

Beads, Prestige and Life Among the Kelabit of Sarawak, East Malaysia

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The visitor to the Kelabit Highlands in Sarawak on the island of Borneo is immediately struck on landing in Bario by the beads worn by the women. Bario is nowadays the focal centre of the Kelabit Highlands and the only place to which the national carrier, MAS, flies. It is by far the largest settlement in the Kelabit Highlands, and receives outside visitors regularly. Perhaps because of the public gaze which the size of the settlement and the presence of outsiders puts them under daily, practically all women in Bario wear bead necklaces nearly all of the time when they are in a public place outside the longhouse, and very many of them – probably all those who own them – also wear bead caps (*petaa*) made up of the most highly valued beads (see Figure 10.1).

My fieldwork (twenty months 1986–8 and four months 1992–3) has been carried out in a small community about twelve hours' walk from Bario called Pa' Dalih, which now consists of three longhouses and a few individual houses, and which has a population of about 100. In 1987 I took photographs of all the beaded items in the possession of individuals in that community and the neighbouring tiny community of Batu Patong, which now has a population of about twenty. There were, in total, sixty-nine beaded items – necklaces, caps and belts. Most of my data comes from Pa' Dalih, although some is from short visits to Bario and discussions with Bario people visiting Pa' Dalih and some was collected in town. Although beads are worn less in Pa' Dalih than in Bario, their ownership is of great significance and beads are restrung, examined and discussed very often.

There are dozens of named varieties of beads in the Kelabit Highlands. I shall not here give an exhaustive description of all of these; I shall rather give an overview of the most important varieties, and I shall explore what I see as the rationale behind the possession and wearing of them. Bario, which is today the major Kelabit centre in the Highlands, has a population of about 1000 most of whom live in six one- or two-longhouse communities within less than an hour's walk from each other but separate in jural and administrative terms and in terms of land use. A small number live outside the immediate Bario area there are a further seven longhouse

