



The eBorneo Knowledge Fair

Community Engagement for Impact

Vice Chancellor UNIMAS

F O R E W O R D

As the world prepares itself for the Industrial Revolution 4.0, the lessons learned by both the researchers and the community more than a decade down the road has now converged to the eBorneo Knowledge Fair. The fair serves as a platform for continued dialogue and interaction between the indigenous communities of Borneo and the relevant stakeholders on future development relating to the emerging knowledge economy.

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Community Engagement for Impact

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edited by

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CHAPTER SIX STIMULATING GRASS-ROOTS INTEREST IN HIGHLAND CULTURE

By Valerie Mashman and Roger Harris

The Highlands in the Heart of Borneo are home to several distinctive and related indigenous cultures. In Sarawak, these include the Kelabit, Lun Bawang, Sa'ban and Penan. In the neighbouring province of Kalimantan, Indonesia there are the Krayan, Brian, Merau, Berau or Sa'ban, Miyau or Lengilu', Nyibun and Potok (also known as Putok) peoples, all collectively known as the Lun Daye of East Kalimantan. In both Malaysia and Indonesia, these peoples exist as minorities within populations whose cultures and lifestyles are different from theirs.

According to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, cultural rights are of particular relevance for indigenous minority peoples given that they are culturally distinct from their neighbouring majority societies which tend to be politically dominant. Cultural rights involve protection for traditional and religious practices, languages, sacred sites, cultural heritage, intellectual property, and oral and traditional history.

The cultural rights of indigenous peoples are guaranteed in various international instruments. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is the foremost instrument on indigenous peoples' rights. It articulates how economic, social and cultural rights apply in the context of indigenous peoples, and it points out the necessity of considering their cultural rights in light of the principles of self-determination and non-discrimination. But what if a culture is disappearing? How can cultural rights be protected if indigenous peoples are unaware of the need to protect them?

National Geographic explorer Wade Davis suggests that westerners see traditional societies as failed attempts at modernity that are destined to disappear because they can't change. He argues that this is completely wrong. If the chief measure of success of a society is technological wizardry, then first world culture would win. But if the criterion is the capacity to thrive sustainably, and the world is moving in this direction, then first world cultures would fail. In a truly diverse world, he argues, the spread of beneficial technology, like the Internet, need not imply the assimilation and elimination of minority endangered cultures. For us at

the Knowledge Fair, we totally endorse this view. The following box describes how Kelabit culture is in danger of disappearing.

BOX 1 The case of the Kelabit community

The Kelabit community has undergone a period of rapid change over the last half century following its exposure to the outside world. Arising from the influence of missionaries and conversion to evangelical Christianity, many aspects of their culture have been discontinued. Their oral traditions previously celebrated the deeds of mythical and real heroes through epics and songs and they upheld their value system through an emphasis on the acquisition of wealth and prestige. Singing was a common form of entertainment before television became available.

The survival of oral traditions relies on repeated performances and the willingness of young people to continue the chain of testimony. But if a community has no interest in the transmission of their traditions, they will be forgotten. Kelabits now say that in the past, when they head-hunted, they had been under the influence of Satan, but as evangelical Christians, they now need to break off from all aspects of their past. The singing of epics used to be a feature of large festivals, such as celebrating childhood initiation, but these have now been modified as a result of Christian influence. In recent times, therefore, Kelabit epics have not been performed in public in their entirety. When the few singers who can remember fragments of epics and a few love songs pass on, there will be no one left to maintain the chain of transmission. Additionally, tribal paintings on the walls of the longhouse disappeared for a time as these evoked the world of spirits that was left behind with conversion to Christianity.

The Kelabit language is also in decline, with less than 1,500 native speakers, most of whom are beyond child-bearing age. However, the community uses written Kelabit for emails and SMS messaging, for singing in church and for scripture reading. Whilst the language is presently vibrant and alive in this context, with the elder generation passing away and people marrying into other ethnic groups and/or migrating out of the Highlands, its future remains uncertain.

Language plays a predominant role here as research shows that language profoundly influences how we see the world. Language isn't just a body of vocabulary; it's the vehicle through which any culture enters the world. A culture's terminology manifests its interest and concerns.

