

"Exploring History Through Photos: A Case Study of the Kelabit People in Sarawak, Borneo"

Alan Zechariah Gian, Poline Bala

Institute of Borneo Studies, University Malaysia Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how photo-elicitation, as a methodological tool, can be used to gather ethnographic information by connecting the past with the present. It aims to discuss how photographs evoke feelings of melancholy or nostalgia in individuals, influencing their perceptions of their surroundings, identities, shared history, and memories in today's world. This experiential study focuses on the Kelabit community, whose traditional homeland is the Kelabit Highlands in northeastern Sarawak. The primary focus is on photographs taken in Bario in the past. The primary finding is that, as time progresses, so do the memories of the Kelabit people (Lun Kelabit). The study revealed that photographs play a crucial role in shaping collective mediated memories. This is evident through the creation of post memory (Hirsch, 2008), where a younger generation relies on photographs to adopt the memories of previous generations as their own.

Keywords: visual ethnographic methodology, collective past, Kelabit people and globalization, post memory generation, photo-elicitation

INTRODUCTION

Under the process of globalization, which means the general dissemination of merchandise, technologies, news, political influence, and religious ideas across political and cultural boundaries, nations, empires, tribes, and states cohere in some way or other through political, economic, or cultural relations. This includes integrating various, previously isolated zones into one system of interconnections and interdependencies (Reiser & Davies, 1944; Hirst & Thompson, 1996; Held et. al, 1996). A concern that came out of this is its impact on collective memory, which refers to group representations of the past that inform action in the present (Stepnisky, 2012). In the context of globalization, the situation was aptly described by Mizztal (2010, p.24) as “problems of remembering in the global age whether remembering or forgetting is essential to ensure the condition of the global citizenship, to discover ways to balance the need for identity and the need to accept the difference in a global age.”

“One [of] or two places on the map of Borneo and, more widely, on the map of the world – where you can get farther away from a known place ..., from what most people call ‘the world’. There are fewer places where you (or I) are likely to be able to feel more remote, more ‘cut off’ from the great outside...” (Harrison, 1959). However, the remotest and smallest community of the Kelabit Highlands could not escape the clutches of globalization. This has led to adaptation to their new surroundings or forsaking certain aspects of their traditional lifestyle as they encounter ideas, peoples, objects and institutions that originated beyond the Highlands (Bala 2008, 2010). To his surprise, Amster noted 39 years after Harrison’s (*ibid*), that the Kelabits were not interested in their history and most of the people he had interviewed “had very little knowledge of their collective past” (Amster, 1998:7). Robert Lian, a Kelabit himself once wrote that the Kelabit have made a break with the past (Lian-Saging 1976/1977, 211, cf Mashman 2020, 204)

By the time this study was carried out in 2019, a situation has emerged: about whether anyone at all knew or still remembers their past and histories, and whether their knowledge of the past can be recollected or triggered through external stimuli. To explore this, the study turns to photographs as a medium to mediate these recollections. This was by showing the respondents a few samples of photographs from the past. We attempted

to determine in what ways photographs could trigger memories of the past and mediate a construction of a communal memory amongst members of the small community especially the ‘generation of post-memory’ (Hirsch, 2008). The paper begins with background context, followed by a brief overview of related literature. The next section will be a description of the methodology employed for this study, followed by discussion of the findings. The final section will be the conclusion.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

The Kelabit is one of the small ethnic groups that belongs to the Apo Duat language group in Sarawak with an estimation of 5000 people worldwide. The main settlement is located northeast of Sarawak and centers around on Bario, located just at the border of Kalimantan, Indonesia that lies between the Tama Abu Range and the Apo Duat Range. Bario is approximately 3000 feet above sea level and is mostly accessible by air due to the highlands being surrounded by mountains and deep rainforest. Fourteen (14) villages are located within the Kelabit Highland plateau while four other villages are located downstream along the Baram River. These upstream villages are Pa’ Lungan, Pa’ Ukat, Pa’ Umur, Long Dano, Pa’ Dalih, Ramudu, Pa’ Ramapuh, Pa’ Derung, Bued Main Beruh, Padang Pasir, Kampung Baru, Arur Layun, Arur Dalan and Bario Asal.

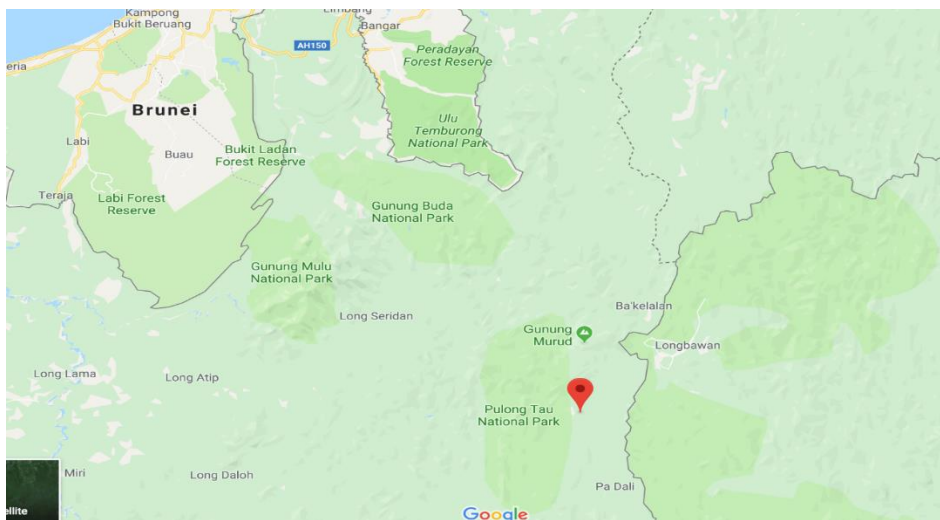


Figure 1: Location of Bario marked in red (Source:Google Maps)

