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Abstract

In 1953, Alastair Morrison, then acting District Officer for the Bara, traveled to the Kelabit Highlands along with his wife, photographer Hedda Morrison, and ever changing entourage of 'coolie' porters and guides. This journey was part of his regular responsibilities as a District Officer. During such tours, Morrison surveyed longhouse communities and collected information about the local population and spoke to people about government policies, school fees, taxes, the registering of guns, and often sought to resolve local disputes. Such journeys were summarized in formal reports. However, Morrison also kept travel notebooks, which he later used to write his memoir, which summarized the highlights of his life in Sarawak (Morrison 1993). These handwritten travel notebooks from his journeys are preserved, along with his wife's photographs, in the Kroch Rare Book and Manuscript Collection at Cornell University. This article is based on a close reading of Morrison's Kelabit notebooks, where he recorded his daily thoughts during a one month trip on foot through the Kelabit Highlands in 1953. Whereas Morrison's published memoir (1993: 86-88) summaries in just over two pages the main issues encountered on the journey, the original notebooks provide much additional information.

Keywords

Alastair Morrison, Kelabit Highlands, longhouse communities

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THE DIARY OF A DISTRICT OFFICER: ALASTAIR MORRISON'S 1953 TRIP TO THE KELABIT HIGHLANDS

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Introduction

In 1953, Alastair Morrison, then acting District Officer for the Baram, traveled to the Kelabit Highlands along with his wife, photographer Hedda Morrison, and an ever-changing entourage of "coolie" porters and guides. This journey was part of his regular responsibilities as a District Officer. During such tours, Morrison surveyed longhouse communities and collected information about the local population and spoke to people about government policies, school fees, taxes, the registering of guns, and often sought to resolve local disputes. Such journeys were summarized in formal reports. However, Morrison also kept travel notebooks, which he later used to write his memoir, which summarized the highlights of his life in Sarawak (Morrison 1993). These handwritten travel notebooks from his journeys are preserved, along with his wife's photographs, in the Kroch Rare Book and Manuscript Collection at Cornell University. This article is based on a close reading of Morrison's Kelabit notebooks, where he recorded his daily thoughts during a one-month trip on foot through the Kelabit Highlands in 1953. Whereas Morrison's published memoir (1993:86-88) summarizes in just over two pages the main issues encountered on the journey, the original notebooks provide much additional information.

Morrison's diary entries were mainly written in the evenings, typically after a hearty session of drinking the local rice beer (*burak*), about which he makes many wry comments. The notebooks not only offer insights into his thoughts and concerns while traveling, but also cover many incidental details that are of historical and ethnographic interest.

I begin below by discussing a number of eclectic details that emerge from the notebooks. I then turn to a more detailed discussion of how the notebooks offer insights into issues relating to the international frontier and cross-border movements. This is then followed by presentation of a specific dispute that occupied much of Morrison's attention during the trip — a case of a strained marriage. Then, finally, I comment on the problem of isolation and communications in the Kelabit Highlands and consider briefly how these notebooks offer insight into some contemporary concerns. In presenting this material, a simultaneous aim is to provide a generous sampling of Morrison's own words, as historically interesting artifacts in their own right. It is also my hope, in sharing this material, that I might inspire other Borneo scholars to consult Morrison's other travel notebooks, as well as the large archive of

photographs by Hedda Morrison at Cornell.¹

Coolies, War Medals, Blowpipes, Guns, the Bamboo Band, a Hailstorm, and Rice Beer

Morrison's trip began June 16 in Marudi, traveling by boat up the Akah River and then by foot to Lio Matu on the Baram, before he proceeded through Kelabit territory.² The bulk of the trip was spent visiting Kelabit houses, beginning with Long Lellang and traveling north by footpath to Pa' Tik and Kuba'an. He then proceeded east over the mountains into Bario and the Kelabit Highlands proper. From there, he traveled north to Pa' Lungan, before returning south, visiting Kelabit longhouses at Pa' Umor, Pa' Mein, Pa' Mada, Pa' Bengar, Pa' Dalih, Batu Patong, and Rumudu — visiting nearly all the settlements in the highlands (Figures 1 and 2).

Completing the journey, Morrison continued south to Lio Matu, and by boat down the Baram River to Marudi, where he returned on July 19. The entire journey occupied just over a month and his daily entries fill one and half composition books of the type a school pupil used during that era.

¹ See Hedda Morrison photographs, #4516. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. In addition to the Kelabit notebooks discussed here, there are many other notebooks and reports by Alastair Morrison preserved in the Hedda Morrison archive. The two boxes of this large archive (mainly photographs), where Alastair Morrison's notebooks are located, is described in the library guide, as follows:

BOX 1: Notebooks, 1953: Kelabit II, Kelabit Tour I (including Akah), Baram, "Men of the Sea: Tropic Shorelife in Sarawak" (notebook and photos), "Fishing Villages" (notebook and photos), Notes, correspondence on Sarawak coast and fish.

