Antiques and Adat:
The Changing Face of Paka’s Mini-museum,
Kampung Benuk,
Penrissen, Kuching

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Introduction

On 2 October 2004, Paka anak Otor, a descendant of Kampung Benuk’s 
original *Tua Gawai* (ritual head) lineage, passed away suddenly. He left 
behind a large stash of old photographs, family documents, and most 
importantly, his ‘mini-museum’: a collection of heirlooms, ritual objects, local 
tools and household implements, as well as various other items which 
happened to catch his fancy. The last category was particularly eclectic in 
scope, for Paka was a voracious collector of stuff in general: Japanese 
Occupation banknotes, black-and-white television sets, dusty ‘Ventolin syrup’ 
glass bottles and a boomerang nestled quite comfortably, as they do today, 
amid the more ‘traditional’ artefacts on display.

Paka’s mini-museum is housed on the ground floor of his family home, 
situated atop a small mound overlooking the village. Days before his death, 
he was still showing tourists around it, as he had done for the last four 
decades. The mini-museum was very much Paka’s domain: he alone acquired 
new objects, rearranged the displays, and spoke to visitors about the 
collection and more general aspects of *adat Gawai*, or local pre-Christian 
rituals, beliefs and customs. His death therefore left the mini-museum bereft, 
and raised serious questions over its future. Who would run the place now 
that the *tua ramin* (head of the house) was gone? Should it – indeed could it – 
still be kept open for tourists? And if so, how would the family convey 
everything that Paka had to these visitors? There was little written 
information in the mini-museum; none of its potential custodians spoke fluent 
enough English to converse with *branda*¹ tourists; and most importantly, 
nobody actually knew as much as Paka did about *adat Gawai* and the objects 
on display. In retrospect, Paka had been the centre of the mini-museum, the 
one person who held everything together; and in the immediate aftermath of 
his demise, it seemed empty and incomplete, a random assortment of objects 
with no one to make sense of it all.

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¹ *Branda*, deriving from the Dutch *Belanda*, is used locally as a generic label for all white people.
At the time of Paka’s death, I had been in Kampung Benuk for a month, having chosen the village as my PhD fieldsite precisely because of the mini-museum. As I discovered later, I was the last in a long line of researchers² to arrive on Paka’s doorstep seeking information on the village, its adat and history. He had clearly developed a reputation as an able and willing expert on ‘Bidayuh culture’: one well-deserved if he was as generous with my predecessors as he was with me. His death therefore came as a blow to my fieldwork. We had spent many hours during the previous month going through sections of the mini-museum and talking about adat Gawai, but these were only scratches on the surface. In the course of these visits, he and his wife Sajir anak Sepen, or Sumuk Meroi³ as she is known locally, informally adopted me as their grandchild and introduced me to the rest of their family. These two considerations became crucial factors in determining my involvement with the mini-museum over the next few months, transforming me from interested observer into (somewhat hesitant) participant in its future.

This paper is an account of recent developments at the mini-museum, which culminated in the production of English text panels for its collection in March 2005. While my role in this project would probably be questionable, if not downright imp(r)udent, to postmodern and postcolonial critics of ethnographic representation, it was in many ways unavoidable given the exigencies of fieldwork. By October 2004, knowledge had been shared, and (adoptive) family obligations subtly asserted: any refusal to help Paka’s family with the mini-museum would have been unbecoming, even ungrateful. As it turned out, working on these text panels was a deeply instructive experience, one which shed more light on ‘native curatorship’ and the character of the place than might have otherwise been possible. In this paper I shall expound on the development of the text panel project, and attempt to work through some of the theoretical and ethnographic issues that arose in the process. I shall also explore these issues in relation to a broader range of literature on both Southeast Asia and the so-called ‘non-Western’ or ‘indigenous’ museum.

**Paka’s mini-museum: a history**

The collection that became the mini-museum began life in the early 1960s, during what was arguably Kampung Benuk’s ‘golden age’ as a tourist

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² Local writers (e.g. Tettoni and Ong 1996, Chang 2002), for example, often consulted Paka as an expert on Bidayuh culture. I have also been told of a number of foreigners (including a few *branda* and two Japanese) who like myself came to stay for extended periods in order to learn about their way of life, from as early as the 1960s. Benuk’s relative accessibility from Kuching, its status as a tourist attraction, and Paka and his father’s network of contacts among the British navy and army (many armed services personnel were stationed in the area during and after ‘Confrontasi’ between Malaysia and Indonesia (1963-66)).

³ Lit. ‘grandmother of Meroi’. Teknonymy is used in all Bidayuh communities, and is usually the prevalent form of identification in villages.
attraction. Paka’s father, Otor anak Sunjam (d.1978) was then the local *Tua Gawai*, the man responsible for initiating and coordinating ritual activities across the village. By all accounts, Otor was highly influential and respected within Benuk, and remarkably well-connected to the world outside it. From the 1950s, he began inviting and playing host to members of the British, Australian and American navy and armed forces, many of whom were stationed in nearby bases. They often turned up in large contingents, occasionally for overnight stays, mingling with the locals and sometimes screening films on portable projectors. Benuk’s fame grew from this initial network, and guestbooks from the 1960s and 70s indicate that it was also receiving tourists, researchers, writers, film-makers and dignitaries from around the world. The village was chiefly famous for its longhouse, a sprawling structure with several *batang* (branches) covering most of the main site; but its key ‘human’ attractions appeared to be the charismatic *Tua Gawai* and his family. At the centre of this traffic was Otor’s house on the hill, which he and his family moved into in 1954: it was here that visitors were hosted and entertained with food, drink and costumed dances.

Paka’s collection appears to have started with his family’s own cluster of ‘hentiks’ (antiques): precious heirlooms such as *tajaw* (large Chinese earthenware jars obtained through 19th century trade networks), brassware, porcelain vessels and old ritual necklaces. But Paka also had a penchant for collecting everything and anything, especially that of an ‘hentik’ nature. I am told, for example, that he often bought others’ unwanted belongings, including the old ritual objects they discarded upon converting to Christianity. Over time, he also turned his attention to what then must have seemed mundane daily items: kerosene gas lamps, baskets, spears and blades, water containers, measuring tools, and various rice processing implements. Finally there were random additions, as mentioned earlier – many probably gifts from visitors or souvenirs from Otor and Paka’s sporadic trips out of the village. Part of the collection was displayed upstairs in the family’s living quarters, while the rest occupied a corner of Otor’s ground-floor provision shop.

After the shop closed in the 1970s, Paka’s collection expanded to fill the space. It is difficult to ascertain precisely when this anonymous entity became a

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4 Especially during the ‘Konfrontasi’ years (1963-66) between the newly-formed Federation of Malaysia and Indonesia.
5 Apart from national figures such as Malaysian Sultans and numerous politicians, Queen Elizabeth II and Cardinal Karol Wojtyla (the future John Paul II) are also said by some informants to have visited the kampung. I have not, however, been able to find documentary proof for either of these visits.
6 This would have been an unusual step at the time, as most of Benuk’s inhabitants still lived in the longhouse. Sumuk Meroi has explained that it was because Otor wanted more space than was available in the confines of the longhouse. As one of the wealthier people in the village, he was also better able than most to afford the relatively high costs of moving into a detached house.
‘mini-museum’; but what is significant is that the name was conferred upon it by visitors, not Paka himself. At any rate, the moniker stuck; and at some point a signboard reading ‘Welcome to Paka Mini Muzium?’ was erected at the foot of the hill. Otor passed away in 1978, by which time Benuk’s status as a tourist attraction was secure; and throughout the 1980s and 1990s a steady stream of sightseers continued to arrive at the longhouse and mini-museum. A handwritten list of visitor figures from 1989-1991 at the back of one of Paka’s guestbooks gives us a rough idea of its popularity: 195 people in September 1989, for example, and 269 the month after. On some days Paka was receiving in excess of 30 visitors: no small achievement for a village only accessible by an un-tarred road until the late-1990s. Many of them took photographs dressed in Gawai necklaces and headgear – no taboo on their non-ritual use appears to have existed – often with Paka himself clad in his Tua Gawai8 outfit.

