

**MIGRANTS AS BROKERS OF FOOD HERITAGE  
MAKING: A CASE STUDY OF THE BARIO FOOD AND  
THE CULTURAL FESTIVAL IN BORNEO, SARAWAK,  
MALAYSIA**

**MIGRANTES COMO CORRETORES DE PATRIMÔNIO  
ALIMENTAR: UM ESTUDO DE CASO DO FESTIVAL  
BARIO FOOD AND CULTURAL EM BORNÉU, SARAWAK,  
MALÁSIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

The ability of the communities to controlling heritage has been ques-  
tioned and analyzed in a broader perspective of socio-cultural cohesion  
and power. However, a research gap exists regarding the capabilities de-  
veloped by the indigenous communities to collectively empower them-

selves by appropriating external resources, such as research and development projects. To address this gap, we have investigated the Kelabit socio-political configuration related to food heritage through the lens of the anthropology of brokers. The empirical basis of this contribution includes participant observation of the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of the Bario Food and Cultural Festival (Borneo, Sarawak, Malaysia) as well as semi-structured interviews with members of the Kelabit community – local, diaspora, and counter diaspora – and representatives of tourism and heritage. Overall, our findings unveil networked food heritage practices with outside agents and notably national and global academic institutions. Consequently, the analysis reveals the trans-identity capabilities of the Kelabit migrants in interfacing the local community with a range of stakeholders – and more specifically research networks – thereby adopting the role of cultural brokers. In doing so, the Kelabit people have been contributing to the intricate co-production of the definition of the Kelabit food heritage.

keywords: food, heritage making, indigenous minorities, brokerage chain, diaspora.

## RESUMO

A capacidade das comunidades para controlar o patrimônio tem sido questionada e analisada numa perspectiva mais ampla de coesão e poder sociocultural. No entanto, existe uma lacuna de investigação relativamente às capacidades desenvolvidas pelas comunidades indígenas para se capacitarem coletivamente através da apropriação de recursos externos, tais como projetos de investigação e desenvolvimento. Para colmatar esta lacuna, investigamos a configuração sociopolítica dos Kelabit relacionada com o patrimônio alimentar através da lente da antropologia dos corretores. A base empírica desta contribuição inclui a observação participante da 11<sup>a</sup> edição do Festival *Bario Food and Cultural* (Borneo, Sarawak, Malásia), bem como entrevistas semiestruturadas com os membros da comunidade local – Kelabit, diáspora e contra-diáspora – e representantes do turismo e do patrimônio. Globalmente, as nossas conclusões revelam práticas de patrimônio alimentar em rede com agentes externos e nomeadamente instituições académicas nacionais e mundiais. Consequentemente, a análise revela as capacidades de trans-identidade dos migrantes Kelabit na interface da comunidade local com uma série de intervenientes – e mais especificamente redes de investigação – adotando assim o papel de corretores culturais. Ao fazê-lo, o povo Kelabit contribui para a intrincada coprodução da definição da herança alimentar Kelabit.

Palavras-chave: alimentação; patrimônio; minorias indígenas; cadeia de corretagem; diáspora.

## INTRODUCTION

A noteworthy participatory turn was observed in heritage scholars in the 1990s: the perspective switched from the academic, architect-based, and descriptive approach to a more process-oriented viewpoint (BORTOLOTTI, 2007). At the trans-national level, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has adopted this approach to escape Western cultural imperialism and to balance Western and Eastern views and powers concerning heritage management (L. SMITH, 2006). The principle of the ability of communities to control the heritage creation process as well as to manage heritage locations and events has been questioned and analyzed within the wider purview of socio-cultural cohesion and power (HARVEY, 2001) and sustainable economic and territorial development. The essence of this control principle advocates the adoption of participatory action research, which consists of involvement as a means of ensuring control over symbolic and economic resources. Such power encourages development grounded on collaboration with the community (HODGES; WATSON, 2000; NEAL, 2015; WATERTON; WATSON, 2011). Concurrently, a critical change of direction has resulted in a close review of heritage practices, expertise, and policies (amongst others ABREU, 2005; SMITH, 2006; WATSON; WATERTON, 2010). In an attempt to examine the triad of applied, populist, or critical perspectives in heritage studies, JACOBS (2014) proposes the use of a 'development brokerage and public action' framework for the analysis of the process of making the 2003 UNESCO Convention operational. Therefore, the paper proposes to analyze the making of heritage as a collective action, and within the viewpoint of the anthropology of brokers.

