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This is a River: Malaysian Borneo Research Expedition

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This is a River: Malaysian Borneo Research Expedition

GiGi Buddie

Our research project was conducted in support of the development of the play *This is A River*, and included a research and cultural immersion trip to Borneo, SE Asia in the summer of 2019. There we worked closely with and listened to the stories of the indigenous people who are severely and negatively affected by the environmental crises. We spent a total of 10 days abroad, 3 days in Kuala Lumpur, 2 days in Miri and 5 days on the Baram River in the Sarawak region of Malaysian Borneo. During this final stage of our clinic trip we spent each night at a different village along the Baram, and got to speak, interact with, and learn about and from the indigenous people at each longhouse.

This is a River was set to focus on the Kayans, one of many indigenous tribes in Sarawak. They have been strongly affected by deforestation, palm oil plantations, big corporations, and mega-dams that threaten the traditions of these people, their homes, and their culture. But we came to realize that Kunya, Kayan and Penan people—although different in tradition from each other—are being affected in similar ways and we have noted that one experience is no less valuable from another.

It is vital to this performance art piece that we be exposed to the culture, struggles, and the people we are trying to represent and whose plight we hope to bring awareness to. We aim to do justice to their situation and that involves our interaction with them and studying the Kayan reaction to the interconnected environmental issues listed above.

As we flew towards the heart of the Borneo jungle in a tiny 15-person plane from Miri to Long Akah, my fellow researchers and I broke down. Looking down at the rainforest below us, suddenly the land had changed and we witnessed acres upon acres of forested land that had been demolished and now was being used for palm oil plantations.



Fig. 1: Flight from Miri to Long Akah June 21, 2019. Credit: GiGi Buddie.

It was undeniably heartbreaking. I realized that it is very easy to distance yourself from the reality of a situation like this when you're removed from it to begin with. The United States is geographically far away, and in modern media, these issues are never or rarely covered. I believe that we all hear and know about deforestation and its negative effects, but seeing it, in front of my eyes was one of the most disheartening things I have had to experience. It's real. It's unnecessary destruction that brought me to tears on many occasions. No picture could ever replicate the feelings I was experiencing, and I don't believe I could ever truly describe the heartbreak I felt and still feel.

Every part of this trip was a new experience for me. I had never even left the country before, let alone experienced any kind of culture shock to the extent that I did. I learned a great deal about observation, and the art of listening. There were clear limitations to how I could communicate with the Kayan people, but in the end they are just human beings who showed a lot of their emotions through their body language, facial expressions, and tone. I learned to watch their interactions with one another and the environment. The work we did was tough; mentally and physically. Each day our bodies were pushed to the limit and our minds were flooded with reactions to the deforestation, cultural loss, and sadness that the people and the land were experiencing.

Yet, one of the most precious memories that I hold from this trip was from our time in the last village we visited. Isabelle Rogers and I sat down with young kids from the village, and despite the definite language barrier, we were able to explain and play a few games of the card game "spoons." The kids had a blast and for a moment the outside world was nonexistent and we were enjoying the calm, the present, the "now."



Fig. 2: Game Playing. Credit: Giovanni Ortega

I honestly did not have a lot of knowledge surrounding the environmental issues in Malaysia and Borneo prior to doing preliminary research for the trip. But the opportunity to research abroad contributed to my growing knowledge in a variety of ways. There is not a lot of

research out there done about the Kayan villages and situations that they are living in. Many Kayan people on the river are bannng together to fight against the government which wants to dam the Baram River and cause even more destruction to the land. The advocacy from ordinary village workers was immense, they are clearly fighting for their home, land and culture and will not rest until they have justice. I learned, shockingly, that the headmen in all the villages, are government appointed. Meaning, the democracy that had been in place in these villages to make sure that the people had a voice in the community and beyond, has been completely taken over by the government. The government did this so that during elections in the region, where the Kayan people still have a voice because they are a part of the state, the “voice” that is being heard is only representative of what the government wants. The government is doing whatever it can to weaken and wipe out the voice, the culture, the land that is inhabited by the Kayan, Kunya, and Penan people. But these factors very clearly did not stop and won’t stop them from fighting back.

