

# **Memories of Sarawak – An investigation of archival photography and social memory in the upriver communities of Malaysian Borneo**

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## **Abstract**

### Context

This project proposes the use of a photographic archive at the Sarawak Museum, Malaysia, to investigate the notion of social memory and shifts in identity in the wake of development. The Sarawak Museum in Kuching, Malaysia, is one of the oldest museums in Southeast Asia. It keeps an extensive photographic archive of the various ethnic groups living in the state. Summarized in this paper are the different parts of the project, the material and its analysis in terms of social and temporal context, provenance and circumstances of creation, the fieldwork and finally the analysis of the outcome in terms of the theoretical methodology.

### Objectives

The first part of the project consists of digitizing the images in the archive and creating an indexed digital database. Fieldwork takes two different approaches. Members of the communities will be interviewed about their memories and understanding of the photographs. The photographs will also be made available online as part of a web-based crowdsourcing project, where viewers can give feedback and information on the images. The analysis of the results of the fieldwork represents the theoretical aspect of the project.

### Key messages

Focus is on images taken from 1949 to 1978 in the remote upriver areas of the Upper Baram and Tinjar rivers. The communities at the centre of the research are small distinct ethnic groups with their own languages and traditions – Kenyah, Kayan, Kelabit, Penan etc.

These communities have undergone rapid development through rural-urban migration, large-scale logging and plantation projects and Christianisation. The ways these changes have impacted the local cultures can be traced through the photographic material taken from the archive.

### Conclusion

The museum photographs in this project are not only tools for anthropological and museological documentation but also historical documents within a community. This project contains a strong emphasis on re-appropriation and transferral of ownership. Interactive media and new technologies find emerging use in museum practices. This project proposes the use of new media in the course of the conducted research, alongside with more traditional research methods.

## **Memories of Sarawak**

### **An investigation of archival photography and social memory in the upriver communities of Malaysian Borneo**

## **Background**

This project investigates notions of communal memory and the construction of ethnic identities in Sarawak, Malaysia by looking at archival photographs at the Sarawak Museum. In other words, it seeks to illuminate, through the photographs, how memory is created, passed on and communicated.

The project 'Memories of Sarawak' centres on photographs from the archives of the Sarawak Museum in Kuching, Malaysia. The project proposes the use of this material to create a discourse on development and change and, above all, memory and identity. As a PhD-project work on the material has started in early 2010, with the project due for submission in March 2013.

The project can be divided into three phases:

1. Viewing, selection and digitization of the original photographic material from the archive to define the scope of the research
2. Systematic collection of background information of the images, the museum and the

archive including field work to the original locations the photos were taken but also through web-based approaches, in particular crowd sourcing

### 3. Analysis of the collected material in terms of theoretical approaches to communal and social memory

The proposed approach to investigating the photographs in terms of communal memory and identity raises a number of questions. Where should we look for “the social, economic, political, and historical” so as to account for how local ethnic identities are invoked and shaped? What are the opinions and where lies the relevance about who identifies themselves as Iban, Bidayuh, Orang Ulu etc. under the context of present-day social maladies, industrial malaise, and the economic and social costs of the timber industry, oil palm and other plantations and industries affecting the environment, health, housing, education, and so on? How does the understanding of change and memory intersect with local understanding of poverty, identities, and history?

The originality of this project lies in its nuanced approach to the question of memory and history, and its foundation in the wealth of archived material. The larger notion of social stereotyping of identities is here reduced to a manageable size; one which will allow the researcher to treat it with the subtle detail necessary in order to present the diversity amongst these ethnic communities. The project is placed within a developing field of digital museum work. Numerous archives and collections, both of objects and photographs, are already available for online viewing. The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, United Kingdom, focussing on archaeological and anthropological images and artefacts, maintains a large database of objects and images. All images comprise a zoom function for viewing of details, and the user is requested to help the museum keep its records accurate by contributing to the information available using a small form. The State Library of Victoria, Australia, has made its large collection of photographs available for viewing, and prints of the images can be ordered for a fee. The library also allows for comments and feedback on the images. The Powerhouse Museum in Sydney