The downstream villages are Long Peluan, Long Napir, Long Seridan and Long Lellang. The area is also home to the Lun Bawang and Penans. Only in the last 15 years that logging roads were built that lead towards the Kelabit Highlands. In the past most Kelabit settlements were longhouse-based and socially organized as close-knit community. They were predominantly farmers, hunters and were once headhunters. They cultivate wet rice which is their primary agricultural produce. As the Kelabit Highlands is geographically located high in the mountainous region of 1000 meters above sea level, the region has an average cool tropical climate of 19 – 22 degrees Celsius all year round that gives the rice a name for itself for its excellent sweet and slightly sticky texture (Slow Food Foundation, n.d).

Besides cultivating rice, the Kelabits also produce their own salt. Known either as Kelabit Salt or Bario Salt, it is obtained by boiling and evaporating brined underground water from saltwater springs inside a big cooking pot. The salt that is produced by the Kelabits were often used for trading between the people downstream of the Baram River. As the salt naturally has a high content of iodine in it, it certainly prevented the Kelabits from contracting goiter (swelling in the neck due to iodine deficiency) in the community as compared to those group of people living in the middle of the Baram river as their food contains very low iodine and also compared to those living near the lower Baram that is closer to the sea (Mattu, 2015).

It is important to note that the term ‘Kelabit’ did not originate from the Kelabits themselves. It originated from Charles Hose, the Resident of the Baram Division where he heard numerous reports of people coming down to Marudi to pay their taxes and to trade from 1890’s onwards [reference]. These people then would say that they had come from Pa’ Labid’ (a former settlement outside of the Kelabit Highlands, where ‘Pa’ refers to a ‘river’

where the place stood and 'Labid' refers to the name of the place) and would also have been said by the Kayan's and Kenyah's that they were from Pa' Labid' (Janowski, 1991).

Hose then would misunderstand that Pa' Labid' would be 'Kelabit' (Harrison, 1958) or 'Kalabit' and would then be applied as a term for the whole group of community living around the Kelabit Highland and including those that lived near the Pa' Labid River which has now been abandoned. In late 1980's Janowski's informants have mentioned that the term 'Kelabit' had been long used by the Kayan and Kenyah to refer to the people now known as 'Kelabit'. The Kelabits however are similarly related culturally and linguistically to the people along the Apo Duat range especially with those over the Kalimantan border. It seems that there are other communities that lives in the Apo Duat range that shares the same language group where Hudson (1977) has proposed a group naming for these people that lives among the Apo Duat range that borders the Sarawak and Kalimantan border.



Fig. 2: Kelabit Elders

The Kelabit and the Cosmopolitan Turn

Prior to early contact in the 1920s, the Kelabit like many other tribal communities on the island of Borneo practiced headhunting. However, the arrival of Christianity has changed this for the Kelabit. An ethnohistorical analysis indicates that Christianity entered through the works of different missionaries. The first were those from the Borneo Evangelical Mission in 1939 led by Frank Davidson and joined by C. Hudson Southwell that ushered in Christianity to one of main settlements then known as Pa' Terap which is located upriver of the present village of Pa Lungan but on the right side of the Debpur River. Its arrival has brought in a wave of change to the people (Law, 2016). One of the first noticeable transformation was when the headman, Tama Bulan decided to give up "drinking" *burak* and spirit worship and encouraged the others to join him. This was a momentous decision as the Kelabits and their ancestors were fervent animists where they appeased spirits and observed bad and good omens. Some of these taboos and bad omens required them to either abandon their crops (which could be on the verge of being ripe), the dissolution of one's marriage and to the extreme of to abandon one's newborn infants.

Over the period of their lives, much of them has suffered long from an oppressive animistic lifestyle and once they have decided to embrace Christianity, it has liberated them as they embraced the change en masse (Bulan, 2004). However, as years goes on, many Kelabits would forsake Christianity, only to have fallen back to their old lifestyle again. In 1973, when a mass conversion to Christianity took place in the Kelabit Highlands because of a spiritual transformation commonly known now as the 'Bario Revival.' The most significant part of the event was that the Kelabit young and old would repent of their sins and devoted themselves to the God of the Bible. This has led to major social, economic and political transformation amongst the Kelabit

Most Kelabits that witnessed or have experienced the 1973 Bario Revival would mention that this significant event has since affected each one of their lives as they would remember it for the rest of their life be it young or

old. As of currently, approximately 90% of the Kelabits are Christian and thus their three main celebrations are Good Friday, Easter Sunday, and Christmas. These are celebrated in accord with other Christians in different parts of the world. In other words, the Kelabit are now very much part of the global community.

Besides the coming of Christianity, another event which affected the Kelabit social world was the Second World War. It was during this period that Tom Harrisson who was a part of the Z Special Unit (also known as Z Force) along with 7 British and Australian men encountered the Kelabits as they were parachuted into the Kelabit Highlands in 1945. The Z Special Unit main objective was to use the natives of Borneo against the Japanese (reference). This meant that the Kelabits did contribute to the effort in sabotaging the Japanese operations in Sarawak where they were trained as guerilla troops and Bario served as one of the starting points of this operation.