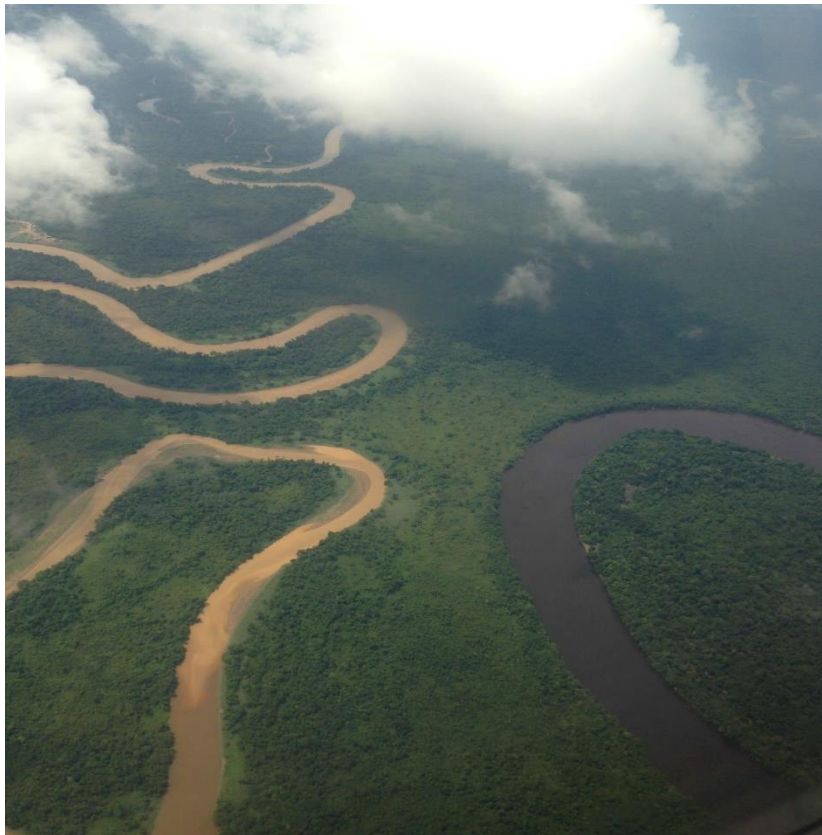


Fig. 3: Deforestation creates the mud-color of the Baram. Credit: GiGi Buddie



Fig. 4: From our city time: Petronas Towers KL, Malaysia. Credit: GiGi Buddie

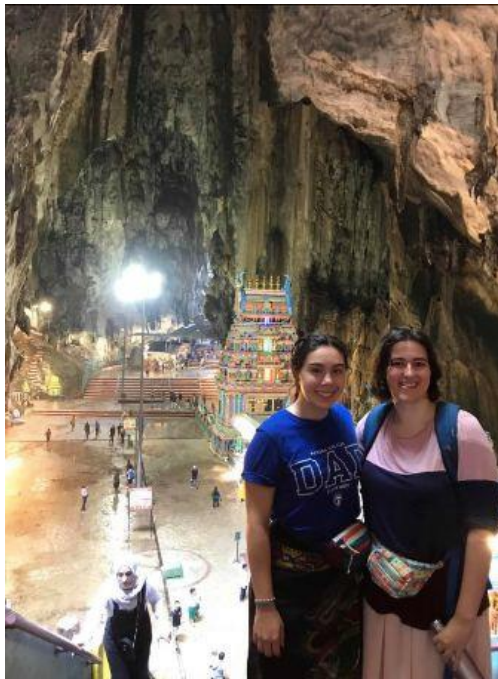


Fig. 5: Batu Caves exploration. A Hindu temple standing in the background. Credit: Giovanni Ortega



Fig. 6: Goodbye ceremony in Kayan Village involving marking the faces of visitors with charcoal. Pictured with Kayan elders. Credit: Giovanni Ortega