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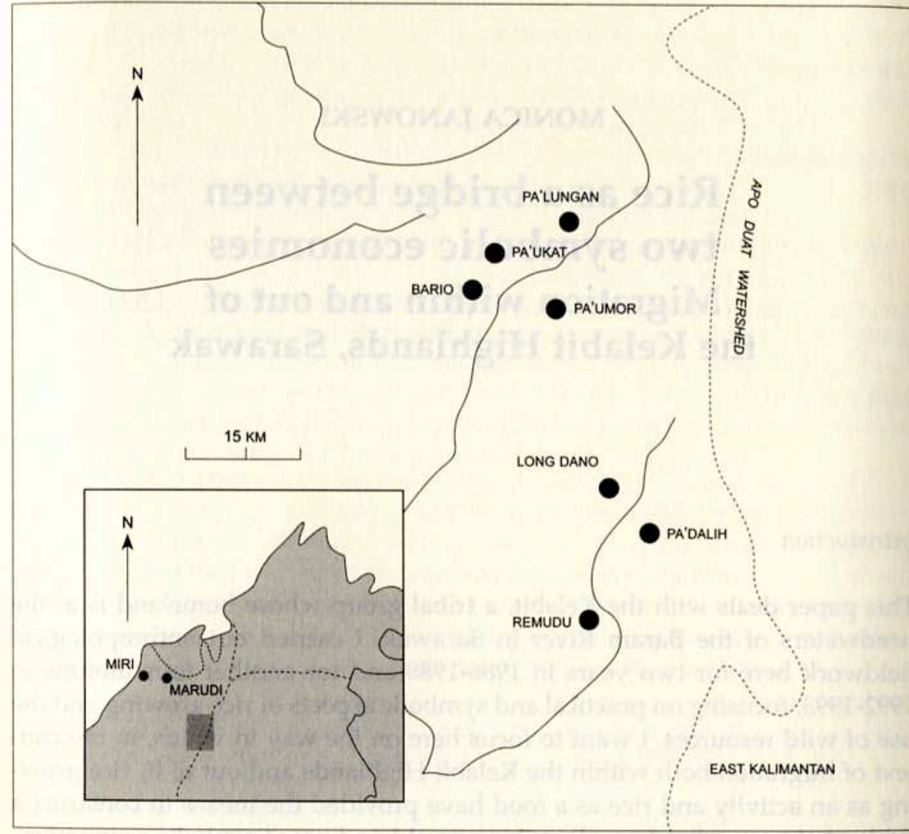
Rice as a bridge between two symbolic economies
Migration within and out of the Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak

Introduction

This paper deals with the Kelabit, a tribal group whose homeland is at the headwaters of the Baram River in Sarawak. I carried out anthropological fieldwork here for two years in 1986-1988 and for another four months in 1992-1993, focusing on practical and symbolic aspects of rice growing and the use of wild resources. I want to focus here on the way in which, in the context of migration both within the Kelabit Highlands and out of it, rice growing as an activity and rice as a food have provided the means to construct a bridge between what I am describing as old and new 'symbolic economies'. I use this term to refer to an economic system which is interpreted with and indeed based on the symbolic cultural values attached to different economic activities.

Rice is the staple food and the symbolic pivot of the traditional Kelabit symbolic economy. This is the case today, just as it was before the Kelabit Highlands were opened to direct contact with the coast by air in the early 1960s. Nowadays, however, rice has become more than this. In the new social and economic environment of the town – the new 'symbolic economy' of the town – with which the Kelabit are now in contact, they have found that they are able to compete as strong players because some of the varieties of rice which are grown in the Highlands are highly valued and saleable on the coast. I would argue that because rice fulfils this dual role, in both the old and the new symbolic economies, it has provided a bridge enabling the Kelabit to adapt fairly successfully to the changing economic and cultural environment in which they now live.

Since the Second World War, the Kelabit Highlands (Map 1) has been sub-



Map 1. The Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak

ject to a very rapid increase in the level of exposure to outside cultures, after having been what Tom Harrisson[1] describes as a 'world within', isolated to a significant degree from other cultures by geographical barriers (Harrisson 1959). A regular air link was opened to Bario in the Highlands in the early 1960s, first to Marudi and later to Miri. Schooling became available for Kelabit children, both in the Highlands and in town. Many Kelabit began to spend time in town, at school or working, temporarily and, increasingly, on a more

[1] Tom Harrisson was an eccentric and colourful individual who was, towards the end of the Second World War, parachuted with other British officers into the Kelabit Highlands where he proceeded to organize the Kelabit, Kerayan, Penan and other interior peoples to carry out missions against the Japanese occupiers of the island. After the war he became curator of the Sarawak Museum and continued to take a special interest in the Kelabit Highlands, publishing numerous articles on them, mainly in the *Sarawak Museum Journal*.

permanent basis. The Kelabit were successful at school and in employment and now have a strong base on the coast centred geographically on the town of Miri and socially on those Kelabit who have been most successful and have established themselves solidly in the cash-oriented, multi-ethnic world of the town. It is this world which represents the new symbolic economy to which the Kelabit are learning to adapt.

At the same time, the Kelabit remain a very homogenous group, not only in the Highlands but in town too. Because they number in total only a few thousand (see below) they are able to maintain a bounded and hence arguably a particularly strong group, with strong internal norms. This group considers itself to be defined by its homeland, its point of origin, in the Kelabit Highlands. The transposition of the symbolic economy of this homeland to town is therefore not just subconscious but conscious, to a degree which is probably greater than with larger and more amorphous ethnic groups in town. In the Highlands, there is a transposition in the other direction: the new symbolic economy of the town has come to have considerable significance. In both the Highlands and in town, stress is placed both on the maintenance of what is consciously seen as a defining way of life specific to the Kelabit – what I am calling the traditional symbolic economy – and on successful adoption of a multi-ethnic way of life specific to the town – what I am calling the new symbolic economy. I argue that rice has helped the Kelabit to succeed in achieving this.

The Kelabit Highlands

The area now known as the Kelabit Highlands forms part of a larger tableland area about 90 km long and 60 km wide which has been described as the Kelabit-Kerayan Highland (Schneeberger 1945). It is inhabited by people who speak closely related languages belonging to the Apo Duat group (Hudson 1977), who also live, interspersed with other groups, over a wider area which includes Brunei and parts of Sabah. This tableland is partly in Kalimantan and partly in Malaysia, and it forms the headwaters of a number of rivers including the Kerayan and the Baram. It is an area of deeply eroded north-south mountain ranges and broad, basin-like valleys, often inundated, through which the rivers meander sluggishly. The soil of the area is, in pockets, fertile, while in other areas it is swampy and peaty (Eilers and Loi 1982).

