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It Takes a Village to Dismantle a Longhouse

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It Takes a Village to Dismantle a Longhouse

Abstract

The author's long-term fieldwork among the Kelabit people informs this discussion of the decline of longhouse living in favor of nuclear households.

Keywords

Kelabit people, longhouse, nuclear family, Borneo

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I think it is somewhat arbitrary to try to dissociate the effective practice of freedom by people, the practice of social relations, and the spatial distributions in which they find themselves. If they are separated, they become impossible to understand. Each can only be understood through the other.

Michel Foucault[1]

Being "modern" for the Kelabit people of highland Borneo (Sarawak, Malaysia) is about many things; it is linked to education, participation in a world religion, new technologies, and involvement in the political and economic structures of the state.[2] Modernity is also intertwined with emergent social phenomena: changing norms, new class structures, and the main concerns of this essay: desires for privacy, reconfiguring of social space, and the transformation of the longhouse.

The longhouse is a place of contradiction (**Figs. 1 and 2**). On the surface, it situates communal integration, cooperation, and harmony.   Seen in Simmelian terms, it is also a place of an enforced social control, since "coercion is necessary for social organization."[3]   Simultaneously providing the safety of an extended family and the critical and reassuring gaze of society,

Fig. 1. Longhouse interior.

the longhouse disciplines social interaction. Despite strong expressions of nostalgia for these traditional structures, desires for privacy, freedom from the coercive effect of communal life, and economic differentiation have proved stronger forces. This has resulted in Kelabit longhouses being dismantled, modified in form, and abandoned in favor of smaller longhouse-like structures and single family homes. Whereas relations of power in the community were once dominated by local, house-based structures of control, these have shifted to incorporate social fields extending far beyond the village.

One community experiencing such an interplay of social, spatial, and architectural transformation is Pa' Dabpur[4], a Kelabit settlement located near the Malaysian/Indonesian border. The Kelabit, former headhunters and animists, converted to Christianity around the time of World War II and have readily embraced change. Pa' Dabpur was founded in 1963 and originally consisted of a single longhouse (*ruma' kadang*) with over twenty family units (*lubang ruma'*–literally "holes of the house"). It was settled with the help of British army, who used helicopters to relocate this longhouse-based community away from the Indonesian border during the conflict between Malaysia and Indonesia known as *Konfrontasi*. At the time, Pa' Dabpur was viewed as a "modern" longhouse design; it had metal roofing, provided by the British army, and architectural innovations such as the addition of private sleeping areas.

Traditionally, the Kelabit longhouse was a single structure, physically and symbolically divided into two sides (**Figs. 3 and 4**). The inner area (*dalem*) centered on the family hearth, where women prepared meals and elderly couples and children slept. The outer area (*tawa*) was a communal verandah, where bachelors slept at night. The positioning of each family within the longhouse carried social meaning. The headman and his close relatives were at the center of the longhouse; those at the far ends were the last people to join the community and usually the most peripheral in terms of kinship. While a traditional class system relegated people of lower status to the outer flanks of the longhouse, mutual obligation and interdependence marked the relationship between all longhouse members. Longhouses were largely egalitarian spaces; each family had roughly equal-sized sections, and all the inhabitants could move about freely.

Prior to the cessation of headhunting and conversion to Christianity, longhouses were also the locations of feasts that involved consumption of vast quantities of alcohol and were considered critical to the well-being of the whole community. These feasts, hosted by people of high status, demanded a great deal of cooperation and typically centered on the initiation of children and mortuary rites.

Fig. 2. Kelabit longhouse from the air, 1994.

1 Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984,), p. 246.
2 This paper is based on anthropological field research conducted between October 1993 and July 1995, as well as a brief visit in September-October 1999.
3 Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950), p. 298.
4 A pseudonym.

The new longhouse at Pa' Dapbur, built in 1963, transformed what were the two sides of the earlier longhouse into two parallel structures. As with the traditional longhouse, the *dalem* was retained, and an open passageway allowed people to stroll its length freely, moving between the hearths of different families. The *tawa* became a separate structure, and private sleeping quarters were constructed above it. This new longhouse design created spaces that were explicitly "public" and "private." In addition, by separating the two structures, the risk of a fire spreading from the cooking area and destroying the entire house was reduced.

In 1990, the headman of Pa' Dabpur spearheaded a project to build yet another new longhouse (**Fig. 5a**). Disagreements erupted over a number of issues and resulted in two small longhouses being constructed instead—housing only about half of the families of the community. Some people chose to remain in what became a cannibalized structure of the old longhouse, while other families opted out altogether, choosing to build single-family houses (**Figs. 6 and 7**). In 1993, the house, close to being dismantled, had only a few families still living in a small section (**Fig. 5b**). By 1999, no traces of the original structure remained, and a number of single-family homes subsequently emerged on this site (**Fig. 5c**). Four years later, Pa' Dabpur was scattered over a much wider area and resembled a village. Individuality of economic resources has resulted in marked differentiation in the size and design of recently constructed multi- and single-family houses.