BOX 2: Alastair R.G. Morrison ts. "Travelling Report," 1948, Travel notes, c. 1952: Ngemah, Entaba I and II and excursion to Sadok and Lubokantu, Penghule Empam II, Penghule Banyang, Penghule, Briak, Chendang, Sengalang and P. Blaja, Entalai, Empan I, Skudan, Siden, Chinese tour, 1952, Hardcover notebook: Bakong, Tinjar, Tutoh, Patah. Travel notes, visit to 2nd Division, June, 1955.

² This was Morrison's second trip to the Kelabit Highlands. His first visit was much briefer (consisting of about five days in late November of 1949), and was as an extension of his tour of the Trusan while serving as District Officer in Lawas. This earlier trip was undertaken specifically to help resolve a dispute between Lun Bawang and Kelabit concerning a Kelabit man who had run amok and murdered some Lun Bawang. The Lun Bawang demanded compensation for these deaths and Morrison went to Bario to help resolve the dispute, where he received substantial assistance from Tom Harrisson. Eventually, compensation was received by people in Ba Kelalan and the matter was settled. On this trip, Morrison passed through Indonesian territory, where he met local officials, as this was (and remains), the only reliable route between Ba Kelalan and Bario. A typed and bound report from his trip up the Trusan is also located in the archive of Hedda Morrison photographs at Cornell (see footnote 1).

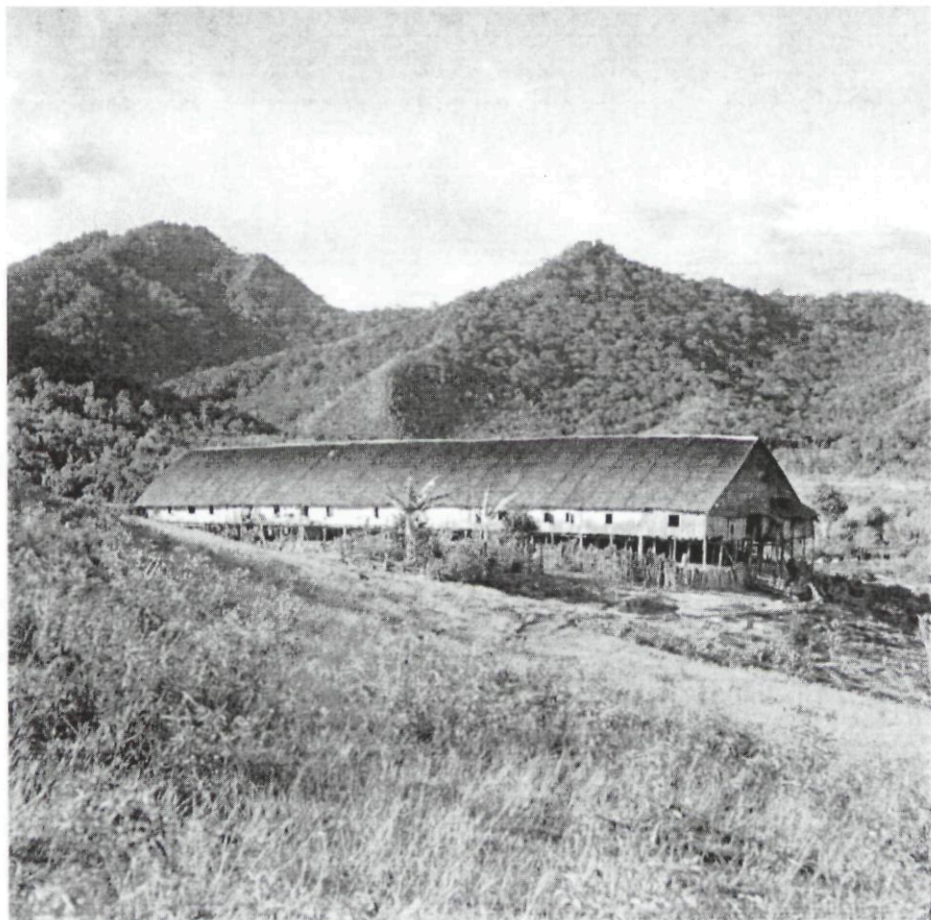


Figure 1: Kelabit longhouse, 1953. Photograph by Hedda Morrison. Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