The Kelabit-Kerayan Highland was, until the 1960s, extremely isolated, and could be reached only by a combination of boat and walking. A journey from the coast took a number of weeks. By the late twentieth century, small planes were flying into Bario in the Kelabit Highlands from Miri and Marudi in Sarawak, and there were a number of airstrips on the Indonesian side,

connected to each other and to the coastal areas of Kalimantan. In 1997, logging roads reached the southern part of the Kelabit Highlands, and it is now possible to travel out on the logging road.

The population density of the highland area, on both sides of the border, is higher than for most other interior areas of Sarawak, reaching 8 persons per square kilometre in some areas (Sellato 1997). This is due to the practice of wet rice cultivation, which exists throughout the area, although the proportion of land used for wet and for dry cultivation varies from place to place; the highest population densities are reached in areas where wet rice cultivation is dominant. Communities are small, reaching no more than about 100 persons, but the distance between communities is not great, usually being no more than two or three hours, and in some more densely settled areas half an hour or less.

Until perhaps the 1960s the term 'Kelabit' was not used among the people now described in this way. It has been suggested that the term originates in a mistake on the part of a government officer, although one Kelabit writer has stated that the term has always been used by downriver people to refer to the people living in the area now called the Kelabit Highlands, after the longhouse of Pa' Labid (LeBar 1972:159; Talla 1979:5-6). The people of the Kelabit Highlands described themselves according to the river or valley in which they lived (Harrisson 1958). However, since the 1960s, with increased contact with the outside world and some success in the educational system, the term has come to be used by the people of the Highlands themselves. Kelabit ethnicity has, in fact, been invented. It has, despite this, become of considerable significance, perhaps because of the much increased contact with other groups in the town context and a desire to maintain identity there.

The form of residence in the Kelabit Highlands remains the longhouse. On the Indonesian side of the border, the government has discouraged residence in longhouses and people now live in single houses or tiny longhouses of two or three families. In the Kelabit Highlands, communities often consist of two longhouses grouped together as one parish (*sidang*) of the Sidang Injil Borneo church, the evangelical church to which all Kelabit now belong, successor to the Borneo Evangelical Mission which converted the Kelabit immediately after the war. During my first period of fieldwork I occupied, together with my husband and baby daughter, one apartment in the longer of the two longhouses in the community of Pa' Dalih, which is the largest community in the southern part of the Kelabit Highlands. Most of my data has, so far, been gathered in Pa' Dalih.

Migration within the Kelabit-Kerayan Highland area before the Second World War

The part of Borneo of which the Kelabit Highlands forms a part, which has been called Central Borneo (Rousseau 1990), is inhabited by tribal peoples who do not have a tradition of permanent settlement. The Kelabit, like other tribal peoples of the area, rely heavily on the forest as well as being agriculturalists (Janowski 2003). Some peoples of the area are purely hunter-gatherers, and move in order to use wild resources – mostly sago – efficiently. The Kelabit, like most peoples of the area, are agriculturalists, but – at least until recently – practised forms of shifting cultivation which entail regular shifting of settlements.

Some of the peoples living in Central Borneo are known to have entered it within the last few hundred years. This includes the Kayan and Kenyah groups. These, then, have engaged in long-distance migration. They are still in the process of expansion, and have displaced other groups, longer resident, as they do so. However, according to present-day informants the ancestors of the Apo Duat-speaking peoples of the Kelabit-Kerayan highland have been resident in the Highlands for as long as their oral histories stretch back. It would seem that the Kelabit may have inhabited a much wider area in the past, as I point out below. The Kelabit say that the Sultan of Brunei's ancestry is the same as theirs and indeed a significant proportion of the population of Brunei speak Apo Duat languages (Martin 1994).

Long residence in the area and a comparatively low level of migratory movement among the peoples of the Kelabit-Kerayan Highland area is associated with a farming system founded in the use of wet fields as well as dry swidden fields. These wet fields are used nowadays for the cultivation of rice. Before discussing patterns of settlement and migration which exist nowadays I want to say something about rice itself, which, as the focal crop, dictates the organization of economic and social life and hence has a profound impact on settlement and migration.

Rice cultivation in the Kelabit Highlands

It is not possible to establish a date when rice cultivation was introduced to the Kelabit-Kerayan Highland. It does not appear to have taken place within the period for which we have records of any sort. Although rice is present linguistically in Proto-Austronesian in Taiwan in 3000 BC and must have travelled into equatorial regions of South East Asia with Austronesian settlers, it is unlikely to have been a major crop in equatorial regions such as in Borneo for some time, until varieties of rice were developed which were suitable for these latitudes, in particular in terms of losing photo-period sen-

sitivity (Bellwood 1985:232-3). It is also likely that settlement was initially in coastal areas. However, recent archaeological finds have indicated that some rice was being grown at least 60 km from the coast at Gua Sireh as early as 2300 BC (Beavitt, Kurui and Thompson 1996; Bellwood and Datan 1991).

Early Austronesian rice cultivation would have been in swampy areas similar to the areas in which wild rice originated, although it is likely that some varieties were developed early on which were suitable for dry cultivation (Bellwood 1985:239-40). Varieties which were taken into equatorial regions would probably have included ones adapted to both swampy and dry conditions. We do not know how quickly Austronesian settlers penetrated to the interior of the island of Borneo but when they did they probably took swamp-adapted varieties of rice with them. Thus it is possible that rice cultivation is very ancient in the Kelabit Highlands, and that it was grown there in swampy areas right from the beginning of Austronesian settlement of the area. However, taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) grows wild in South East Asia and it is also possible that the swampy areas of the Kelabit-Kerayan Highland area were used for taro rather than rice until quite recently. It has been suggested that swampy fields may have previously been used for taro cultivation by Kenyah groups in other nearby parts of interior Borneo (Sellato 1997). The method of cooking rice in both the Kelabit-Kerayan Highland and in the Kenyah area concerned (with a large quantity of water for two/three hours, beating towards the end to destroy the shape of the separate grains, producing a uniform sticky mass which solidifies on cooling) could suggest that taro used to be the staple, as does the fact that the Kelabit names for taro (*opa'*) and for cooked rice – (*uba'* or *nuba'*) appear possibly cognate (Sellato 1997).