In the last three decades, the Kelabits in Bario have received an increasingly steady influx of tourists from both locally and internationally. This steady growth of tourists has introduced them to the prospect of venturing into tourism as part of their main economy. This has sparked multiple tourism avenues such as ecotourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism and research tourism. Tourism certainly was not initially intended when the first airstrip was built in 1953 for missionary purposes by the Borneo Evangelical Mission near a headman's house. Focusing on the emphasis on 'made' as the first airstrip was made by clearing some bushes and field for the make-shift airstrip, unlike the current airport that was built out of concrete in 1996.



Fig. 3: Kelabit students

At the same time, as noted by scholars on Kelabit history and culture (Lian-Saging, 1976/1977, Janowski, 1991, Amster, 1998, Bala, 2000) the Kelabit like many other communities in Sarawak have experienced high rate of rural-urban migration as in search of higher education and new job opportunities. Many have inter-married with non-Kelabit spouses, and currently living in different cities and towns in Malaysia – Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Kota Bahru, Kuching, Miri, Bintulu including overseas in London, Rotterdam, etc. Unlike their parents and grandparents who still live in the Kelabit Highlands, many are now doctors, teachers, engineers, managers, company owners, government officials, entrepreneurs, and corporate leaders. They have embraced new lifestyles and ways of life. One of the central arguments raised in recent years in the field of social science maintains that more attention should be shifted to the 'cosmopolitan turn' (Beck, 2003; Beck and Sznaider, 2006), the process that involves more openness to the transnational arena and the sensitivity to 'universal values' that become part of national societies.

It was through their engagement with peoples, objects, and ideas from outside that the Kelabit was exposed to the idea of photography and "photographs", and as objects of desire were adopted into their social world. A walk along the common gallery in the back of the longhouse (for instance the Bario Longhouse) provides evidence of this. Hanging on the wall of each family are photographs displayed for public viewing. Often, photographs of the old days (*gaber ngilad*) are also on display. They become important windows into a world that has changed so much yet continuities still prevail.



Fig. 4: Borneo Evangelical Mission (BEM) service at the main Bario longhouse

LITERATURE REVIEW: PHOTOGRAPHY IN VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Photography, according to Mifflin (2012) came into acceptance in anthropology when early anthropologists were concerned with the uncertainty of verbal testimony and information. He suggested that this was caused by the suspicion on verbal data and personal observation that were not subjective but more susceptible to personal impression. Consequentially some early anthropologists became suspicious of the transparency of native informants. It was within this context that photography became important as a fixed record of incontrovertible fact and as a crucial mediator in anthropological research to transmit reliable data (*Ibid*).

Collier (1957) stated that photography has long been established as a tool in scientific research and is widely used by anthropologists solely to support their findings by illustrations. Collier and Collier (1986) stated that “early ethnographers were enthusiastic photographers” as the camera was used to gather descriptive details and data for the material inventory phase of anthropology. They stated that most anthropologist agree that “photographic records are good” but to some researcher would say that they are “too good, with more information that we can refine”. Collier believes that this may be the reason there is little research in anthropology that has been based on photographic data (Collier J. and Collier M., 1986; pg 10).

Later Schrer (1990) wrote that historical photographs can be used as anthropological documents. This he suggests as anthropologists look through photograph, they can extract ethnological data. For instance, from historical photographs, one can study the academic perspective of the photographer, one also can study the subject influence over the image as well as the study of the subjects themselves and the audience construction of the image. Schrer (*Ibid*) also suggests that a photograph can seduce, amuse, or distract the readers correlating it to the Chinese proverb, “A picture is worth a thousand words.”

A photograph can open a window to the past through nostalgia or recalling a memory. Bay and Lowderbaugh (1979) wrote that photographs can reveal details of everyday life, the clothing that people wear, the tools that they use at work and the furnishing that they put at home just by looking at photographs. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that although the camera does not lie, it does not tell the whole truth. This is because a photographer could set the scene according to his or her preferences before capturing the photo. Although photograph, captures a moment that exists briefly in the way the photographer wished to capture it (based on the equipment that he or she has on him), still a successful photo is one that captures part of one’s everyday life (Bay and Lowderbaugh, 1979).

Favro (1992) suggests that, not only that photograph can reveal the archaeological stone of a person; it could also capture the surrounding environment. Photographs reveal a more realistic view of a subject as compared to past historians that only rely on drawing and painting records, that may be distorted or sometimes imposed with

artificial coloring, embellishment and altered scale based on the understanding and perception of the historians.

Echoing Favro, Lizardi (2016) suggest that looking back into the past invokes nostalgia amongst people. even though perhaps may not always explicitly discussing nostalgia, it advocates a healthy engagement with the past in a way where it informs the present but does not necessarily linger. This is true when we engage the past, it is best to learn from history than to live in it, although some may try to recreate the past by remaking the same scene in a movie or a photograph just to convert longing for bygone eras into lessons for the present. Lizardi work was significant as he combines the work of photographers through the merging of both the past and present photo of a particular location into one photo.

