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

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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*

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 monuments[1]". 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).

To address this gap, in this article, I explore in more detail the role of religious conversion in the cessation of megalith building among the Kelabit people of the Kelabit Highlands. The data presented in this article is based on the study of existing literature and archival research, as well as information gathered from fieldwork observations and interviews (both formal and informal) conducted as part of my doctoral research (Gani, 2021). The interview participants consisted of a variety of individuals, including both community leaders and ordinary villagers, who are knowledgeable about the megalithic sites in the local area and the past megalithic culture of the local people, and/or have past or present engagements with the megalithic remains. These include people who are well-versed in the local culture and oral history, people who have been involved in local land and heritage activism (for example, individuals who have been actively involved in community-based efforts to record and conserve local cultural sites) and the tourism industry (village homestay operators and local guides), and farmers and hunters who frequently encounter megalithic remains located on farmlands and in the surrounding forests. My field interviews were carried out in Malay or English, or a combination of both languages. As most locals are fluent or at least have basic competency in either one or both of these languages, I did not employ any translators or interpreters in this research. The interviews were conducted in diverse settings: in the homes or villages of informants, at village shops, or while making visits to megalithic sites.

This article first introduces the Kelabit as an ethnic group in Sarawak, and their megalithic culture. Next, the changes that impacted the local or native communities in the Kelabit Highlands during the colonial period (1946-1963) in Sarawak is discussed in order to provide the contexts to the Kelabit people's religious conversion and the cessation of megalith building that followed. 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 the practice. The Kelabit attitudes towards the megalithic monuments after Christianity is then discussed. Despite the distancing of the Kelabit from the megalithic monuments that occurred after the religious conversion, I point out that in more recent years, there has been a growing appreciation of the megaliths as a cultural heritage of the Kelabit people, leading towards efforts to preserve the megaliths. 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, and highlights the continued, albeit changing, relevance of megalithic monuments in Borneo today.

THE KELABIT AND THEIR MEGALITHIC CULTURE

The Kelabit is an ethnic group that can be found predominantly in an area called the Kelabit Highlands in the northern interior of Sarawak in the Miri Division. Located in the extreme headwaters of the Baram, the Kelabit Highlands is a highland plateau that is drained by two upper tributaries: the Dabpur and Kelapang rivers. In the west, the Kelabit Highlands is bordered by the Tamabu Range, and in the east by the Apad Wat Range, which also serves as part of the international border between Sarawak and Indonesian Kalimantan. Besides the Kelabit Highlands, which is deemed to be the traditional homeland of the Kelabit (Bala, 2016), Kelabit communities can also be found in the Madihit and Seridan river valleys. With an estimated population around 9,000 people in 2008, the Kelabit is one of the smaller ethnic groups found in the state of Sarawak (Bala, 2016).

Linguistically, the Kelabit language belong to the Dayic sub-group (also known as the Apo Duat group, see Hudson, 1978) of the North Sarawak language group (Blust, 2010; Smith, 2015). Traditionally, the Kelabit are a longhouse-dwelling people, whose economy is based on diverse agriculture. Rice, grown in swidden and wet fields, is the most important crop and is consumed at almost every meal. The centrality of rice in the cultural and social spheres, particularly among the Kelabit, has been previously discussed by the anthropologist Monica Janowski (1991, 1995, 2003a). In more recent times, the mechanisation of rice farming and the commercialisation of rice

has made it an increasingly important economic crop (Bala, 2016). Besides rice, vegetables and fruit trees are also planted. In addition to plant-based agriculture, livestock such as buffalo, cattle and chicken are also reared. The upland forest environment provides for the subsistence economy of the Kelabit, who hunt wild game, gather wild food plants, and fish in the rivers. Forest produce is typically gathered for domestic consumption, but is sometimes sold. A unique geological feature of the highlands is the occurrence of salt springs. The Kelabit are well known for their traditional salt production (Douglas, 1909b). Among the upland groups in northern interior Borneo, salt was and continues to be an important trade commodity (Egay, 2012; Gani, 2012; Langub, 2012). In the olden days, using salt as exchange, the Kelabit obtained iron blades and carved handles from the Kenyah (Murang, 1995, p.45; Schneeberger, 1979, p.77), as well as other goods such as mats, local pots, Chinese pots and gongs (Harrisson, 1959, pp.25-26). It has also been argued that salt production was one of the factors that allowed the Kelabit to achieve relative wealth and independence from outside control (Harrisson, 1959, p.25; Rousseau, 1990, p.161).

The pre-Christian belief system of the Kelabit people was animistic. Practices such as farming and hunting, as well as the construction and movement of longhouses, were governed by belief in omens communicated by animals and spirits (see Amster, 2009). Also, as is common among other Bornean ethnic groups, the mockery of animals is considered taboo, the breaking of which is believed to cause petrification (Rousseau, 1990, p.27). Mortuary and child initiation rites are "major ritual complexes" accompanied by communal feasting (Amster, 2009, p.314). The death of a member of the aristocratic class in the Kelabit society is typically commemorated by the construction of megalithic structures during secondary funeral rites (Harrisson, 1958a, 1958b). In the past, these events would have been accompanied by ritual animal sacrifices and offerings, and the drinking of copious amounts of rice beer. The secondary funeral or the secondary treatment of the dead is also a feature that distinguishes the Kelabit from their neighbours (e.g. the Kenyah and the Penan). However, after the Second World War, a spiritual shift occurred among the peoples of the Upper Baram when they converted *en masse* to Christianity.