provides a diverse range of online services including different well-documented online exhibitions and collections, such as an electronic swatch book for fabric patterns, different photographic collections along with blogs and articles by and from curators, photo of the day and object of the week, podcasts and many other resources. It is an excellent resource for visitors and educators. The Victoria and Albert Museum in the United Kingdom is taking its online database yet a step further. In taking up crowdsourcing techniques, it invites the viewer / user to work on the collection and its online representation.

These different approaches taken by the museums all have common emphases. The first is the attempt to involve, educate and entertain the viewer, to drag them in and generate interest in the collection. The other is to generate viewer involvement with the collection. This may be just to give comments or use social networking or web 2.0 techniques like Facebook or Twitter to get involved with the items. The user may also give direct feedback about the item, should he or she have additional information relevant to the collection. Crowdsourcing, derived from the words ‘crowd’ and ‘outsourcing’, involves asking a large group of volunteers to contribute to working on a specific task. The principle is used in web 2.0 organisations such as Wikipedia, where the users generate the content.

In asking users to contribute feedback on a collection, the museums or archives address important developments in the distribution of information. Museums are keeping track of and using new technologies that can tie in the various sources of knowledge that have become available through new media. Museums can use these new methods to bring together and evaluate the different sources of information.

This project proposes to use “crowdsourcing” methods to collect information on the content of the images from the Sarawak Museum archive. In a combination of methods used by the institutions mentioned above, different groups of participants will be asked to contribute information on the images used in the project. Rather than addressing the general public, it is organisations like cultural societies and individuals such as headmen,

schoolteachers and others that will be requested to take part in identifying locations, objects and people in the images. This digital part of the field work is juxtaposed with the work within the communities. This part is constituted of bringing prints of the original photographs back to the villages where they were taken, and recording the reactions they produce in terms of evoking and retelling memory.

At the moment, the Sarawak Museum is in the process of digitizing its collection. However, the digitisation of the photographic collection is slowed down by concerns about copyright issues that remain unaddressed. The project will include a best-practise proposal for the digitisation of the collection based on the case studies named above.

### The museum

The Sarawak Museum was first established in 1888. One of the oldest museums in Southeast Asia, it was founded by the 'White Rajah' of Sarawak, James Brooke, with the encouragement of Alfred Russel Wallace<sup>1</sup>. After the Brooke regime over Sarawak, the state, and the museum along with it, continued through years of Japanese occupation and British colonial rule before finally becoming part of the federation of Malaysia. After an era of communist uprising from 1948 to 1960, Sarawak was claimed by Indonesia from 1962 to 1966, resulting in a time of undeclared war between Malaysia and Indonesia locally termed 'Konfrontasi' – all in all turbulent times for Sarawak<sup>2</sup>

As a government institution under the different consecutive types of local and federal government, the Museum has been reflecting diverse ideas on ethnology, anthropology and nation building. When Sarawak joined Malaysia in 1963, it did so with some special arrangements - rather than being one of the thirteen states that make up the federation, the contract was made between the Federation of Malaya, North Borneo (Sabah), Sarawak and Singapore, recognizing the differences between the partners in ethnic setup, economy and historical development.

<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarawak\\_State\\_Museum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarawak_State_Museum) (accessed 09.09.2010)

<sup>2</sup> Poulgrain, G. (1998). *The genesis of konfrontasi: Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, 1945-1965*. C.Hurst & Co. Publishers.