The emphasis of the central position of cooking and table manners in cultures (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1966, 1968), and the food cultures, at the interaction of a human group in its environment (CONDOMINAS, 1980; HUBERT, 1997; POULAIN, 2017) has contributed to a shift in the perception of food heritage: from being seen as an aspect of the culture of elites, to being regarded as the subject of popular cultures (in the plural), those at the bottom of the social ladder, or belonging to the 'otherness' (HOGGART, 1957). Food is involved in daily life, and hence, diverse scales of society and representations are associated with these scalar manifestations (MATTA, 2016; ROBINSON; SILVERMAN, 2015). It could have thus contributed to the turn of 'conservative' forms of heritage, according to the modalities of 'monument' (BORTOLOTTI; SAGNES, 2016; FABRE, 2013), to a legacy that is considered a 'resource' for the community (BESSIÈRE, 1998; BESSIÈRE; TIBÈRE, 2013; BRULOTTE; DI GIOVINE, 2016; MACIEL, 2005; PINHEIRO; SOARES, 2016; POULAIN, 1984). Hedonic dimensions of food cultures have subsequently been highlighted, and popular practices have been defined as 'gastronomic' (POULAIN, 2011).

Social scientists focusing on food heritage have previously demonstrated the significance of external gazes and forces as drivers of heritage-making (APPADURAI, 1988; CUSAK, 2000; DESOUCHEY, 2010; HUBERT, 2000; MOGNARD, 2018; POULAIN, 1993, 1997; WILSON, 2006) and have highlighted the prominent role of researchers (BARBE, 2013; FOURNIER; LEPILLER; SIMONET, 2018; POULAIN, 2011), as well as tourism (BESSIÈRE; MOGNARD, 2012; BESSIÈRE; POULAIN; TIBÈRE, 2012). While some focus on the imbrication of the public roles of heritage researchers and practitioners with the capabilities and practices of networking (VAN DER HOEVEN, 2016), a research gap exists regarding the expertise developed by the communities that collectively empower themselves, by appropriating external forces, such as research and development projects.

In recent years, initiatives have been developed in Bario (in the Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak, Malaysia) to promote the food heritage of the indigenous Kelabit people. A festival (*Pesta Nukenen dan Kebudayaan Kelabit Bario*) and inventories initiated by the community demonstrate local awareness towards this food heritage and its interconnection with global social networks. The Kelabit Highlands has been recognized for the participation and empowerment of the indigenous community. This engagement has resulted in economic development that relies on the promotion of socio-cultural assets. Indeed, several projects such as e-Bario (BALA, 2011), or the Kelabit Highlands community museum (SWEET, 2015; SWEET; KELLY, 2014), have been successfully implemented using a participatory action research (PAR) design. Observations made during the 11th Food festival reflect the ongoing engagement of the Kelabit with the event and with its tourism products and services, which are claimed to be the outcomes of the participatory initiative. The unfolding of the events from the first to the final day of the festival unveiled brokerage heritage practices.

This paper introduces first the approach, material, and methods of the article. It further contextualizes the study with a brief presentation of the place and the people from the Kelabit Highlands. Subsequently, the article analyses the stakes of food heritage and tourism from an actor-oriented perspective, namely the point of view of the Kelabit population (including its 'local' diasporic and counter-diasporic aspects). Furthermore, the network heritage practices are analyzed, and the brokerage role of the Kelabit diasporic and counter-diasporic population and its co-production of the knowledge of the food heritage and its management are consequently unveiled.