Whatever the truth regarding the origin of rice in the highland area, it is, and was in the remembered and documented past, grown both in wet fields and dry fields in the Kelabit-Kerayan Highland area. These are described as *late' baa* (wet *late'*) and *late' luun* (highland *late'*). The term *late'* is used for a field whose primary purpose is to grow rice. Dry *late'* are swidden fields, in which crops other than rice – root crops including cassava and sweet potatoes, other grains including Jobs tears, millet, maize and sorghum, sugar cane and vegetables of various types – are also grown. The wet *late'* made in the Kelabit-Kerayan Highland area before the Second World War were of various types. In the Kelabit Highlands, a type was made which was a kind of shifting cultivation. This type of field was mainly made on fairly flat land which is swampy and peaty, a type of land which is quite common in the Kerayan-Kelabit Highland area. This was not levelled out but was divided into tiny subdivisions with bunds of rotting vegetation, through which water was directed to cover the whole field without the necessity of it being entirely flat (Harrisson 1960). After a few years other land was brought under cultivation and the previous area left fallow.

The relationship between *late' baa* and *late' luun* is a complex one. It is difficult to establish a definite preference, unchanging over time, for one or the other among the peoples of the highland area. It has been pointed out that there was very little iron in the interior, and without iron it is very difficult to practice swidden cultivation, since this requires the felling of trees (Padoch 1983; also Dove 1989). Sellato suggests that the immigrants to the area in the seventeenth century were originally swiddeners in areas from which they came but were forced to adopt swamp cultivation of rice because of the lack of iron tools, and this later turned into more sophisticated irrigated cultivation (Sellato 1997).

Until recently – perhaps up to the Second World War – it would seem from what Kelabit informants have told me that there was a preference for dry swidden fields in the Kelabit Highlands. This may be due to the fact that although wet rice fields are said by the Kelabit to be more productive in terms of labour input (supported by data on some other Borneo groups; Dove 1981:922 and Wadley, personal communication), they can only be used for the growing of rice – apart from a little taro around the edges and the vegetable *kangkong* (*Ipomoea aquatica*) on the bunds. Although rice is the prestige crop, other foods and crops are highly valued too, and indeed it is other foods which are said to be 'tasty'. Rice is bland (it is always cooked without salt, as is indeed usual in South East Asia in contrast to the practice in, for example, India), and only together with other foods does it make up a meal (Janowski 1995). Although a good proportion of the foods eaten with rice at the rice meal are wild, cultivated vegetables are relished too. The fact that root crops, maize and sugar cane can only be grown in dry fields is also very significant, since these are valued as snack foods. All of these can only be grown either in highland *late' luun* or in gardens specifically made to grow these crops, called *ira*.

However, it was only early in the twentieth century, in the Kelabit Highlands, and since the Second World War, in the Kerayan Highlands, that there has been much access to iron, making the cultivation of extensive dry fields possible. Before the war, people in the Kerayan could remember that each village might have just one bush knife (Padoch 1983). Thus it may well be that people actually had no choice but to make wet fields, using areas without large trees which tended to be swampy and were easier to clear, even though they might have preferred to make dry fields. Because of the difficulty of clearing trees, small *ira* gardens may have been made for snack foods rather than large highland *late' luun* in which rice was also grown.

The type of wet field being made in the highlands nowadays is quite different from the earlier type made in the Kelabit Highlands – and probably in many areas of the Kerayan Highlands too. The new type is not temporary but permanent, and resembles the *sawah* of the lowlands of South East Asia. Such

fields are made with considerable investment of labour and the use of iron tools. In the Kelabit Highlands, at least, they are still made on fairly flat land, with minimal terracing (although Schneeberger reports seeing terracing in the Kerayan in 1939; Schneeberger 1979:49-53). The new, permanent form of wet field began to be made in about 1960, apparently introduced from the Kerayan area (Harrisson 1962). It would appear that permanent fields were made there earlier than in the Kelabit Highlands, but that this was done until a few decades ago using only tools of wood and bamboo (Padoch 1985). Therefore it would seem that the transition to this type of farming cannot be explained by greater access to iron, although there is no doubt that the work of making a permanent field is less with iron tools.

Insofar as relative efficiency (relationship of labour input to rice produced) of wet and dry rice cultivation is concerned, my own data collected in Pa' Dalih suggest that they are roughly equivalent; however, it is difficult to factor in the maintenance of wet rice fields, since this varies a great deal, and is highly significant in terms of labour input. It is not, unfortunately, possible to retrieve any information about the efficiency of the old-style wet fields. Kelabit themselves say that wet rice cultivation of the type practiced nowadays is more productive than swidden cultivation if the field is a good, well-established one with a reliable source of water. However, this is of course not always the case, and it must also be borne in mind that a given area of swidden field produces not only rice but many other crops, into whose cultivation little if any labour is invested. Thus in terms of total production a swidden field may well be more efficient in terms of utilization of labour.

Nowadays, there is a growing interest in making wet fields in the Kelabit Highlands, and the area of wet fields is increasing. The same is apparently true in the Kerayan Highlands (Sellato 1997). Why is this taking place? I have argued elsewhere that, at least in the Kelabit Highlands, this is related to issues of prestige (Janowski 1988). Wet fields of the type made nowadays in the Kelabit Highlands, and apparently made even earlier in the Kerayan, are permanent marks on the landscape. Marks on the landscape are traditionally associated with high status: the peoples of the Kerayan-Kelabit Highland area were, until the 1950s, megalithic, and they also cut notches in ridges and diverted rivers to form oxbow lakes, at huge feasts of merit (*irau*). While the erection of megaliths and the cutting of notches in ridges did not have an economic function, making an oxbow lake generated land for wet fields. The very fluid situation as regards status in the Kelabit Highlands at the moment, where there is a lot of scope for mobility, arguably encourages attempts to achieve social mobility via the making of a new type of mark on the landscape – the wet rice field. The significance of the making of wet rice fields is underlined by the fact that success in rice growing has always been fundamental to the generation of status, which was advertised not only through megalithic and landscape-marking activity but through the conspicuous consumption of huge quantities of rice in the form of both cooked rice and rice beer at *irau* feasts.