“... images that look into the past does not cause a person to forget but in fact bring evidence of the past in direct confrontation with the present, and ensure a view of the past that encourages learning through comparison” (Lizardi, 2016; pg 138)

He argues that through these images, one can learn from the past through photographs by looking directly at the loss, learning from it, and moving on (Lizardi, 2016; pg. 139). (See also Gyori. Z.) Meanwhile Schwartz (1989; pg. 120) argues that “the tendency to treat photographs as objective evidence ignores the convention-bound processes of both image making and interpretation.” He further asserts that to use photographs, as a methodology tool in social science is to ground the method in an interactive context where photographs acquire meaning to it, which is shaped by social context, cultural conventions, and group norms especially for the purpose of photo-elicitation. Schwartz concluded that “it is not the photographs themselves which inform, but rather the analysis of them” in which using photography as the medium for communication (Schwartz, 1989; pg. 152).

As early as 50’s Collier (1957; pg 856) has already experimented with photo-interviewing his subjects and informants to extract and analyse the content of the photographs. Because of that he was able to prove his initial hypothesis where the materials that were obtained with photographs was precise as compared to his controlled verbal-only interviews with his subjects. Collier (op-cit; pg 857) again mentioned that those photographs dictated the content of the interview and the responsiveness of the informants more effectively than the verbal-only interviews. Collier (1957) also reversed the trend of the interviews and produced more material. He interpreted the situation as an indication that “photographs can be stimulating and can help to overcome the fatigue and repetition often encountered in verbal interviews” and safe to assume that photographs were an aid in opening the field of dialogue in gathering precise information on identification of geography and personality as compared to the controlled interviews where he sometimes had to “press against resistance and apathy” (Ibid)

Historical photographs were mostly used during photo-elicitation interviews which focus on oral history. At times, some interviewees may feel a strong connection to the photographs as some may have gone through the events or period that took place when the image was taken, thus narrating the experiences they encountered as a part of history, therefore giving the researcher an account through the interviewee's verbal narratives (Parker, 2009).

Guided by observations made by Collier (1957), Parker (2009) and Lizardi (2016), this experiential study amongst the Kelabit sets out to determine in what ways photographs can play significant roles in forming collective mediated recollections. That is in what ways photographs can mediate their past with their contemporary situation being dispersed, widespread, and global. The aim is to use photographs to extract anthropological data with regards to how the Kelabit themselves view their collective past and history in the contemporary world as noted by Stepnisky (2012) collective memory is a social construction that embodies a group's identity.

METHODOLOGY

The research processes draw on empirical data and ethnographic evidence as a springboard to examine how photographs affect collective memory patterns. Stepputat et al. (2015, pp.6) notes ethnography is “the science of contextualization.” By contextualizing photographs and observations made during the fieldwork they clarify and contribute as lens through which to uncover significant role played by photographs in forming the qualities of collective mediated recollections amongst the Kelabit

We began to collect photographic materials for this research back in 2019 where we had acquired several old photos from various sources. The number of photographs that we have searched on regarding the Kelabits were adequate and diverse although surprisingly in good condition, collecting the photographs proved to be a challenge as they were scattered from multiple sources. We are thankful that we have managed to procure some digitally scanned photographs from public and private collections. We have selected up to 60 digital pieces of photographs from various sources that include some taken by previous early researchers such as the Earl of Cranbrook's, Nootboom's and Pringles. We have also obtained from the Sarawak Museum that was supplied to us through an informant. Dr Datin Valerie Mashman has shared with us some of her private collections of photographs of the Kelabit. These printed photos were scanned using a printer scanner and digitized as part of our collection. Amongst the collection of photographs that we had looked through, there were some that were taken outside of Bario, such as Long Banga, Long Seridan and Long Lellang. However, for the purpose of this research we narrow it to photographs taken in Bario only.

The photos were then assessed, and were chosen based on one or more elements from the following criteria:

1. Any photographs must either have one or more subject (portrait) present
2. A group of people within the photographs
3. A photograph that depicts the everyday life of the subject
4. A photograph of a location such as a house, villages, fields, and nature that is located within the boundaries of Bario in which is recognizable by the subject(s)

All these photos must be images that were photographed in Bario and its surrounding vicinity. There are no restrictions to the age of these photographs as this allowed me to organize the photos according to their respective timeline. To define the timeline of said photographs, ideally these photographs qualify as the research material would be photographs that are taken as recent as a day old and all the way back as old as 60 years back. Any photographs that were found to be older than 60 years old will be considered a bonus if it is useful for the research.

Photo Exhibition

In 2019, we attended the annual Bario Food and Cultural Festival in the Kelabit Highlands. It is one of the key events by the Kelabit and for the community. where through the introduction of my supervisor towards the event organizer, we were graciously given a space within the food festival to conduct a small exhibition of photographs. Within the festival area, there is a building which was built as the local Kelabit museum in 2015 to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Bario Food Festival, and it was there where we had made my preparations for the photo exhibition.

The Kelabit museum, which is a double story building, was constructed mainly from wood. It has both modern and traditional touches incorporated into the designs and outward visual accents. Inside the museum, it is filled with infographics on Kelabit's practices of stone monuments in the Kelabit Highlands.

There is also a dedicated section on the Kelabit involvement in the liberation of Sarawak from the Japanese occupation of World War II. The space that was given to carry out an exhibition was a corner of the top floor with about 7 feet of wall space. The photos used for the exhibition were selected and printed out in sizes ranging from 2R up to 4R.