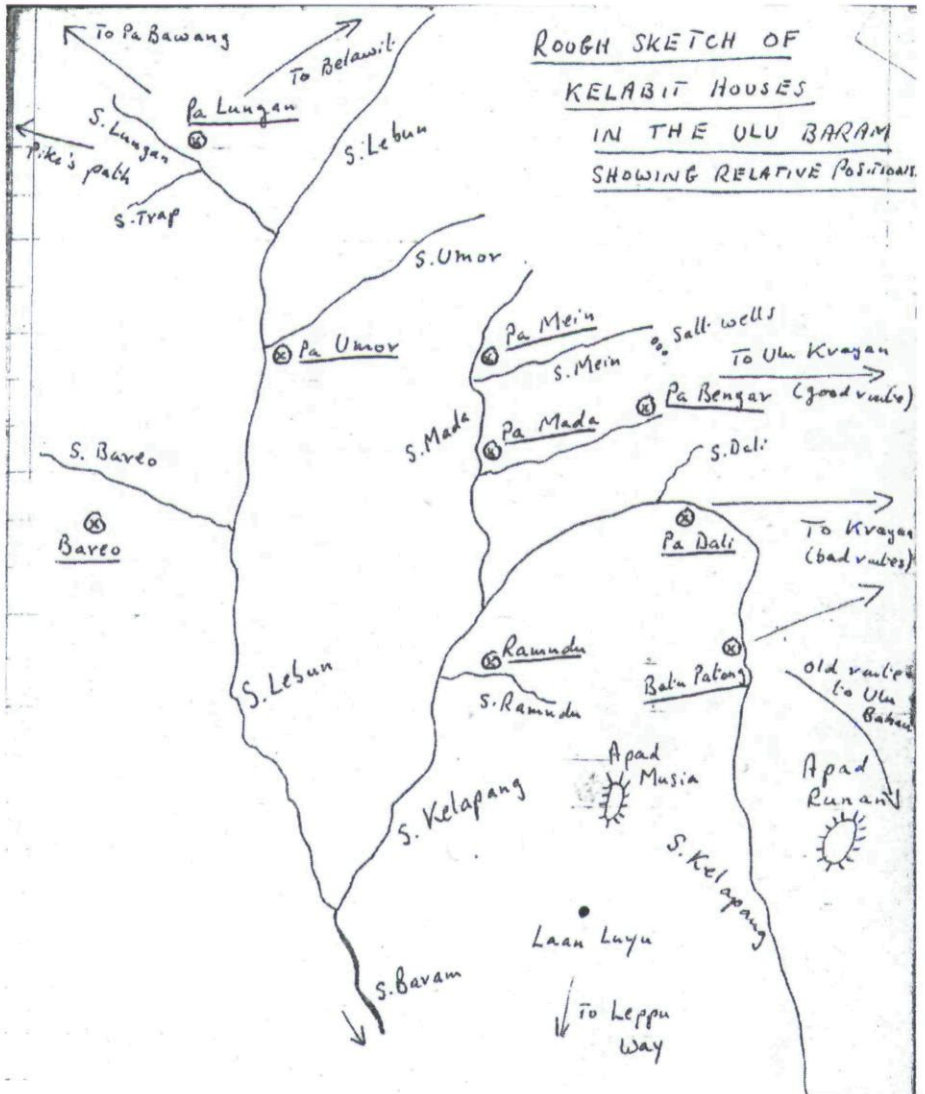


Figure 2: Alastair Morrison's sketch map of the longhouse communities of the Kelabit Highlands from his Kelabit Notebooks. Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

The most basic information recorded in the notebooks was census data on each longhouse. For each location visited, he recorded the name of the headman, the number of "doors" (household units), the total population, the number of guns, cows, and water buffalo, and whether they grew "hill padi" (swidden rice agriculture) or "swamp padi" (wet-rice agriculture). This census data was tabulated in the back pages of the notebooks.³

The regulation of guns, in particular, was a key concern that reappears throughout the notebooks. Not only did he attempt to maintain a record of all guns in each longhouse (noting that "Kelabits have a hell of a lot of guns"), and resolve many gun-related disputes, including at least one incident where he confiscated and destroyed an illegal weapon, but these interactions represent the most overt assertions of his authority.

In contrast to the notebooks, which are, as one would expect, disorganized and wide-ranging in scope, Morrison's published memoir focused on a limited number of topics from the trip, including comments on topics such as entertainment (drinking and feasting), the settling of disputes, the first landing of a Borneo Evangelical Mission (BEM) plane in Bario, a description of the first school at Pa' Mein, and discussion of some ethical problems relating to the treatment of illnesses and distribution of medicine. He also recalled Hedda meeting a honey bear along the trail. The notebooks, however, touch on quite a number of other incidental topics of interest.

One of these relates to the use of the porters and guides, the "coolies" who accompanied him on the journey. During the early part of the journey, in Pa' Tik (on June 27th) — eleven days into the trip — Morrison mentioned paying these "coolies," who consisted of "10 Kayans" and "no less than 22 Kelabits" and exclaimed: "Fuck us all! This was at least 8-10 more than necessary. Rarely can so little have been carried by so many!" Later in Batu Patong (on July 9th), we learn that local Kelabit hospitality made such paid labor entirely unnecessary. "From Pa Umor to Pa Bengar no coolie pay. People do not accept. Had to start again today." For the final leg of the journey back to the Baram River, he mentioned (on July 11th) hiring twenty "coolies" and taking some girls as well.