There are claimed to be around 6,000 languages spoken on Earth, of which half are not taught to schoolchildren, which in effect means that they are already dead, unless there is action to reverse the trend. This means that by doing nothing, half of humanity's cultural legacy will be lost in a single generation or two. That's why we launched Radio Bario in 2010 and showcased it at the Third Knowledge Fair in 2011. Malaysia's first ever community radio station, Radio Bario broadcasts to the local area around Bario predominantly in the Kelabit language. When we can get it onto the internet, it will broadcast to the entire Kelabit community – and to the world.

With the help of technology like this, traditional minority cultures have become more resilient than was ever anticipated, and they have survived in new ways into the modern era. For example, although Rodney Needham predicted in 1959 that the Penan were culturally doomed and they would merge and be assimilated by their neighbours, today the Penan are reading and writing their language on the internet and on mobile phones and using it for singing, prayer and Bible reading in their churches. The Penan people are ready to demonstrate and articulate Penan-ness, to any visitors; tourists, officials, journalists or academics, who come to see them. And they are doing this with the help of contemporary ICTs.¹ They are also using mobile technology to record their extensive traditional botanical knowledge and their traditional sign language.²

At the 2015 Knowledge Fair in Ba' Kelalan representatives of the Penan community discussed the challenges of hosting visitors throughout year, which causes problems for them in providing hospitality during the harvest season. They shared their experiences with other

¹ See for instance; <http://picnicwiththepenan.org/picnicwiththepenan.org/Welkom.html> and <http://www.borneopenanadventure.org/> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VomE4GN9Z6I>

² Digitalising and Preserving Oro, A Secret Signage Language of the Nomadic Penans in the Rainforest and Digitalising and Preserving Oro, a Secret Signage Language of the Nomadic Penans in the Rainforest.

communities and also exchanged concerns relating to tourism and village sustainability, the expectations of tourists as well as the expectations of the residents in terms of the cultural norms that they would wish visitors to follow.

The Knowledge Fair has also promoted increased awareness of oral history. Researcher Valerie Mashman presented part of a three part oral history together with the narrator Kelabit elder Malian Tepun to the audience, bringing responses from the conference elders. Ribuh Balang, another elder, responded with his version of the stories revealing the complexities and multiple layers to oral history. The interaction provided a new audience and a new appreciation of elders' narratives of the migrations of their ancestors. These were people who left visible signs on the landscape, fruit trees and stone graves menhirs, dolmen and rock carvings which provide crucial knowledge about ancestral lands that needs to be passed on, as they are threatened by alternative forms of land use by outside parties.

In addition to providing an international forum for the discussion of community problems relating to tourism and development, the Knowledge Fair also promotes Highland cultures and stimulates the actions, including research, that are increasingly required to ensure that they do not disappear. It also serves many other purposes. Artefacts such as artwork and handicrafts are essential visual expressions of any culture. In the Highlands, as elsewhere, they also provide important sources of income, especially for women. However, the skills that are required to produce handicrafts are being lost as they are not being passed on to the younger generation, who are often sidetracked by other attractions, often technological. If we can harness technology to help in the process of passing on traditional skills, then it's possible that young people might become more interested in taking them up. At the Knowledge Fair, we are doing just that, as you can see in Chapter X.

Sales of handicrafts at the Knowledge Fair are always brisk, which is one of the reasons the event is popular among the residents as well as the visitors. One benefit is that the products - such as traditional bead jewellery - are generally small and light-weight which makes them easy to carry and transport on the small aircraft that serve the Highland destinations and which have strict baggage restrictions. Being high-value / low-weight makes them economical

for e-commerce and air-freight, which is another aspect of the local economy that can be promoted at the Knowledge Fair.

For instance, Jenette Ulun, a Kelabit from Bario, operates a shop there from which she makes and sells her bead handicrafts. Beads are of great importance in the Highlands and are worn in a range of accessories and styles as necklaces, caps, belts and bracelets. They are popular as souvenirs among visitors and they serve well to draw attention to this important aspect of local culture. Jenette (spelling) learned her skills from her great-aunt and at a craft workshop during the Knowledge Fair, we were able to introduce contemporary designs to the local artisans who appreciated the opportunity to mix fresh ideas with their traditional approaches.