## APPROACH, MATERIAL, AND METHODS

Sociological perspectives on global collective action have primarily highlighted two attributes: first, participation depends on shared interests; and second, the power vested in the relationship between at least

two entities that are associated with such common interests. Hence, power is established through the control of a specific competency or know-how, or a relationship with relevant environments, or with the information and communication networks, and/or sources of regulation. The pool of social relations, regulations, competencies, and know-how, known henceforth as the collective identity, constitutes a cultural community and social capital. Scholars of the sociology and anthropology of development (LEWIS; MOSSE, 2006; LONG, 2001; OLIVIER DE SARDAN, 1995; OLIVIER DE SARDAN; BIERSCHEK, 1993) have fruitfully mobilized the anthropological concept of ‘broker’ in analyzing their role in the mobilization of resources and the facilitation of development processes. This approach regains interest in the context of the transformation of the nature of the states where an increasing number of novel actors are involved in the public action arena (KOSTER; VAN LEYNSEELE, 2018; LINDQUIST, 2015). According to this perspective, the power vested in heritage does not solely rely on the side of experts and the ‘authorized discourse on heritage’ (L. SMITH, 2006) nor does it depend on the institutions governing the heritage politics; rather, it is distributed amongst the stakeholders.

Grounded on this perspective, we engage with the analysis of the participative food heritage and tourism promotion practices of Kelabit people. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has suggested that festivals are the showcases ‘par excellence’ for the presentation of intangible heritage (1998). Therefore, the fieldwork was organized around the time of the 11<sup>th</sup> *Pesta Nukenen dan Kebudayaan Bario* (Food Festival) to allow the researchers to observe the practices and examine the discourses of the stakeholders of the food heritage and its tourism promotion. Participant observations focused on the preparations of the festival and the actual event, consumption of a variety of meals in homes and at the festival. Further, we have conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 Kelabit participants purposively selected because of their relevance to food heritage and tourism promotion activities (cooks, tourist guides, homestay hosts, restaurateurs, and owners of shops or cafés). Representatives of the tourism and heritage system (Sarawak Board of Tourism, journalists, and travel agents) were also questioned. Before the interviews were conducted, and ahead of the observation, we took time to meet with representatives of the community and the members of its council of elders to ensure the relevance of the research, to address any questions that may be asked, and to consider their suggested directions for research.

## **KELABIT HIGHLANDS: THE PLACE AND THE PEOPLE**

Bario is one of the main settlements of the Kelabit Highlands, located in the heart of Borneo, in the north-eastern part of the Malaysian state of Sarawak, and bordering the international frontier of East Kalimantan

(Indonesia). Nowadays, the area can be reached by two main modes of transportation: a 12-hour journey from Miri on logging roads built in the late 1990s and early 2000s; and a rural area air service, first introduced in 1962, which is the fastest option. Eighteen seated Twin-Otter aircrafts now fly to the area three times a day.

Figure 1 - Location of Kelabit Highlands (Borneo, Sarawak, Malaysia)



Source: WorldAtlas

According to the 2013 national census, the Kelabit indigenous people are the main inhabitants of the area, with a population of approximately 6,600 people. Those living outside now outnumber the inhabitants of the Highlands. Various scholars have highlighted numerous and diverse external influences that have shaped this remote community. Written history suggests the existence of external governance from Brunei, a country that was once largely dependent on trade between China and India, and thus to the exchange of trading items or products (EWART, 2009). Some of these products found their way into the longhouses in the Kelabit Highlands, which were, in turn, used as a means to display eminence in status in the highly stratified Kelabit society (LIAN-SAGING; BULAN, 1989). The notion of the modern state system was systematically introduced when the Brookes dynasty increased their influence throughout Sarawak, including the Kelabit Highlands (BALA, 2002; ONG; ONG; SELVADURAI; MOHD RADZI; SAIBEH, 2014). Christianity was introduced in tandem with the establishment of the white Rajahs. AMSTER (1998) highlighted the centrality of Christianity to the contemporary definition of the Kelabit identity (also BALA, 2009). The rise in interest in Christian tenets, mainly during and after World War II, led to the abandonment of former spirit-related beliefs and practices (JANOWSKI, 2014a) in the community. This change was compounded in 1973 by the spiritual phenomena known as the 'Bario Revival' (S. BULAN; BULAN-DORAI, 2004; JANOWSKI, 2014b). For many, the modernization of the Kelabit community is inseparable from

its conversion to Christianity as a point of fracture from prior animistic beliefs (AMSTER, 2016)<sup>2</sup>.