Like other peoples of Central Borneo, traditionally the Kelabit are a stratified society (Rousseau, 1990). The hierarchical categories in the Kelabit stratification system can be divided into aristocrats or nobles (ruling and lower aristocrats); commoners or followers; and slaves (Lian-Saging, 1976/77; Talla, 1979; Bala, 2016). In this stratification system, social status is hereditary and leaders are members of the aristocratic class. However, as class status is also dependent on personal industry, character, accomplishments and the accumulation (and transfer) of wealth, social mobility is possible. This is why it has been argued that the Kelabit (and other related groups) have a less rigid social stratification compared to other Bornean groups like the Kayan and the Kenyah (see Datan, 1989). Traditionally, elaborate headhunting and death rites, which are usually accompanied by expensive communal feasts, constitute the field where members of the Kelabit society compete for prestige. As Rousseau notes, "maintenance of high status is linked to the performance of feasts with conspicuous consumption", and that within the Kelabitic system, there is a high social competition, where "leaders must compete for followers" (1990, p.209).

One of the features distinguishing the Kelabit from other groups of people in Sarawak is their megalithic culture, which consisted of the building of stone monuments for funerary and commemorative purposes (Harrisson, 1958a, 1958b, 1962, 1973, 1974). These stone monuments occur in an array of configurations, which include standing stones, dolmens, stone vats or stone jars, stone mounds, and stone carvings. The stone monuments are also linked to traditional beliefs about the power in the environment (Janowski and Barton, 2012), and origin stories and legends of mythical figures commonly seen as ancestors of the Kelabit people (Janowski, 2014). Among the Kelabit people, who as previously mentioned are traditionally a stratified society, the building of megalithic monuments is usually attributed to the activity of the aristocratic class, who have the necessary power and means to organise the labour for megalith making and the accompanying feasting. The funerary ceremonies of the Kelabit elites - the *burak ate* (the primary burial feast) and the *burak nulang* (the secondary burial feast) (Southwell, 1999) - in particular were traditionally the central occasions for the construction of megalithic graves and commemorative

monuments.

The writings of European administrators provided some of the earliest glimpse of the Kelabit megalithic culture (Douglas, 1909a, 1912; Banks, 1937). At the time that they written (early 20th century), megalith building among the Kelabit people was still an ongoing tradition. Furthermore, it has been observed that the erecting and carving of commemorative stone monuments among the Kelabit people are known to have occurred until around the middle of 20th century (Harrisson, 1958a, 1958b, 1959, 1962; Janowski and Barton, 2012). Nevertheless, the megalithic culture of the Kelabit Highlands may have a more ancient beginning. Recent archaeological research suggests that several of the large stone mounds in the northern Kelabit Highlands may date to more than 2,000 years ago (Lloyd-Smith, 2012; Lloyd-Smith *et al.* 2017). It is also important to note that besides in the Kelabit Highlands proper, megalithic monuments are also found in the western and southern fringes of the Kelabit Highlands (Gani, 2019), as well as in the neighbouring areas of the Upper Trusan in Sarawak (Cluny and Chai, 2007), Long Pasia in Sabah (Hoare, 2002), and in the Kerayan and Bahau regions of East Kalimantan (Ariffin and Sellato, 2003; Sellato, 2016; Schneeberger, 1979), where they are associated with other related (linguistically, culturally and historically) groups such as the Lun Dayeh or Lun Bawang, Sa'ban and Ngurek.

Previously I have mentioned the cultural significance of megalith building as a major component of elite funerary ceremonies, as well as an arena for social competition, among the Kelabit people of Sarawak. However, as the middle of the 20th century approached, the practice was on the wane. Harrisson notes that although the Kelabit megalith building that he observed in the second half of the 1940s was still at the time an ongoing practice, it was "probably the ghost of a more lavish past" (Harrisson, 1973, p.134). By 1950, "probably the *last* fully megalithic act" (Harrisson, 1958b, p.699, emphasis in original) took place with the erection of two standing stones in the village of Pa' Umor, signalling the end of a tradition, which may have begun more than 2,000 years ago. It is important to underscore that the cessation of megalithic practice among the Kelabit occurred as part of widespread social changes that took place in the colonial period of Sarawak (1946-1963). Therefore, before discussing in greater detail the abandonment of the megalithic tradition, the next section first paints a picture of the colonial-era changes and social transformation experienced by the Kelabit. Then, I will focus on the Kelabit's conversion to Christianity, which many have considered to be one of the main influences of social change among the people. Following that, I will discuss the impact of Christianity on the cessation of megalithic practice among the Kelabit.

CHANGE IN THE KELABIT HIGHLANDS IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD

Scholars generally point out that up to the period of the Brooke family's rule in Sarawak beginning in 1841, the Kelabit people in the highlands lived in relative isolation due to their locations in the extreme headwaters and thus, beyond the navigable range of the Baram River. Therefore, they were independent of outside control (King, 1993; Rousseau, 1990). This is despite Sarawak, including the Baram area, being under control of the Brunei Sultanate since the early 16th century. As Ewart (2009, p.232) notes, between the period of Brunei and Brooke rule, "political control of the interior remained tenuous, and depended on indigenous power structures." Nevertheless, the highlands and the coast were evidently linked by trade and this is best exemplified through the influx of trade goods such as glass beads, gongs, and Chinese 'dragon jars', which were brought to Borneo by Brunei's international trade links, into the highlands. Such goods were accumulated by the native peoples as prestige items and in turn were distributed across generations as heirlooms. Thus, they were symbols of status among the various stratified societies of interior Borneo. In the opposite direction, the Bornean interior supplied the international trade network with forests goods such as camphor, *gaharu* wood (or agarwood) and birds' nests.