The growth of population in those areas where wet rice fields are the most appropriate form of cultivation, such as Bario in the Kelabit Highlands – which I shall discuss below – has probably also been an important factor, since where there is pressure on land it is important to establish customary use rights as firmly as possible, and permanent cultivation is the most likely to achieve this. However, the Kelabit do not as yet have full legal title to any of the land in the Kelabit Highlands.

The history of settlement in the Kelabit Highlands

The early history of settlement of the Kelabit-Kerayan Highlands is shrouded in myth. The people of the Kelabit Highlands told me during fieldwork that their ancestors have always lived in this area, and were preceded there by ancestral proto-human peoples who were capable of superhuman feats. They say, in fact, that all humanity originates from around the mountain range which runs down the border between the Kelabit and Kerayan Highlands, the Apo Duat or Apad Uat range. Literally, *apad uat* means 'root range', and it is possible that this term is related to the belief that this is the origin of all people. The myth told by the Kelabit of Pa' Dalih tells that there was once a flood, and some people floated downriver while others, the ancestors of the Kelabit and related peoples, remained in the same place. It has been suggested that the highland area is the homeland of the Apo Duat peoples of the highlands, and that they expanded out of this area into the coastal area (Schneeberger 1945) and that peoples of the Apo Duat language group may have inhabited much more extensive areas outside the highlands than they now occupy, being pushed into the highland area by marauding Kayan and Kenyah invaders in the nineteenth century (Harrisson 1958). On the other hand, Sellato (1997) has suggested that the present people of the highland area are fairly recent immigrants, having moved into the area from an area much further downriver in what is now Indonesia – the area around the town of Malinau – in the seventeenth century. Clearly there must have been migration into the highland area at some point by Apo Duat speaking peoples; it is a question of when this occurred. If a wave of migration did take place into the highland area as recently as the seventeenth century, migrants were presumably integrated into existing populations, either speaking other languages which were displaced or already speaking Apo Duat languages. It seems unlikely that there was no habitation of the highlands before that date.

Whatever the early history of settlement in the highland area, the people

living there in the early part of the twentieth century clearly moved around a good deal within the highland area, but over short distances and in cyclical patterns, with groups returning regularly to the same sites. There are indications that there were in the past, as there are now, territories (*tang*; Talla 1979:91), usually the catchments of small rivers and streams, which were seen as 'belonging to' a particular group of people. However, in contrast to the more clearly hierarchical groups like the Kayan and the Kenyah, longhouse groups were fluid in nature, with individuals and groups of people grouping and regrouping regularly, so that it would not have been exactly the same group returning in any organized fashion to the same areas. The fluidity of settlement make-up is something Sellato has noted for the closely related Kerayan people across the border in Indonesian East Kalimantan (Sellato 1997).

It has been suggested that diseases introduced after more frequent contact with the outside world from the late nineteenth century as a result of *Pax Brookiana* have reduced the Kelabit Highland population to a tenth of its previous size (Harrisson 1958). It is probable that this is an exaggeration, but there is evidence of wet rice cultivation in parts of the highlands which are now uninhabited, for example; along the Kelabit side of the base of the Tamabo range of mountains[2] indicating that the Kelabit population in the highlands in the past may have been bigger.

Kelabit longhouses nowadays, and Kerayan longhouses in the past, have and had a maximum of about 100 inhabitants, which is quite small by the standards of Kayan and some Kenyah longhouses. In the early part of the twentieth century, before the Second World War, informants in Pa' Dalih told me that settlements were smaller, more scattered and located up smaller streams. However, the situation was fluid, and large groups of longhouses would form at times. I was told, for example, that at Batu Patong near Pa' Dalih there was a very large grouping of longhouses some generations ago.[3] When the area was visited by Douglas in 1908 he tells of a settlement at Batu Patong of four longhouses (Douglas 1912). This is, in fact, a fairly big settlement by the standards of those times, when it would appear from informants that settlements were smaller than nowadays, and it may be a remnant of an even bigger group. Such larger groupings of longhouses may in some cases have been based – and perhaps always were based to some extent – on access to wet rice land. This seems to have been the case over the border in the Kerayan. However, they were also very clearly based on leadership: where a strong leader arose, he and his wife would be a magnet for the settlement of other people. Lesser leaders would lead their own followers to settle and

2 British Ministry of Defence map of the Bario area published in 1967, series T735 sheet 3.115/6; Harrisson 1949.

3 Said to be of 100 longhouses, which we can assume to be an exaggeration.

build a longhouse near the longhouse of a very strong leader.

There was arguably both status differentiation and social mobility among the Kelabit, and this has facilitated flux in settlement and residence patterns. Although it is correct to say, as does Bernard Sellato (1997) that the people of the Kelabit-Kerayan Highland area are not rigidly hierarchical, as are, for example, the Kayan, their society is certainly based on status differentiation, and this is inherited. Those of high status are described as *doo*, which can be translated as 'good'. However, there are nowadays no named strata or status groups; people are described as being more or less 'good'. I would argue that the evidence does not suggest that there were such groups in the past either, although Kelabit writers do suggest that there were.[4] In a context where there are no rigid strata, mobility is relatively easier than where such strata do exist. Leaders can be made and can fall more easily than among groups with named status groups, and groupings of longhouses based on leadership can change. Also, while among hierarchical groups it is not possible for an individual or household to leave a longhouse without the permission of the leader, this has not been the case among the people of the Kelabit-Kerayan Highland. Thus, membership of longhouses has changed and fluctuated.

At the time of the Second World War, there were eleven settlements in the Kelabit Highlands: Lam Baa at the area now called Bario; Kuba'an, Pa' Ukat, Pa' Umor and Pa' Lungan in the northern part of the highlands within a few hours' walk of Bario; Long Dano, Pa' Dalih, Batu Patong and Ramudu in the southern part of the highlands; Pa' Mein halfway between the southern and northern areas; and Pa' Bengar just within Sarawak near the border with Indonesia in the south of the highlands. In addition to these communities in the highlands, there were Kelabit communities outside the highlands, at lower altitudes within Sarawak. These were Long Peluan on the Baram River, Long Lellang on the Akah, a tributary of the Baram, Long Seridan on the Tutoh, also a tributary of the Baram, and Long Napir on the Limbang River.