Rice has a symbolic pivotal role to the Kelabit community, so much that it carried symbolic meaning to its people as an aspect of social status (JANOWSKI 1991, 2007) and collective identity within and outside the highlands (JANOWSKI, 2005). Like everywhere else in Borneo, these people historically cultivated hill rice through the slash and burn technique. To a certain degree, this practice has influenced how they have shifted and moved in their landscape. In the past, villages would relocate relatively more often in a circular migration pattern by dismantling the existing longhouse and by using the planks for the construction of a new one in the new territory that was occupied (HITCHNER, 2009). Over the last 10 decades, the Kelabit people practiced a form of wet paddy cultivation, that does not resemble any of the methods used in Borneo (CHRISTENSEN, 2002). The community has experimented with different varieties of rice over the last 50 years but has become famous because of the fine, small-grained adan rice (bera adan, in Kelabit language). The renowned 'Bario rice' grown in paddy fields filled with fresh running water irrigated from the surrounding mountains has received the Slow Food Presidia Foundation Award (S. BULAN; BULAN-DO-RAI, 2004; JIWAN; PAUL CHAI; TEO; JIWAN, 2006).

Since the community lives close to the forest, the people also hunt and gather wild and semi-wild resources from the surrounding forests or jungles (CHRISTENSEN, 2002; JANOWSKI; LANGUB, 2011). Their dependence on the forest for their daily sustenance is reflected in the line: 'the Jungle is our Fridge'<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the mountainous forests of the Kelabit Highlands house many salt-water springs or salt licks. These features play very important roles in the social world of the Highlands. Besides domestic consumption, the people also traditionally boiled this salt-water to make salt sticks, which were highly valued as trade items and were offered as gifts during their "Kelabit irau" or feasts (CHONG, 1954; JANOWSKI, 2014B; LIAN-SAGING; BULAN, 1989; MURANG, 1992; SELLATO, 1993). The significance of these salt sticks for trade and gifting is reflected by the designation they have received as 'Wang Berin' or People of the Salt (MURANG, 1992), by their neighbors, the Kenyah people. These different varieties of food in their landscape have been promoted as their food heritage through the food festival initiative described in the next section.

According to a census conducted by the local health clinic in 2015, about 1,200 Kelabit live in 13 villages. Most of those who are currently living permanently in Bario are either senior citizens without their grown-up children or young parents whose children are in primary or secondary school in Bario. Others have moved away to urban areas such as Miri, Kuching, Sibul, Bintulu, as well as Kuala Lumpur and overseas (England, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand).

The first survey to map rural-urban migration amongst the Kelabit (MURANG, 1998) revealed that 64% of the population have migrated out of the highlands in pursuit of education and job opportunities. This phenomenon involves both women and men as soon as they have reached 15 years of age because there are no upper secondary schools or colleges in the area of the Highlands. Today, the literacy rate amongst the Kelabit is particularly high. Many have at least a secondary school leaving certificate (after 11 years of formal education), while others have local and foreign university degrees. Still, others have attended professional courses and are now working in government departments and private sectors. This accelerated outwards migration of the younger generation affects the people in the highlands, who are left short of manpower, particularly for the cultivation of rice. Many families are hiring workers for the neighboring communities or from Kalimantan (Indonesia), and Kelabit migrants are supporting financially this effort.

The migrant Kelabit daughters and sons consider the Kelabit Highlands as their homeland, and therefore many will often return to visit (BALA, 2007). In recent years, there is a movement to ‘muli’ or return permanently after retirement. Many have built new homes in the highlands to remain in Bario. Others commute regularly, either by air or road between the city and the villages.