From 1841 until the start of the Second World War, Sarawak came under the rule of the Brooke family from England, who would come to be known as the 'White Rajahs' (Runciman, 1960). An important historical consequence of this political shift was that between 1884 and 1890, the

Baram, Trusan and Limbang areas, where various Kelabitic-Murut groups lived, were seceded from Brunei control into the hands of the Brooke government of Sarawak (Pringle, 1970; Runciman, 1960). The Brooke government ruled the interior from Claudetown (today Marudi), the administrative centre on the Baram River. In order to exert control over the native population in the interior, the Brooke government outlawed headhunting and initiated 'peace-making' between feuding tribes, at times by 'punitive' ways (Douglas, 1912). As Rousseau (1990, p.35) notes, "the main effects of colonial rule on central Borneo was the disappearance of headhunting and warfare by 1910-1925." Apart from maintaining the peace in the upland frontier region and taxing the local populations in exchange for their loyalty (see Hose, 1898a, 1898b), control was for the most part indirect and the upland peoples and their cultures were left largely uninfluenced by colonial rule. Nevertheless, in 1911 a fort, which also acted as a permanent trading post, was built in Lio Mato at the uppermost navigable portion of the Baram River in order to monitor the security and raiding activities in the area.

The Second World War opened up the highlands to the outside world in greater ways than ever before. In order to quell the Japanese invasion of Borneo, which began in 1941, the Allied Forces established military bases in Bario and Long Banga. Not only did the region receive the arrivals of foreign soldiers, the war time also saw the introduction of many foreign materials: "corrugated tin sheets, wire rope, steel nails, sheets of plywood, saws, hammers, and other metal tools" (Ewart, 2012, p.9). Many of these 'new' materials were left behind after the war, and were subsequently re-used by the local population as building materials.

The war period also saw the arrival of a figure by the name of Tom Harrisson. Prior to the war, Harrisson had already achieved fame for his expeditions in the South Pacific, and for pioneering the Mass-Observation social research organisation in Britain (Heimann, 2002). Harrisson first came to Borneo as part of University of Oxford Expedition in 1932 (Harrisson, 1938). During this initial trip, however, Harrisson did not reach the highlands proper, but only the Kelabit-settled areas in the Tutoh and Malinau lowlands. In 1944, during the course of the war, Harrisson, who by then was a Major in the Allied Forces, parachuted down in the Kelabit Highlands, where he led the Z-Special Unit, as well as many Kelabit and Lun Dayeh recruits, in the fight against the Japanese army. Tom Harrisson's war exploits and his subsequent stay with the Kelabit after the war have been extensively documented in Harrisson (1959) and Heimann (2002).

The British colony of Sarawak existed from 1946, when the state that was formerly ruled by the Brooke 'White Rajahs' (see Runciman, 1960) was ceded to Britain after the end of the Second World War, to 1963, when it gained independence as part of the Federation of Malaysia. In general, the colonial period was a time of great change for the state and its peoples. As Porritt (1997, p.ix) summarises in the preface of his book, 'British colonial rule in Sarawak, 1946-1963', "the colonial era…was one of rapid economic, political and social change in pursuing the pledges made and obligations undertaken by the British government at the time of annexation" (for other discussions on the impacts of colonial rule in Sarawak, see Morrison, 1988; Ooi, 1990; Kaur 1998). In the colonial period, changes were not only sweeping though the coastal regions of Sarawak, where major towns were located, but also its interior, where the traditional ways of the native population underwent rapid change as they began to embrace modernity and new ways of living under colonial and missionary influences. A government report at the time describes the situation succinctly (Colonial Reports Sarawak, 1958, p.148):

> In particular, the influence of [colonial] Government education and of Mission activities has very generally been to create with extreme rapidity a new set of values…Ten years ago every young Kenyah, Kayan or Kelabit was proud of his leopard teeth ear-rings…and his tattoos. Today these fashions are in many areas being replaced by short hair, short trousers and skin clear of any design except vaccination.

In the Kelabit Highlands, similar rapid changes have also been observed. The Kelabit anthropologist, Poline Bala (2016) lists economic change, and greater contact with and access to the outside world as two major changes that occurred in the Kelabit Highlands during the colonial period. For example, an Agricultural Station was opened up by the colonial government in 1958, in order to improve local economic livelihood and to develop new ways of agriculture. New wet rice farming techniques were introduced. Other than that, the opening of a new airstrip in Bario in 1961 facilitated contact with the coastal towns, and enabled easier access to market goods. Toynbee (1965, p.218) also notes that under colonial rule, "a complete revolution has taken place in the Kelabit's pattern of living." Although Toynbee did not elaborate, he attributed the drastic change to the "opening of schools" (1965, p.218). The impact of the introduction of formal education on Kelabit lives is further explored below.

Previously, under the Brooke administration, the education system in Sarawak was a fragmented one (Tan, 2012). Educational institutions in the state were limited to missionary, as well as Malay and Chinese vernacular schools, all of which were predominantly based in urban centres. As a result, Porritt (1997, p.278) stresses that "education was not accessible to most of the rural population." Although efforts to remedy this situation were initiated by the Brooke government with the opening of a rural school in Belaga in 1940, progress was impeded by the start of the Japanese occupation in 1941. After the war, however, the first school among the Kelabit was established in Pa' Main in 1946 by Tom Harrisson, who served in the Allied Forces and operated in the highlands during the Second World War (see Heimann, 2002), and who later became the Curator of the Sarawak Museum and contributed to early archaeological investigation of the megalithic sites in the Kelabit Highlands (Harrisson, 1958a, 1958b, 1962, 1973, 1974). At this point, it is worth noting that despite his various contributions to archaeology and ethnography in Borneo, Harrisson was not a trained or qualified archaeologist, anthropologist or ethnographer. In archaeology specifically, Harrisson was self-trained beginning 1950, with the help of Michael Tweedie, the Director of the Raffles Museum in Singapore at the time (Harrisson, 1951; Harrisson and Tweedie, 1951). His early excavations of megalithic sites in the Kelabit Highlands were also crude and, at least in terms of those conducted in the late 1940s, were mainly aimed at collecting material specimens for the Sarawak Museum (Colonial Reports Sarawak, 1947, 1948, 1949), in contrast to systematic archaeological research. Harrisson was also a controversial figure, who has been accused of looting from historical and archaeological sites (Heimann, 2002), including by the Kelabit themselves (see Hitchner, 2009). Nevertheless, the building of the Pa' Main school, according to Sagau Batu Bala (a Kelabit and a former schoolteacher), was "one of the greatest contributions that Tom Harrisson had made to the Kelabit community" (2014, p.198). The Pa' Main school started with 36 students, many of whom were adults, and the first teacher to be hired was the Timorese preacher Paul Kohuan, who, prior to the war, served in the Christian Missionary Alliance in Belawit, Dutch Borneo (now Long Bawan in East Kalimantan, Indonesia) (Toynbee, 1965).