In recent years, there has been much criticism of the status of Sarawak and Sabah within Malaysia. The two Bornean states contribute much to the country's wealth as they are rich in resources, mainly oil, gas and timber, but still rank as the poorest and least developed. Adding to this, the religious and ethnic distribution of mainland Malaysia is different from that of the East Malaysian states. The percentage of ethnic Muslim Malays, which form the majority on the peninsula, is exceeded in East Malaysia by a mixture of different cultural groups such as Iban, Bidayuh and others, who are mostly Christian. The '18-point Agreement' concerning the status of Sarawak within Malaysia, a treaty signed during the establishment of Malaysia, stipulates that the state would not have to declare Islam as state religion and would have control over immigration, civil service, education and development funds. Some of these points were made to expire in the 1970s, while others - such as sovereignty over immigration - are still valid.

The Muzium Sarawak (Sarawak Museum) operates and is funded under the federal 'Department of Museums Malaysia', the 'Jabatan Muzium Malaysia'. As a place of representation and heritage, it must operate at a position between the state and the federation, managing different political interests.

The museum is one of the oldest research institutions in Southeast Asia. Its functions and responsibilities are manifold. Following the Sarawak Cultural Heritage Ordinance from 1993, the museum's role is to be the custodian of all historical documents and artefacts of the people of Sarawak. Its many sections include Archaeology, Ethnology, Zoology, Conservation, Enforcement, and it has nine separate museums all over Sarawak, such as the Islamic and Chinese, Textile and Petroleum Museum, the Niah Archaeology Museum and others.

The earliest curators of the museum usually specialised in Archaeology, Ethnology or Zoology. Eric Mjöberg, Curator from 1922 to 1924, was eventually ousted under the suspicion of illicit acquisition of artefacts. A later curator, Tom Harrisson, organized a guerrilla uprising in the upriver communities in Sarawak during the time

of Japanese occupation in the Second World War, and remained in Sarawak as the Curator of the museum from 1947 to 1966. He was active as an ornithologist, explorer, journalist and broadcaster, ethnologist, archaeologist and visual anthropologist. The time of his curatorship coincides with the earlier photos used for this project, and I feel that it is likely – although there is no proof of this – that he was the instigator of the position of the photographer at the Museum. Both he and his wife Barbara were interested in the practise of visual anthropology, including photography and film.

### **The Archive**

This project consists of two distinct phases, the first of which is concerned with the digitisation of the material and the collection of information available on the photographs. The second phase is the analysis of the material and the collected information. The project started in March 2010 as a PhD project for the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University of Technology, and is due to be completed in March 2013. Preliminary investigations in the field have been carried out in 2009, with more intensive fieldwork to be undertaken in early 2011.

The Photographic Archive of the museum contains a large collection of material covering the whole of the state. It is housed in one of the side buildings of the museum, which is used as storage and office space. The earliest photos in the archive are glass slides dating back to the turn of the 20th Century. Documents range from the glass slides through medium format black and white photographs and 35mm color film to, since the last few years, digital photographs. Although constantly accessed by students, researchers and the museum staff, the archive has no centralised catalogue or indexing system. Most of the photographs are filed under specific categories according to ethnic group or location. Some examples of this are the Kenyah/Kayan photos used in this project, two ethnic groups that share a similar geographical area and who therefore and for reasons of cultural similarities are often grouped together. For this project, medium format black-and-white photographs filed under 'Kenyah / Kayan' between 1951 and 1978 are

used – this makes up all of the material on this specific group using medium format photos, around 1.500 images.

The negatives are kept in small booklets each containing 100 to 150 photos. Booklets are named according to subject matter, such as 'JC – Kenyah Longhouses' or 'JF – Agriculture, Husbandry & Fishing'. Up to around 1970, these are small format booklets with envelopes made out of acid-free, transparent paper. For most of the medium format negatives in the archive there is a corresponding A4 sized folder holding contact prints of the negatives, for easier review. While on the negatives only a reference code and a registration number and the date of capture are marked in ink, these contact print folders often contain other remarks written on the side, although it is unclear who made these comments and when – often there may be more than one pen color and varying handwriting, so the comments were probably made over time by different people.