There are also numerous references to the distribution of war medals, given to Kelabit for their service during World War II, when Tom Harrison arrived by parachute in the region and recruited Kelabit into the war effort (Harrison 1959, Heimann 1997). Morrison wrote: "We have a lot of war time medals to distribute. About 50 Pacific Stars & War Medals." He also mentioned complaints by Kelabit that "Tuan Carter did not see that all his people got medals, unlike Tuan Harrison." As for Harrison, who became the curator for the Sarawak

³ His total count, from the fourteen longhouses he surveyed was: 228 doors, 1,261 people, 174 guns, and 52 doors planting "swamp padi." From this we see that the average longhouse had just over 90 people and about 16 doors and a dozen guns. The largest settlement, in terms of population, was Long Lellang (173 people), followed by Pa' Lungan (153 people) and Pa' Mein (143 people). The smallest settlements were Pa' Tik (35 people) and Batu Patong (49 people). Curiously, Morrison did not count pigs, rather only *sapis* ('cows') and *kerbaus* ('water buffalo'), of which there were a total of 396. (Today, one no longer finds cows in the Kelabit Highlands, though pigs and water buffalo are quite numerous.) Finally, variation with regard to reliance on wet-rice versus swidden agriculture was commented on by Morrison as often being a function of terrain and location. In Pa' Mein, he wrote: "No doors plant swamp padi. Situated in rather hilly country." In contrast, in Pa' Lungan, he noted that everyone, all twenty-three doors, were planting "swamp padi."

Museum after the war and made a second home in the highlands, there were many comments, including the following on his acquisition of blowpipes: "Was told that there are now no blowpipes in the Kelabit area all having been sold to Tom [Harrison] for \$5-\$10 each. Wonder what he did with them all. Bloody unlikely to have given them away." Another entry mentioned the "new [government] Kubu" which he credited Harrison for having made "very neat and well built."

On the topic of religion, Morrison noted that the Kelabit, who had converted to Christianity after the war, were more observant than he had expected, but less so than the neighboring Lun Bawang (formerly called "Muruts"). We also see much evidence that drinking of rice beer (*burak*) persisted, despite religious conversion:

Service in the evening. More religion than I expected in this area but not as much as in the Trusan. Pa Mein has the only church. The evening started off as a quiet one. Around 9 we were invited for a drink & this developed into quite a party. Got rather plastered and staggered off to bed at midnight. [Notebook entry from July 1st in Bario.]

Indeed, the notebooks have many references to the effects of alcohol, including Morrison's own personal consumption and attempts to avoid drinking (or drinking too much). His entries are liberally peppered with comments like: "Nasty hangover," "Some rather strong berak [*burak*] on arrival which made me very sleepy" or "Lun Aran very drunk & sick. Also spitting blood." In Pa Mada, a settlement abandoned during Confrontation in the 1960s, he wrote: "Bit of a party after tea. Staved it off as long as I could. Stood it from a bit after 5 to 6:45 & then broke off ... Racha Umong the life and soul of the party. Noisy vigorous bullshitter." Later in Rumudu, Morrison commented that it was a "pity" that drinking "plays so large a part in their lives" and while in the southern highlands, that people were "less intoxicated, so [they got an] earlier start." This confirms what I had also been told by Kelabit informants in the mid-1990s, when I asked about the prevalence of drinking in the years immediately following conversion. Although the Kelabit converted to Christianity *en masse* after the war, and missionaries discouraged drinking, drinking and associated feasting clearly still occurred, and the arrival of a Colonial Officer certainly warranted the holding of a *burak* feast (Figure 3).

Around the time of Morrison's visit there was an unusual, and, indeed fatal, incident: a fluke hailstorm — a truly rare occurrence — hit the longhouse of Rumudu and, during this storm, part of the longhouse collapsed on a young woman and her four-year old, and the child died five days later. Morrison noted that it "must have been a freak storm," and commented sarcastically that people, nonetheless, managed to save some *burak*, implying that this event might not have been as tragic, and people more responsive, if they didn't drink so much.⁴

⁴ Also while in the southern Kelabit Highlands, Morrison commented on this being the location of a peace treaty reported by Douglas (1909): "The valley at Ramudu quite a fine one. Scene nice, fairly open buffalo pasture about the present house. Racha's father, the first Govt Kelabit Penghulu received Douglas here. They called people from the Krayan. In the old days the Kelabit were on friendly terms with the Upper Krayan & their enemies were the lower Krayan. Some of the latter feuds not yet 'settled'." (Rumudu, July 10th). In the prior entry, from July 9th, he also took a swipe at Charles Hose: "Racha Umong is a small guy. On



Figure 3: Morrison drinking *burak* in a Kelabit Longhouse, Kelabit Highlands, 1953. Photograph by Hedda Morrison. Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

