



Cerita Perintis

PIONEERS' NARRATIVES

UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK

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From Hamilton...



To Kota Samarahan...

We accepted the UNIMAS offer. When Ian, the Dean, returned from his overseas leave, he was quite upset that our resignation had been accepted by the Acting Dean. We sold off our house, gave stuff to the local mosque, put our hardly used new Volvo on sale (all this while driving a beat-up Honda), and received sweet mementoes from our students. Zufar and Lisa were glum for weeks.

After a brief stint at the UNIMAS KL office, we landed at Kuching Airport. "Wow! This feels like a real exotic Borneo adventure!" cried an excited Lisa inside the university Pajero that was sent to get us. Our adventure begins. Needless to say, we bought our own Pajero soon after.

FROM MOUNT POPA TO SAMARAHAN PEAT FOREST

Dr Indraneil Das

The fateful call came when I was in Burma in 1998, climbing Mount Popa and looking for frogs in the isolated massive mountain located in the centre of the dust bowl of Mandalay. As usual, my mother had no idea where I was (and mobiles back in the day were the prized possessions of a few) and much later, I was (jokingly, I think) rebuked by Prof Charlie for not telling my mum where I was at all times!

The offer was treated with the utmost respect – not only had my pal from Harvard at the time (Stuart Davies), accepted a position at the Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation, but I had earlier worked in adjacent Brunei Darussalam for a couple of years. Additionally, the term 'biodiversity' then was a freshly minted term, derived from Tom Lovejoy's first usage of 'biological diversity' in 1980. The academic landscape being at the time populated by departments of zoology, botany, and their ilk, I decided to give it a shot.

It has been an honour and a rare privilege to be invited into the team of early contributors of a new public university, made amazing by its priceless location and people. We brought our experiences from New Zealand into UNIMAS, in much the same way we brought our Malaysian experiences into Waikato.

Zufar and Lisa had their fair share of experiences and challenges at St Joseph and St Teresa, picked up Bahasa Sarawak, and made life-long friends. They did return to NZ for upper secondary school and university.

Oh yes, we did move again – back 'home' to KL when we joined the private sector and later to be on our own. Today, all grown up with modest businesses of their own, Zufar and Lisa appear grounded and confident whilst retaining a global and intercultural outlook. Like us, they look back at Sarawak and UNIMAS with special fondness and gratitude.

Practical aspects of matters, however, are often more complex than mere wish – there were books to be shipped (herpetologists do not believe in travelling light), pets to be given for foster care, and the Lonely Planet consulted again for a last moment refresher on local sensitivities. The campus seemed indeed set in the middle of nowhere at the time – dusty access roads through swamps and *kampungs*, which no doubt, contributed to at least two staff leaving within a week! For many of those who remained, it was a love-at-first sight with the campus, its staff, and its mission.

For starters, it was a series of low rises – wooden bungalows really, connected with perfectly rainproof shelters, making a visit to see colleagues or to '*makan*' during a thundershower, a cinch. The small, lily-covered lakes, edged by forests, made the campus reminiscent of a resort, and it was with pleasure that I spent the first three months in the wooden quarters provided by the University for me to settle down.

Informal weekend get-togethers were organised in local bistros, where it was rumoured that beverages stronger than '*teh tarik*' were served. Lasting friendships were made with colleagues and others at the time, over meals, invitations to show expats the town, or even some out-of-station trips, the most memorable being to the then back of beyond Bario (where wild animal depicted on posters served as menu cards).

PUTTING MY BODY WHERE MY MOUTH HAD BEEN

Dr Michael Leigh

Having researched and written about Sarawak society and politics since 1962, and knowing so many good friends here, I was excited when told of the plans to establish UNIMAS. Visiting Sarawak in 1996, I contacted Dato' Dr Zawawi, who invited me to join his staff recreation event at the beach. There, he and Prof Charlie quizzed me at length about my ideas for a social science research institute at UNIMAS. From that day onwards I saw Dato' Dr Zawawi and Prof Charlie as the yin and yang combination of UNIMAS leadership. I could not help smiling as I recalled the apocryphal tale of Singaporeans designing two statues embodying polar opposites: one was Kwan Yin – the goddess of mercy, and the other was Kuan Yew.

Several weeks later I received a telegram asking whether I would put my body where my mouth had been and set up the Institute of East Asian Studies at UNIMAS. Unknown to me, the seaside conversation had been my job interview. This new role sounded much more challenging than anything the University of Sydney had to offer, so I leapt at the opportunity.

Upon arrival in early 1997, I asked Dato' Dr Zawawi if we could change the Institute's name from East Asian Studies to Borneo Studies. His curt reply was "Prime Minister Dr Mahathir said that UNIMAS should look east, to accord with national policy. Next question?"



A trip to Bario was made in late 1990s. A senior Kelabit woman, waiting to board a flight home, consented my request to photograph her.