Since the Sarawak Museum employed only one photographer at a time, it is likely that most of the pictures used in this project were taken by Junaidi Bolhassan, who was the Museum photographer for over 30 years. However, this is often not marked and thus hard to verify.

I think that the Photographic Archive of the Sarawak Museum contains a major resource for research in anthropology, history, linguistics and other fields in Borneo. At the moment, the Museum has not made the archive or its conservation and development a primary concern, and little conservation or restoration work is done in the existing archive. As a part of this project, I am trying to establish a system and working model with a small part of the collection that could potentially be applied to the rest of the collection, should the situation arise where funding becomes available.

Working with the material of the archive requires first of all the construction of a searchable archiving system. A good practise guide for digitisation needed to be established based on feasibility considerations such as slower scanning speed at higher resolutions, problems of digital storage at higher file sizes and questions of color

modes. Is the sepia tone of the images, which is caused by aging, part of the object or can the negative be scanned in black / white format? Fortunately, many very well documented projects provide advice and expertise<sup>3</sup>.

When facing the task of making sense of the photographic material, it became clear at the outset of the project that more and especially more consistent details of the content, the location and circumstance of the creation of the photos needed to be collected. Since the photos are covering small ethnic groups with a population of 200.000, and none of the photos were taken earlier than 1949, the assumption was that it could be possible to find witnesses and informants that remember the people and places in the pictures, and preliminary field work has shown that this is the case.

These ethnic groups involved in the project live in remote upriver communities. The villages and longhouses are spread far apart, and the specific objects as well as traditions can vary a lot. It is necessary to find the exact location of a photo to find out who and what the photo represents; members of the next village up- or downriver are often not able to confidently provide information. The only information consistently provided on all the negatives is the date. Locations are only marked on very few images. While digitizing the images, dates and all available information are collected in a database. This makes it possible to trace the itinerary of the photographer, who would usually go on photographic excursions of several weeks and who would rely, as a mode of transport, on river travel. If one location is known, it is possible to extrapolate possible locations up- or downriver within the next few days, too. Until now images had been kept in different folders according to subject matter. This meant that images of the same dates, and the same communities, would not be stored within the same folder. In a digital database, this problem does not occur. Any search criteria keyword, such as a village name, or a date, will bring up the relevant images.

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Tutorials and good practical advice for digitizing projects:  
<http://www.jiscdigitalmedia.ac.uk>, knowledge network on digitizing content:  
<http://www.minervaeurope.org>

This knowledge makes it possible to retrace the route of the photographer and find out quite accurately the most likely locations of the images. Specific buildings or very well known personalities like headmen provide additional hints. Once the location is ascertained, a visit to the community in question will bring to light a wealth of information on the photos themselves and their content as well as specific traditions, legends and oral history, tales of genealogy and the old religions and much else.

## Analysis

These photos and the memories that they refer to and make emerge is what this project intends to investigate. Sol Worth, pioneer in the use of film in anthropological field research, explains that '...meaning cannot be inherent within the sign itself, but exists rather in the social context, conventions, and rules within, and by which, articulatory and interpretive strategies are invoked by producers and interpreters of symbolic forms' (Worth, 1981, pp.166)

In the originating communities, what do the photos evoke, what memories do they bring back, and who is able to access these memories? Do the images contribute to the identification with a specific ethnicity? Or, if the memory of the subjects of the photos has faded away, how can the images be related to?

Images offer interesting ways of investigating these questions. An image can be read and understood in many different ways:

'...Pictures can mean almost anything. The limits placed upon our interpretation in attributing meaning are dependent mainly upon our individual psychological, social, and cultural histories.' (Worth, 1981, pp.181)

In these photos, the images are interpreted depending on who is viewing them, and their own knowledge and understanding – the headman, the retired schoolteacher or the secondary student who only comes back to the village in the school holidays.