The notebooks also provide a glimpse of life at Pa' Mein (now abandoned) — the location of the first school and medical clinic in the highlands. Pa' Mein had a relatively large longhouse (with twenty-seven doors and one hundred and forty-three people) and he described the school as being in poor condition. The student body was comprised of forty-five students, and he noted that all the girls at the school, a total of five, were from Pa' Mein (whereas the boys came from throughout the highlands). Morrison recounted how, upon his

arrival wore jungle boots, green shorts, red shirt & old officer's cap. But he certainly has some liveliness. His father was a big chief at Ramudu & was made Penghulu by Douglas. Hose was too fat even to get up here."

arrival, he was serenaded by the school's bamboo band (Figure 4), created by the school teacher, Guru Paul. Guru Paul had been brought from the Dutch side of the border after the war by Tom Harrison and Morrison described him as a "rather sharp little Timorese. But not bad." He also noted: "Cordial welcome Pa Mein. Met by the very good school band, better than L. Semado." In his published memoir he complained: "Unfortunately he [Guru Paul] had impressed on the children that the time to serenade the visiting DO was at first light and while the DO was shaving." (Morrison 1993:88)



Figure 4: Bamboo band, Pa' Mein, 1953. Photograph by Hedda Morrison. Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

Cross-Border Movement, Medicine, and Allegiance to the Nation

The most interesting information to emerge from the notebooks — from the perspective of my own research — are the insights it offers on the international border during the mid-1950s — a period for which there are few records. In my research, I have been looking at the role of the international border in contemporary Kelabit life through ethnographic accounts

of cross-border marriage in the highlands (Amster 2005, Amster and Lindquist 2005) and examinations of the ways that Kelabit attempt to use the power of the state for local advantage, keeping migrants workers — upon whom they are deeply dependent for agricultural and other labor — marginalized (Amster 2005a). Following Kelabit anthropologist Poline Bala (2002), I have also recently written about the shifting local meanings of this frontier (Amster 2006). To some extent, Morrison's notebooks help fill a critical gap in the historical record between the time of World War II and the 1960s.

The main form of cross-border movement Morrison documented is that of people from the Indonesian side of the border coming into the Kelabit Highlands to obtain medicine at the clinic at Pa' Mein. He described this situation, and his own initially misguided efforts to stop it, in his memoir:

There was a very good though only semi-trained local Hospital Assistant in the Kelabit area. It was difficult to provide him with all he needed because so many people from the adjoining areas of Indonesia came in for treatment. I took a rather unsympathetic line — which I am glad to say was reversed by the Medical Department later — and said that people from the Indonesian side must go for treatment to the Indonesian centers. I told this to one elderly headman from the Indonesian side and was embarrassed to find that he and his people had for years believed that they were on the Sarawak side of the border and had regularly paid Sarawak Head Tax. (Morrison 1993:88)

Here the notebooks are even more instructive and offer additional insight into Morrison's concern and temperament, as well as his relationship with "Grawat" [Gerawat] — the lone medical dresser or "hospital assistant" in the highlands. His concern initially arose when encountering large groups of people crossing the border to obtain medicine at the clinic and he sought to stop this. Hence, in Pa' Lungan (on July 4th), a few days before walking to Pa' Mein, he wrote:

4/7/53 Getting ready to leave and lots of regrets. Health is probably genuinely poor. Grawat rarely comes here. He seems preoccupied with loads of Indonesian Muruts who come up in parties of 20-30 to get ubat [medicine]. This will have to stop. There is a dispensary in L. Bawang [on the Indonesian side of the border]. Drake with his usual proclivity for saying Yes told Grawat it was OK but as usual without the slightest inkling of what he was letting Grawat in for. There must be several thousand Murut not far away on the Dutch side & we simply cannot attempt to look after them, even though we would like to.

The following day, preparing to leave Pa' Umor, he wrote:

I told 2 Indonesians that the Pa Mein ubat racket had got to stop. And explained why. Met 4 more on the road. A really sick man is unlikely to walk to Pa Mein from Belawit.

Then, once he arrived in Pa' Mein, he wrote:

Grawat described some of his troubles. Both Drake and Harrisson said OK to berusal [treat with medicine] Indonesian Muruts. But anyway cannot believe that they were thinking in terms of such large numbers. Parties of 20-30 at a time. Anyway my decision will stand pro tem & put the whole matter up to the DMHS [Director of Medical and Health Services]. Told Grawat that he should treat any genuine visitors who fall ill here, e.g., traders & friends.