### EXISTING FOOD HERITAGE-MAKING: PARTICIPATORY AND NETWORKED PRACTICES IN THE KELABIT HIGHLANDS

For the past decades, initiatives promoting the food heritage of the Kelabit have been developed in Bario and a festival was launched in 2004. It has focused on food and became a yearly event from March 2006 onwards. At the time of our fieldwork, we have counted 32 canopies accommodating luxuriant and diverse raw vegetables cultivated or harvested in the wild by people from the longhouses and/or villages of the highlands and deemed to reflect the importance of foraging for Kelabit identity (HALL, 2013; JANOWKI, 1993). Cultural activities—such as games, dances, and songs—happen in parallel to the exhibit to encourage visitors to repeat their participation in the event. At the center of the site, some tables and chairs are arranged to provide spaces for the visitors to enjoy the food and socialize.

Figure 2 - Food Displays at 11<sup>th</sup> Bario Food Festival



Credits: the author

Feasts – where food is pivotal – are common in the social world of the Kelabit, and many scholars have long highlighted their centrality. Therefore, the *Bario Food Festival*, which is now known as *Pesta Nukenen Bario*, is not entirely a ‘foreign’ concept to these people. As most of the festivals, it partly derives ‘from the joyful events associated with the traditional feasts’ (KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, 1998, p. 66). However, the festival is different from the common ‘irau’ because of its intent. The festival primarily aims to increase awareness about their traditional foods by celebrating them. Therefore, the first audience targeted by the festival comprised the Kelabit Highlands community and the Kelabit diaspora<sup>4</sup>. As such, it is conforming to the characteristics of the festival of re-enacting, re-presenting, and re-creating food activities in a discrete performance (KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, 1998). Over the years, the festival has gained momentum amongst local and international tourists. By its second edition, the festival began welcoming international visitors, and around 400 guests were estimated to attend the feast and ceremonies. Since 2010, the Sarawak Tourism Board has officially promoted the festival in its calendar of events. It is also presently included in international tourism guides such as *Lonely Planet* (ADEYINKA-OJO; KHOO-LATTIMORE, 2013). As the international participation in the festival revives and rises yearly, informants have reported that food already cooked for the convenience of the guests is becoming more common, while being either packed in locally harvested leaves and trunks or plastic containers and labeled.

According to the official brochure of the 10th edition, the initial expansion of the festival depended on several concurrent initiatives that blended trans-local and local stakeholders. This promotional document of the festival describes it as being organized by the Kelabit Highlands community, the staff of the e-Bario Telecentre, and the Alde Valley Food Adventure (United Kingdom). According to the same brochure, the event is a community-owned Festival that celebrates the exceptional food, forest, farming, and cultural heritage of the Kelabit Highlands. The pamphlet further claims that 16 longhouses and communities from the villages supported the first edition of the event, along with the Kelabit Highlands church.

The festival has benefited from networking practices with academia and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The e-Bario community Telecentre originated from the e-Bario project, by University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) in 1999. This organization prompted the marketing of Bario as a tourist attraction in the Kelabit Highlands. According to the informants, the project was grounded on a PAR methodology (BALA, 2011) that resulted in the local community, more specifically its group of churchwomen<sup>5</sup>, contributing with an exploratory inventory of the representative products that the inhabitants of the participating settlements were willing to promote commercially. Since then, more com-

prehensive inventories (BULAN @ SINEH RABEN BALA; LABANG @ RABEN BALA, 2015; LUGUN, 2015) have been initiated and/or supported by members of the community, reflecting the awakening of an awareness of the food heritage in the community. This association with the academia is also corroborated by the nomination of Make JIWAN – at that time one of the Ph.D. students from University Putra Malaysia and co-researchers of a project funded by the International Tropical Timber Organization - as co-chairperson to the first edition of the food festival along with John TARAWE - a representative of the community, acting as the e-Bario Project local coordinator/manager.

Most of the informants have stressed the supporting role of numerous NGOs in the organization of the festival. For instance, volunteers from Task Force, World Challenge, Far Frontiers, and Rotary have consistently provided manpower and helped in the development of infrastructure, such as homestays. This contribution, in terms of manpower, is deemed very significant because of the substantial migration of the youngest, who move away from Bario in search of education and job opportunities. Apart from the helping hands, volunteers have (and are) helped by providing an external gaze to the community, a foundation, and a clientele to tourism activities such as homestays and treks: 'I can be a tour guide. I was a guide for five years for Task Force', says a nature guide.