Three key developments in the world around the mini-museum during this period are worth noting. First, fundamental changes to Sarawak’s official ethnic taxonomy were set in motion just prior to independence in 1963, when Paka’s collection was just getting started. Escshewing the use of the colonial term ‘Land Dayak’, local politicians started referring to the inhabitants of Benuk and other villages in the First Division as ‘Bidayuh’. In some dialects, this translates literally as ‘people of (bi-) the land / hills (dayuh)’ (Chang 2002:22; Winzeler 1997:222), although few of my informants seem aware of its etymological origins9. While people in Benuk fully acknowledge that they are ‘Bidayuh’, they do not always see it as more ‘indigenous’ than ‘Land Dayak’, which is often used as an interchangeable term. A more common endonym for themselves, their language and way of life is ‘Dayak’, which also means ‘people’. The key point, however, is that Benuk has gradually become a ‘Bidayuh village’ to outsiders, including tourists, land surveyors and other civil servants, writers and researchers. Correspondingly, as guestbooks and publications over the years reveal, Paka’s mini-museum came to be seen as a collection of ‘Bidayuh’ objects, and the knowledge he dispensed, representative – even metonymical – of ‘Bidayuh culture’. Paka was certainly aware of this, and I noticed that he tended to use the term ‘Bidayuh’ more frequently than most of my other informants.

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8 Muzium being the Malay spelling of the word.
8 Paka and his family maintain that he inherited his father’s mantle in 1978, retaining the position until he converted to Christianity in the 1990s. But his actual status has been the subject of some controversy within Benuk. Most believe that upon Otor’s death, leadership was passed to the current Tua Gawai (now one of a dwindling handful of ‘pagans’ in the village). Paka, however, insisted that the person in question did not know enough to be a bona fide ritual head: precisely the same accusation that the latter levelled against him.
9 Although ‘dayuh’ also refers to the land in Biatah (the dialect of which Benuk’s inhabitants speak a variation), ‘bi-’ is not a common prefix or form of identification. For many of my informants, ‘Bidayuh’ is simply a name without inherent meaning.
Secondly, this was the time that large-scale conversion from *adat Gawai* to Christianity began in Benuk; and today all apart from about ten ageing ‘pagans’ are members of the Anglican, Catholic and SIB\(^{10}\) churches. Paka and his wife converted in the early 1990s, by which time most of his family had already been Christian for a while\(^{11}\). This added a significant temporal dimension to the ritual objects in the mini-museum. Whereas in the past they were regularly taken off display for use when needed, they now inched closer to becoming ‘museum pieces’ in the popular sense of the term. As before, visitors were allowed to handle and wear them; but now they really were ‘hentiks’ in being from the *adat Gawai* past with little functional relevance to the Christian present. Finally, there was the fate of the longhouse, Benuk’s key attraction. From the mid-1980s, this vast structure, which once spanned the length of the village, began ‘opening up’, as some put it. As more money, usually from urban and industrial employment, became available, entire *batang* were taken apart to be replaced by more ‘modern’ detached concrete houses. Today a diminished version of the old longhouse remains in the centre of the village, and people have frequently expressed regret that there is so little left of this once-massive edifice. More importantly, they have categorically linked it with a sharp decline in tourism to Benuk in recent years: ‘What else is there to see now that the longhouse is gone?’

This was the tourism situation when I arrived in September 2004. Although the mini-museum was probably receiving no more than 10 visitors a week, Paka continued to serve as its custodian and guide, personally welcoming tourists and talking them through the displays in Bidayuh, Malay or limited English. Throughout our brief acquaintance, Paka maintained that he began his collection to enable his children and grandchildren to see old things and learn about their history. But the intervening decades had added a retrospective slant to the whole affair. Paka and his family always emphasised that this was the only place where you could find such ‘hentiks’ and other items from the days of *adat Gawai*. ‘When people started converting to Christianity’, he and his wife told me, ‘they threw out all their Gawai objects and heirlooms or sold them to the Chinese’. Apparently the other villagers mocked Paka for wanting to save these old things: but now ‘they all want

\(^{10}\) Sidang Injil Borneo – an evangelical church with growing congregations throughout Borneo.

\(^{11}\) I have heard several overlapping reasons for this, all broadly applicable to conversion cases. Apparently Paka was very ill in the early 1990s, and when Gawai healing methods proved ineffective, he turned to Christianity, to which he attributed his eventual recovery. Secondly, his children were instrumental in persuading him to convert, explaining that their ignorance of *adat Gawai* post-mortem procedures would leave them ill-equipped to ‘take care’ of their parents after their death. It was fairly common for parents to belatedly ‘follow’ their children in adopting Christianity. Thirdly, it may have become too difficult by then to carry out labour-intensive *adat Gawai* rituals, which depended upon a large (but dwindling) pool of helpers and much manual work. Going to church, by contrast, was physically and practically easier.
such things again, yet nobody has them anymore’. Before he died, then, Paka was aware that his personal collection, started as a ‘hobby’ and with his direct descendants in mind, was becoming – or had the potential to become – more widely relevant to the community. Or more to the point, the mini-museum had what everyone else didn’t have, which was why school groups and visitors from other Bidayuh villages were now adding to the tourist numbers.

Developments after Paka’s death

While aware of the mini-museum’s unique status and potential, the family’s main priority in October 2004 was to publicise news of Paka’s demise. They constantly pointed out that he was a well-known man with friends all over Malaysia and the world: some military or police contacts from Otor’s time; others tourists or researchers who kept in touch through cards and photographs. A few options for spreading the word were mooted. When the initial idea to place a notice or obituary in the national press proved too expensive, the family began looking at the possibility of soliciting an article on the mini-museum, several of which had been written in the past. As someone who travelled regularly to Kuching, I was seen as best-placed to facilitate this; and in late October, I managed to arrange a visit by a reporter from the national broadsheet, the New Straits Times. The result was a half-page spread titled ‘Quandary over Bidayuh mini-museum’ (Ridu 2004), which highlighted the ‘plight’ of Sumuk Meroi, the single-handed custodian of her late husband’s collection, and finished with an appeal for donations or other kinds of support. It occupied the middle ground between the family’s original intention (to publicise Paka’s death), and the probable interests of a reader with little or no prior knowledge of the place (a Bidayuh museum, the threatened loss of cultural heritage). This was less a clash of concerns than a realignment of priorities, as the family had also expressed their anxiety over the museum’s future during the interview. While they were thus grateful when the article appeared in the New Straits Times, I did hear a few murmurs that there should have been more information on Paka, for wasn’t the article meant to be about him?

12 This is not strictly true: I have seen tajaw, beaded necklaces, dayung beris hats and grunung bundles (brass bells, animal teeth, glass and ceramic bottles used in most Gawai rituals) on display in a few other houses. These tend to belong to elderly, more recent converts (within the last ten years), who kept them as kenangan (souvenirs) after becoming Christian. Later evangelisation efforts were generally more accommodating towards ‘pagan traditions’, and sought to incorporate them into Christian worship rather than dispense with them altogether (Fr James Meehan, interview 2005).

13 Quite tellingly, the first thing the journalist asked Sumuk Meroi to do was put on her adat Gawai attire for a photograph: an attempt, presumably, to lend it an ‘authentic’ Bidayuh flavour. The same thing happened when a reporter from the Malay-language newspaper Berita Harian visited in January.
Their second concern was to ensure that the mini-museum – Paka’s kerja (work) and passion in life – would remain open to tourists. One afternoon during the seven-day mourning period, a tour guide turned up with a group of German visitors, blithely unaware of the family’s recent bereavement. Mild panic spread through the family members gathered upstairs: what to do with all these tourists? Who would speak to them? Which objects did Paka usually show visitors? Amid the chaos, the museum – still in a state of disarray, having doubled as a gambling den that week – was opened and the tourists allowed to look around. To my great surprise, I found myself being hustled downstairs by Sumuk Meroi and others. ‘Go speak to them in branda,’ she urged, not realising that not all white people (branda) spoke English (branda). ‘Tell them he has died, tell them what they want to know about the objects.’