When trying to interpret reactions to the photographs several factors need to be taken into

consideration, which came to play in the creation of the images. The identity and ethnicity of the photographer and the technology used in the creation of the images both had an impact on the creation of the images. In some instances, it is evident that the photos are staged or composed, reflecting traditions of anthropological photography. This also reveals some of the objectives behind the commissioning of the images and thus a distinct bias that may detract and mislead the viewer. As mentioned above, the Muzium Sarawak in its role as a government institution and the implications of this also must be investigated and put into context with the content of the images.

In the recent past there have been several attempts to look into archival photography in order to reunite the material with the place and community it came from (Appleton, 2008).

An overview of the developments within visual anthropology and memory studies helps to understand the process of creation of the media covered. Several internationally published articles and exhibitions show the shifting use of this kind of material within the field of visual anthropology, for example the work by Ann Appleton and Annette Kuhn. Archival photographs turn from documentation into documents in their own right. As such, they need to be analyzed in a different way<sup>4</sup>.

On the subject of identity material on the selected ethnic groups will be reviewed thoroughly; this is necessary as background knowledge for the researcher only. The Sarawak Museum Journal, first published in 1911 and one of the oldest resources in the region will be taken into consideration along with other books published nationally and internationally. This also highlights changes in anthropological discourse over the past 50 years.

In the last decades, modern memory studies have taken an increasing interest in the way communal memory is generated, and how this memory is

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Morphy, H (1997) 'Rethinking Visual Anthropology' or Nordstrom, Alison Devine 'Persistent images: photographic archives in ethnographic collections'

modified in communities that have not retained the social structures that enable social memory. Communities deal with the loss of social memory in different ways. Memory may be substituted by commemoration and the strategic remembering of specific dates and events. This point is a point of transition between memory and history, as Pierre Nora writes:

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. (Nora, 1989)

One of the question this project is trying to address is, then, how do these communities depicted in the archival photographs construct their own history around the memories that are still available? How are images of the past used in the process, and how do the memories of the past compare to the photographic documents of it? The images that are the base for this project bear witness to changes in society, but also to all that remains constant. They offer an opportunity to discuss identity in terms of shared traditions and customs, and they also can serve as ways to salvage and retain and, eventually, repossess and recover.

## Conclusion

This project sets out to work with archival photographs from the Sarawak Museum in several different ways. The practical side of the project involves the digitizing of the images and the adaptation of interactive media to complete a body of information around the images. This allows an evaluation of the use of modern media and audience involvement in the effort to archive cultural heritage. At the same time, the repatriation of the images to their original source

communities establishes an insight into how the changes that are occurring in the communities are reflected in the individual and social memory of the members of the communities.

The project combines a practical and a theoretical aspect, focusing around notions of memory. The small scope of the ethnic groups involved allows for a nuanced and in-depth investigation, covering different approaches to the material. Memory studies tend to be eurocentric, with some of the main contributors such as Pierre Nora or Maurice Halbwachs, who first put forward the notion of communal memory, mainly looking at the French or European environment. The recontextualising of the theory in the remote upriver communities of Borneo offers the possibility of applying these theories to a microcosm, and one in which social processes of development and modernisation have been happening in acceleration.

At the same time, as the communities in developing societies are changing fast, this project is an attempt to investigate how memories, customs and traditions are adapted to suit the inevitable changes within a community. As it appears that many changes — to apply the classifications put forward by R.A. Rogers — can be understood as caused by cultural domination rather than cultural hybridism or transculturation, the repatriation of archives may have an impact on the opportunities to establish more democratic modes of representation for indigenous groups. These questions of the role of modern media in supporting indigenous and individual agency are at the heart of many museum initiatives to digitise their collections.

The project presented in this paper has developed out of a long term involvement with the photos of the Sarawak Museum Photographic Archive and an interest in their conservation as part of the state's heritage. It profits from a contemporary interest in new methods for museum collections and archives, and is situated in a growing field of similar projects. As a PhD project, it is an attempt to work on a little known collection to preserve and open up the material while at the same time rethinking the role of the archive with the possibilities offered by new technology.

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