There is a broad dialectical difference between the northern and southern settlements within the highlands nowadays, and it would appear that they formed two political groupings under different leaders in the early part of the twentieth century. At the time of the Second World War, and still now, this was recognized by the Sarawak government, which appointed and still appoints two *penghulu*, or chiefs, for the area. However, it would seem that in practice, at the time of the war, the chief of the southern area, who lived in Pa' Dalih, was the stronger of the two leaders, and that there was denser

4 Bulan n.d.; Lian-Saging 1976-77; Talla 1979. The terms these authors quote are ones which are used among Kayan and Kenyah groups. It seems arguable that they were borrowed in an attempt to create parallels between notions of hierarchy and status held by the Kayan and Kenyah on the one hand and the Kelabit on the other, and that the Kelabit did not in fact have the rigid strata which these terms reflect among the groups in which they originate.

settlement in the south because of this. Nowadays the centre of power, and both the *penghulu* and the higher level-level *pemanca* are based in Bario.

Migration within the Kerayan-Kelabit Highland area since the 1960s

In 1952, Tom Harrisson organized the building of an airstrip near the longhouse of Lam Baa in the northern part of the Kelabit Highlands, where he was based during his time there in wartime. This area came to be called Bario. In 1961 a government airstrip was opened, also at Bario (Lian-Saging 1976-77: 109). The first primary school in the Kelabit Highlands was built at Pa' Mein, and by the early 1960s there were primary schools at a number of settlements in the highlands (Toynbee 1965). A government clinic was opened at Bario and one at Pa' Dalih in the southern part of the highlands at some point during the 1960s or 1970s. In the 1960s, a government research station was opened at Bario to look into the agronomic potential of the highlands.

The fact that much of the development in the Kelabit Highlands was focused on Bario was largely due to Tom Harrisson's particular interest in the longhouse of Lam Baa, where he had spent a good deal of time during the war and subsequently. When the so-called Confrontation with Indonesia broke out in the mid-1960s, and the Kelabit Highlands became a focus of the fighting along the border, the people of Pa' Bengar, Kuba'an and Pa' Main chose, with a good deal of encouragement from the authorities, to resettle in Bario, presumably in order to gain protection. Many people of the other southern settlements also resettled in Bario at that time, almost certainly partly because of the access to services there. All of the primary schools were closed except that at Bario – supposedly temporarily but in the event none ever re-opened except that at Pa' Dalih. After the Confrontation the movement of population to Bario continued, and by the mid-1970s there were nine longhouses in Bario.

Of the Kelabit Highlands longhouse settlements at the time of the Second World War, only six of those outside Bario remained in by the late 1980s: Pa' Umor, Pa' Ukat and Pa' Lungan in the north and Pa' Dalih, Long Dano and Remudu in the south. Batu Patong in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a remnant community with one native household resident there, together with a small number of households which arrived around 1990 from the Kerayan area across the border. For administrative, religious and social purposes it formed part of the community of Pa' Dalih. The movement to Bario continued in the 1990s from all of the settlements, and particularly the southern settlements. Only Pa' Dalih was, in the early 1990s, still a thriving community which was not suffering severe depopulation, and this is probably to a large degree because it had a primary school and a clinic.

Not only has there been migration into the Bario area from other parts of the Kelabit Highlands; there has also been an appreciable migration into Bario from across the border with Indonesia, from the closely related people of the Pa' Rian area, which is in the northern part of the Kerayan Highlands. Across the border there is much less access to possibilities for earning cash income outside the interior; the Indonesian Rupiah is worth little compared to the Malaysian Ringgit so that wages are higher in Sarawak, and it appears to be much more difficult to send out rice for sale, despite the fact that there are much larger areas of wet rice land there than in the Bario area. Most of this migration is seasonal, consisting of people coming over to work in the rice fields in Bario for wages. People also come to sell heirloom beads (*ba'o*) – in great demand as markers of prestige in the very competitive, socially mobile context of Bario – to the cash-rich people of Bario.

Migration from the Kerayan is not only into Bario. It is also into Pa' Dalih in the southern part of the highlands. The people coming into Pa' Dalih in the early 1990s were close relatives of people living in Pa' Dalih and Batu Patong and came from the part of the Kerayan Highland area close to Pa' Dalih. Around 1991 immigrants from this area built themselves a separate, third longhouse in Pa' Dalih (which was interesting, since in the Kerayan communities people mainly live in separate houses now, not in longhouses, due to pressure from the Dutch and then the Indonesian authorities). They were, in 1992-1993, cultivating land for wet rice at the oxbow lake at Batu Patong, about an hour and a half's walk away. They had been given permission (without payment) to use this land by those who have the right to cultivate the land because they or their ancestors cleared it and made it into wet rice fields in the past.

Both men and women were migrating into the Kelabit Highlands from the Kerayan in the early 1990s. Almost all migration is in the context of kin ties, and migrants reside in the households of relatives if they are temporary migrants. Permanent migration too is initially into a related household (which I term hearth-group;[5] Janowski 1995), with a separate household being established only later.

The sale of rice to town since the 1960s

Since the 1960s the possibility of exporting rice to town for sale has stimulated the making of wet rice fields in the Kelabit Highlands as well as migration to the Bario area. In the Kelabit-Kerayan Highland area, a number of rice

5 *Tetal* is the most common word the Kelabit use for this group of people, a word which is also used to mean 'hearth where rice meals are cooked and eaten'. It consists of a couple, their unmarried children and sometimes one married child, their spouse and children.

varieties are grown; in Pa' Dalih in 1986-1988 I established that 32 varieties were being grown. Most of these, interestingly, can and are grown in both wet and dry fields. However, there is an exception. This is a group of small-grained, rather aromatic varieties called *pade adan* and *pade dari* which can, according to the Kelabit, only be successfully grown in wet fields. These varieties have turned out, since the 1960s, to be extremely popular in town, and a considerable export trade of rice from Bario, by air, has developed. MAS, the air carrier, allows a special rate for rice, and quite high prices are paid for what is described as 'Bario rice' in towns like Miri. Some is even exported out of Sarawak.

The fact that these varieties can be exported for sale and that the Bario area is particularly suitable for wet fields have combined to produce a booming economy in that area. Immigration to the Bario area from other parts of the highlands, already started because of the provision of government services and the resettlement during Confrontation in the 1960s, was given a considerable stimulus in the decades following this.