The preparation of the exhibition in the space provided took nearly 2 days. To construct the space, we had to move 3 moveable wooden walls that were 7 feet tall into a single formation. On each of the wooden walls, we then must install a down-facing spotlight that shines a bright warm yellow light. In the center of these 3 walls, we had placed 6 backlight signs that have the following numbers in an increasing order: 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000. All 6 of these signs were aligned on a straight string that we had placed horizontally on the center as to create a timeline on a straight line. Once the signs were up, we placed photographs that we had earlier printed out and placed inside a picture frame, we then proceeded to place them according to the year they were

taken neither above or below the timeline string.



Fig. 6: Wall of photos

Throughout the 3 days of the event, we managed to interview 17 respondents. Each interview started with a greeting. The greeting was followed by asking the informant whether she or he has seen any of the photos before. If they have answered 'YES', we would proceed to ask them where they have seen the photo(s). We then asked them whether they personally know the person (s) in the photos, or the landscape captured or whether through a third-party introduction. If instead they have answered 'NO', we would then ask them if they can identify any one of the persons in the photos or any place of the landscape. This is to observe the interaction of the guests towards the photos with us while contributing information regarding the photos. Unlike Horn's (2010,2013) approach of adding in information she had next to the photos that she was showing at her exhibition, we have opted for an on-site oral and face-to-face approach. During the photo-interview, we opted to lead the questions and then let the participant 'drive' the interview by choosing which photographs to discuss.



Fig. 7: Timeline for photos

Individual and Group Photo Elicitation

Throughout this research, one-on-one interviews and group discussions are conducted through two (2) methods. One group will be solely based on traditional interviews and the other with photographs based on the photographs that we had procured from various sources in which Harper (2002) referred this method as 'Photo Elicitation'. To collect data effectively, photo-elicitation interviews were conducted with the traditional interview group towards the end of the session. Through these photographs, many of the subjects were eager to talk about them, and in a few instances, these photographs were the trigger to extract some information and 'get the ball rolling' because some of the photos that we have brought were ones that they had never seen before. During these interviews, we tried to acquire an in-depth information and they were semi-structured accordingly which would last under an hour. During a group interview session, the sessions may last up to an hour or more.

During the research in the Kelabit Highlands, we focused mostly on private individual interviews and group discussions regarding the photographs. Before starting an interview, we would introduce to the subjects the nature and objectives of the research and would conduct the interviews or group discussion on a more casual setting and interview tone. As we have made some acquaintances in the villages, approaching them to establish other contacts was possible for this research. They often redirect us to the informants they deemed appropriate. During the interview sessions, the interviewees were shown a couple of photographs from the collection on a laptop as we scrolled past the photographs. If we do come across photographs which they can relate to, they were asked to describe the photographs which may include naming the people or groups of people in the photos and then continue to discuss about what scenes or objects were captured within the photographs.

As I (Gian) consider myself as someone who is not originally a part of the community, nor am I someone who is not a stranger to the community, I would position myself as an outsider and insider. This unique take was introduced by Mashman (2018) as neither the definition of being an outsider nor an insider could fit her situation, given her relationship with the community. (Mashman, 2018: 60). For these reasons, I can position myself in this unique situation where during the research, I am either an outsider or an insider towards my respondents.

As we conducted the photo elicitation amongst the respondents in the longhouse, these interactions took place in the common area or the dining area. Most of the time, the discussions took place over meals where the Kelabit's like to interact over food. However, it is imperative to note that during a particular period of the research, it was almost impossible to bring together several informants, as those times was during the Covid-19 pandemic. The movement control order forbade any forms of physical movements especially between the urban and rural areas. The villagers were aware of the movement restriction and social distancing that was in effect. Hence, they were naturally mindful of social distancing requirements. The villagers were very wary of any visits made by outsiders to the Highlands. Due to this, getting into any residence was the subject of invitation from homeowners while exercising utmost adherence to safety protocols.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter will cover findings of the interviews and observations made during the exhibition "Looking Back Into The Past And Linking The Past And Present Through Photographs: A Case Study in the Kelabit Highland" includes analysis of the data collected from both primary and secondary resources.

Over the years the Kelabit and their homeland have encountered and experienced various degrees of social, economic and political changes. This was mainly through their contacts with the outside world while playing a role in the retaliation against the Japanese occupation during the second world war. These changes were intensified through experiencing a religious and cultural transformation and finally embarking on a new pathway to promote the highland as an appealing ecotourism-based economy of the present. Throughout these events, most of them were recorded and photographed by explorers, soldiers, researchers and even the locals themselves.

This section focuses on three main objectives: firstly, can photographs be used as a tool in visual ethnographic methodology to extract information, followed by if photographs can be used as a link to bridge the past and the present and finally to identify is their evidence to suggest that when showing a photograph to the subjects, does the subjects exhibit symptoms of 'generation of post-memory'?

Photographs as Effective Methodological Tool

This research has determined that photographs are very effective as a visual ethnographic tool to extract information. The data collected does support the basis that photo-elicitation does enhance the interviews and provide a more precise set of data. Based on the methods that we used especially when splitting two different types of interview methods of separating the interviewees into two (2) groups of one with photographs and a traditional interview. When conducting the interviews for the group without the photographs, many of the interviews were mostly slow paced and at times were not fruitful. To gather more data, we have introduced the photo-elicitation method towards the end of the traditional interview group.