Each of the dozen formerly longhouse-based communities of the Kelabit Highlands have experienced their own architectural innovations. Many have
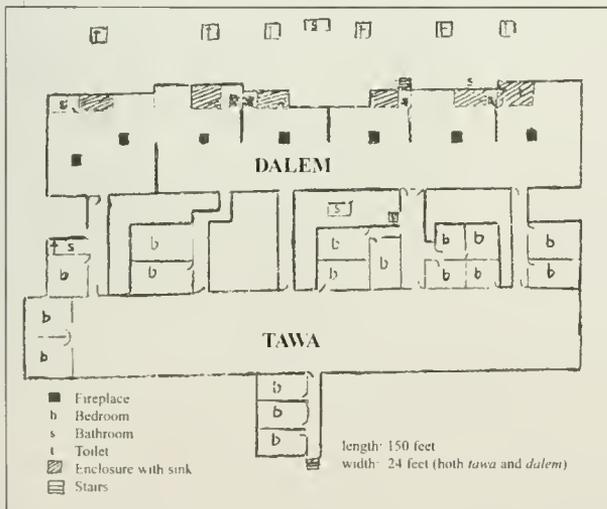

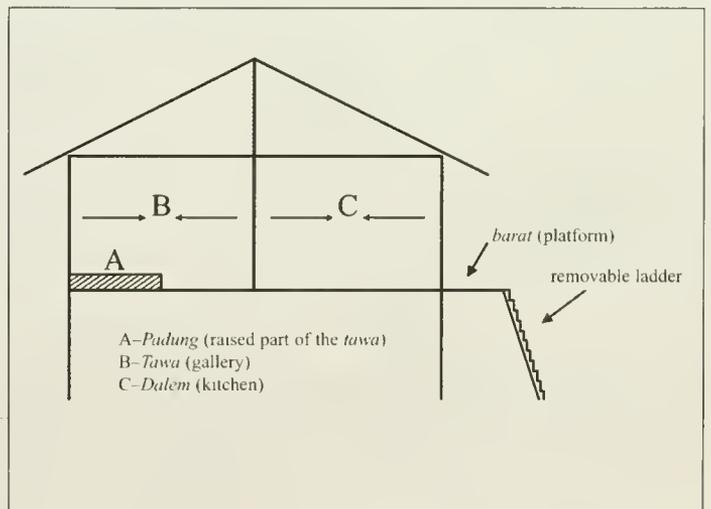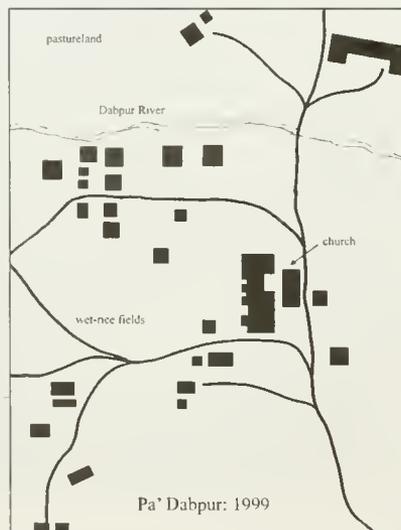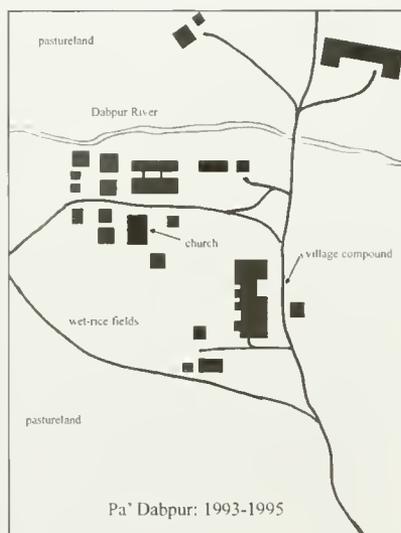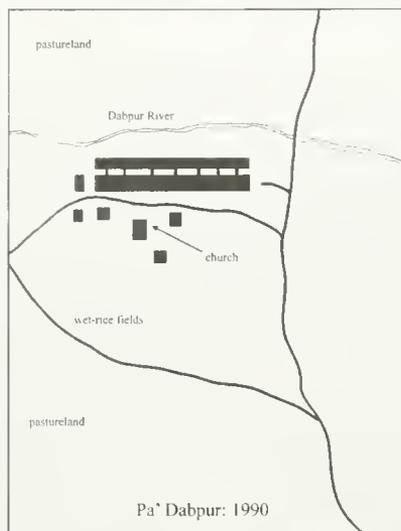**Fig. 3.** Longhouse plan. Adapted from Talla 1979, p. 52.