At this point I realised how large a hole Paka’s death had left in the mini-museum, as well as how I was being implicated in its future. Since Paka’s death Sumuk Meroi had taken over her husband’s role as keeper of the museum; and as an ‘adopted’ member of the family, I was obliged to help in this undertaking wherever I could. I had also been the last person to work with Paka before his death, and over the last month had been the recipient of a great deal of his knowledge. Family members and other Benuk residents would sometimes tell me only half-jokingly that I knew more about adat Gawai and the objects in the mini-museum than they did, because they had been Christian for so long. It thus seemed perfectly reasonable to expect me to impart what I had learned to visitors: indeed it would probably have been selfish not to. The family did not seem to share my academic qualms about ‘speaking for’ my informants: for most people ritual knowledge is not exclusive, just something that needs to be learned. Over time, then, a routine emerged in which I would be sent downstairs to show branda visitors round the collection whenever they turned up. I usually tried to repeat exactly what Paka and Sumuk Meroi had told me, and ask the latter any questions on the tourists’ behalf: an arrangement which worked well for a while. But there were times when branda visitors showed up and I was not around. Although the family welcomed them, they found such visits awkward due to the language barrier. For them, the mini-museum was not simply a repository of objects to be looked at in silence, but a place for communication and conviviality, as it had always been under Paka’s custody.

Meanwhile, Sumuk Meroi decided to continue her late husband’s mentorship by telling me everything she knew about the mini-museum’s collection. Between November 2004 and February 2005, we spent a great deal of time looking at and talking about individual or groups of objects in the mini-museum. Initially this took place in Malay, but as my spoken Bidayuh improved, we began to use both languages. The contrast between the

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14 During the mourning period it is common for visitors to spend the night with the bereaved family. Part of the ‘entertainment’ provided for guests after prayers and meals is a space for gambling, which is enjoyed almost exclusively by men.
expositional styles of husband and wife was striking. Paka was adept at giving overviews of the objects within the context of adat Gawai rituals or life in the past: a balance undoubtedly honed by decades of interaction with tourists keener on broad strokes than fine details. Conversely, this was new territory to Sumuk Meroi: although she had frequently been present whenever Paka met visitors, she had neither been as visible nor loquacious. Her engagement with the objects was often more personal and detailed, based on her own memories of how they featured in rituals or daily life. While Paka was aware that he often spoke for an entire community, his wife constantly protested that her knowledge came mainly from her own experience or what she had heard from her parents, grandparents and husband.

In January 2005, a casual conversation about my future plans threw up a new question: What would happen when I returned to England? Sumuk Meroi and her other family members could easily communicate with Malay-speaking visitors (who now constitute about half of all mini-museum visitors), but would have great difficulty conveying the same information to branda tourists. From this, another idea for the mini-museum emerged. Perhaps I could leave in my stead some written English material for branda visitors to read. One such specimen already existed: a large typed text panel called ‘A Brief History of Kampung Benuk People and their Tua Gawai (ritual chief)’, which Paka had probably dictated (if not produced) in 1989. Essentially a narrative of his genealogy, it refers specifically to Benuk’s ancestors as ‘a group of Bidayuh’ (emphasis added), a reflection, perhaps, of the growing currency of the term at the time. There were also individual labels on some of the tajaw, gongs and other objects featuring their names and brief descriptions. But nothing existed that conveyed what seemed most relevant to Sumuk Meroi: how the objects were used in adat Gawai rituals and daily life.

At this point, the cultural significance of giving came to the forefront. Knowledge, adat, songs and stories are, despite their apparent intangibility, often spoken of by my informants as being ‘given’ or ‘lost’, like ‘regular’ objects. This is reflected in Bidayuh legends and origin myths, in which agricultural skills, adat and other forms of knowledge are bestowed upon humans (or lost) as specific items (cf. Geddes 1957; Harris 2001; Nuek 2002): literacy, for example, has frequently been spoken of as – not simply represented by – a piece of paper with writing on it which the ancestors of the Bidayuh lost to their eventual detriment15 (Harris 2001:29-30; cf. Roth 1898). Now that I had received all this information, Sumuk suggested that I turn it into a sheet or text panel – anything in branda which she could then pass to tourists. The fact that she depicted herself (or whoever was manning the mini-museum at the time) as ‘giving’ such information to them was significant:

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15 Tellingly, literacy in these stories is usually ‘gained’ (through ingenuity or deceit) by either the white person or the Malay – the two groups to have governed or dominated government of Sarawak since the 19th century – a reflection of the close association between writing (books and paper) and political ascendancy.
rather than replacing the human interaction that was so central to the museum when Paka was alive, the text would simply mediate it by making communication easier. ‘Giving’ thus became central to the transmission of knowledge: more than a motif or metaphor, it was the key mechanism by which knowledge(-objects) could be passed on. In that sense, it felt only right to ‘give something back’ to the family and the museum by helping to produce English text for the mini-museum.

‘Native curatorship’ and the ‘indigenous museum’: reflections on the text panel project

‘…(T)here is not one universal museology, but a world full of museologies.’ (Kreps 2003:xiii)

In late January 2005, I began working with Sumuk Meroi (and other family members who happened to be around) on the creation of text panels for the mini-museum. My original intention was to be as transparent as possible: to record and translate everything Paka’s family said into English. Predictably enough, the futility of trying to efface my presence from the project quickly became obvious. Anthropologists can be curiously un-reflexive about the role of linguistic translation in ethnography, a tendency probably heightened in the throes of fieldwork. Because language seems so basic to the ethnographer’s project of ‘grasp[ing] the native’s point of view, his relation to life … his vision of his world’ (Malinowski 1972:25), it is often all too easy to take for granted flawless translation from one language (the informants’) to another (the ethnographer’s).

But creating text panels went beyond grappling with linguistic difference. On a more fundamental level this was a project of translation between different epistemological regimes and cultural parameters: between different museologies, so to speak. The English text panels would serve as interfaces in this project, and from this important position could well end up shaping the entire mini-museum experience. On the one hand, my priority was to capture the nuances of ‘native curatorship’ (for want of a better description): to make sure that Paka’s family’s views were respected and represented in the final product. While the use of written material as a means of transmitting information – or giving knowledge – to visitors was relatively alien to the mechanism of the mini-museum, the principle behind it wasn’t. As mentioned earlier, Bidayuh stories and myths inhabit a world in which it is ontologically possible for knowledge to be an object – that is, for what is seemingly intangible to be instantiated as, not simply represented by, tangible objects. And although nobody today can seriously claim that mere possession of a piece of paper will make one literate, there is still a general acknowledgement of the potency of objects as things through which one can become pandai16, or

16 Pandai in Malay and Bidayuh means both ‘clever / knowledgeable’ and ‘having the capacity (to do something)’. My notebook and camera, for example, are widely seen to
knowledgeable and efficacious. For Sumuk Meroi, whose experience of museums was mostly confined to the one she now ran, these text panels were probably very similar in nature to other Bidayuh knowledge-objects with which she was familiar.

On the other hand there were the *branda* tourists for whom these text panels were being created. They too were likely to find museum text panels familiar objects – albeit in a different way. As the field of museum studies has amply demonstrated, the (stereo)typical Euro-American museum has historically been conceived of as a repository of objective knowledge (Bennett 1995; Edwards 2001; Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Jenkins 1994), its didactic mode of communication making it more a ‘temple’ than a ‘forum’ (Cameron 1972). As elements in this epistemological framework, text panels and labels have conventionally provided ‘objective’ overviews of the provenance, uses and meanings of its collections: information which the average visitor would probably look for in the mini-museum. Moreover, we could not expect visitors to Benuk to possess prior knowledge of the village, its social and economic circumstances or its *adat* Gawai past; so any information Sumuk Meroi gave me would have to be tempered accordingly.

As the project progressed, then, I found myself dealing with several different impulses: to ensure that ‘native curatorship’ was adhered to and represented; to meet the demands of a generic ‘tourist gaze’ (or what I imagined it to be); to deal with the somewhat fuzzy ethical demands of such ethnographic participation; and to draw on my own prior experience of museum work without it overshadowing everything else. The one thing to remain constant throughout was translation: between languages, ways of seeing, cultural backgrounds and museological concerns. In the rest of this paper, I shall assess some ethnographic and theoretical implications of this recent phase in the mini-museum’s history. These culminate in an important question that the project invoked but did not resolve: what next for the mini-museum?

**Going nowhere: fixity and mobility in the mini-museum**

To start, we needed to determine the precise form and configuration of the English text – a tricky task given that Sumuk Meroi and I started out with rather different conceptions of how things would work. The former’s intention was for me to write about every single object in the museum on a few pieces of paper which she could hand to visitors. Apart from the fact that everything she and Paka told me could have filled a small book, the problem with her idea was the lack of correlation between the written information and

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17 This has certainly been reflected in my interaction with mini-museum visitors thus far.
the objects’ physical locations. Visitors holding free-floating pieces of paper would thus end up constantly guessing what was what. A possible alternative – to create text labels for all the items, thereby ensuring complete congruence of text and object – was dismissed in light of the collection’s sheer size and variety. Moreover, as discussed below, Sumuk did not consider all the objects in the mini-museum significant enough to warrant individual labels. In the end I made the decision, with her son and grandson, to focus on a few specific clusters of objects, producing a single text panel for each.