After the success of the Pa' Main school, more schools were established in the different Kelabit communities: Long Lellang (1952), Kubaan (1957), Long Seridan (1961), Pa' Lungan (1961), Bario (1962) and Pa' Dalih (1962) (Bala, 2016). These schools were served by Kelabit teachers, who were products of the earlier Pa' Main school, and who received teacher's training at the Batu Lintang Training College (BLTC) in the state capital of Kuching. The BLTC was itself established by the colonial government in 1948, with Colonial Development and Welfare (CDW) funding, which according to Porritt (1997, p.179) was "the largest external source of assistance to Sarawak's development plans between 1946 and 1963." As a way to train native teachers, it has been described as "one of the most enduring CDW initiatives" (Morrison, 1988, p.37).

Education opened doors to new opportunities and greater integration with the outside world in the form of job employments. The successes achieved by many Kelabit individuals who were graduates of the early schools in the Kelabit Highlands have been well-documented (see P. Bala, 2016; S.B. Bala, 2014). Writing on the educational progress of the Kelabit in 1965, Toynbee

(1965, p.219) points out that in the less than two decades since the opening of the Pa' Main school, more than eighty Kelabit individuals had been employed "by Baram District Council, the Medical Department, the Agriculture Department, the Civil Aviation Department, the Sarawak Museum, and the Sarawak Constabulary and Field Force." The advancement of the Kelabit was also a personal interest of Tom Harrisson, who assisted a number of Kelabit individuals in obtaining education and jobs in Kuching (Heiman, 2002, p.270). One such individual was Lian Labang, who became a staff member of the Sarawak Museum. Notably, Lian Labang contributed to the museum's study of the upland megalithic culture and excavation of megalithic sites in the highlands (see Labang, 1958, 1962).

Along with education, the religious conversion to Christianity is often seen by the Kelabit as a major force of positive change in their lives, leading to their "rapid progress and transformation" (S. B. Bala, 2014, p.198; see also Lian-Saging and Bulan, 1989). Christianity has even been portrayed as one of the greatest influence of change among the Kelabit (see Amster, 1998). Further below, I will consider the influence of Christianity on the Kelabit's abandonment of their megalithic practice. Before that, the following section describes the introduction and adoption of Christianity among the Kelabit.

THE KELABIT'S CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY: A BRIEF HISTORY

Christianity was brought to the upland peoples of Sarawak (e.g. the Kelabit and the Lun Bawang, who are culturally and linguistically related) by the Borneo Evangelical Mission (BEM) (Lees, 1979; Southwell, 1999). It has been said that "the Kelabits and the Lun Bawangs are perhaps the only ethnic groups in Sarawak who had, as a people, abandoned their traditional beliefs to convert to Christianity en masse" (Bulan and Bulan-Dorai, 2004, p.43). Unlike the rapidity of the Lun Bawang's conversion (see Deegan, 1973), which occurred within a decade (from 1930 to 1940), the Kelabit's conversion was a more gradual one, beginning in the late 1930s and only reaching completion in the 1970s (Amster, 1998), as will be described below.

After successfully converting the Lun Bawang people in the Limbang area in the 1930s, BEM expanded its activity to the Kelabit Highlands, and in December 1939, the missionaries C. Hudson Southwell and Frank Davidson visited the Bario and Pa' Trap (now Pa' Lungan) longhouse communities. However, this first attempt at converting the Kelabit was rather unfruitful. As Southwell (1999, p.98) reports regarding the outcome of a Gospel preaching in Pa' Trap, "here the Headman gave us a good hearing as we preached the gospel, but the people were not yet willing for a complete change from the old pagan ways."

Nevertheless, in the following month (January 1940), when the missionaries were in Kubaan on their journey out of the highlands, it was reported that a Kelabit man by the name of Pun Abi made a declaration of faith and thereby became the first Kelabit convert (Bulan and Bulan-Dorai, 2004, p.46; Lees, 1979, p.66). Furthermore, unbeknown to the missionaries, their earlier preaching in Pa' Trap had managed to gain ground. When Southwell returned to Pa' Trap after the war in 1947, he discovered that many villagers had already converted to Christianity. Southwell (1999, p.190) describes what he discovered about the conversion (see also Talla, 1979; Amster, 1998):

> I learned that following the visit Frank Davidson and I had made to this area in 1939, Tama Bulan, who was then Headman of [Pa' Trap] resolved to trust God. He was a powerful Headman and was still spoken of with great deference and respect. Tama Bulan gave up drinking and spirit worship and gradually influenced others, until in 1943 [1941, according to Talla, (1979)] the people sent messengers to Aris Doemat [an American missionary] in Belawit, inviting Aris and others to come and teach them.

However, while "the people gave up all the old taboos and learned some hymns and how to pray" (Southwell, 1999, p.190), certain practice like the drinking of rice beer (*burak*) persisted. Amster (1998, p.40) attributes the persistence of *burak* drinking to its centrality in Kelabit social and ritual life:

> All large events required the consumption of large amounts of *burak* and even small events, such as the hosting of agricultural work groups, could only be accomplished if the host served *burak* to the participants in such communal labor.