By conducting photo interviews, we determined that the interviews were longer and establishes an enjoyable atmosphere for the interview to carry on for the rest of the session just as Collier's (1967) findings regarding photo-interviews being "longer and more comprehensive interviews but at the same time helped subjects overcome the fatigue and repetition of conventional interviews". On average, the interviews would last up to 60 minutes during a one-on-one interview and up to 90 minutes during a group interview as compared to the traditional interview which may last up to 30 minutes or less an average per session and appears to be rigid and less engaging. Some of the photos that were used during the photo-interview certainly broke the ice amongst the interviewer and the interviewees as they were more comfortable with sharing their recollection of those photos. The interview sessions would go on towards having delightful conversations filled with laughter and some of the interviewees even asked us to bring more photos to look at during subsequent sessions. Through this shared familiarity that we established, we were able to ask them questions regarding various topics and sensitive issues that would have been difficult to be answered (such as the previous beliefs held by the Kelabit before mass conversion to Christianity. When introducing the photo-interviews towards the end of the traditional interview group session, we managed to stimulate a more engaging and fruitful conversation with the participants which then prolonged the interview sessions. As suggested by Carillo (2024) in their research, by utilizing photography and photo elicitation, it can evoke emotions and foster a more profound dialogue between the researcher and participants.

By using photo elicitation during group discussions, we observed that whenever the respondents do know of the subject that is shown in the photo whether they personally knew them or heard of them, they will state the name of said person, where that person is from or the current place the person has settled in. Besides that, the group will go on to state the job that the person had which some of it being as "Ketua Kampung" (Head village chief), or as medical dresser, or a teacher, a police officer or a pastor.

When discussing amongst themselves regarding the photos, there were times when the group would try to pinpoint the location of where the photo was taken geographically whether it's beside the paddy fields or according to the mountain range by showing us the map on their smartphone app. Such an example during the group discussion would be:

(This is a photo of the old airstrip. And this is the old office to buy the flight ticket. Do you know where this was, young man? It is next to Raja Siwa's homestay)

Respondent BS, 72 years old, Bario

During the 3 days of conducting the photo exhibition, a majority of those who came over to have a look were mostly guests under the age of 60. 25% of which were females and the remaining 75% were males. As we have placed some considerable amount of photos on the walls with a theme of "The Journey Through Time", where, as described, we have tied a long string indicating a timeline from the 1950's until the 2000's and placed the photos accordingly to the year they were taken, around 20% of the respondents found that efforts we had put in helped them to imagine the era of those photos and have instilled in them a sense of time and space. As many as 25% of the respondents were able to know that the photos on display were Kelabit because they know the subjects of the photos personally.

"I could identify my mother in the photo, however as far as I remembered, this photo was actually much wider than what you had placed here and it seems like you have had half of the photo. These are quite cool."

Respondent AK, 41 years old, Kuala Lumpur

"Hey, I know some of them!! I actually grew up with them."

Respondent DGG, 52 years old, Kuching

"Oh, I had just met her outside the museum. I was not sure if it was her at first in this picture since it looks to be from 30 years ago, but I knew it was her since I noticed her long ears. And isn't this taken outside of the market, right."

Respondent SG, 21 years old, Kuching

During the photo exhibition, there was a respondent whose family had some copious quantities of these older photographs collection that were similar to the collection exhibited. He noted that since he grew up looking at those photos, he immediately knew that these photos were of Kelabit or were taken in Bario even though he was not raised in Bario, but he did indeed return to Bario often during his school holidays. Although he could not identify some of the subjects in the photos, he could deduce that they were Kelabit, because in some photos, the subjects were wearing the traditional Kelabit headgear called 'Peta'. He explained to me how only the Kelabits are the only ones in Sarawak that uses that specific style of headgear.

"I can relate to some of the photos because I personally know some of it and have seen some of them. I can clearly figure out that these people are Kelabits, because they are wearing the 'Peta' (traditional headgear) due to it being unique and exclusive only to the Kelabit. I can relate to this because I used to go back to Bario for school holidays because I was raised in Kuching."

Respondent ZL, 42 years old, Kuala Lumpur

In another instance, the photo of the 'Peta' was indeed a factor for some of the visitors who has never seen or met any of the subjects that were shown during the photo exhibition. Most of these visitors are young adults under 30 years old. They mentioned that being familiar and having personally worn the traditional Kelabit headgear instantly made them to recognized it through the photographs.

"Oh! I know her. And I suppose these other people are also Kelabit right? I mean, look at their long earlobes and that 'Peta'. Only the Kelabit has them. I've worn them on occasion too."

Respondent RH, 26 years old, Kuala Lumpur

When interviewing a group of younger participants, they too recognize the traditional Kelabit headgear:

CP: Yeah, I don't think we know all of them in these photos. I mean they look so young here. Probably our parents would recognize them. But for sure maybe my parents would know.

ER: I mean for sure they all are kelabit here, right?

GD: Look at their long earlobes.

EA: This is a 'Peta' right? So, it must be Kelabit then.

JH: Isn't this outside this building? What a change compared to back then. Gravel roads back then and cemented road now.

Respondent CP, ER, GD, EA, JH, OL, JL, RJ 22 – 24 years old, Miri

Looking through the photos, some informants will share their recollection of their memories of the past that is associated with the photos that we have displayed. During one of the interviews, we were treated to a hearty bowl of rice porridge that contained a wild fungus that the locals called 'Kecip'. We decided to pursue the conversation by asking the interviewees about the 'Kecip' and by asking them how one finds or forages for some 'Kecip'. The interviewees went on to state that this 'Kecip' is especially important in defining the Kelabit delicacy, as they stated that porridge is one of the integral foods that make up the local society due to the dependence of the local Kelabits on rice consumption and wet paddy cultivation. This led the conversation further where one of the interviewees pulled up a photograph from his smartphone and presented to me and the rest of the interviewees a photo from his backyard of a 'Kecip' that was growing on a dead tree. He later extended an invitation to us to visit his house to have a look on the 'Kecip'. We accepted his invitation and went over to his house one evening on a different day. By combining photo elicitation with digital technologies, fosters unexpected opportunities for interaction and data exchange. This integration not only strengthens the connection

between the researcher and participants during the ethnographic studies but also enhances the depth and quality of the analysis (Castillo, 2024).