Fig. 4. Typical longhouse section. Adapted from Talla 1979, p.50.

Pa' Dabpur: 1990

Pa' Dabpur: 1993-1995

Pa' Dabpur: 1999

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kept some features of longhouse-style architectural design intact. In some contemporary longhouses, cooking areas have become separate rooms, while in others they still form an open communal space. In all contemporary longhouses, it is now standard to have private sleeping areas, and single family houses are becoming increasingly common. While one can still experience the glow of fires extending down the long open space of a *dalem*, often many units are vacant, and this structural form is gradually becoming a way of the past.

The biggest factor in the transformation of Kelabit life is the steady and large-scale outmigration of young people to coastal towns that began in the mid-1960s. Roughly three-quarters of all Kelabit now live away from their rural homeland. Many settle in the town of Miri, where the local economy is centered on an offshore oil industry. Urban migration has increased the average age of those still living in the longhouse-based communities of the highlands. It has also resulted in significant funds being available for new home construction and the expansion of wet-rice fields, as children employed in town send remittances home. This, coupled with the large pool of migrant wage labor available from nearby Indonesia, has allowed the Kelabit to build new, often larger houses (even as the population shrinks) and expand rice production.

The vast majority of Kelabit under forty years old live in town, typically working in office or civil service jobs, and most (around 75%) have intermarried with members of other ethnic groups.[5] Of the few people who choose to return to their rural home communities, most are young men, many of whom have become disillusioned with town life. Many of these young men return knowing that they will have little trouble finding wives from among their economically less well-off neighbors across the border in Indonesia. This dynamic social field, propelled simultaneously by the outmigration of Kelabit youth, an influx of remittances from town, and the availability of an economically disadvantaged pool of migrant labor (and potential brides), has resulted in both the growth and spread of fragmentation within the community.

Outmigrants living in town typically return home on vacation to help with the harvest, attend weddings and funerals, and perform name-changing ceremonies—a Christian-modified version of former longhouse feasts.[6] These events are ideally held in the communal *tawa*, but, with each passing year, as more and more families choose to splinter off and build individual homes, the potential venues for such gatherings are becoming limited. Some Kelabit living in town have constructed vacation homes in the highlands, and others speak of retiring in their home communities.

Figs. 5a, b, c. Transformation of Pa' Dabpur from 1990 through 1999.

Fig. 6. Construction of new housing.

Fig. 7. Cannibalized longhouse.

In 1999, I visited Pa' Dabpur and found that the headman of the community was in the final stages of building his own single-family house, located about a hundred meters away from the small, six-family longhouse in which he lived (constructed in 1991). The area directly in front of this house, where people had gathered in 1993-1995 to play volleyball on Sunday afternoons, was now occupied by a large, new church—funded by children living in town. The community was clearly moving further in the direction of private, walled spaces. Public space, once dominated by the longhouse and its compound, appeared to be shifting to the church. Only two multi-family houses remained in the village, and nearly all the younger families had either built, or were planning to build, their own single-family houses (**Fig. 8**).

Although proud of the "success" of their children in town, old people often complained about the lack of liveliness of rural community life and the prevalence of a "bad silence" (*da'at ali*). In terms of "core" values, elders insisted that a defining feature of Kelabit identity is "to look after visitors, to feed and nurture anyone who passes through the community." They lamented that the younger generation did not correctly understand this and pointed out that, whereas in the past young men returning from hunting freely distributed meat to each household, now meat is now often sold for cash. As visual reminders of this process, longhouse verandahs, to the extent they still exist, have become empty places, and community life has grown "cold" as more time is spent in private spaces. Cooking areas, once within sight of each other, have, in some longhouses, become walled-off and separate rooms. The *tawa*, once the center of community life, is now a place for occasional gatherings and to pass through in accessing private quarters. Privacy, once only found within the mats people rolled themselves up in at night to stay warm, has become commonplace.

Inverting the axiom of the poet Robert Frost that 'good fences make good neighbors,' Christine Helliwell has argued that, traditionally, the reverse was true in Borneo societies: good walls made bad neighbors.[7] "There [in the longhouse] it is not the walls which make good neighbors, but the gaps and tears that occur within them."[8] Explicitly linking the longhouse to contestations of social control, Helliwell describes the "wish to escape community pressure" as a main reason young people "build free-standing dwellings, and so leave the longhouse."[9] Similarly, among the Kelabit, solid walls, doors and locks, and freestanding homes centered on the nuclear family are emerging as new norms of a "modern" social life.