Relatedly, Mashman (2018, p.242) notes, "the difficulty with giving up drinking was that it was related to the underlying prestige system, which brought together *lun tauh* (our people) through large-scale hospitality and kinship and this hampered its abolition."

Because of the inability to cut themselves completely off their old ways, Amster points out that many Kelabit feel that the first stage of their conversion was "an incomplete and superficial adoption of Christianity" (1998, p.53), and that it was only after the religious 'Revival' in Bario in 1973 (see Bulan and Bulan-Dorai, 2004) that the conversion was deemed complete. Nevertheless, incomplete as it may seem, the religious conversion process in the 1940s had resulted in the gradual abandoning of many other traditional practices by the Kelabit.

ADVANTAGES OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

Conversion to Christianity appealed to the Kelabit for the improvements that it brought to their standards of living. Firstly, Christian missionaries improved general hygiene and health as they discouraged the keeping of pigs under longhouses and unhealthy habits such as smoking and the drinking of rice beer (Amster, 1998, p.39). Furthermore, as part of their proselytising strategy, BEM missionaries were known to provide basic medical care to the rural communities they visited (Tan, 2012). Besides religious teachings, the missionaries also brought literacy to the upland communities. For example, the three Kelabit men from Pa' Trap, who travelled to Belawit in the 1940s to learn about Christianity also attended school there to learn to read and write (Amster, 1998). That Christianity went hand in hand with education was also observed by Tan (2012, p.64), who mentions that in the rural schools set up by the missionaries, "there was a thin line between education and evangelism."

In general, as Bala (2016) observes, the Kelabit's acceptance of Christianity (and conversely, their rejection of pre-Christian beliefs and practices) is driven by the desire to be exposed to the outside world, as well as to free themselves from the restrictive and burdensome beliefs in taboos and omens, and fear of malevolent spirits, which governed traditional Kelabit life (see also Amster, 1998, p.264). In the past, observances of omens and taboos had impeded travel and agricultural productivity, disrupted marriages, and in some cases, influenced the practice of infanticide (S.B. Bala, 2014). Many Kelabit thus view their pre-Christian society negatively. Amster (1998, p.289) observes that most Kelabit are of the opinion that "before becoming Christian, they had no religion at all, only 'superstitions'." Pre-Christian customs, beliefs and practices have come to be seen by Christian Kelabit as "demeaning and archaic", while 'pagan' Kelabit of the past have been described as "taboo-ridden", and characterised as "heavy smokers and drinkers" (Bulan and Bulan-Dorai, 2004, pp. 40, 44-45). Furthermore, Amster (2008, p.77) notes that "for the most part, today, the former beliefs are highly stigmatized and often cited as examples of Satan's influence on the Kelabit prior to conversion." Similarly, among the Lun Bawang, Crain and Pearson-Rounds (2011, p.5) note that "many today still describe their pre-Christian society as evil and licentious." In contrast, life under Christianity is seen to be more open and free. As Lian-Saging and Bulan (1989, p.114) describe, "the advent of Christianity with its liberating influence was like a breath of fresh air…a gateway from the yoke of oppression under paganism."

Appell (1997) explains the motive of religious conversion in terms of economic gains. Besides freeing people from beliefs in omens and taboos, which restricted economic productivity and the traveling in pursuit of economic opportunities, he mentions that "with Christianity, there is no longer the need for expenditure of large amounts of food, drink and domestic animals for sacrifice in ceremonies for sickness, fertility, death, etc." (Appell 1997, p.65). The extent to which this explanation can be applied to the Kelabit situation is, however, debatable. As Amster has shown, large and costly ceremonies, celebrations or gatherings (*irau*) are still commonplace among the Christian Kelabit, although "substantially transformed and modified to suit current concerns" (1998, p.43), which means being devoid of ritual sacrifice and the consumption of alcoholic drinks. Instead, the Kelabit *irau* of today is typically accompanied by Christian prayers, hymns, and Bible readings. An example of the continuation of lavish *irau* is the Kelabit name-changing ceremony of today, which Amster (1999) argues has replaced the child initiation ceremony or *burak lua'* (see Lian-Saging, 1976/77, pp.138-145; Talla, 1979, pp.198-210; Amster, 1998, pp.256-263) of pre-Christian times.

Conversion to Christianity has also been associated with progress and modernisation (Appell, 1997). The transformative influence of Christianity has been stressed by a number of Kelabit writers (see P. Bala, 2016; S.B. Bala, 2014; Bulan and Bulan-Dorai, 2004; Lian-Saging, 1976/77; Lian-Saging and Bulan, 1989; Talla, 1979). Today, most Kelabit are staunch Christians, who consider Christianity to be a profoundly positive influence on their lives, as well as a catalyst for further improvements within the Kelabit society. For instance, Lian-Saging and Bulan note that the "acceptance by the Kelabit of the Christian religion in the [1940s] has brought about a drastic change for the better amongst the Kelabits" (1989, p.89), and that "the teaching of Christianity came hand in hand with literacy and health consciousness so that change in Kelabit society was quite dramatic towards the second half of [the 1900s]" (1989, p.114). In relation to this, in acknowledging religious conversion as a vehicle that has carried the Kelabit forward towards progress and modernity, Bala (2009, pp.175-176) observes that "the Kelabit envision Christianity as an entry point as well as an integral part of modernity…Christianity is a catalyst for change that propels the Kelabit onwards to search for a better future – economically, spiritually and socially."