Nowadays, Bario is the largest area of wet rice cultivation in the Kelabit Highlands. It consists almost entirely of flat peaty land of the Umor series and the Bareo series (Eilers and Loi 1982:77). The former, which have a thin layer of peat, can be made into wet fields fairly easily although it is necessary to invest a considerable amount of labour in removing the peat before this is possible. Soils of the Bareo series are more difficult to make into wet fields, since the layer of peat is thicker. In Bario all of the areas of Umor series soils and much of the area of Bareo series soils had been made into wet fields by the 1980s.

The capacity of the wet fields of the Kelabit-Kerayan Highlands to produce an extremely good crop of rice has been noted by other authors (for example, Sellato 1997). In the past, this excess production was consumed at huge *irau* feasts, generating prestige for the couple providing the feast. At such feasts, rice was consumed both as cooked rice and as rice beer (*borak*). Rice beer was an extremely important item not only in the practical but also in what I am calling the symbolic economy of the area, being used as a kind of currency in the exchange of labour and generating prestige for its provider in the process. Its making provided the opportunity to turn any amount of excess production to use in terms of symbolic capital.

Since the Kelabit became evangelical Christians in the 1960s and 1970s, converted by the Borneo Evangelical Mission (whose successor is the Sidang Injil Borneo, the SIB church to which all Kelabit now belong) they have stopped making rice beer. They were considered to have a serious drink problem by the missionaries (and many Kelabit appear to concur that this was so) and a good deal of effort was invested in making them teetotal, with considerable success (Lees 1979). Nowadays although there is some semi-secret drinking of 'compound brandy', brought up in satchels from town, and it is rumoured that there are a few individuals who still make rice beer in Bario, the majority of Kelabit do not touch alcohol. This means that they are unable to consume, through the making of rice beer, more rice than they can actually eat. Even at feasts there is a limit to the amount that can be used. However, with the possibility of selling rice to the coast a new way of utilizing surplus production and of generating status became possible. Money earned through the sale of rice is used, in the Highlands, for prestige expenditure. This includes building new longhouse apartments, buying heirloom beads from people from the Kerayan (who are not so fortunate in having a market for their surplus rice) and hosting very lavish *irau* feasts at which town-bought snack foods are provided as well as a huge rice meal, and at which expensive gifts are given to guests.

The possibility of selling rice only exists, however, in communities close enough to the Bario airstrip to carry rice to it. All rice has to be carried in baskets on people's backs to the airstrip and it is not really practicable to carry rice regularly from communities more than a couple of hours' walk away. This means that all the southern communities are in practice excluded from this lucrative trade in rice, since they are at a distance of about 32 (difficult) km from Bario – a distance which takes at least ten to twelve hours with a load of rice on one's back.

Despite the fact that they could not sell the rice produced in them, communities in the south of the Kelabit Highlands were making new wet rice fields in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some of these fields were in areas which had never been used for wet rice fields before. Some of these are being made in small peaty flat patches or in the enlarged beds of streams, and some are in old oxbow lakes which were probably created for the purpose of making wet rice fields in the past (Harrisson 1962). Why are these fields being made? The reason should be sought partly in the prestige of making this kind of mark on the landscape and partly in the hope of eventually being able to export rice. This would be via the ex-mission airstrip in Pa' Dalih, which the people of the community were, in the late 1980s, putting a great deal of effort into extending so that it could at least take charter planes.

Access to agricultural land in Bario

While in the past – and still in the 1990s in communities outside Bario – there has been no shortage of agricultural land, this has not been the case in Bario since the 1960s. Gradually, migration into the Bario area began to put pressure on the land there. The early immigrants gained access to adequate

land but later migrants, and certainly any that moved from the mid-1980s onwards, have had difficulties getting land to grow rice.

While Kelabit custom does not allow for actual ownership of land, it does allow for privileged access, which amounts to de facto ownership, to land which has been altered and improved for agriculture on the part of those who have carried out the alterations and improvements. This of course applies to wet rice land, particularly land brought under permanent cultivation, where a good deal of earth is moved. Thus, in practice the original inhabitants of the one longhouse in Bario, Lam Baa, 'owned' most of the land in the area since at one time or another they had cultivated it, either under the new permanent system or under the previous less intensive system. They did cede land to incomers – they were indeed quite pleased to have them since it increased the status of the original inhabitants; in Kelabit custom, as is common in the Austronesian area (Bellwood 1996), it is prestigious to be the first settlers of an area. However, they became less willing to cede more of their land as more immigrants arrived.

Migration out of the Kelabit Highlands since the 1960s

The first person to leave the Kelabit Highlands to live in town was Lian Labang, who went to work at the Sarawak Museum under Tom Harrisson after the Second World War, when Harrisson became curator. Harrisson appears to have been instrumental in assisting a number of Kelabit children to succeed at school outside the Highlands; until a lower secondary school was opened in the Bario in 1967 it was necessary to leave the Highlands in order to attend secondary school. It is still necessary to leave to attend upper secondary school. By the early 1970s there was a handful of Kelabit university graduates, and since then a number have succeeded as professionals in town and have settled there. These will probably never return to live in the highlands, but form the core and the leaders of the Kelabit community in town.

There is a much larger group of unskilled, semi-skilled or clerk-level Kelabit working in town nowadays, mostly in the town of Miri. These people, particularly those who are unskilled, are not always long-term residents in town; they tend to come and go from the highlands depending on the availability of work. Once they marry, some of the unskilled return to the highlands, particularly if there is not much work in town at that time. It is, therefore, difficult to estimate with any precision how many Kelabit actually live in town. However, it is probably about half of the Kelabit population nowadays. There were estimated to be 5,059 Kelabit in 1987 and a growth rate of 4% from 1970 to 1980 (Ko 1987:35), so it is probable that the total is now about 7,500, with about 3,500 in the Kelabit Highlands and 3,500 in Miri

at any one time, with the rest distributed around other towns in Sarawak.[6] It appears that there are about equal numbers of migrants from the different communities in the Kelabit Highlands resident in town, although there are probably more skilled and professional-level people from Lam Baa longhouse in Bario, which benefited from the particular support of Tom Harrisson.