In some ways Paka had made this easier for us by imposing a rough taxonomic order on some of the collection. The main categories were:

- Jars (especially tajaw)
- Gongs (as these already had labels, we decided to forgo this cluster)
- Necklaces / beads (stagi, stagan, sempun)
- Miscellaneous adat Gawai ritual objects (arranged next to a tree trunk which Paka had dressed as a human being), baskets, fabrics and other items which were used in both rituals and daily life in the past
- Spears
- Chinese trade porcelain
- A model of Benuk’s ancestral cave and longhouse which Paka had built

Other individual objects had also been stashed in these groups: the main jar cluster, for example, also featured a shield, an akal (an offering tray traditionally suspended from the ceiling of the longhouse attic, where padi was kept) and a miniature sikob (triangular fish-trap), among other things.

We eventually decided to place the text panels in five main areas:

1) Jar cluster
2) Spears, ritual and old objects on and next to the ‘tree trunk man’
3) Ritual and old objects next to 2)
4) Necklaces / beads cluster
5) Benuk’s ancestral cave model

Finally, I also suggested that a text panel be placed at or near the entrance of the mini-museum (see Appendix One), and asked the family members present to tell me how they would introduce the place to the average visitor. Our conversation, which is reproduced in Appendix Two, was very revealing of the family’s perceptions of and priorities for the mini-museum.

This textual format had important repercussions for the configuration of the mini-museum – although this became apparent only when I began work on my computer days later. The content of each panel was determined by the composition of its cluster; but to make things clearer, I added small arrows to further indicate the objects’ locations. This meant that once the text panels were in place, the objects had to stay where they were – that is, where Paka had left them before he died. But they had not always been there: in fact the entire layout of the museum had probably never stayed the same for more
than a few months at a time. As photographs of the space from the 1960s reveal, Paka was frequently adding to the collection and moving objects and furniture around. And while it was unlikely that Sumuk Meroi and her family would do much tinkering of that sort after his death, I felt momentarily guilty for imposing fixity on the mini-museum through my panels.

This was alleviated, however, when I realised that the objects’ mobility within the space was less crucial than ensuring the fixity of the collection as a whole. As far as Paka and his family were concerned, he could move his objects about his own house as much as he liked – as long as they stayed there. For them, it was the permanence and integrity of the mini-museum’s ‘hentik’ collection that truly mattered. I have heard a story, on several occasions, of how a branda, then head of the Sarawak Museum18, came to visit Otor many years ago. Upon seeing the mini-museum collection, he offered to take the lot back to Kuching with him for safekeeping and display. Thankfully, Paka said, his father had the wisdom not to agree, telling his visitor that the Sarawak Museum could not jaga (guard, care for) these precious objects as well as he could. If Otor hadn’t taken a stand back then, Paka concluded, the family would have lost their unique collection of objects. The fact that the mini-museum collection19 had stayed in the village – and more importantly, in Paka’s house – had become central to his conception of the mini-museum as a distinctive place with great historical value.

Yet I suspect that the family’s concern with keeping their ‘hentiks’ in one place also had deeper connotations. Throughout our conversations I was struck by how closely the mini-museum collection was linked with Paka’s (and earlier, his father’s) status as an important individual: a man who stood at the centre of a large network of friends extending far beyond the village. Their words reminded me in some ways the ‘centrist’ tendencies identified by historians and anthropologists as endemic to the region. Historical or ‘classical’ Southeast Asian polities dating back to the era of the so-called ‘Indic state’20 have been described as ‘mandala’s of rule (Wolters 1999:28), revolving around what Geertz famously called ‘exemplary centres’ (1993:331-37): rulers

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18 Whose name, as Paka remembered it, sounded very much like ‘Tom Harrisson’, Curator of the Sarawak Museum from 1947 to 1966. He developed a reputation within Sarawak for ‘borrowing’ indigenous groups’ heirlooms for the museum without ever returning them. Apparently some of these ended up leaving Sarawak as part of his ‘personal’ collection.

19 This did not apply to every single object in the museum collection: only those classified as ‘hentik’ or ‘asal’ (original, authentic) or important in some other way by the family. Guestbooks and personal observations suggest that the family were still amenable to selling newer items. This is discussed further in the next section.

20 As various writers (e.g. Anderson 1990, Errington 1989, Milner 1982, Wolters 1999) have noted, ‘state’ is a bit of a misnomer for such political systems, which shared few characteristics of the ‘classic’ Western (especially Weberian) model. In this paper I use it as a convenient term to refer to the political entities that preceded the establishment of colonial and postcolonial statehood in the region.
and their courts who both embodied and shaped the cosmological order. Each centre was magnetic in its potency – which was often believed to derive from a tremendous concentration of *semangat*\(^{21}\) - exerting a centripetal pull on outsiders while simultaneously dispersing its influence outwards toward the peripheries (Errington 1989:26, Geertz 1993:331-37, Wolters 1999:28-31). Some academics have identified similar principles of concentration and potency in their successors, Anderson’s analysis of the modern Indonesian regime being a famous case in point (1990). Moreover, recent anthropological works have recognized these principles among the peoples on the edges of the *mandala* – ‘hill-tribes’ or ‘mountain-people’ (including the Bidayuh) – who were once seen as distant, occasional vassals only subject to the pull of these centrist polities (e.g. Atkinson 1989, Tsing 1993, cf. Harris 2001).

While I not suggesting that Paka viewed himself as an ‘exemplary centre’ in such precise terms, I would argue that he – and his father before him – were seen as ‘potent persons’ in much the same vein. A key measure of a potent person / centre’s influence lay not territory, but in influence exerted over people (cf. Milner 1982). Significantly, material objects were also both indexes and boosters of such potency and status (Anderson 1990; Errington 1989). Perhaps it was no coincidence, then, that leaders in Land Dayak / Bidayuh communities in the past were often also *kaya*, or *rajar* (rich/wealthy): people whose authority and general *pandai*-ness were quite tangibly manifested in the objects surrounding them (Nuek 2002:94-96; Low 1988:288). More recently, Fiona Harris, who worked in the Bidayuh village of Kampung Gayu, noted the connection between status, potency and the possession of objects, especially prestige goods like *tajaw* (2001:85; cf. Harris 1990 and Kreps 2003:38 for a more general Bornean overview). Cause and effect were often collapsed in these equations: on the one hand, prestige goods bolstered these people’s potency, but on the other, they would not have acquired these goods if they were not already potent in some way. Or as Errington put it: ‘How can anyone know who should have succeeded except by seeing who in fact did?’ (1989:166).

Having secured possession of these objects, it was crucial to ensure that they stayed where they belonged. While Paka and his family may never have been aware of other Southeast Asian concepts of *semangat*, potency and power, I would suggest that they subscribed to very similar principles in emphasising the integrity\(^{22}\) and immobility of the mini-museum collection. This was brought home clearly when the family laid out his collection of business cards

\(^{21}\) Described by Errington as ‘an impersonal and creative agency [that] supports and animates the universe, and can be tapped by individuals in order to increase their own potency and effectiveness (1983:546; cf.1989:122), *semangat* appears to be a basic element across the socio-cultural systems of maritime Southeast Asia, and the closest regional equivalent to the more famous Polynesian *mana*.