SOCIAL IMPACTS OF CHRISTIANITY

It has been observed that Christianity has influenced almost every facet of life in the Kelabit Highlands. Its impacts on the Kelabit social, economic and political spheres have been summarised by Amster (1998, p.47):

> The church has become the focal point for community organization and interaction, and the church in rural Kelabit settlements now administers such things as communal labor and agricultural work groups. Many longhouse leaders and headmen today are also pastors who received training at the bible school in Lawas. From the 1950s onwards, missionaries were welcome as regular visitors to the Kelabit Highlands. Holidays such as Easter…and Christmas have come to be major celebrations for the Kelabit. In each Kelabit rural community, church services are held not only on Sundays but every weekday and Saturday morning (usually at 5.30 AM) and in the evening on Wednesday and Sunday.

Christianity has also brought new ideas concerning social relations. Under Christianity, all members of the Kelabit society are seen as equal to one another. This means that today, in Christian Kelabit society, less importance is given to the social stratification or class system and the gender roles of the past (Amster, 1998, pp.294-299; Bulan and Bulan-Dorai, 2004, p.40). This is not to say that preoccupation over previous social status has completely disappeared. Indeed, as Amster (1998) has shown, for some Kelabit of today, individual and family status continue to matter, for example in marriages. However, Amster (1998, p.297) adds that "[social] differences

remain downplayed and disguised in Kelabit life, since it is neither good Christian behavior nor good 'aristocratic' behavior to emphasize that one is a member of an elite social group." In terms of gender roles, while ritual was a cultural domain traditionally dominated by men, in today's Christian Kelabit society, both men and women are able to become pastors and, as such, would preside equally in church ceremonies.

THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY ON THE KELABIT'S MEGALITHIC PRACTICE

The findings of studies conducted among various indigenous groups in the wider region suggest that there is no obvious causal relationship between religious conversion and the discontinuation of traditional practices. This is to be expected considering the different cultural, historical, religious and socio-economic circumstances underlying the processes and experiences of religious conversion. For example, in her study among the Bidayuh of Sarawak, Chua notes that in contrast to the situation in interior Sarawak, "Christianity in Bidayuh areas was never adopted as 'a new culture whole'" (2012, p.514, citing Robbins, 2004, p.3), and that in a few Christian Bidayuh communities, the continuation of the traditional *gawai* ritual practices can be observed. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, religious conversion among the Toraja has led to the discontinuation of some traditional practices, but at the same time, the revitalisation of death rituals (Adams, 1984; Volkman, 1990). Furthermore, among the people of West Sumba (Adams, 2007), and among the Ngadha in Flores (Cole, 2003), megalithic practices have persisted in spite of the peoples' conversion to Christianity. The continuation of traditional beliefs and practices alongside Christian ones in some indigenous societies may be due to the more accommodating nature of certain denominations of Christianity, for example Roman-Catholicism (see Molnar, 1997). Furthermore, in the case of the Christianised indigenous communities in Indonesia, there exists a separation between religion (*agama*) and custom or tradition (*adat*) (Schroter, 2010).

However, to many observers, religious conversion among the Kelabit and other upland or interior peoples of Sarawak has clearly resulted in the discontinuation of most traditional practices. In the Kelabit case, this may be connected to their strong desire to "break with the past" (Lian-Saging, 1976/77; see also Amster, 1998, p.7), following religious conversion to Christianity. Bala (2009, p.175) refers to this distancing or rupture as the Kelabit's "overt rejection of their past." For example, Amster (1998, p.266) observes, "what is clear is that the *burak lua'* [child initiation rite], and many other aspects of pre-Christian rites, were abandoned after Kelabits adopted Christianity." Similarly, Datan (2011, p.31, citing Lees, 1979) points out that "the mass and rapid conversion of the Lun Bawang and the Lundayeh to Christianity (Borneo Evangelical Mission) in the early 1930s…resulted in the abandonment of nearly all their traditional culture." During the spread of fundamentalist Christianity among the various indigenous groups in the interior of Sarawak between the 1930s and the 1950s, campaigns to dispose potent objects related to pre-Christian beliefs and rituals (e.g. skulls obtained through headhunting, charms and fetishes, old jars, shrines and carved wooden images) were also conducted at longhouses at the behest of the missionaries (Lees, 1979; Southwell, 1999; Talla, 1979). This active disposal of objects that are perceived to be 'dangerous', according to Nyiri (2016, p.244), constituted acts of "spiritual warfare" by proselytising missionaries.

In regard to the cessation of megalithic activities among the Kelabit, Harrisson clearly attributes it to "Christian pressure" (Harrisson, 1958b, p.699). Similarly, Talla (1979, p.489), a Kelabit scholar, observes that with the adoption of Christianity, "no one will ever throw a feast to construct *kawang*, *nabang* or megalithic monuments." I propose that the main reason why this is so is because of the incompatibility of the rituals of megalith building with Christian beliefs. The cessation of megalith building followed the discontinuation of the Kelabit death feasts: the *burak ate* (the primary burial feast) and the *burak nulang* (the secondary burial feast) (Southwell, 1999), which were traditionally the central occasions for the construction of megalithic graves and commemorative monuments. Clearly, the Kelabit practice of two-stage burials is contradictory to the Christian funerary practice. The *nulang* practice in particular, which involved the cleaning of the bones of the dead prior to secondary burial, was rejected as "'heathen' re-disposal of bones"

(Harrisson, 1958b, p.699). The *burak ate* and the *burak nulang* were also problematic from the Christian point of view because, like all large gatherings (*burak* or *irau*) of the Kelabit, they involved extravagant feastings and heavy drinking of rice beer. As documented by Talla (1979, p.253), at the *burak ate* feast, "everybody drank until they were drunk. They slept on the floor and woke up only to eat."