Another noticeable illustration is the association that the Kelabit have forged with Slow Food to gain its recognition. The connection with this trans-national movement through the participation at the Presidia 2002 has enabled the community to work on getting some of its products certified Slow Food<sup>6</sup>. Even though the certification has been challenging for the Kelabit when understanding informal requirements, Bario rice has been recognized as part of the *Ark of Taste* catalog, in 2011, as a local product cultivated by hand and a noteworthy traditional crop worthy of preservation. More importantly for our analysis, the Slow Food movement has expanded awareness of the notion of food heritage and structured some of the activities at the festival. For example, when interviewing a local organizing committee member, on the relations between the festival and the e-Bario project, he replied:

It was the award given to the Bario rice. [...] But you cannot eat just rice. [...] The other thing that we have is salt. Our salt is also worthy of a Slow Food award, and we have addressed this once during the first and second festival (Pesta Nukenen) demonstration on making the salt.

The commitment of the Kelabit in discussing with external stakeholders testifies the mutual learning and engagement 'which take place in the borderland of a third culture, created by the interaction between the cultures of the clients and the locals' (LING, 2008, p. 186-187) or a meta cultural production of heritage (GRAVARI-BARBAS, 2012, 2018; KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, 2004).

The food festival has related food heritage and tourism promotion initiatives are pointing out the important involvement of external stakeholders. These external interventions could potentially lead to a deficiency in the appropriation of the food heritage by the ‘community’ is crucial. This question then arises, how do the Kelabit people maintain control of the heritage resources while being included or involved in so many external initiatives?

## THE ROLE OF RETURNING KELABIT MIGRANTS IN HERITAGE-BROKERAGE PRACTICES

The brokerage approach invites researchers to consider the roles of communal power that results from the control of either a specific competency or know-how; or from a relationship with relevant environments; or the information and communication networks and/or sources of regulations. It is noteworthy that the control of the resource of ‘food heritage’ seems initially to go back to individuals who are part of the diaspora and have returned to the Kelabit Highlands. Besides the organizational competencies demonstrated above, the anthropology of brokers suggests that these actors institute their power based on competencies in terms of rhetoric, scenography, and network capabilities (BIERSCHENK *et al.*, 2000; OLIVIER DE SARDAN, 1995).

The role local stakeholders are intending to play in the definition of heritage is reflected by questions about their contribution to the publication of the research initiative we are reflecting upon. This demand arose in the context of our fieldwork, and it is not isolated. It reflects a longer history of co-producing texts that could potentially serve both academic and community purposes. The context of the Kelabit Highlands reflects global transformations in the manner in which the associations between the ‘local community’ and researchers are conceived and framed. Indeed, it asserts the post-colonial paradigm of development practices and studies (L. T. SMITH, 1999; LASSITER, 2005), which sheds light on the territories and imaginaries of the communities, and contemplates that ‘indigenous narratives are equally capable of generating their legitimate forms of knowledge and discourses on development’ (ZAWAWI, 2017, p. 41; ZAWAWI; NOORSHAH, 2012). Hence, these native accounts oppose previous a-territorial and a-historical narratives on indigenous peoples.

The Kelabit has developed the capacity of appropriating development and research projects that allows them to channel the efforts of external stakeholders. While we are meeting him on our overall research initiative, a representative of the community spontaneously mentioned one of their collaborations with a well-known university:

We have Cornell University; we want them to conduct research on how to perform waste management because they are quite experts in that field anyway. We give them this job so they can come back with a proper

proposal. Of course, we can go to local council with research that has been developed; we can go to the government for help.

This representative is strategically shedding the light on the connections and the negotiations of the Kelabit people with legitimate academic institutions. We posit that the case reflects the broader capabilities of orienting knowledge and participating in its production as per its development agenda, previously noted by HARRIS (2009). Also, our observations are leading to conclusions similar to those of Sweet and Kelly (2014) on the capacities enabled by the Kelabit political circumstances in engaging with a range of agents outside the community. These accesses to legitimate networks are playing a key role in the incorporation of vision, strategies, and values underpinning trans-national and global understanding of heritage.