Both men and women migrate to the coast for work on a temporary basis. There is about an equal number of young unmarried men and women absent from Pa' Dalih, working in Miri. However, once a couple is married, it is more likely that the young husband will migrate seasonally to town for work and his wife will remain in Pa' Dalih. If the couple both have work in town, or the man has a good job, the couple may live in town together with their children. The problem of child care is often solved by bringing in a female relative – either a young girl or a mother, aunt or grandmother – from the highlands to care for the children. Particularly if a woman has been educated to sixth form or beyond, it seems to be likely that she will work and will not stay at home with children. Education is highly valued, for both men and women; by the early 1990s level of education was quite significant in the arranging of marriages, although inherited status was still, according to informants, the most important determinant of who should marry whom.

The direct air link between Bario and Miri which existed by the late twentieth century meant that in a sense Kelabit in the two places formed part of one community. The fare between Miri and Bario, which was at that time about M$ 70, was subsidized by the government, and was low enough to enable most people to make fairly frequent visits up and down. In 1997, the loggers reached the southern part of the highlands near Remudu, and people from Pa' Dalih, Long Dano and Remudu could, after that, go down by logging truck for a lower payment, although the danger of this mode of transport meant that many still chose to go by air (Rinai Adun of Pa' Dalih, personal communication). Even the people of Pa' Dalih, who have much less cash than those of Bario, visited town at least once or twice a year in the 1980s and 1990s, and those of the Bario area clearly visited much more often, although no exact figures were available. Kelabit resident in town visited the highlands less often unless they were doing business up there, but most were likely to come up at least once in every year or two, often much more often. Gossip and information, of course, traveled extremely effectively, both via visitors up and down and via the radio telephone link which was available in Bario and in Pa' Dalih, although in Pa' Dalih it is often out of order. With the e-Bario project set up in 1999 by the University Malaysia Sarawak (www.unimas.my/fit/roger/Bario) communications with the Kelabit community

6 Martin 1994 estimates only about 1,000 in Miri, but admits that there is no way of assessing the numbers other than by guesswork.

in town as well as with the wider world may become even easier. Despite prestige differentiation, the Kelabit conceive of themselves as all being related, and their small number means that they are able to keep pretty good track of what is going on within the community, even in other longhouses. I found that they had less close contact with and less knowledge of the affairs of Kelabit from longhouses outside the highlands, however, although marriage ties are set up with people of those communities fairly regularly, which keeps them related and within the network of exchange of information. Links with Kelabit in town were better than with those living in longhouses outside the highland area.

The ability of young Kelabit to come and go from town is dependant on the fact that they are able to stay with more established relatives. The Kelabit have a strong tradition of hospitality to all, but particularly to young relatives, who are allowed, both in the highlands and in town, to stay and be fed for as long as they like. This is largely due to the fact that being able to maintain a large hearth-group (household) is the basis of prestige among the Kelabit (Janowski 1995).

Negotiating the relationship between two symbolic economies

I would argue that Kelabit, both in town and in the highlands, are having to try to integrate two very different symbolic economies. The traditional symbolic economy rests on the cultivation of rice and the provision of the rice meal by those described as *lun merar*, literally 'big people'. 'Big people' are, at the basic level, married couples who provide for their dependants within the basic hearth-group – their children, both biological and adopted, and their grandchildren. Being able to do this was until the 1960s the sole basis of status within the society. This is because the notion of 'big people' was the basis of prestige differentiation. Entities equivalent to the basic hearth-group may be said to exist at higher levels too – the entire longhouse, and a group of longhouses, are equivalent to higher-level 'hearth-groups' in certain contexts, and are led and provided for by the leading couple, described as the 'big people' of all of the members of the lower-level 'hearth-groups' which make up the longhouse or group of longhouses (Janowski 1991, 1995). This was, and still is, acted out and brought into being at *irau* feasts, where huge numbers of people are fed and thus become, temporarily, the 'children' of the couple providing the feast. Being able to provide the wherewithal for rice meals was the basis of the traditional symbolic economy, and this meant (and still means) growing lots of rice as well as having access to the forest for wild meat and vegetables and to dry *late'* or *ira* gardens for growing vegetables.

In the new symbolic economy of the town, on the other hand, success in education, getting a good job, and having a lot of money matter in the generation of prestige. These things matter in the highlands too; the world of the highlands and that of the town cannot really be separated, since they are in frequent contact via the exchange of people and information. In the highlands, as in the town, having a salaried job (being the dresser in the clinic in Pa' Dalih, being a teacher in the primary school, being employed at the airstrip in Bario) did matter, by the end of the twentieth century, in generating prestige. Such jobs were not desired solely for their monetary return but because they linked the individual to the institutions of the town, to the structure of the state. Money was desired in the highlands as in town, not just because it could be spent (although this is, of course, highly relevant!) but in some sense for its own sake, as something which originates from, and links one with, that outside structure. Its function was not just to buy the necessities of life but also to buy prestige items and the wherewithal for holding *irau* feasts. In fact, the attitude seemed to be that food, particularly rice, should ideally be grown rather than bought. The most useful things from town, which were seen as necessities by the 1990s, are mostly either very cheap (plastic items such as bags and basins, matches) or are organized by the community as a whole (such as pipes for water supply). For the people of the Kelabit Highlands, then, the main role of money was not, late in the twentieth century, to sustain physical life but to sustain prestige.

I would suggest that both in town and in the highlands, attempts were being made, by the 1980s, to negotiate the relationship between the two symbolic economies. Households in town, even when they were headed by a couple with children, were not fully accepted in Kelabit custom as being proper hearth-groups, since they were usually unable to grow their own rice. Rather than buying it, they tended to eat rice which was sent down from the highlands by their 'source' hearth-group, to which they nominally still belonged – usually that of the parents of one of the two spouses. Despite the difficulty of getting rice down to town from Pa' Dalih because of lack of easy access to an air strip, which normally precluded the possibility of making any income from the export of rice, hearth-groups in Pa' Dalih went to great lengths to ensure that they were able to send rice down to their 'dependants' in town. This meant that they maintained a larger symbolic hearth-group, including relatives in town, which was arguably generative of status.

Having to continue to remain in a state of perpetual 'childhood', implied by having to rely on one's parents for rice, not being able to establish a true hearth-group, clearly chafed with many households in Miri. In the early 1990s, some began making small rice fields outside the town (personal communications from Kelabit informants; Martin 1994). The only reason that there could possibly be for this is that they wished to establish their autonomy as separate hearth-groups, since these households were not, as

far as I know, under any economic pressure.[7] Most significant is the fact that buying rice was not seen as a desirable option; this is, I would argue, due an acceptance of participation in the symbolic economy of the highlands, and, linked to this, the fact that rice is closely associated with life itself and its transmission. I have discussed this elsewhere (Janowski 1998).

