

Religious Conversion and the Cessation of Megalithic Practice in the Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak

Nicholas Gani

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
gnicholas@unimas.my

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of religious conversion in the cessation of megalith building among the Kelabit people of the Kelabit Highlands in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. The religious conversion and the cessation of megalith building that followed are contextualised within the wider changes that impacted the local or native communities in the interior of Sarawak during the colonial period (1946-1963). More specifically, this article considers the impacts of Christianity on the Kelabit society, and demonstrates the incompatibility of the rituals of megalith or monument building with the ‘newly’ adopted Christian religion, which ultimately contributed to the abandonment of practice. This article contributes not only a better understanding of the cessation of the megalithic practice in the Kelabit Highlands, but also provides a portrayal of a local culture undergoing change during the colonial period of Sarawak.

Keywords: *Megalith, religious conversion, Kelabit, Sarawak, Borneo*

Copyright: This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, for non-commercial purposes, provided the original work is properly cited.

INTRODUCTION

Megalithic monuments constitute a unique cultural heritage of Sarawak in Malaysian Borneo (Chin 1980). In the Kelabit Highlands in northern interior Sarawak in particular, hundreds of megalithic remains, which are found in various configurations, have been documented (Cluny and Chai, 2007; Harrisson 1958a, 1958b; Hitchner, 2009). Archaeologically, some of the megalithic monuments have been dated to more than 2,000 years ago (Lloyd-Smith, 2012; Lloyd-Smith *et al.* 2017). Today, the megalithic remains and culture in the Kelabit Highlands are commonly associated with the Kelabit ethnic group of Sarawak. Among the Kelabit people, however, the making of megalithic monuments is no longer a practice that is seen today as the tradition was widely abandoned around the middle of the 20th century. Previous observers have linked the cessation of the Kelabit megalithic practice to the religious conversion of the Kelabit people. For example, Tom Harrisson, who observed what he described as “the *last* fully megalithic act” in the village of Pa’ Umor in the Kelabit Highlands around 1950, simply attributed the gradual end of the practice to “Christian pressure” (1958b, p.699, emphasis in original). Similarly, Talla (1979, p.489) mentions that following conversion to Christianity, “no one will ever throw a feast to construct *kawang*, *nabang* or megalithic monuments¹”. Despite that, the connection between religious conversion and the abandonment of the megalithic culture has never been adequately or thoroughly explained by previous researchers.

¹ Among the Kelabit, monuments were not just built out of stone, i.e. megalithic monuments. There are also non-stone monuments, or landscape modifications, such as the *kawang* (ridge canopy cuttings) or *nabang* (ditch cuttings) (see Harrisson, 1958a, 1958b).