The young men of the village were helping the headman install a satellite dish, the first in the village, which would depend on a diesel generator and

Fig. 8. Single-family house.

fuel brought into the highlands by light aircraft, all purchased with the help of adult children in town (**Fig. 9**). The satellite dish had been carried across the border from Indonesia (the Malaysian government prohibits their use fearing "foreign influences"). The headman's unit at the center of the longhouse, soon to become vacant, was being offered for sale to the adjacent households. The following week, members of a neighboring family met in town (where most lived) to discuss whether they would purchase the unit, seriously considering the idea of disconnecting these two central units from the rest of the longhouse, perhaps turning it into a rest house for backpackers.[10]

The physical contours of this once longhouse-centric community have transformed to that of an ordinary village. Power, once located at the center of the longhouse, is now dispersed, reaching outward to economic and political centers of power elsewhere, while also being reconstituted and concentrated within the local church. Whereas before social control was maintained through the "universal gaze" of communal life, itself a type of "panoptic system," today it is mainly the fear of God and common Christian fellowship that unites people in this community, while money and economic difference divide them.[11]

With each passing year, the dispersal of village structures continues, fueled by disagreements, economic differences, and the desire for privacy, freedom, and other "modern" values. Clearly, the newly-constructed church has taken on an increasing role in structuring and domesticating communal life, as have the contacts that extend to places farther afield. The longhouse beside the church is now overshadowed by it and faces possible dismantling, as the headman prepares to move to a new single-family home. Both young and old alike seek the privacy of single-family homes, which are being constructed farther and farther from the village core. This process fuels greater community fragmentation, of which the demise of the longhouse is only the most overt symptom.

Visitors and strangers who pass through the community—backpackers and migrant workers—are now treated differently. No longer are all strangers housed and fed with the same spirit of generosity and warmth. Tourists (and, perhaps, anthropologists) are seen as valuable commodities, people who are bound by their own customs to leave gifts of cash or other goods (as the *Lonely Planet* and other guidebooks instruct), and who hire local guides for their journeys into the surrounding jungle, bring the people of Pa' Dabpur and places like it into more intimate contact with "modernity," which in local thought is inexorably bound up with positive associations relating to

5 Matthew H. Amster, "Community, Ethnicity, and Modes of Association among the Kelabit of Sarawak, East Malaysia." Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University (1998), Chapter 2.

6 Matthew H. Amster, "Tradition", Ethnicity, and Change: Kelabit Practices of Name Changing," *Sarawak Museum Journal* 54. no. 75 (1999), pp. 183-200.

7 Christine Helliwell, "Good Walls Make Bad Neighbours: The Dayak Longhouse as a Community of Voices," *Oceania* 62 (1992), pp. 179-193.

8 Helliwell, 191.

9 Helliwell, 188.

10 The Kelabit Highlands is described in regional travel guides as an ideal place for setting out on jungle treks. The impact of tourism, however remains limited, due to the difficulty of getting in and out of the highlands. At present, there are a few very basic lodging houses offering inexpensive dorm-style accommodation and meals, and young Kelabit men can occasionally gain work as guides and porters.

11 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 154-155.

Christianity, technology, productivity, cleanliness, privacy, and wealth. On the other hand, seasonal migrant workers from Indonesia, though more closely-related ethnically, are associated with "traditional" culture and poverty and thus typically treated with less respect.

While places like Pa' Dabpur may seem to an outsider remote and peaceful "paradises" capable of fulfilling longings for pristine rainforests and simpler ways of life, to those who have lived through the changes of the last fifty years, community life has undergone considerable upheaval. Such changes, viewed in local terms, are seen as both positive and negative. Privacy and personal space have emerged as newly acquired tastes, and most Kelabit recognize that they also come at some cost. With physical dispersal, both to town areas and within the expanding space of the former longhouse-based community, social life is gradually growing "colder." Where once there were no doors or walls, there are now locks and solid walls. *Tawa* are now mainly empty places, passages connecting the doors of private apartments and kitchens, some of which are vacant. Instead of sharing meat and garden produce, people may now sell it to one another, and, in many situations, the use of cash has replaced traditional reciprocity. As old forms of social interaction and social control are transformed, new forms emerge in their place: the public gaze has shifted from the longhouse verandah to the church; political and economic factors, rooted in distant towns and cities, have come to influence relationships in the village; and, as economic differences and more complex social relationships gradually strain the fabric of village life, longhouses that were built collectively are now being collectively dismantled. Where once there was a house, there now stands a village.

Fig. 9. Assembling a satellite dish.