We suggest that the political circumstances of the Kelabit people and hence the participation in academic projects primarily rely on the rhetoric capabilities of the Kelabit diaspora. Undeniably, a great number of scholarly investigations have been conducted in the Kelabit Highlands. Kelabit academicians such as the author (social anthropology), Ramy BULAN (law), and Robert LIAN-SAGING (ethnohistory) have undertaken research. These endeavors demonstrate the acquisition of rhetorical and trans-identity capabilities by the community (WEDEL, 2005). Also, much of the Kelabit youth are graduating from higher education institutions, and continue to maintain social ties with the Kelabit Highlands community. The exposure to higher education and numerous research projects could have created grounds for negotiation. Indeed, the initial collaborations with universities, as part of the e-Bario project, have been formative in terms of the understanding of some of the academic regulations: *'One guy from UPM was doing a Ph.D., and he had a grant. So, the grant was used in a way to actually start this festival. We used the grant properly. So, we are very careful with the grant'*, describes one of the festival organization committee members, who has studied at university before returning to the Kelabit Highlands. Additionally, the festival usually culminates in a community dinner. This feast serves as a stage for the launching of new initiatives by the community, that echo the scenography capabilities of the 'brokers'. These initiatives include projects such as the *Memorandum of Understanding* between UNIMAS and the Alliance of the Indigenous Peoples of the Highlands of Borneo (FORMADAT), or the founding of a community museum (SWEET, 2015; SWEET; KELLY, 2014) in July 2016.

Concerning network capabilities, the Kelabit diaspora is represented at discrete levels of the Malaysian political system, while maintaining important connections with the Kelabit Highlands (BALA, 2008). This communal network and its trans-local connections may enable the Kelabit people to address the agenda of the indigenous minorities.

The national agenda is caught in a position that would find the recognition of indigenous minorities difficult. Since both indigenous minorities and the Malays are considered ‘Bumiputras’, or sons of the soil, recognition of indigenous minorities would challenge the claims of the indigenous identity of the Malays who form the major ethnic group of Malaysia (R. BULAN, 1998; IDRUS, 2010; NAH, 2003; ZAWAWI, 2013). Moreover, DUNCAN (2008) argues that the main policy in Southeast Asia is to aim at creating unity in new nation-states in their relationships with ethnic minorities being on their peripheries, so they do not usually exert much influence on the national agenda. However, in the specific case of the Kelabit community, its representatives may be found in influential positions<sup>7</sup>. Thus, attention must be paid to the Kelabit diaspora and counter-diaspora, especially in terms of their ability to move even as they maintain multiple identities and agencies, and consequently achieve indigenous self-determination in the mainstream Malay-Muslim society. As suggested by CAI (2017), for other indigenous groups and cultural heritage from West Malaysia, by contributing to the definition of the heritage, the Kelabit are asserting their cultural identity and self-determination. Also, we suggest that the *Bario Food Festival* is a political and intellectual forum that provides relevant material for the production of knowledge and for official and unofficial meanings to be attached to the participatory heritage discourse (JACOBS, 2017). This festival—organized by Kelabit people and relevant agents outside of the community—is taking part in the bottom-up nature of intangible heritage making (ROBINSON; SILVERMAN, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

Grounded on the anthropology of the perspective of the brokers, this article has explored the Kelabit socio-political configuration that is attached with the notion of cultural heritage. The analysis of the fieldwork conducted during the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of the Bario Food and Cultural Festival unveils networked practices, such as identification and tourism promotion, that are conducted with various institutions, associations, and NGOs. The Kelabit people – through these networked practices – achieves its empowerment regarding food heritage. The diaspora and counter-diaspora appear to form the core of these networks, interfacing the local community with a range of stakeholders and hence playing the role of cultural ‘brokers’ (BRANDECKER, 2009; LEWIS; MOSSE, 2006; LONG, 2001; OLIVIER DE SARDAN, 1995; OLIVIER DE SARDAN; BIERSCHENK, 1993; RICO, 2017; SALAZAR, 2016). In doing so, the Kelabit people maintain the ownership of its food heritage as a socio-economic, socio-cultural, and political resource and sustains it beyond external and temporary projects.