\(^{22}\) See Errington 1983 for a useful discussion on the importance of integrity in the *pusat*, or centre.
under a glass-topped table in the mini-museum in order to show how many friends he had. More than visual proof of his status, they evoked images of things – and people – gravitating toward a centre. These were literally personal fragments from around the world which had transcended time and geographical boundaries to end up in one man’s collection. In another incident, Sumuk Meroi and I were reflecting on dwindling visitor numbers at the mini-museum, which was causing her some anxiety. I suggested that since the house was several minutes’ walk away from the longhouse (usually the first stop made by tourists), the family should erect a signboard to guide people in the right direction. Or perhaps they could approach the village committee for help in simply publicising the museum’s presence. Sumuk’s answer was an immediate and emphatic no. Various reasons were cited, but what really resounded was her matter-of-fact assertion that ‘Kalau nama besar, memang orang akan datang’ (Malay; lit: ‘If the name is big, naturally people will come’). In other words, Paka’s fame – his ‘big’ name – ought to be enough to draw visitors to the museum without her having to do anything about it (cf. Milner 1988). This nothing-doing ideal recurs in scholarly analyses of ‘exemplary centres’ elsewhere in the region (e.g. Anderson 1990; Geertz 1993; Errington 1989; Siegel 1986): for *semangat*, potency and status are, if anything, about stillness and composure, not constant activity. In that sense, it might have appeared unseemly, even counterproductive, for Sumuk Meroi to have taken any action (or be seen to be doing so) to draw more people to the mini-museum.

While not wanting to treat my informants as prototypes of historical and anthropological analysis, I believe it is worth evaluating the issues that came to the forefront during the text panel project within a broader cultural framework. My initial reservations about fixing the physical configuration of this previously fluid space had to be assessed with such notions of (im)mobility in mind. Viewed in that light, Paka’s constant tinkering within the mini-museum space was simply something that he did for the fun of it, rather than a crucial element of ‘native curatorship’. More than anything else, it was the permanence of the collection as a whole, within that house on the hill, that really mattered to Paka and his family.

The ‘asal-ness’ of an ‘hentik’

Having settled on the format of the text panels, we began selecting specific objects within each cluster to write about. Charles, one of Paka’s grandchildren, was particularly helpful in this endeavour: having helped at

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23 The relationship between the mini-museum and the rest of the village has often been an uneasy one, as I shall explain in a later section. For now it is sufficient to note that Paka once approached the local committee for help with marketing and maintaining the museum, but was turned down because of the widespread belief that he was already making a profit from running it. Since then the family have been reluctant to ask kampung leaders for anything else.
the mini-museum on most days, he was able to identify the objects that usually intrigued tourists. By this stage I was adequately familiar with the collection, but wanted Sumuk Meroi to expound on the relevant objects once more to ensure the accuracy of the information in my notes. More importantly, I hoped that this time she would phrase things with an imaginary branda tourist in mind, thereby making my job of translation more straightforward.

The first session threw me into a wretched panic. Quite unexpectedly, Sumuk started reeling off information I had not heard previously, some of which even appeared to contradict my earlier notes. The uses of the ayun (swing) for example, caused some confusion for a while. When Sumuk first showed it to me in October 2004, she said that it was used only to rock babies to sleep, as she had done with the very ayun on display many years ago. Remembering what I had heard elsewhere about the practice of berayun, in which female ritual practitioners (dayung beri) sat on the ayun and sang beri (ritual invocations) while swinging24 (Lindell 2000:133-34; Nuek 2002:238), I asked Sumuk whether it was also used in adat Gawai. She denied this, saying that it was only used to put babies to sleep. Yet four months later, while working on the text panel project, Sumuk seemed to have changed her story, telling me that it was really used in adat dayung (women’s rituals). She then described in great detail a coming-of-age adat Gawai ritual for pre-adolescent girls, in which women who were ritually pandai (i.e. dayung beri) would sing while swinging on the ayun: precisely what I had asked about and she denied earlier! Later, when we paused in front of the ‘tree trunk man’, Sumuk told me that the sabok (loincloth) it was ‘wearing’ was in fact Iban. I had mooted this possibility three months before, to be told emphatically that the sabok was ‘Bidayuh’. This nerve-fraying pattern continued for several days, as new information came to light, and old information was seemingly contradicted.

Of course there was the possibility that Sumuk Meroi had no idea what she was talking about: as she said in the beginning, she did not know half as much as her husband about adat Gawai or the mini-museum objects, having spent most of her life raising their children at home. But since Paka’s death, she had grown into the role of teacher and custodian of knowledge, which seemed to assure her that her information was more ‘betul’ (correct, accurate) than anyone else’s. It was therefore plausible that some of what she told me was simply her own off-the-cuff attempt to make sense of things. But the more I read my notes and analysed her expositional style, the more I suspected that these were contradictions only from the perspective of a quintessentially ‘Western’ museology, one built on an assumed foundation of objective knowledge. Central to this museology is the expectation of epistemological transparency – and by implication, comprehensiveness – in its displays (Ames 1992; Edwards 1995:184; Jenkins 1994; Kirshenblatt- Gimblett 1990). To see, in other words, ought to be to know – and to know

24 This is still practised in Benuk by the few remaining dayung beri at the end of major rituals.
fully. When I first began taking notes on the objects in the mini-museum, I worked unthinkingly on the assumption that Paka and his wife were telling me everything about them: all their possible uses, meanings and manifestations. And this sort of overview was precisely what I was trying to give readers of the text panels – hence my consternation over the difficulty of obtaining it in the first place.

Paka may have been more adept at this particular form of exposition, but Sumuk Meroi was navigating new territory. For her, it was not about providing a comprehensive (‘objective’) commentary, but sharing what seemed personally relevant and interesting at the time. Her information thus came in fragments: how she personally remembered using an object; the sorts of stories and memories it evoked; the way that particular object – not the category of objects it belonged to – featured in her life. So when she insisted that the ayun in the mini-museum was not used by dayung beri, it may have been because berayun had no place in her personal commentary on its history as a cradle for her children. Or perhaps that specific ayun – not the ayun as a generic entity – had never been used for the purpose. When Sumuk later told me of its role in adat Gawai rituals, she added that this was its ‘betul’ use in the past: the closest she had come to discussing the object as a type (as it often is in Euro-American museums) rather than as the family’s specific possession. In the end, due to lack of space and the fact that the plank in this particular ayun was the type used in berayun (children were rocked to sleep in a wider wooden ‘cradle’), I decided to only include information on berayun in the text. While this may seem to give tourists a raw deal, it is worth remembering that the information on the panel is no more complete than what they might have heard from Sumuk Meroi herself had she spoken any English.

The confusion over the Iban / Bidayuh status of the sabok raised a different but equally weighty issue: that of provenance and authenticity. Could it be that Sumuk and I were actually referring to different things when talking about how ‘Iban’ or ‘Bidayuh’ it was? My original question, which I believed she understood, concerned the origin of the sabok: where it was made, and by whom. For me it was a clear-cut question of provenance – a standard category in museum accession databases and object labels – and the colour and motifs on the fabric looked like it had been created by Iban weavers. But ‘provenance’ is an awkward concept in a place like Borneo, where ethnic boundaries are far more fluid than official Malaysian, Indonesian and Bruneian taxonomies suggest (cf. King 1989; Kreps 2003; Rousseau 1990). For Sumuk Meroi and most of my informants, authorship and ‘ethnic origin’ – a clear line of descent, so to speak – can never be definitive markers of what is and is not Bidayuh, given their long history of migration, trade and inter-group relations. Most of Sarawak’s Bidayuh, for example, are believed to share descent with Indonesian Kalimantan’s Dayak, who possess very similar linguistic and social traits. Most of the objects – mats, baskets, hats and so on – used in Bidayuh households or sold in Kuching as ‘Bidayuh’ souvenirs have
in fact been bought from across the border. When Sumuk Meroi insisted that the sabok was ‘Bidayuh’, then, she may not have been talking about its physical origin, but the way it had been incorporated into local rituals and dances over many years. In that sense it was no more or less ‘Bidayuh’ than wooden tools made in Kampung Benuk, baskets her grandmother had woven, the Chinese-made tajaw obtained two hundred years ago through trade networks, or the Brooke-era coins (dated 1900) sewn onto the hems of women’s ritual clothing and hats as jangling accessories.

These considerations coalesced in discussions over which objects to focus on and what to say about them. As we circled the museum, Sumuk Meroi talked about the importance of selecting only ‘hentiks’ (antiques) and asal (original, authentic) objects: no point wasting time on the other newer items, she said. But how asal was asal, and how ‘hentik’ did an antique have to be? As mentioned above, provenance – which in Euro-American museums is usually the main gauge of an object’s ‘authenticity’ – is neither sufficient nor even necessary to define an object (or practice) as ‘Bidayuh’, or more commonly, ‘Dayak’ or ‘asal’. For a start, it appeared that the object had to be old: old enough to have been around from at least when Sumuk Meroi was a young mother (which seemed to be her cut-off point for the time before the world became ‘modern’). For this reason, she elected to include a 70-year-old gebat in the text panels: this large, sturdy rattan basket had been brought into Benuk by a visitor from Sungkung, in what is now Kalimantan Barat. Sungkung is acknowledged by many Bidayuh, including some in Benuk, as their ancestral home (Aman 1989; Chang 2002: 22); but for Sumuk this seemed less relevant than the fact that it was old and therefore had pangkat (status). The precise reason it ended up in the museum, she said, was that it was ‘different’ (bekün) from the baskets you find in this village – and Otor, liking the look of it, persuaded the man to leave it here. But certain old objects simply did not warrant inclusion in Sumuk’s scheme of asal-ness: a bundle of ‘banana leaf’ notes – Japanese Occupation currency (1942-45) – and what appeared to be ancient Chinese coins were categorically left out.