He went on to mention having created a "new ubat adat" — his own new rule regarding the dispensing of medicine — which, as we know from his memoir, never took effect.⁵

It is clear from the notebooks that Morrison was both concerned about this particular form of cross-border movement and sympathetic to Grawat's plight in not wanting to turn away any people seeking medicine. "As might be expected difficult for him to say NO." Pondering Grawat's situation further, he wrote about the need for better pay and the fact that he could use an assistant, perhaps a midwife. He also noted that Grawat had worked since June 1951 and been to Marudi twice in that time. Among Grawat's requests was that he wanted some penicillin for serious cases, which he considered reasonable.⁶

In addition to concern about people crossing the border to use the clinic, there are other comments that show the border's permeability, including incidents where large numbers of people had moved across the border and cases where communities were confused as to which side of the border they were on. He also commented on the arrival of a new administrator in Long Bawan, on the Indonesian side, and that people found the situation to have become "more senang" [happy or contented], adding, nonetheless that: "Quite a few doors of Indonesian Muruts have moved into the Trusan [in Sarawak]. Wonder what the reaction will be." He also described the locations of salt springs on both sides of the border (which form "Quite an extensive system"), and how the spring owned by the Kelabit community of Pa Bengar — directly along the frontier — is "used by Dutch Muruts." Morrison also mentioned numerous well-traveled paths used to cross the border during this time, as well as documenting the names and political leadership of the villages along the opposite side of the border in the "Krayan" [Kerayan] region of Indonesia.

Finally, his notebooks reveal some complexities regarding the border that hint at both

⁵ Morrison also took an interest in the dogs in the highlands and, in an entry from Pa' Mein, commented on how mangy the dogs were and wondered why, with so much rice, they couldn't treat dogs better, as they did pigs. "Told Grawat to try and get them [the dogs] shot." Then later, in Pa' Dalih he commented: "Noisy house full of dogs. Fairly well fed. Perhaps because they have fewer guns" [and thus rely more on their dogs for hunting]. His response was to give them more "chits" to buy guns in Lawas, making me wonder why he was, ironically, first so concerned about mangy dogs in Pa' Mein, and wanting them shot, and then concerned about their having healthy dogs in Pa' Dalih, and thus in need of more guns.

⁶ It is clear that Morrison respected Grawat, with whom he had a complex relationship. Grawat, now known as Ngimat Ayu, subsequently became Penghulu and remains one of the most respected traditional leaders. Upon his retirement as Penghulu in the late 1990s, Ngimat Ayu, who still lives in Bario, was elevated to the position of Pemanca — the first, and only Kelabit to date, to hold this auspicious title.

local perceptions and his own sentiments about and consequences of being on one side versus the other.⁷

Talked to an old Murut TK called Tama Asah whose old name was Anak Kuil (means son of the tiger). Years ago when Bolhassan was URA [Up River Agent] Lio Matu he used to bring the Wang Hasil which the Krayan People used to pay to Sarawak. 12 houses paid as far as Long Mutan. Paid for 3 years in kind, some sort of rubber. Seems sad that the Dutch & then the Javanese should have got control of the area ... Say it was much more senang before the war. All Christians over there now. The Penghulu of the Krayan is called Tama Sumu. No guns in the Krayan. Not even the Penghulu. No Javanese have been brought up to the Ulu to settle as was rumored in 49-50. [Pa Mada July 9th]

As this quote implies, affiliations in the borderland were in the process of being solidified and some people on the Indonesian side had even mistakenly paid taxes to the Sarawak Government. There was also, already, awareness of important differences between the two sides of the border, particularly with regard to access to valuable items, such as guns (used for hunting). There were also indications of new forms of cross-border trade and commerce.

Finally, and quite pointedly, Morrison — in a particularly revealing entry — considered the idea of allowing people (or at least *certain* people) to migrate into Sarawak and to occupy the remote and sparsely inhabited border areas. Near the end of his journey, while in the headwaters of the Baram, he wrote:

Got to wondering about immigration from the Indonesian side. I have always taken the line that it should only take place with the approval of the Indo's but begin to wonder what we have to lose allowing people in freely whether the Indo's like it or not. Govt could cover itself by some platitudinous policy statement. The only way we can fill some of these Ulu spaces is by immigration & surely better to do this with the normal denizens than with Ibans. Only to apply to Ulu Baloi, Baram, Limbang & Trusan. We do not want any more bloody Malohs. [Long Pelu'an July 13th]

Marital Problems in Long Lellang: An Example of a Dispute

In his memoir, Morrison recalled, overall, that the journey was “pleasant,” but also one in which “the number of disputes brought up was exceptionally large” (1993:86-87). One of the most complicated of such disputes involved a love triangle, which I offer mainly as a sample of Morrison’s tone, writing style, and language. First, though, it is worth seeing how he remembered this dispute in his memoir, where he summarized the incident:

⁷ Some details about migration histories also can be found in the notebooks. In particular, Morrison suggested that the people at Long Pelu'an, far to the south, had once lived in the Kelabit Highlands (specifically Batu Patong, near Pa' Dalih). “These people must have been here years ago. They fought with the Indonesian Kenyahs & retired to B. Patong & came down again in the time of Douglas.”

