



**CHANGING BORDERS
AND
IDENTITIES
IN THE
KELABIT HIGHLANDS**

**Anthropological Reflections
on Growing Up in a
Kelabit Village
Near the International Border**

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**Changing Borders and Identities in the Kelabit Highlands:
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Dayak Studies Contemporary Society Series, No. 1
The Institute of East Asian Studies

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1005390

Preface

This work began in the form of a M.A. thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Cornell University in January 1999. It has since been extensively revised after much reflection and further observation at the border. This study considers the ways in which the international political boundaries between Malaysia and Indonesia on the island of Borneo have affected the everyday interactions, kinship ties, group relations and other communal networks amongst the Kelabit and Lun Berian in the Highlands of Central Borneo. It deviates from the conventional manner of defining political boundaries as fixed points in international relations in order to discuss state sovereignty and nation-building processes, and to study disputes and conflicts between states. Instead, it highlights specific significances and meanings of the border to the people living in its immediate vicinity. This is an aspect that has been relatively neglected by researchers who examine borders. For some of these people who live near boundary lines, for example, the Kelabit in the Kelabit Highlands, the boundary is less an issue of state politics and nation-building processes than it is an aspect of everyday life experience, of class, kinship and group relations, as well as of issues of economic and political differences.

The central theme is that the international boundary lines on the island of Borneo currently act as a new variable in what had been a fluid and changing situation of non-bounded territorial group interactions in the region. Long before the construction of the political boundary lines, the peoples of Borneo had formed political, social and economic networks and links that were defined by their functions more than by territory. These links and networks were extended over large and varied geographical spaces despite the rough and rugged physical terrain of the area. However, the construction of the political boundary lines through the various treaties, beginning with the Convention of 1891, has slowly transformed the nature of these links and networks.

An aspect which differentiates this monograph from many others is the use of my own personal experiences as part of the framework for this study. Although this procedure opens up a largely unexplored frontier, I sought to compare information I found in books with my own experiences growing up in the Highlands. I include stories, memories and just a few statistics in my personal data and combine or contrast this with information gathered in interviews, gleaned from books, observations and from other Kelabit stories and songs. I left the Highlands in 1985, and my longest stay since then was from January to May, 1995. However, I have visited the Highlands regularly, with my most recent visit being in May 2002.

Organization of the Chapters

In Chapter One, I describe my own personal experience in telling this story. I decided to put this at the beginning of the book to provide the reader with an idea of my personal stance as the researcher, writer and part of the subject of this writing. Bearing that in mind, I hope the reader will understand my position as I move back and forth between being the storyteller, recorder, observer and the subject, as I relate the story of the politically constructed international boundary between Malaysia and Indonesia.

Chapter Two offers a cultural and regional context for the Kelabit and their homeland in the northeastern part of Central Borneo. Within this context, a boundary line as a form of marker to delineate physical borders and to define a bounded place was formerly absent. But other social boundaries and connections have existed, undefined in terms of fixed geographical space. The neighboring peoples have formed networks and links that have extended over large and varied geographical spaces.

Chapter Three provides an overview of the Kelabit sense of social and geographical space in the Highlands, and how this has changed over the years due to various factors. These changes have produced new forms of cultural and social boundaries within and between communities.

Chapter Four describes the historical evolution of the permanent boundary line in Central Borneo, a process that can be viewed as a development from jurisdictional to territorial sovereignty. However, it was the Confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia in 1963-1966 that provided political significance of the boundary line to the local people.

Chapter Five looks at some day-to-day activities at the border and the development of my own awareness concerning the boundary. This chapter looks at the many and varied meanings different people attribute to the border line, and how the political boundary has transformed and differentiated the quality of life between the two neighboring frontier regions in the Highlands of Central Borneo.

In Chapter Six, I come to the conclusion that the political boundary line in the Highlands of Central Borneo acts as one of the newest variables in a long history of many variables that have affected the complex and changing patterns of peoples' movements in what is now the Border Area between Indonesia and Malaysia.

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