From this research by using photographs that were supplied by the interviewees, we were able to determine how the Kelabits perceive their identities in this contemporary world. As Blumer noted, through photos, individuals interpret and give meaning to their social world through interactions and using photo-elicitation to delve into participants subjective experiences and meanings. This is particularly true as when we reversed our methods during photo-interviews, we went to the interviewees' house and managed to conduct interviews by using their photos that were on display in their living rooms. From conducting the interviews by using the interviewees photographs, we could determine that family relations and educational achievements play a major role in the Kelabit household. Images mostly depicting family portraits taken professionally at the studio, the union marriage of spouses, and lastly educational and career achievements were displayed in the shared area of the household.

Photographs As a Link to The Past and Present

Photographs is like a time capsule. They have the capacities to capture what has happened in the past and the memories contained in it. It is then undeniable that photographs can bridge the past and the present through the shared memories that is held by those who took the photo and by those who are present in the photo and the stories that was carried forward because of the photographs. In many instances, there were several historical photographs that were taken by Tom Harrison during his stay in the Kelabit Highlands. Most notably were of old portraits that were of Kelabit elders with uniforms and medals which signifies that they were once a part of the special operation that played a part in liberating Sarawak from the Japanese occupation during the World War II and the Malaysia-Indonesia Confrontation. Till this day, we have noticed that many of the interviewees has spoken about the involvement of their grandfather's or father's involvement:

"This medal belonged to my father. They gave him the medal because he helped fend of the invasion of the Indonesian during the Confrontation. So we displayed his medal on his behalf"

Respondent MN, 55 years old, Bario

When we asked about the medals, some of them said that they would wear these medals during special events when there is a memorial service for the war efforts or when there is a special VIP coming down to Bario for a visitation.

"Since this medal belonged to my late father, I wore it on the right side of my front shirt as I am representing him. So if this medal belongs to me, I will wear it on my left side. You can see from this picture how my late father used to wear it on his left side."

Respondent JN, 62 years old, Bario

This signifies that the Kelabit are immensely proud of the achievement of their family members whether it be during the previous war effort, career achievements and especially educational achievements. During our photo-interview sessions at multiple subject's house, we noticed there were many framed portraits of medal-giving ceremonies of their family members given out by the head of state, the Governor and by Sultan(s) from other states in Malaysia. The photos also include award ceremonies given by government officers for their outstanding work performance and excellence, especially to retired government servants, schoolteachers, police officers and so on. Besides that, there are also graduation photographs of their children and grandchildren that were framed and hung on the walls in their houses. This is evident that the Kelabit valued education highly, especially during the early days when the first school was built in the Kelabit Highlands.

"Back then we had to leave our parents during the school period and lived in the school dorms. Before leaving home, we would pack food in our bags because we knew it would take some of us at least a couple of days to reach the school, so we would go through the jungle with our siblings and cousins and our parents would accompany us. As we get older, we can already make the journey by ourselves. Going to school meant that we

would not be able to help our parents at the farm, but they insist that we go to school and study”

“Yes, he is right. Our parents would try to raise the funds themselves to pay for our school fees and to buy our uniforms. My parents were so poor, we couldn’t even afford to buy toothbrush.”

We could determine that education has been an integral part of the Kelabit community since the establishment of the first school and it is reflected during our research at the interviewees houses where we found not only photographs or portraits of said educational achievements but as well as certificates and school awards being displayed together with these said photographs.

During one of the photo exhibition sessions that we conducted, one of the subjects were looking through at the photos that depicted the changes in the landscape in Bario over the past 20 years, specifically the photos of the gravel roads of Bario, he proceeded to share his story of riding on a motorbike with his father during his childhood. The photo triggered a bad memory of his experience where he and his father fell into the drain while riding the motorbike.

“Looking at the old dirt roads that Bario used to have, I am reminded of the time during my childhood of a bad memory of when me and my father rode a motorbike and because the roads were so bad, we fell into the drain. What a bad experience.”

Respondent SG, 21 years old, Kuching

There was one special instance, where two (2) respondents immediately told me that they initially could not tell if the subject of the photos were of Kelabit nor whether the location that was captured was of Bario. However, they could immediately relate to One (1) photo on display. It was an old photograph of a group of people, that would seem to be farming in the wet paddy fields, which their actions point towards a work party effort. The respondents told me that before they made their way to the main town Bario, they were previously from Pa’ Lungan, where they were spending their school holidays with their grandparents. The work party photo immediately caught their attention because prior to their journey to Bario, they were helping their grandparents in the field, in a situation that mirrors the old photo.

“Hey, are these people Kelabits?”

‘Yes they are’ (Me) “No wonder, actually I was not sure if these were Kelabits or of Bario. I could not recognize anyone or the landscape, but I do suspect they were Kelabit judging from this person’s long earlobes. It was when I saw this photo of this “Kerjasama” (work party) that I immediately called FA to show her this. We both just got back from Pa’ Lungan, visiting our grandparents so we did some “Kerjasama” work while we were there.”

