their culture and to construct a robust representation of identity. A key aspect of this is drawn from the heritage significance accorded to the alliance between the Kelabit people and the allied forces operating in North Borneo during World War II, and the legacies of this fellowship in the following decades. In 1959, Tom Harrisson wrote of this fellowship in the memoir *World Within. A Borneo Story*, and the biographical accounts of others have continued to reinforce the significance of this relationship in post-war generations.

In his memoir, Harrisson recounted wartime experiences in the Highlands as a leader of the Z Force commandos (Operation SEMUT). He documented essential wartime operations such as the initial establishment of relationships between the members of Z Force and the Kelabit through the use of commodity exchange (predominately parachutes); activities, such as the innovative communal construction of a bamboo airstrip; and the strategic support of local traditions, such as the taking of enemy heads. Reflecting on his experiences, Harrisson acknowledged his profound personal debt to the Kelabit people who, he wrote, ‘have looked after me, in war and peace, for years’ (Harrisson 1959: xii).

In his writing prior to the war Harrisson (1933) had promoted the scientific and cultural richness of Borneo, having undertaken an exploratory collecting expedition there in 1932. Indeed, he was privileged to get close to the remote Kelabit at that time because during the government of the Brooke dynasty (1841–1940) this small tribe had largely ‘remained beyond effective contact’ (Pringle 1970: 320). Their situation was distinct from that of the largest indigenous group, the Iban, whose lands were more accessible from Kuching. Some Iban were employed in the pre-war Brooke administration, and in some cases they continued to work in the Japanese occupation government. Kelabit attitudes to the sovereignty of their forest homelands also distinguished them from the coastal Malays, whose attitudes to the occupation (it has been argued) ‘were mostly ambivalent’ (Talib 2000, pp.135–6), and for whom the return to colonial rule after the war may have been tolerated as a prelude to national independence. From the mid-1940s, the experiences of the war and the impact of modernity were thus distinct for the Kelabit because, critically, the alliance they formed with allies during the war was clearly focused on vanquishing the Japanese occupiers.

**The Confrontation and transformation of identity**

A second phase of significant community transformation as a result of the experience of conflict was experienced by the Kelabit in the 1960s, and was a major factor in influencing a change in the cohesiveness of community identity. In
1963 Sarawak, formerly a British Crown Colony protectorate, was incorporated into the newly formed Federation of Malaysia. Indonesia laid territorial claims to parts of Sarawak, and the incursion of its forces into border areas and attacks against local tribal Dayak and other indigenous peoples constituted an undeclared war known as The Confrontation (Konfrontasi), which lasted until 1966. These events had a significant impact on the Kelabit owing to the tribe’s proximity to the Sarawak–Kalimantan border.

The location of the main Kelabit settlement of Bario in the Plain of Bah was again recognised as being of strategic importance amidst the challenging terrain, and Commonwealth forces utilised Kelabit Border Scouts in intelligence-gathering activities, because of their local knowledge and extended family networks. Bario became the operational centre for British SAS forces tasked with defending other Kelabit longhouses deeper in the interior. Small-scale air raids were launched by Indonesian forces and many Kelabit in the area were too dispersed to be properly defended, prompting the SAS to relocate a number of longhouse communities away from the border area and resettle them on the Bario plains where they were well protected from the enemy. This move had the effect of concentrating the Kelabit population into a more centralised community group and created an uninhabited frontier region to the east. Amster describes this as ‘a pivotal event that shaped local attitudes towards the border’ (Amster 2009: 317), and resulted in conditions that have been examined by Kelabit sociologist Poline Bala (2002). Bala has highlighted that local awareness of political allegiances and boundaries was minimal until The Confrontation, when land was granted to those Kelabit who had been relocated. Involvement in this new political environment and the imposition of constraints by the nation-state therefore signified a ‘key

Figure 13.1 Kelabit longhouses that housed Commonwealth forces during The Confrontation. In the foreground the remains of defensive bunkers are a reminder of the incursion of the Indonesian military.
transformation’ in social relations and cultural legitimacy whereby ‘people from across the border came to be viewed as outsiders rather than relatives (lun ruyung)’ (Amster 2006: 215).