This making of rice fields by people who were well integrated into the town economy – who did not have plans on an immediate basis to return to the highlands – was, I would suggest, an attempt to come to terms with their own rather anomalous situation. They had been successful in generating prestige within the symbolic economy of the town, but they were still children in the eyes of the traditional symbolic economy of the highlands. I have heard relatives of professional people attempting to achieve an integration of the two symbolic economies on behalf of their relative in a different way, by telling me that their relative's job 'is his rice field'. However, this is not a sufficient answer to the problem – ultimately, a real rice field is required!

In the highlands too one can see the attempt to integrate the two symbolic economies. In Pa' Dalih in the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a strong felt need to achieve success in the symbolic economy of the town. Pa' Dalih saw itself as disadvantaged, and as losing prestige, because of its lesser involvement with the town, compared to the involvement which Bario had. Before the 1960s, Pa' Dalih appears to have been the major centre in the Kelabit Highlands, in that it was the home of the Kelabit *penghulu*, Penghulu Miri; by the end of the twentieth century, however, it had become a minor centre to which few outsiders went. Bario had been endowed with most of the government facilities, largely because of the siting of the only government-run airstrip there and because of the resettlement of most of the Kelabit population there at the time of the Confrontation. It had the airstrip, the government agricultural research station, the main clinic, and practically all of the shops selling goods from town. Outside visitors usually spent most, sometimes all, of their time in Bario. Not being involved in all this meant that the status of the southern part of the Highlands was suffering. In particular, the impossibility of earning cash through the export of rice chafed. This was the reason for the efforts during the periods of my fieldwork to extend the ex-mission airstrip in Pa' Dalih. The community worked together on this; work groups were organized to work on the airfield regularly.

7 The standard of living in Malaysian towns is quite high and it seems likely to be very rare for a Kelabit household in town to be under such economic pressure that they could not afford to buy enough rice.

Rice – a link between the two symbolic economies

I would suggest that rice provides a link, or bridge, between the two symbol ic economies – that of the highlands and that of the town. This has a certair appropriateness, since rice is a focal crop and a focal food for almost every one in Southeast Asia. Both in towns and in rural areas, and among almost al ethnic groups, rice is the only real food, the only possible focus of a meal. Th extent to which even the government has this attitude is expressed in thei efforts to get the nomadic Penan not just to settle but to start growing rice Given the difficulty of growing rice in the forest and the need to tend it con stantly – something the Penan have shown reluctance to do – it would mak more sense to encourage the Penan either to plant sago – their staple alread as a wild resource – or cassava. However, these are not even conceived o as options. Not growing rice is, as I have argued for the Kelabit, equivalen to not being fully human, to being 'forever children' (Janowski 1997). Othe tribes have similar attitudes, as was apparent in comments I received fron members of those tribes when I presented this material in Kuching in 1990.

The importance of rice is that it has the capacity to generate status withi both symbolic economies. As a crop and as a food, it has an important rol not only in the 'world within' of the Kelabit Highlands (Harrisson 1959) but in the broader Malaysian and Southeast Asian world. It therefore allow the Kelabit to maintain a continuity between the past and the future. It ha the potential, for Kelabit of the highlands, to allow them to participate full in the symbolic economy of the town while continuing to be resident in th highlands. For Kelabit living in town, growing their own rice enables them in a sense, to transform the town into an extension of the highlands whil participating in the symbolic economy of the town as well.

At the moment, it is only in Bario and not in a community like Pa' Dali in the southern part of the Kelabit Highlands that it is possible to achiev this foothold in the symbolic economy of the town, because in Bario there i access to a good functioning airstrip. However, should a government airstri ever be opened in Pa' Dalih, it will go some way to levelling the playing field The isolation of the southern area, which is due to the lack of a proper air strip, would diminish or disappear. Above all, rice could be exported, whic would mean an inflow of cash and of town goods. This would undoubtedl lead to increased settlement in that area.

Conclusion

In the Kelabit Highlands, rice, the symbolic pivot of life up to the Secon World War, has not just retained this role – it has been expanded and buil

upon through its role as a cash crop. The possibility of growing rice for sale has not only underpinned the traditional symbolic economy but has also enabled the Kelabit to enter the new symbolic economy of the town in a strong position. For this reason, the Kelabit Highlands is not inevitably subject to the same inexorable pressures towards out-migration as are most interior areas in Sarawak.

In town as in the highlands, rice has a pivotal role, symbolically, not only for the Kelabit but for everyone. The very fact that rice grown in the highlands can be sold at such high prices in town is due to the fact that the urban symbolic economy is not, in fact, entirely divorced from its roots: rice remains the main, focal food for people in town. It could even be seen as a pivotal symbol within the urban symbolic economy – not just for Kelabit, but for everyone. Without rice, for all Southeast Asians, rural or urban, a meal is not a meal. Eating a meal, for all groups, tribal and non-tribal, is 'eating rice'.

Because of the role of rice as a bridge between the two symbolic economies, old and new, the practical economy of the Bario area, which has access to town by air and can sell rice to the coast, has remained vibrant. Bario is able to keep one foot in the old while dipping the other into the new. The rest of the Kelabit-Kerayan Highlands, including the southern part of the Kelabit Highlands, has not, so far, benefited in the same way because they do not have the same easy access to a market for their rice. However, the people of the southern area, and particularly those of Pa' Dalih, have managed to hang on so far, even though many have left for Bario. They are trying very hard to achieve the same balance between old and new which has been attained in Bario, through investing labour in new wet rice fields in which to grow the saleable varieties, and in an airstrip to enable them to export the rice to town, so that they too can bring in a cash income.

The example of the Kelabit shows how a traditional factor can come into play to enable a balance to be achieved between the old and the new. Recent migration patterns, both within and out of the highlands, have been spurred by a desire for integration into the outside world. However, migration carries with it the danger of either an emptying of the highland area and/or the isolation of the remaining inhabitants of the highlands because they are unable to engage in any activity which allows them to participate in the symbolic economy of the town, leaving them stranded in the symbolic economy of the highlands. I have suggested that it is proving possible to maintain a bridge between the two symbolic economies through the cultivation of rice – a crop and a food of considerable significance both in the traditional highland arena and also in the town arena, not only for Kelabit but for all ethnic groups.

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