19th century blue-and-white trade porcelain dishes from China, on the other hand, were defined as both ‘hentik’ and asal26, as was a made-in-Brunei sawat (sarong) which Paka had further embellished with little silver trinkets. These ‘foreign’ objects were included primarily because they had been incorporated into local rituals, dances or simply daily routines. Blue-and-white dishes, for example, are still used to hold beras sia (yellow uncooked rice) as well as various food offerings during adat Gawai rituals, while the sawat was worn by

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25 It is difficult to ascertain precise numbers from conversations with Sumuk, who usually provides only vague estimates of age and date. She has usually referred to this gebat as being ‘very old’, but on two occasions has mentioned that it was over 70 years old – so this is the information I included in the text.

26 These were in a cabinet which did not get its own text panel, so nothing was written about them in the end.
Paka for ritual dances. Interestingly, although these items had more or less become *asal* over time, their ethnic origin – or rather Sumuk’s understanding of their ethnic origin\(^{27}\) – was never forgotten. I have noticed a similar tendency in attitudes towards intermarriage, which is not uncommon in Benuk: although the incoming spouse is usually said to have ‘become Dayak / Bidayuh’ once they have learned the language and entered village circles, their ethnic origin (*Cina*, Iban, Dayak from Bau, etc.) is never forgotten by those around them. In that sense, it is possible for something or someone to be simultaneously ‘Dayak’ / ‘Bidayuh’ (through incorporation) and of Chinese, Malay, Bruneian, etc. ‘origin’. The application of the term *asal* to such objects, however, blurs these distinctions somewhat – and confounds the usual boundaries and markers of ‘authenticity’ in most Western museological schemes. Thankfully, Sumuk’s awareness of many objects’ ‘foreign’ origins meant that I could include such details in the text panels – thereby giving provenance-seeking visitors the information they wanted.

The fact that the (stereo)typical ‘Western’ model is no longer sufficient or meaningful in dealing with the museum’s myriad manifestations around the world has been widely acknowledged (e.g. Clifford 1988, 1997; Kaplan 1994; Kreps 2003; Simpson 1996). In this case, it was the common category of ‘provenance’ that came under question. Recent research (Bouquet 2000) has highlighted the fact that Euro-American museums’ taxonomical structures are based heavily, if not always explicitly, on the trope of biological kinship. In such schemes, tracing an object’s provenance is thus akin to tracing its genealogical line of descent, and finding a ‘family’ of like objects to place it with. As Kreps (2003) and now Paka’s mini-museum have shown, it is dangerous to assume the universal applicability of such provenance-based measures of ‘authenticity’. But the story did not end there. My conversations with Sumuk Meroi on *asal*-ness had also raised some rather unsettling, if intriguing, questions: not simply about objects and museums, but about the very idea of ‘culture’ and ‘Bidayuh-ness’. The fact that Sumuk could classify certain objects of ‘foreign’ origin as ‘asal’ or ‘Bidayuh’ was indicative of the impossibility of pinning Bidayuh-ness down to a single geographical, biological or even ethnic source. In other words, Bidayuh-ness itself does not conform to the biological kinship model mentioned above. From the beginning of my fieldwork I was reminded of how ritual knowledge had to be learned: even a Chinese person, I was told, could become the *Tua Gawai* (ritual head) if he learned enough. The reality of this was made clear during a visit to Kampung Tringgus, a Bidayuh village with a practising *adat Gawai* minority in the Bau district. We were told that one of the village’s two *Tua Gawai* had recently passed away, and that the surviving *Tua Gawai* had taken on a new ritual partner, an Indonesian. Granted, the new *Tua Gawai* was probably a

\(^{27}\) As far as Sumuk Meroi was concerned, for example, the Chinese-made items were essentially Bruneian items, because Brunei was where they came from. Brunei has historically been Borneo’s gateway to the Chinese trade, and Sumuk sometimes used them as interchangeable terms.
Dayak from next-door Kalimantan, and therefore enjoyed greater ‘cultural’ affinity with Tringgus’ inhabitants than the average Chinese – but the principle was much the same.

In order for something or someone to be Bidayuh, then, a clear unbroken genealogical or geographical link with Sarawak’s Bidayuh communities is not essential. What seems more relevant is that they are incorporated in some way into activities acknowledged as Bidayuh (or as one more often hears in the village, ‘Dayak’): Bidayuh is as Bidayuh does, I suppose. This is problematic from the point of view of official (national), museological and many academic discourses on culture and ethnicity, which often treat the former as the natural and inalienable property of the latter (Handler and Linnekin 1984:273; Harrison 1993; Kreps 2003; Leach 2003:124-25). An ethnic group is expected to possess a culture or cultural lineage that is uniquely and traceably its own. In the modern Bidayuh case, politicians and local writers have often unproblematically defined this as adat Gawai. Yet as the mini-museum project reveals, it is not always necessary for objects (or people) associated with adat Gawai to be geographically or indeed biologically ‘Bidayuh’, as might be assumed. If this is the case, then, could the reverse also be true? Did the fact that something was used in an adat Gawai ritual, or had been housed in a Bidayuh village for many years automatically make it ‘Bidayuh’?

Paka, Benuk, Bidayuh? The mini-museum’s status and future

When I first chose to do fieldwork in the village, I assumed that Paka’s mini-museum was in effect Kampung Benuk’s mini-museum, and therefore a Bidayuh mini-museum. This seemed fairly straightforward when using ethnicity as a starting point: I wanted to do research on the Bidayuh, and Kampung Benuk was a Bidayuh village. Such microcosmic attribution of ‘Bidayuh-ness’ has been echoed in the Malaysian media (e.g. Ridu 2004, Berita Harian 2005, Munan 1999), as well as the local tourist industry. Moreover, literature on the ‘non-Western’ or ‘indigenous’ museum – so influential in debunking notions of a monolithic Western museum model – has focused on its place in the wider community, depicting it as concerned primarily with the display and preservation of a shared ‘cultural heritage’ (e.g. Clifford 1997; Kreps 2003; Kaplan 1994; Karp et. al.1992; Simpson 1996). The danger, however, is in allowing this assumption of communality to become axiomatic in studies of all ‘indigenous museums’. While not completely isolated from the rest of the village, Paka’s mini-museum could not be defined as particularly community-oriented: indeed its intensely personal nature has sometimes put it in conflict with village and wider ethnic concerns.

During the seven-day mourning period at Paka’s house, I spent a lot of time speaking to guests who had come for the customary prayers, food and
gambling. With everyone expected to turn up to keep the bereaved family company, a death in the village is occasion for communal solidarity28 - and an excellent chance, I thought, to solicit people’s opinions on the mini-museum. However, much to my surprise, most had never visited the museum before; and while they were mildly interested in the objects, there was little sense that they identified with or were proud of the collection. Some informants told me that the collection was their ‘culture’ (Malay/Bidayuh: budaya), but I got the distinct impression that they did not feel that this was ‘their’ museum. Over several more months, the realisation that few people in Kampung Benuk had visited the mini-museum, and fewer still saw it as a local resource, deepened. A common reason cited for not visiting is the assumption that it displays only prosaic everyday objects which can be seen elsewhere in the village29. Secondly, some seem deterred by the fact that the mini-museum is private; part of somebody else’s house, which makes simply walking in to see objects and not people rather awkward. I suspect this would be alleviated somewhat were Paka’s house in the middle of Benuk, where kampung sociality can be observed at its liveliest. Its position on the hill, however, quite literally sets it apart from most others.