There were all sorts of complicated personal problems to be settled. Many of these related to gun deals of staggering complexity, but the worst concerned the marital problems of a young trained teacher. His marriage had run into difficulties. Under one of the old pagan customs of the Kelabit, both he and his wife had been allowed to take temporary lovers, but the husband wanted to make the temporary arrangement permanent. The wife was consumed with jealousy, and then the valuable bead hat of the second girl disappeared. This created uproar in the village. The wife had denied that she had taken it.

When I eventually met the wife, who had returned to her own village, she again denied that she had taken it, but it turned out that she had admitted the theft to the Penghulu. She was then rather more frank with me but still refused to say where she had put the beads. She told me she had thought of killing the other girl, but thought that God would not approve, so took the beads instead. Such action by a jealous wife was a fairly well-known custom in the past. It was all settled eventually. The wife was fined, the beads were returned, and the teacher married the other girl, but unraveling the story took many hours. (Morrison 1993:87).

Details of this dispute appear throughout the notebooks. It was first mentioned in Long Lellang (on June 24), where the trouble began, when Morrison described how the headman “brought up a couple of matters,” the most serious of which had to do with a situation involving a man named Paran, his wife Sigang, and his lover Bulan.⁸ I offer the story again, as told through the notebooks in fuller detail.

Paran has had wife trouble. Long story but certainly seems that he has been pretty bloody to the girl. Refuses to have anything to do with her. Her name is Sigang from Pa Mein. When Paran refused to sleep with Sigang, he, Paran, ordered Sigang [to permit] him [to take] a little poppet called Bulan to sleep with him. Apparently a married couple can do this. Paran had Bulan that night. Later Sigang suspected Paran of more copulation with Bulan though a surprise check by [the headman] revealed no skullduggery. This odd promiscuous arrangement enables a man & his wife to copulate with other parties by mutual agreement. It happened twice. Paran choose Bulan both times & Sigang had [the headman's] son once & a chap

⁸ To protect these people's privacy, I have changed the names of the individuals mentioned in this dispute, replacing them with common Kelabit names. I have also removed the name of the headman from Long Lellang, inserting “the headman” in brackets. The only exception here is with the name “Penghulu Lawai” of Bario—which is his actual name. Similarly, Morrison did not mention the people by name in his memoir when discussing this incident.

called Lian once. [June 24, Long Lellang]

Morrison then went on to explain how Sigang, the jealous wife, became a suspect in the theft of the valuable bead cap owned by Bulan. At the time, there was no proof that Sigang was guilty, but people were very suspicious.

No evidence at all but Sigang could have known these beads were Bulan's & she was in a queer state. People suspect her but they have no proof of any sort. 7 days later Sigang ran away. Paran followed her and took her home. She never admitted taking the beads. Could hardly have taken them away with her. Said she was afraid Bulan would kill her. [June 24, Long Lellang]

Before leaving Long Lellang, he noted that the beads were still not found, though there was a rather big search. A week later, Morrison returned to the dispute and the plot thickened. Sigang arrived in Bario and "came clean" about stealing the beads to Penghulu Lawai.

Said she had taken the beads & hidden them in a safe place because no one would take any notice of her complaints about Bulan. When the bichara [case] was settled then she would return the beads. Told her that this would never do — that she must inform [the headman] where they were hidden. She refused & I left her to think it over. Hope public opinion will force her into it. She is rather a plain beefy type & very jealous of the little poppet Bulan though Paran is mainly to blame. Said she thought of killing Bulan but reckoned that Tuhan Allah would not approve so took the beads instead!

Sigang eventually came clean and told [the headman] where she hid the beads. He will now go back and try to find them. Lawai will go down to L. Lellang to hear the laki-buri bichara on 1st August. The bichara about theft will have to wait until later. Perhaps bring her down at the time of the District Council. But hardly possible to settle anything until the beads recovered. Hope Sigang has spoken the truth to [the headman]. [July 2, Bario]

Subsequent diary entries commented on how Penghulu Lawai wanted to settle the case in Bario, but he "Told him to do nothing of the sort." The last mention of the incident, on July 17, is simply: "Bloody beads not yet found."⁹

⁹ Since the memoir noted that the beads were ultimately returned and the matter resolved (as quoted at the outset of this section) one might infer that the dispute was settled at a later date, sometime after Morrison returned to Marudi. The notebooks commented on a number of other disputes as well, but I have chosen this one to recount here, as it was the one that most captured Morrison's attention. Other incidents included a case of attempted adultery, someone fined for quarrelling, and a number of complex dealings having to do with gun licenses.