In addition, the spiritual aspect of monument building involved the ritual offering of rice beer and animal sacrifice in order to invoke and placate the spirits of Kelabit ancestors. As Talla (1979, pp.238-239) describes the rites involved in the making of a *kawang* burial monument:

> When the party arrived at the spot where the *kawang* or clearing was to be made the ritualist would slash the goat standing on the ground allowing the blood to splash over the place. Just before the party started felling, the ritualist would stand forward from his fellow-men and the pig was handed to him. He would first address Buyan, then Seluyah, the two great mythical ancestors of the Kelabit and ask them to help in burying the dead man. He would plead with them to ensure that they would not encounter any mishaps and explained that they intended to make a mark among the trees in his [the deceased] memory. He would continue to tell them not to harm the dead man's children and kinsmen; he begged them and told them the quantity of [*burak*], of buffaloes, of deer, and cows to be slaughtered for the festivities, and that they wish to share these gifts of food and drink with the great spirits (*ada'*) of Buyan and Seluyah.
>
> He then sprinkled some [*burak*] on the hill for them (Buyan and Seluyah) and said, "This is the pig we brought for you". He went on imploring them not to haunt the deceased's relatives should ever any of them come to the mountains to hunt, but instead provide them with luck and make it an enjoyable hunting trip. "We slaughter the pig now. [Its] pork is for us but also [its] spirit is for you". He then killed the pig and cut down the first tree to mark the commencement of the clearing and felling of the *kawang*.

In this sense, the cessation of megalith building is comparable to that of the *burak lua'* (child initiation) ceremony. As Amster notes, "the holding of *burak lua'* ceased as a direct result of conversion to Christianity, as it was clearly perceived to be in contradiction to Christianity" (Amster, 1998, p.250). There were several reasons why the *burak lua'* was considered to be in contradiction to Christianity. Firstly, like the *burak ate* and the *burak nulang* mentioned above, the *burak lua'* included "two aspects which were strongly objected to by missionaries": the excessive consumption of rice beer, and ritual sacrifice. The ritual sacrifice of the *burak lua'* is called *ngelua'*, and it consisted of the ritual slaughtering of a pig and the smearing of the pig's blood on the initiated child in a ceremony known as *ngelua' anak* that was done to protect the child from harm (Amster, 1999, p.187). Furthermore, the *burak lua'* was frowned upon by missionaries because of its link to headhunting. Hunted skulls played important roles in the rituals of *burak lua'*. One of the rituals is *nu'i ulung* or the "raising of a wooden or bamboo pole (*ulung*), in the compound of the longhouse" (Amster, 1999, p.188), from the top of which, skulls would be hung. Skulls also played a prominent part in the *ngutek* ceremony, which was "performed primarily to instill young boys with qualities they would need to become successful headhunters in the future" (Amster, 1998, p.259). It involved "immersing a human skull (again, presumably one obtained from headhunting) in a river and then pouring water from this skull over male children" (Amster, 1999, p.189). Another version of this ceremony was described as "involving an older man placing a spear in a young boy's hand while guiding him in the act of piercing the skull, again being held in the river" (Amster, 1999, p.189).

At this point, it is also important to note the role of the changing social dynamics in Christian Kelabit society on the cessation of the traditional megalithic practice. As mentioned previously, the adoption of Christianity has impacted views on social relations whereby the social stratification system of the past is given less importance in Christian (modern) times. Thus, megalithic monuments have become less relevant in the Kelabit social life of modern times as they are no longer seen as necessary to mark the social status or prestige of Kelabit elites. Also, the megalithic feast no longer provides the arena of social competition, where Kelabit elites display their power and influence, and maintain their *doo*-ness.[2] In modern Kelabit society, instead of being measured by one's inherent social standing and the ability in terms of wealth and influence to hold large feasts and to commission the construction of monuments, one's status or *doo*-ness is now commonly measured in terms of success in education and employment (Amster, 1998; Janowski, 2003b), and in the pursuit of religious life (Bala, 2009). Nevertheless, the organisation of the grand Kelabit *irau* in order to commemorate important events has continued to this day, although today, the *irau* has evolved to become a Christianised event. Thus, the *irau* has continued to serve the social function of generating prestige for the host(s), as well as creating and reinforcing "a web of mutual obligations", which in turn, provides social cohesion (Amster, 1998, p.270). Further to this, Amster (1998, p.266) observes that modern-day *irau* events, such as the Kelabit name-changing ceremony, "provide a socially acceptable forum for holding large-scale feasts, filling a void created with the cessation of *burak lua'* and other [e.g. megalithic] *burak* feasts that were an important part of Kelabit life."

KELABIT ATTITUDES TOWARDS MEGALITHS AFTER CHRISTIANITY

Previously, I mentioned that when missionaries spread Christianity to longhouse communities in interior Sarawak, many potent objects related to pre-Christian rituals of the indigenous peoples were disposed or destroyed. To my knowledge, however, no destruction of megalithic monuments as a result of Christian influence has ever been recorded. In my experiences in the field, I have also never heard of any story of such an event occurring in the past. Such a conclusion is also implied by Hitchner (2009), who in discussing threats to cultural sites in the Kelabit Highlands, did not make any mention of damages to megaliths caused by zealous Christian missionaries and converts. This is despite a claim that "megalithic stone structures were under threat of being destroyed because most of the local Kelabit had embraced Christianity and denounced the worshipping of these stone structures" (Chia, 2003, p.58). There are some explanations for this. Firstly, most megalithic sites are considered graves of Kelabit ancestors. Therefore, like all cemeteries, megalithic sites are places to be respected, not disturbed. Additionally, unlike the skulls, charms and fetishes, which were disposed at the time of conversion, megaliths were not domestic objects kept in or near longhouses (most megaliths are found in the surrounding forests), and thus were less prone to the scrutiny and objection by visiting missionaries.