As is probably evident in this paper, Paka and his family did not exactly attempt to counter that impression. From the time I began fieldwork, I was constantly reminded of how unique the mini-museum was – and that this uniqueness stemmed from Paka’s own effort and status. While the relationship between Paka and the rest of the village could hardly be described as antagonistic, I got the distinct impression that he, like his pet project, stood apart from local village networks: or as Sumuk Meroi put it, he possessed a ‘big name’ outside the kampung but not inside it. This situation was exacerbated by certain local rumours that Paka was profiting from his mini-museum by selling off his heirlooms. Sumuk Meroi consistently denied them, saying that her husband would never get rid of his ‘hentiks’: the mini-museum was a labour of love, not a money-making venture. Such gossip, she claimed, was being spread by villagers resentful of Paka’s fame and success, but had the damaging effect of depriving the mini-museum of financial and marketing support from the kampung committee. Interestingly, however, she neglected to mention that Paka did sell items to tourists – just those not of ‘hentik’ or ‘asal’ character. Tourists from Holland once purchased a few old Dutch glass bottles in the 1980s, leaving a note of thanks in the guestbook.

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28 Interestingly, attendance at such events also seems to be a marker of how much a part of the village you are: the fact that I have been to nearly every single wake/funeral since my arrival (there were eight in the first four months – an unusually large number) is often cited with approval by my informants as proof of how ‘Dayak’ I have become: ‘She speaks Dayak, eats Dayak, and when people die she visits their houses.’

29 This is only partially true: some of the household tools and implements in the museum, such as parangs (working blades) and baskets are still widely used today, and Chinese trade ceramics are sometimes displayed in living rooms. Many of the adat Gawai objects inherited from Otor, however, are rarities; and I have only ever seen similar items in the home of the current Tua Gawai.
and early in 2005 Sumuk Meroi herself sold several new decorative drums to a group of visiting students. There is thus truth in both Sumuk’s words (he did not sell his core collection) and village rumours; and the upshot of such mutual suspicion has been a widening gap between museum and village. The only thing both sides agree upon is the highly personal nature of the collection.

This is not an earth-shattering revelation considering the history of the mini-museum, which, like Otor and his family, stood at the centre of Benuk’s nascent years as a tourist attraction. Guestbook entries from the 1960s indicate that visitors saw the village as a unique specimen – often referring to it as ‘your (Otor’s) village’ – rather than a prototypical ‘Land Dayak’ or ‘Bidayuh’ village. As time passed and post-independence ethnic categories grew increasingly salient, personal charisma and networks gave way to a more generic ethnic-themed tourism, in which visitors turned up not to see a specific person, but a ‘representative’ Bidayuh village. In the 1990s, tourism officially became a village concern with the setting up of a local subcommittee to deal with its development. A tourist information centre was established, small entrance fees were levied, and some collaboration with the municipal council and others began. Paka’s mini-museum has remained distanced from these developments; and although his family and the kampung committee each acknowledge the other’s importance, no concrete steps towards cooperation have yet been taken.

Relations between the mini-museum and the village raise a second important question: where does the museum fit into the wider ethnic scheme? While gathering data from Sumuk Meroi on the objects in the collection, it had never occurred to me to take note of whether she spoke of them as ‘Bidayuh’. I had certainly noticed that she most frequently described them as ‘hentik’s’ or ‘asal’ items. Like everyone else, Sumuk was of course aware that these ‘Dayak’ artefacts were now also known as ‘Bidayuh’, and in the right circumstances did describe them as such. But for the most part, ethnic and cultural affiliation did not seem especially relevant to Sumuk’s conception of the mini-museum collection: what mattered more were the historical, functional and personal resonances it held for her and her family. When it finally came to composing the English text panels and realigning some of the information to appeal to (what I perceived as) the ‘tourist gaze’, then, I faced another dilemma. How freely should I use the term ‘Bidayuh’, given the concerns mentioned above? Tourists arriving at the mini-museum would, like I did in the beginning, probably expect some sort of ethnic mooring; a clear sense of whose culture they were looking at (I have met visitors who thought they were in an Iban village because it was the only ‘native’ group they had heard of). Calling the village and its history, practices and objects ‘Bidayuh’ was also technically correct from the family’s point of view, even if they did not necessarily see

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30 Again, this change is reflected in both guestbook entries and tourist brochures and magazine articles which Paka kept over the years.
'Bidayuh-ness' (or indeed 'Benuk-ness') as the museum’s chief defining feature. In the end I settled on an uneasy compromise, using the term sparingly and trying not to overplay its significance to the character of the museum, which continues to be perceived as the private legacy of one man.

By this stage, I had realised that the mini-museum was a far more complicated beast than anyone could imagine. While the text panel project proved an extraordinarily valuable ethnographic exercise, the final products – the laminated sheets that now dot the room – could only be said to mask a great deal of complexity and confusion. Chief among all this is the mini-museum’s ambiguous status as both a highly personal project and a community and ethnic resource, depending on who one speaks to. Ambivalence lies at the heart of the mini-museum experience: there is no one ‘truth’ to it, for it is as much a product of external circumstance as the family’s history and efforts. The question is whether it can remain suspended indefinitely in this ambiguous state. Tourism discourse in Sarawak is almost relentlessly ethnic in scope and content; and it is quite likely that embracing ‘Bidayuh-ness’ will be the way forward for Benuk’s tourist industry. The continued existence of Paka’s mini-museum depends heavily on donations from visitors, many of whom will have arrived in Benuk in search of ‘the Bidayuh culture’. Should it be forthcoming, financial support from the kampung committee – including revenue from visitor entrance fees – would implicate the mini-museum even further in the local tourist industry. Finally, it is also possible that the increasing prevalence of ‘Bidayuh’ as an endonym among the younger generation will turn the mini-museum into a ‘Bidayuh museum’ in their eyes. As Paka’s memory fades over the years, might the collection’s strongly personal overtones also fade in his descendants’ memories? While one can only speculate for the moment, I suspect that this ambiguity will eventually be resolved in favour of the ‘communal’ potential of the mini-museum, thereby opening another chapter in its history.

Conclusion

It is tempting to situate this case study within a framework that pits the individual against the community; or worse, Western-style individualism against indigenous communality, which is all too easily assumed to be the hallmark of ‘non-Western’ societies. Paka was, after all, a little more ‘westernised’ than most by virtue of his constant interaction in the past with branda visitors – and it was they who gave the museum its name. But if, as suggested earlier, his emphasis on maintaining the integrity and permanence of his ‘hentik’ collection in a single location reflected centrist tendencies commonly found in Southeast Asia, then this was ‘individualism’ and a museum of a different kind. More importantly, he never saw the personal nature of the mini-museum as incommensurate with its potential as a

31 See Geddes 1957:20-21, 29-33, who also described a particular kind of ‘individualism’ among the Land Dayaks of Mentu Tapah; cf. Harris 2001:81-85.
'Bidayuh’ resource, although he and his family were aware of the tensions that might sometimes arise. It is this almost Janus-like combination that makes Paka’s mini-museum such an intriguing place – and its future so ambiguous.

The question that faces academic observers (and indeed participants) is how a place like this fits into the existing literature. As mentioned earlier, studies of the ‘indigenous museum’ tend to focus overwhelmingly on its place in the community – often as analytical rejoinders to earlier tendencies to view museums as isolated institutions (cf. Karp et. al. 1992). But while these works constitute significant contributions to the study of ‘non-Western’ museums (or museum-like entities), their preponderance in this nascent field may well have erected as many barriers as they have brought down. By instinctively associating such museums with communality – thinking of them as community-oriented institutions – it is all too easy to get trapped within certain cultural and analytical parameters which may not be appropriate for every situation. While it is unquestionably important to aspire towards ‘liberating our thinking from Eurocentric notions of what constitutes the museum and museological behaviour’ (Kreps 2003: x), entities like Paka’s mini-museum sometimes demand that we push the boundaries even further. Often it is not simply about identifying what constitutes a ‘museology’, but about dissecting seemingly straightforward notions like ‘culture’, ‘cultural heritage’, ‘ethnicity’, ‘object’, and ‘authenticity’. As I hope this paper has shown, it is only through such critical scrutiny that the very real issues facing places like Paka’s mini-museum can be adequately dealt with.
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APPENDIX ONE: Text panels produced for the mini-museum, c. March 2005

↑ AKAL
Hung in the longhouse attic, where newly-harvested padi (unhusked rice) was stored. Small amounts of tubi (cooked rice), bai (betel nut), ba’id (sireh leaf) and tobacco were placed on the akal as offerings to the semangat (spirit) of the padi, to ensure that it did not run away. The akal also protected the padi from rats, evil spirits and other dangers.

