

## MEGALITHIC AND NON-MEGALITHIC MONUMENTS IN THE KELABIT HIGHLANDS OF SARAWAK

*(MONUMEN MEGALITIK DAN BUKAN MEGALITIK  
DI KELABIT HIGHLANDS, SARAWAK)*

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### Abstract

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The megalithic and non-megalithic monuments of the Kelabit Highlands gained prominence in archaeological circles and in public eyes through the pioneering research conducted by Tom Harrisson from the late 1940s to the 1970s. From the mid-1970s to 2000, however, there was a lack of new archaeological research on the monuments of the Kelabit Highlands. This changed beginning in the 2000s with new interests in the monuments of the Kelabit Highlands in terms of their preservation and conservation (Cluny and Chai 2007; Hitchner 2009), as well as in archaeological research (Barker et al. 2008; Barker et al. 2009; Lloyd-Smith et al. 2010; Lloyd-Smith 2012; Lloyd-Smith et al. 2013; Lloyd-Smith et al. 2017). With new findings coming to the fore in recent years, this paper reviews the present state of knowledge on the megalithic and non-megalithic monuments in the Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak. This review is based on the study of existing literature and archival research, as well as archaeological excavations and surveys, and ethnographic research conducted in the field by the author. First, this article discusses previous archaeological research conducted on the monuments. Following that, this article discusses the chronology of the monument building tradition in the Kelabit Highlands and the typology of monuments. Next, this article focuses on the social contexts of monument building, as well as the cultural significance of monuments to the Kelabit people. By employing both archaeological and ethnographic perspectives, this article contributes a more holistic and nuanced understanding of a monument building tradition in the Kelabit Highlands that began more than 2,000 years ago and continued until around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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**Keywords:** Megalith, Monument, Kelabit, Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak

### *Abstrak*

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*Monumen megalitik dan bukan megalitik di Tanah Tinggi Kelabit, Sarawak mulai dikenali dalam dunia arkeologi dan masyarakat umum hasil daripada kajian yang dilakukan oleh Tom Harrisson dari akhir tahun 1940-an hingga 1970-an. Walau bagaimanapun, dari akhir tahun 1970-an sehingga 2000, monumen-monumen di Tanah Tinggi Kelabit ini kurang mendapat tumpuan kajian arkeologi. Keadaan ini telah berubah selepas tahun 2000 dengan adanya usaha yang baharu untuk memelihara dan memulihara tapak monumen di kawasan tersebut (Cluny and Chai 2007; Hitchner 2009), di samping kajian-kajian arkeologi yang terkini (Barker et al. 2008; Barker et al. 2009; Lloyd-Smith et al. 2010;*

*Lloyd-Smith 2012; Lloyd-Smith et al. 2013; Lloyd-Smith et al. 2017). Makalah ini membincangkan maklumat terkini berkenaan monumen megalitik dan bukan megalitik yang dijumpai di Tanah Tinggi Kelabit di Sarawak. Perbincangan ini adalah hasil daripada kajian kepustakaan, ekskavasi dan survei arkeologi, dan kajian etnografi di lapangan yang telah dijalankan oleh penulis. Pertama sekali, makalah ini akan membincangkan kajian-kajian arkeologi lepas yang telah dijalankan ke atas monumen-monumen di Tanah Tinggi Kelabit. Kemudian, makalah ini akan membincangkan kronologi tradisi pembinaan monumen, serta tipologi monumen yang terdapat di Tanah Tinggi Kelabit. Seterusnya, makalah ini membincangkan konteks sosial yang menjadi asas kepada pembinaan monumen dan kepentingan monumen-monumen tersebut kepada budaya masyarakat Kelabit. Dengan mengaplikasikan perspektif arkeologi dan etnografi, makalah ini menyumbang satu pemahaman yang lebih holistik dan terperinci terhadap tradisi pembinaan monumen di Tanah Tinggi Kelabit yang bermula lebih daripada 2,000 tahun dahulu, dan telah berlangsung sehingga pertengahan kurun ke-20.*

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**Kata kunci:** *Megalit, Monumen, Kelabit, Tanah Tinggi Kelabit, Sarawak*

## INTRODUCTION

No other Bornean people (as far as I know) have such an active megalithic life today or in the recent past. Indeed, the whole area is rich with a vigorous mythology of culture heroes and monsters and with complicated social competition and material exchange, centred on the priorities of those who pay for the monuments, which are superficially no more than 'loving reminders' of the late great (Harrisson 1954: 107).

The megalithic and non-megalithic monuments of the Kelabit Highlands (see Fig. 1) constitute one of the best known examples of funerary and commemorative monuments in Borneo. Distribution-wise, megalithic and non-megalithic monuments are found throughout the Kelabit Highlands (Harrisson 1958a; Hitchner 2009). First encountered and described by European colonial officers in the first half of the twentieth century (Douglas 1912; Banks 1937), they gained prominence in archaeological circles and in public eyes particularly through the research of Tom Harrisson from the late 1940s to the 1970s (e.g. Harrisson 1949, 1958a, 1958b, 1962, 1973, 1974). From the mid-1970s to 2000, however, there was a lack of new archaeological research on the monuments of the Kelabit Highlands. This changed beginning in the 2000s with new interests in the monuments of the Kelabit Highlands in terms of their preservation and conservation (Cluny and Chai 2007; Hitchner 2009), as well as in archaeological research (Barker et al. 2008; Barker et al. 2009; Lloyd-Smith et al. 2010; Lloyd-Smith 2012; Lloyd-Smith et al. 2013; Lloyd-Smith et al. 2017). With new findings coming to the fore in recent years, this paper reviews the present state of knowledge on the monuments of the Kelabit Highlands. This review is based on the study of existing literature and archival research (both primary and secondary sources), as well as archaeological surveys and ethnographic research conducted in the field by the author. Firstly, this paper discusses the previous archaeological research that has been conducted on the monuments of the Kelabit Highlands. Following that, this article discusses the chronology of the monument building tradition in the Kelabit Highlands and the typology of monuments. Finally, this article focuses on the social contexts of monument building, as well as the cultural significance of monuments to the Kelabit people of Sarawak.