Figure 5: Interior of Kelabit Longhouse with women preparing rice, 1953. Photograph by Hedda Morrison. Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

Isolation, Communications, and the Opening of the Highlands: Final Thoughts

The Kelabit Highlands today stands on the precipice of what perhaps, one day, people will look back on as a critical turning point. As of this writing, in December 2005, there were reports that timber operations, having entered the highlands from the south, had passed the communities of Rumudu and Pa' Dalih and recently reached up to Pa' Mada and Pa' Bengar. The logging road was reportedly getting close to Pa' Mein. Thus, much of the route Morrison traveled in 1953 has just become a timber concession. The site of the first school at Pa' Mein — where Guru Paul's bamboo band disturbed Morrison's early morning shave and where Grawat treated large groups of people from neighboring Indonesia — is reported to be the planned future site where logs will be gathered. As such, the former pastures of Pa' Mein, once at the heart of Kelabit settlement, may soon become a dusty timber camp. The concession (awarded to the Samling Corporation), is said to extend all the way up to Pa' Lungan and beyond, to the boundary of the newly gazetted National Park, Pulong Tau ("Our Forests") — which protects the mountains to the north and west of the Kelabit Highlands. In

pointing out these recent changes, my purpose in this final section is to connect the conditions that Morrison encountered in the 1950s to the broader sweep of changes that have come to the Kelabit Highlands since then, and to consider the gradual opening of the region through the specific lens of the time of Morrison's writings.

Morrison's account offers a brief, yet valuable, glimpse into a time in between that of the first major, and already well-documented, contact with the outside world during World War II — when Tom Harrison established the first airstrip at Bario — and the broader opening of the highlands in the 1960s, after Confrontation, when regular air travel facilitated movement into and out of the region. His notebooks point to the fact that isolation was already an emerging concern to people in the Kelabit Highlands in the mid-1950s. As mentioned above, the first BEM airplane landed in Bario during his visit, an event of considerable importance to these newly converted Christians. Throughout his journey, Morrison spoke to people about the importance of maintaining the small airstrips that dotted the highlands and he repeatedly noted that people were eager and cooperative in volunteering their labor. A typical comment reads: "Also spoke about the airstrip. No difficulty there. Just raring to go." Such enthusiasm stood in contrast to other issues he pursued, such as school fees, about which people were less eager and able to cooperate.¹⁰

While Morrison remarked on the excellent footpaths in the highlands, he also noted hardships faced on the less-traveled routes, particular the ones linking them to the coast — including both of the routes he used to enter and exit the highlands. We see in the notebook that Kelabit faced obstacles in traveling to towns such as Marudi and, indeed, Morrison was told that one of the most direct routes to the Baram had fallen into disuse. "In the old days there was a track straight down the Baram to Lio Matu which could be reached in 4 days from Ramudu. No one knows the track now." Regarding this southern route to Marudi, he wrote:

Kelabits seem upset because T. Paya Anyi has said that he will not provide Kelabits going down to Marudi to trade with rice. He will only provide those called down on Govt business. I suppose a lot of Kelabits do use L. Alip as a staging post. T. Paya is the only chief to adopt this attitude. Told Lawai to bring up at Council Meeting. [July 4th, Pa' Lungan]

In another entry, he contemplated the problem of reaching Marudi by the potentially more direct route traveling west from the Kelabit Highlands, where challenging rapids made it difficult to travel.

There are rapids between here & L. Kubaab & very much worse rapids between L. Kubaan & L. Melinau. But in good water, not too high and not too low, they can get right through to Marudi by prahu. Terrible job coming back. Wonder if it is possible to blow up the worst obstructions and so improve the approach to the Kelabit area. The Ulu people have asked for this in the past. [June 28, Kuba'an]

¹⁰ Indeed, when he brought up the issue of paying school fees, Kelabit raised objections and told him that a one dollar school fee was simply too much and Morrison was clearly sympathetic. He wrote: "They said Lio Matu too far to make payment in kind & I must say I agree."

While in Bario, Morrison commented that the Kelabit leader, Penghulu Lawai, was “very interested in idea of radio. But not much to be done at present.” While eventually radiophones did come to Bario and, more recently, have been replaced, at the new millennium, by an Internet kiosk and payphones (operating on solar power and using satellite uplink technology), communications — both in terms of their ability to travel and literally communicate with people in town — remain a perennial concern to people in the highlands.

Such concerns about communications and isolation are as relevant today, if not more so, as they were in the 1950s. Some Kelabit, particularly older people, see the idea of having a road linking the highlands as progress, though most Kelabit naturally fear the destructive consequences and are deeply concerned about the loss of property rights and resources (and are in the early stages of seeking compensation for the logging). In the years following Morrison’s visit, travel in and out of the highlands has only become easier, and daily flights to town have facilitated the Kelabit mobility and out-migration. Yet, even in 2005, the medical clinic in Bario still has no medical doctor, and, for the time being, the highlands remains linked only by small aircraft. I raise these contemporary issues, albeit briefly, as a means to reflect on the value of Morrison’s account, reminding us, as it does, of the end of an era: of a time when government officials put on jungle boots, amassed supplies, and walked with large entourages of porters and guides into remote places. While the Kelabit Highlands is not nearly as remote as it was at that time, it seems certain that, for better or worse, neither is it as well-connected as it will be in the future.



Figure 6: Kelabit man and boy, 1953. Photograph by Hedda Morrison. Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

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