Nevertheless, in certain cases, megalithic sites have become taboo places that are to be avoided. On one hand, this could be because megalithic monuments have now become objects that are associated with the 'sinful' pre-Christian past. Consequently, many Kelabit, especially elders, prefer not to come into contact with, or to even talk about the megaliths. I experienced this unwillingness to talk about the Kelabit's pre-Christian past during one of my field interviews, when my informant attributed his reluctance to speak to his fear of "contradicting the Bible" (see also Amster, 1998). On the other hand, certain beliefs about the environment have persisted, despite the Kelabit's conversion to Christianity (Amster, 2008). Thus, megaliths in the forests have continued to be seen as spiritually potent places. They are laden with *lalud* (life force) because of their materiality (see Janowski and Barton, 2012), and they are also commonly believed to be the residing places of forest spirits (*ada'*). Thus, for fear of spiritual retribution, megalithic sites have at times been regarded as places that should be left undisturbed, or best

[2] Bala (2009: 178) defines *doo*-ness as "the [Kelabit] notion of goodness, success and well-being, or rather, the qualities required to constitute a good person such as knowledge, endurance, perseverance, self-discipline, hospitality and strength." She further states that *doo*-ness is "an indicator of social status."

avoided. In some instances, this has provided a new avenue for the performance of Christian 'spiritual warfare'. As Nyiri (2016, p.246) notes, "negative views [of the megaliths] still persist, calling for the (regular) ritual cleansing of such locations: sprinkling salt and oil on stone mounds, or casting exorcised jar fragments under stone monuments."

The distancing of the Kelabit from the megalithic monuments has contributed to their neglect. Mashman (2017) refers to this as the 'forgetting' of the stone monuments. Over the years, this has led to the loss of historical knowledge concerning the megaliths. Local appreciation of the historical and cultural values of the megalithic sites have also deteriorated. Until recently in the late 1990s, when local communities began to seriously consider the preservation of their culture (see Cluny and Chai, 2009; Hitchner, 2009), the megaliths in the highlands have generally been treated with neglect and ignorance. For example, among the Lun Bawang, Datan (2011, p.31) observes that it was common for the people "not to look after the sites and to pose little objection when the sites are threatened by development projects or to be levelled to give way to farms or houses." Similarly, Mashman notes that among the Kelabit, "custody of such [megalithic] sites is overlooked" (2017, p.413), and that the Kelabit response to known destruction of megalithic sites is one of "passive acceptance" (2017, p.414).

Despite the distancing of the Kelabit from the megalithic monuments after the religious conversion, in more recent times, beginning the 2000s, there has been increasing awareness of the significance of the megalithic monuments among the Kelabit community, leading to community-based efforts to document and to preserve the megalithic monuments and other sites of cultural importance (Cluny and Chai, 2007; Hitchner, 2009). In part, this is a consequence of the "awakening of heritage consciousness" (Sweet and Kelly, 2014) that began in the 1960s, when educated Kelabit individuals began to question the Kelabit people's whole rejection of their past. Thus, the community-based efforts to preserve the megalithic monuments should be seen in the context of the wider and growing interest among the Kelabit community to preserve their culture and heritage. This is apparent, for example, in the recent recording and digital preservation of the Kelabit oral tradition (Yeo *et al.* 2006), the organisation of the annual Bario Food and Cultural Festival (Mognard *et al.* 2021), the establishment of the Kelabit Community Museum in Bario (Sweet and Horman, 2012; Sweet and Kelly, 2013, 2014; Kelly, 2016) and the documentation and representation of megalithic monuments and rock carvings using visual technology (Rafee *et al.* 2019). Additionally, the community-based efforts to preserve Kelabit cultural sites can be seen as a response to the growing threats of development, in particular the arrival of logging activities, to the natural and cultural resources in the Kelabit Highlands (Cluny and Chai, 2007; Hitchner, 2009). Today, the megaliths and other built monuments are also important markers that are viewed as evidence of traditional land use in customary land claims (Lian-Saging and Bulan, 1989; Bulan, 2003). With preservation efforts in place, the megalithic monuments in the highlands have been promoted as ecotourism destinations or attractions, which demonstrates their new importance to the growth of local tourism and to the local economy (Hitchner *et al.* 2009; Hitchner and Bala, 2020). The construction of the Millennium Kawang in Bario in 2000 to mark the coming of the new millennium (see Hitchner, 2009) should also be mentioned as an interesting event, where as a revival of a previously abandoned practice, it exemplifies present interest in the monument building tradition of the past as a cultural heritage of the Kelabit people.

CONCLUSION

Modernisation, socio-economic development and extensive contacts with the outside world, as agents of social change, have impacted traditional cultures across the globe. Among the impacts that have been observed include cultural change, the changing or redefining of group identities, and the discontinuation or transformation of traditional practices as part of the processes of adapting to new political, social and economic conditions, and environmental changes (Eder, 1977; Bernstein, 1997; Bodley, 1999). In this article, I explored the cessation of the megalithic practice among the Kelabit people of the Kelabit Highlands in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. While recognising that cultural change is the result of the interplay between myriad factors, this article

focused on one of the often cited causes – although never explained in much detail previously – for the cessation of the megalithic practice, which is the religious conversion of the Kelabit to Christianity. In particular, I have shown the religious conversion to be a part of widespread changes that were impacting Kelabit lives during the colonial period in Sarawak, and particularly, how the rituals of megalith making were incompatible with Christian beliefs, which eventually led to the abandonment of the megalithic practice among the Kelabit people. Nevertheless, it is also acknowledged that in more recent years, the Kelabit has gained a new appreciation of the megalithic remains in the Kelabit Highlands, and as a result, various community-based efforts have been initiated in order to document and preserve the megaliths. This shows that despite the discontinuation of the megalithic practice in modern times, the megaliths of the Kelabit Highlands have continued to be regarded as important cultural heritage of the Kelabit people.

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