This paper contributes to scholarly knowledge in two ways. First, it asserts the idea that participative ‘local communities’ are developing

some expertise in engaging with external stakeholders and projects, intending to combine them with their initiatives of heritage making, developing and asserting a collective identity. The case studied reveals the role of the diaspora and counter-diaspora: their capabilities form the essence of connecting the local community to the academic or developmental stakeholders. Waterton and Smith (2010) have pointed out the possible conceptual disjunctions frequently encountered by the local groups in the assertion of their understanding of heritage. The Kelabit community, at large, is enabling the overall community group to overcome the challenge faced by many in defining and negotiating their food heritage within the local-global nexus. This is achieved based on its rhetoric, scenography, and network capabilities.

Second, we suggest that the intricate relations shaped between the community and external stakeholders are renewing the knowledge and representations of the indigenous people. Indeed, a renewed paradigm of identity and ethnicity is emphasizing the fluidity that supports the construction of social agencies (ZAWAWI, 2017). Overall, these findings contribute to a conceptual framework for research endeavors on indigenous communities that transcends the dominated/dominating dichotomy and conceives the repartitioning of key competencies and power, and the creation of complementary associations between different types of knowledge for a trans or meta production of the heritage (GRAVARI-BARBAS, 2012, 2018; KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, 2004).

In this contribution, we have focused on the capabilities demonstrated by the Kelabit community in producing knowledge and promoting food heritage by networking with external stakeholders, and notably the academia. However, we must also acknowledge certain limitations, such as the choice of analyzing the relationships of the community with external stakeholders, and this does not allow the provision of insights on internal social interactions such as gender, generational differences, and social positions. Further, the fieldwork and participant selection cast light on the food heritage practices and discourses of the local community, and only included the diaspora closely related to the festival. The involvement of the rest of the diaspora has not been systematically investigated in the current study. Future initiatives could attempt a re-construction of the whole brokerage chain to further analyze the competencies of the identified social agents.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Slow Food Foundation champions the Slow Food Movement for Biodiversity. Under the Slow Food Presidia, the movement aims to sustain quality production at risk of extinction.

<sup>2</sup> This conversion could be associated with a naturalistic shift according to the approach suggested by Descola (2005) and supports the idea that the differen-

tiation between cognitive modes of the relationship with the natural environment is not that definitive (JANOWSKI, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> This remark came out of a dialogue on the threat posed by industrial logging companies on the forested hills and mountains surrounding mountains in Bario. It means that the forest is where we store our daily needs for vegetables and protein. Then there was no 24 hours supply of electricity in Bario and the forest 'acts' like a fridge for food storage and for keeping it fresh.

<sup>4</sup> Most of them are patronizing the festival, even though few new Kelabit comers were encountered at the 11th edition of the festival. Hence, it can be considered that food heritage and festivals act as an important revitalization resource, as observed elsewhere for another small-scale society by Di Giovine (2016).

<sup>5</sup> Possibly reflecting this lead by women and their pre-dominance in the preparation and display of the food during the festival, at the time we have completed the fieldwork, most of the organizing committee members were women. It is worthwhile noting that most of them are migrants or return migrants.

<sup>6</sup> While placing the festival at the core of the investigation and analysis, we were not able to elaborate on the certification process of Bario rice by Slow Food and resistances to the mechanization of the rice cultivation, another noteworthy process for the analysis of the ways Kelabit are negotiating power through food activism (COUNIHAN; SINISCALCHI, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Such as Idris Jala (holding the position of minister in the Prime Minister's Department and chief executive officer of the Performance Management and Delivery Unit – Pemandu – a task force to address bureaucracy in public-private partnerships from 2009 until 2015 and then the President and CEO of Pemandu Associates, a global consultancy company focusing on organizational change both in public and private sectors); Ramy Bulan (associate professor of Law at the University of Malaya and expert in indigenous land rights); Ose Murang (previously Resident of Miri Division of Sarawak and currently Deputy State Secretary of Sarawak); Robert Lian-Saging (former Director of Immigration Sarawak). Positions refer to the ones held prior to the 14<sup>th</sup> General Elections as fieldwork was conducted in 2016.

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