Above the akal: miniature SIKOB (triangular fish trap)
: SEMBANG, bamboo water holder used in boys’ rituals

NENGIN (shield) →
Like most Bidayuh shields, the penguin is shaped like a leaf. It is made of tree bark and rattan, and has a ‘face’ and ‘body’.

EARTHENWARE JARS, C. 19TH CENTURY ↓
These antique Chinese jars came to Sarawak via Brunei over 100 years ago through barter trade. They were used to store various types of food and treasured as heirlooms.
TAJAW (dragon jars): stored padi (unhusked rice)
TEMPAYAN: stored beras (husked rice) and durian

↑ SPEARS
(from top): BRUS; SERAPANG; RENJU; BRUS; TAPUN

Some items worn and used in the past
(clockwise from the top of the ‘human’ tree trunk)
GUBAK: hat worn at major Gawai rituals
MANIT: bead necklace worn by women
JUWAH: basket for carrying jungle and farm produce and newly harvested padi
SABIT and SISOT JAMANG: silver belts
SABOK: Iban sarong worn in brejang (eagle dance)
TEMBUAK BAI BA’ID: basket for holding betel nut, sireh leaf and other personal items
PARANG: blade used in rituals, for manual work and for protection when travelling.

GRUNUNG: a bundle of glass bottles, animal teeth and brass bells used in many Gawai rituals. Shaken over a person to summon their semangat (spirit/soul) or to stop it wandering to faraway places. The sound would also keep bad spirits away.

BARK CLOTH: the earliest form of Bidayuh clothing, worn around the waist.
SAWAT: sarong worn by men for dancing during Gawai rituals at the Panggah (meeting and ritual place).
Miscellaneous items used in adat Gawai rituals

AYUN (swing)
Used in certain Gawai rituals. A dayung beris (woman skilled in Gawai knowledge) would sing songs while swinging (berayun) on it.

YAG and BUSOK (basket)
Used in rituals for a two month-old child. The busok was filled with tubi (cooked rice). At the end of the pantang (ritual prohibition) period, the yag was waved over the child’s head, while a list of foods that the child was now allowed to eat was recited.

RAGA SAWAN (wedding basket)
A rattan basket decorated with strips of coloured cloth. The new groom would put his belongings in this basket and carry it to his bride’s house. Many people would send him off, making music and noise along the way. He would stay one day and one night in the house, where there was feasting, music, dancing and merry-making throughout.

GEBAT
A large, sturdy rattan basket with a skin lid, used to carry personal belongings when travelling. This gebat, which is over 70 years old, belonged to a man from Sungkung (Kalimantan) who married a local woman. Such baskets are not found in this area. The then-Tua Gawai, Otor anak Sunjam, took a liking to the basket and persuaded him to leave it here.
GUBAK
A bead hat worn by old men and women who had attained a high level of ritual knowledge, and were skilled at singing Gawai songs. They also taught others about adat Gawai and Gawai rituals. The hat revealed their status.

Gawai Necklaces
Worn by men and women during adat Gawai rituals, or when important people came to visit the village.

STAGAN: round necklace worn by men well-versed in adat Gawai and its rituals; usually made of shells, manit (beads), grunung (small brass bells) and leopard’s teeth.

STAGI: oval necklace worn by women and girls, made of manit (beads) and coiled wire.

SEMBUN: slung over one shoulder. Made of manit (beads), grunung (small brass bells) and animal teeth.
WOMEN’S HATS

SEPIYA: a basic hat worn by women and girls during Gawai rituals. Look for the old coins, issued by the Brooke Raj in 1900, sewn into the hem of one of the flaps. They could be heard when the wearer was dancing.

TUKUA: conical red hat made of rattan, beads and shells, worn over the sepiya. Given by old people to young girls when they had ‘entered’ adat Gawai.

MODEL OF KAMPUNG BENUK’S ANCESTRAL CAVE

Over two hundred years ago, the ancestors of today’s villagers lived in a cave far away in the surrounding mountains. At the time, they did not live in houses. Life in the cave was difficult. They were often attacked by enemies, and did not have a good source of water.

After the arrival of Rajah Brooke (1841-1946), the group moved from the cave to the present site at the foot of the mountain near the river. They started planting padi and created a more permanent settlement here. They built a longhouse and a panggah (meeting and ritual building), the models of which are shown here. They hung the heads of their enemies in the panggah, making offerings and saying prayers to them every four and eight years. This ensured the safety of the village. Today, ten skulls can still be seen in the panggah.
Introductory text panel at the entrance to the mini-museum

This mini-museum was the work of the late Paka anak Otor (d. October 2004), a descendant of the village’s first Ketua Gawai (ritual chief).

His family moved here from the longhouse in 1954. They brought with them all their belongings, including antiques inherited from their ancestors. In the past, these items were not bought with money, but obtained by trading rice, sireh leaf and other local products.

Paka began collecting and displaying old objects as a hobby in the early 1960s. His collection consisted of his family’s possessions as well as items he bought from other people. He wanted to ensure that his children and grandchildren could look at their history, culture and traditions in the future.

Later, visitors to the village became interested in the collection, and named it a ‘mini-museum’. The Sarawak Museum also encouraged Paka’s efforts to ensure that these antiques were never lost. Before the family converted to Christianity, certain items were taken off display whenever they were needed in adat Gawai (traditional religious practices) rituals.

Today Bidayuhs from far away come to visit the mini-museum, because it is the only place where you can find such a collection of adat Gawai objects and other antiques.

The family hopes that the mini-museum will persist and even expand in years to come. They also hope that future generations of Bidayuhs, Sarawakians and tourists will continue to visit this unique place.

The contents of this and other text panels were translated (as directly as possible) from Bidayuh and Malay by Liana Chua
APPENDIX TWO

Conversation on what information to include in the introductory text panel.
26 January 2005, with Sumuk Meroi (SM), her M, Miko anak Paka (M) and grandson, Charles anak Nisong (C).

This took place in a mixture of Bidayuh and Malay; and I (LC) began by asking them to say what they wanted to tell tourists about the place.

SM: Long ago, Babai’s (Paka’s) mother and father lived in this place (Kampung Benuk). Before they moved here (the present house) they lived down there in the longhouse. When they built this house they brought all their belongings and antiques with them.

M: This was in 1954.

SM: All these items were kept / stored here by Babai... they’re all being looked after here now.

LC: When did he create the mini-museum?

M: In the 1960s.

LC: Why?

SM: To store his old objects and belongings. To let his children and grandchildren look at them. Later, when tourists came, they became interested in the collection. They gave it the name ‘museum’.

M: It was like a ‘hobby’ to him.

SM: The people from the museum in the city (the Sarawak Museum in Kuching) also came to visit, and encouraged Babai. They told him not to lose these things as they were important. Now people from far, far away come to see the museum because it’s only here that you can look at such old items. Old people in the past did not buy these – they got them in exchange for padi, beras, sireh and other things.

LC: Did Babai add to the collection he inherited?

SM: When people in the village wanted to get rid of their belongings Babai would sometimes buy or take them. He would not sell his belongings although many Chinese came wanting to buy them, because he wanted to ensure his children and grandchildren could see them.

LC: When they were practising adat Gawai, did they use the objects on display?

SM: Yes – they’d just take them off display. When visitors wanted to try the objects on they could.

LC: What do you hope will happen after this?

SM: That the museum will still be here. The same.

M: That it will last forever, and continue to grow if future generations (i.e. Paka’s descendants) are interested in adding to it. That it will remain a place for his descendants, Dayaks and others to visit.

SM: Look at all this: it’s all good, everything here is ‘hentik’. The museum in the city doesn’t have these things – they only buy new objects.

(Pause, suggesting the end of the conversation)

LC: So this panel will be there to let people know about the history of the museum.

M: Yes, definitely. And also history (sejarah) of the Bidayuh.

LC: And culture (budaya)?

M: Yes, culture. Bidayuh traditions and customs (tradisi, adat Bidayuh).

SM: Bidayuh objects (barang-barang Bidayuh).

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32 Lit. ‘grandfather’.
33 On this occasion, Tom Harrison was not mentioned: she may thus have been referring to another visit made by Sarawak Museum staff.