Seeing is believing, as they say, and there are excellent examples of individuals with cultural roots in the Highlands who are making a good living from their artistic pursuits. Stephen Baya is an accomplished artist who moved back to Bario when the internet became available which he could use to promote his work.³ Some of his most outstanding paintings were commissioned by anthropologist Monica Janowski to accompany her book about a Kelabit epic, named after its hero *Tuked Rini*. Stephen's paintings bring incidents in the epic alive for a new generation, as does Monica's presentation of extracts of the epic in print.⁴

Another example of the use of technology to promote the arts and work of a young Kelabit woman is Alena Murang. She is a prolific and multi-talented artist, musician, dancer and teacher with a passion for the arts of Borneo. She has travelled internationally, teaching, performing and show-casing both the traditional roots and dynamic vibrancy of the Highland cultures which she promotes from her website. Alena visits her elders in the Highlands to record the old songs that are being forgotten, which she then transcribes in order to sing and record them in a new way. The EP CD edition of her music is available at her website.⁵ She also chooses traditional images originating from the tribal mural patterns on longhouse walls of illustrious chiefs infusing fresh interpretations, meanings and currency.

³ See <http://junglebluesdream.weebly.com/> and <http://tuked-rini-online.niaspress.dk>

⁴ *Tuked Rini Cosmic Traveller* by Moncia Janowski NIAS press 2013. http://tuked-rini-online.niaspress.dk/?page_id=107

⁵ See <http://www.alenamurang.com/>



Blue Fling by Stephen Baya



Tree of Life by Stephen Baya



Hocus-Pocus by Stephen Baya



Alena Murang performs on the *Sape*



Did You Ever Think Of Me?

By Alena Murang



Alena Murang at the Rainforest World Music Festival 5 August 2016



Jenette Ulun and her beads



Kelabit elder Ribuh Balang sings part of an epic with the author, Valerie Mashman, present.



Bead-making workshop



UNIMAS Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor broadcast on Bario Radio during the Knowledge Fair

These examples demonstrate the opportunities for those with passion to broaden the audience for traditional art forms in a way that contributes substantially to the local culture and economy. The audience changes and diversifies with digital media and creates the cultural synergy to stimulate the re-creation of traditional forms. Technology supports this and the Knowledge Fair will continue to inspire new ideas and opportunities for making this possible. Technology can further intensify cultural dynamism towards new forms of expression that maintain its roots in tradition, thereby ensuring a freshness that will have greater potential for appeal among the youth.

The cultures of the Highlands have spawned a range of vibrant and unique art forms that continue to reflect their origins whilst simultaneously adapting to contemporary influences and opportunities. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have an important contribution to make to the preservation of artistic traditions as well as in promoting new forms of expression and the wider dissemination of visual and audio creations. The Highland Arts workshop at the Knowledge Fair addresses the problems and opportunities in cultivating the arts of the Highlands and how ICTs might be used to spur artistic pursuit among the Highland communities and to enhance indigenous art appreciation among a broader audience. The ongoing intent is to: assess the state of the Highland arts and cultures; identify any challenges in promoting them; present benchmarking research of how other communities have attempted to preserve their art and culture; brainstorm ideas and solutions; and agreeing an action-oriented agenda for further development.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

This book describes an innovative event that takes place regularly in the highlands of the Heart of Borneo. It showcases how research by Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) into the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has contributed, and continues to contribute, towards sustainable development among the indigenous communities in the Borneo Highlands and elsewhere in Malaysia. The eBorneo Knowledge Fair is a unique gathering of researchers, officials, professionals and community representatives that turns the concept of orthodox conferences on its head. By taking place within an isolated and remote community, it emphasizes the notion that community perspectives come first; with regard not only to the conceptualisation, design and implementation of research, but also to evaluating and making use of its results.

Engaged research is that which regards the needs of its audiences as paramount. Research impact is derived from satisfying those needs. The eBorneo Knowledge Fair targets both, and it is not solely an academic conference. Neither is this book an academic treatise, although researchers and academic institutions may find both the event and the book of interest. Written for the interested reader, the book explains why academic research often fails to see the light of day, and therefore rarely has any influence over those whom it might benefit. It describes the pioneering work that UNIMAS is conducting with its partner communities and how they are benefiting directly from the findings. The Knowledge Fair acknowledges that ICTs work best within innovative processes, but also highlights the necessity to innovate in order to conceive, design, create, test and replicate such processes. That's what the Knowledge Fair does and this book describes how it does it.