Regardless of the separation between community members as a result of political divisions, markers of The Confrontation, such as defensive bunkers against the Indonesians and buildings that housed Commonwealth forces in Pa Lugan, still remain embedded in the landscape as a reminder of the incursion. Furthermore, families display with pride medals awarded by the British for military contribution and weapons used to succeed against the enemy, reinforcing the centrality of this event in the collective Kelabit identity. The lasting impacts of the events of The Confrontation and in particular the relocation of families fostered another level of connection to the landscape resulting from a process clearly marked by their involvement in military campaigns and their experiences of war.²

The awakening of heritage preservation in Bario

During the post-war British administration of Sarawak (1946–60), a missionary school was established in Bario and Christianity flourished. The impact of education was felt most profoundly during the 1950s, when the current Kelabit leadership were children. During this period, Harrisson stayed on in Borneo as the Government Ethnologist and Curator of the Sarawak Museum in Kuching from where – as a counterpoint to the work of the missionaries – he was an important agent in promoting the foundations of a modern concept of heritage conservation. Through his ongoing personal relationships and fieldwork in the Kelabit Highlands he raised heritage consciousness in the community; he was able to interpret movable and intangible heritage with authority; and he also developed local approaches to archaeological and anthropological research. Furthermore, he promoted the value of indigenous visual arts and music (later seen as ‘intangible cultural heritage’) as a foundation component of economic development, and proactively built capacity within the indigenous community to enable its representatives to participate in museum operations.

In Bario during the 1960s and 1970s the question of heritage started to emerge in the thoughts of a new western-educated generation who had adopted Christianity. Kelabit students became aware that there was a lack of continuity with the practices of their grandparents, and that some relatively benign cultural expressions appeared to be at risk of disappearing. As Bala (2009) has argued, Christianity enabled the Kelabit to free themselves from evil spirits and also to embrace a form of modernity but in the process much of the pre-contact culture was submerged. The desire to foreground some practices and assert these as cultural heritage underpins the thinking of the current leadership, and also reflects the wishes of the wider community. For example, in the words of a RKS Council Member, the former Bario school principal Lucy Bulan:

At the time this was happening I don’t think people thought about the kind of loss that they would experience. It is much later, 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 practised, and then we started saying ‘surely not every thing Kelabit is wrong, it cannot be that everything 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.

(S. Wilmot, personal communication, June 2012)

In the years since, this awakening has led to the realisation that the preservation of Kelabit culture necessitates the ability to more clearly articulate heritage values. Thus, the contemporary Kelabit leadership has pursued a heritage strategy in which they have encouraged the assemblage of traditional Kelabit culture, informed by Christianity and modernity, and within a framework that addresses contemporary social, political and economic issues. Bala sees Christianity as a direct outcome of the community’s involvement with outside forces during World War II and her work is a significant example of where high-level research is being conducted by community members that goes beyond the recording of historical facts to inform a much deeper understanding of the social conditions that have shaped heritage values. As a Kelabit woman, Bala’s research shows that heritage construction is a process in which the community itself is participating and has some agency.

An awareness of the significance of wartime experiences in the affirmation of heritage and identity has also been facilitated in the broader community through more recent external agents. The Malaysian Heritage Group commenced a well-publicised project to locate and preserve World War II aircraft, but perhaps more profoundly, direct exchanges with the Kelabit villagers include interactions with former Allied servicemen. In 1996 and 1997, Major Jim Truscott, an Australian serviceman working for the Special Operations Headquarters, researched *Voices from Borneo; The Japanese War* (nd), which focused on the experiences of Australian servicemen who had participated in Operation SEMUT and the Kelabit people who assisted them. Truscott conducted oral history interviews with wartime survivors and their descendants, a process that facilitated the sharing of memories and revealed the level of emotion that had been buried within the community.

In 2009 this was followed by a television documentary broadcast by PBS, which was titled *The Airmen and the Headhunters* (2009). It tells a powerful story of the crash-landing of an American plane in the Borneo jungle during 1944. Some of the crew were rescued and cared for by indigenous groups in the Kelabit Highlands and, with Harrisson’s assistance, they were eventually flown out of Borneo some months later. The film includes dramatic re-enactments of historical events and rare archival footage of Kelabit customs. Above all, however, the heritage significance of these events is reinforced through interviews with
The community museum

surviving American and Australian soldiers involved in the rescue, and local representatives who describe and interpret their memories or understandings of events. These first-hand testimonials showed that there is willingness within the community to express and share their experiences, which they have vested with heritage significance. The research also demonstrated that members of the community were willing to participate in the development of a cross-cultural discourse concerning the shared heritage significance of World War II, based on the values of camaraderie or fellowship that are embodied in these historical events. This is evidenced by the scene in the film that shows community members participating in the re-creation of the innovative bamboo airstrip, which was used to shore up the surface of the rain-soaked valley floor for the evacuation of the airmen by light aircraft.

Furthermore, the way that the community now chooses to remember those experiences is largely in a positive light, placing the Kelabit as victors remarkably free from the typical sufferings of war and beneficiaries of many highly positive aspects of interactions with their military allies. Wartime stories feature prominently in Kelabit recollections of past encounters with foreigners (Commonwealth allies) and are a source of pride and empowerment in recalling victories over their enemies (Japanese and Indonesian).

**Heritage, identity and development**

The social and economic benefits of tourism have invigorated efforts to address the preservation of Kelabit cultural heritage and to think strategically about sustainable cultural tourism in Bario. For example, the steady increase of young tourists interested in World War II has stimulated a discussion about the use of historical site markers in a context where the historical record is often not watertight, and accordingly there has been some debate about the location of the Harrisson memorial. Furthermore, young tourists are often quick to use social media to disseminate their thoughts and impressions of Bario, and there is now a plethora of amateur internet-blogs providing interpretations of wartime historical events and their significance to local people. Accordingly, the RKS and the Council of Headmen have identified a need to address issues concerning the accuracy of the historical record, including access to archival material, and the representation of their culture. In part to address this they have initiated and supported a study into the benefits of a community-managed museum that would provide a place to engage with Kelabit culture. The museum would help orient and shape the experiences of visitors, and most importantly act as an endorsed agent for strengthening social cohesion and cultural identity within the community.

As a strategy for managing a range of issues associated with the preservation and representation of Kelabit culture, in 2011 Deakin University partnered with the RKS to assist with the Kelabit Highlands Community Museum Development Project. The first stage was designed as a participatory scoping exercise to engage with the community and aimed to understand the level of interest in the concept and the nature and availability of cultural assets that might be utilised. Fieldwork was
Figure 13.2 Local resident displaying a parachute preserved in the Kelabit Highlands.
The community museum

Figure 13.3 Kelabit men discussing The Confrontation and their interactions with Commonwealth forces stationed in Pa Lugan during the 1960s.

Source: Sophie Turnbull.

conducted in Bario in June 2012 by a supervised group of cultural-heritage postgraduate students during which formal consultation was undertaken with a range of community representatives. These included the Council of Headmen, other community leaders from the Baram District Council and the RKS, and a range of longhouse residents. The community as a whole was interested and responsive and the researchers were provided with an opportunity to document tangible material culture and intangible cultural heritage, and to begin to understand the prioritisation of heritage values and the ways in which the community felt these might be most appropriately preserved and interpreted.

It became evident to the researchers as well that this enquiry had reignited an interest within the community to explore the question of Kelabit identity, and what it might mean to be Kelabit. The participation of community members in the consultation process, be it through discussion, display of keepsakes and items of spiritual significance or the sharing of stories, generated excitement and an evident pride in Kelabit culture. An integral component of their cultural heritage is the legacy of World War II and The Confrontation. During the fieldwork the researchers became aware that many objects from the conflict were being kept safely hidden away by community members: the preservation and discussion concerning of material culture such as military medals, Japanese swords and parachutes, is very clear evidence of the impact of island warfare and its social significance in the Kelabit Highlands. For the museum scoping exercise this reinforced the perception
important subject for the museum to address and that though the museum the community could manage their heritage interpretation and retain agency in the presentation of their experiences of historic events.

Conclusion

The incorporation of the experiences of Kelabit people during World War II and The Confrontation in the discourse addressing heritage and war emphasises the point that heritage construction of this type occurs through cross-cultural dialogue and exchange. In the first place, World War II figures prominently because it is considered to mark the real starting point of radical change for the Kelabit from a pagan to a Christian society, through which western education became available. Significantly for heritage preservation, the war led to a closer association with Harrisson and his concern to awaken cultural heritage acumen in the community during the post-war decades. Furthermore, alongside stories and artefacts that have been passed from one generation to another in a traditional longhouse context, the experiences of the Kelabit people during the Japanese occupation of Borneo have also been made accessible through modern technology, initiated by Allied servicemen and researchers. It is clear that experiences of war and the impact of these on the landscape are intimately woven into Kelabit memory and identity. The Kelabit Highlands Community Museum Development Project furthers the aspirations of the community to manage their heritage through a framework that integrates heritage conservation, community development and cultural tourism.

References


Notes
1 See for example, Bala, (2002).
2 For more detail on the Kelabit connections with the land see Bulan (2003).