Respondent ER and FA, 24 years old, Miri

The photo exhibition clearly has shown some interesting findings to this research. Most of the correspondents were able to relate to the photos that were shown. About 70% of the respondents could immediately identify that the subject in the photos were indeed a Kelabit person or was taken in Bario. Although there were several respondents who noted that initially they could not determine whether it was a Kelabit just by looking at their faces, they were able to confirm their deduction when they saw some photos of a lady wearing the Kelabit traditional attire, especially the ‘Peta’ headgear. While there was one respondent that stated that he was familiar with one (1) photo because he has seen it on the internet before that stated that the person in that photo was a Kelabit.

Generation of Post-Memory

Hirsch (2012) wrote that we can remember the memories of others in which she suggested that traumatic events continue to live on and “leave a mark of the lives of those who were not there to experience them”. She states that the relationship that the generation after those who bears the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those

group that came before, in which an experience they remember through images, stories and behaviours which were handed down to them as they grew up. Due to the nature of these experiences that the generation before had gone through, it was transmitted to the generations after who were affectively and deeply passed on to take upon these memories as their own. Through this paper we try to ascertain whether the Kelabits has experienced these “post-Memory” symptoms and if so, how does these “Generation of Post-Memory” respond to this in their contemporary world with the introduction of photographs during the interview.

As Hirsch (2012) idea of a “generation of post-memory” started from the traumatic experiences of the Holocaust survivors and the stories that were transmitted to the generation after, however for the Kelabit, there were no extreme experiences as traumatic as the ones depicted by Hirsch. Despite that, the Kelabit experienced hardship before their mass conversion to Christianity where they were fervent animist as they worshipped spirits and observing the sight of certain animals as signs of danger or wrath of the spirits. Certain practices and rituals were considered when commencing any kind of task which includes an important journey and starting any kinds of agricultural cultivation. As they continued to observe certain rituals and taboos, it certainly made their lives much harder and were oppressive.

“Based on what my late parents used to say, the old beliefs were quite troublesome for us. For my case, it was a taboo to give birth to twin children. If a woman gave birth to twin children, then one of the children will need to be abandoned. Not to even be given away but to be abandoned, and thus the child will die”

“Why did you say, ‘in my case’ back then?”

“Well you see, from what my late mother told me, I used to have a twin sister. The rest is up to your imagination. Things are much better once we’ve abandoned the old ways”

During the interviews, we showed the participants photographs of dragon jars, most of them who identified the dragon jars in the photo as “to store items such as rice or tuak(rice wine)”. When we pressed further about the tuak, most of them had said the following:

“Last time, before we all converted to Christianity, we were believers of the spirits. We used to make our own tuak and store them in these dragon jars. I heard that our grandparents and great grandparents were heavy drinkers. Of course, they stopped drinking once they had adopted Christianity.”

The research highlighted the existence of a generational gap between those who know and are aware about the past and history of the people of the Kelabit Highlands and those who don’t. These two categories: those that knew about the past as the elders and seniors of the community while those who don’t could be categorized as the young adults, specifically the under 40 generation. However, exist in between the ones who know about the past and history of the people living in the Kelabit Highlands and between the ones who don’t know about such information. This group of people would be placed in between and would categorize them as described by Hirsch, the ‘generation of post-memory’ (Hirsch, 2008). This generation tends to take memories of the generations before them as their own in which we will determine by using photographs as a methodology.

Another point of interest in respect to the ‘Generation of Post Memory’ and the similarities that is exhibited by the Kelabits are associated with the 1973 Bario Revival where massive numbers of Kelabits in the Kelabit Highlands experienced a spiritual religious movement that sees many Kelabits repenting for their sins as they describe it as a ‘Movement of God’ which has turn the lives of many even till present day. In an unpublished letter written by the late Dato’ Sri Joseph Balan Seling to his missionary friends, whom at the time of the Bario Revival in 1973, he was a member of the Sarawak State Legislative Assembly and as a prominent Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) (now known as Borneo Evangelical Mission, BEM) church leader (Bulan et.al.,2004). In his letter, he wrote:

“We have been preaching the Gospel for years and years and have seen very few people saved. [In fact] so many have gone farther away from the Lord. But in the last three weeks there have been more than one hundred saved in a very dramatic manner during services.”

-Dato’ Sri Joseph Balan Seling, 1973

As written by Bulan (2004), during the inception of the 1973 Bario Revival, he was the ISCF (Inter School Christian Fellowship) teacher for the school and witnessed the drastic change that this ‘Movement of God’ has started from his own students and spread towards the parents of those students which then also spread to other children and also to the rest of the villages. Teenagers and children were sharing testimonies throughout chapels across the various villages, and many had repented of their sins and asked forgiveness from God. According to Bulan (2004), lives were changed with the conviction and fear of God came upon the people. Through various testimonies, Bulan wrote that even marriages were saved during that period as well as mass reconciliation occurred amongst the people, especially families.

Penghulu Ngimat Ayu, the Kelabit chieftain at the time also reported that many cases that were brought to his native court were cancelled as the group involved in those cases were convicted by the fear of God and decided to reconcile. In another sense, many disputes were brought before the elders of the church and settled before God. Bulan also wrote that shops that sold alcoholic beverages and cigarettes soon found that they could not move these two items at all, in which Southwell (1999) noted the change in the Kelabits with their obsession with drunkenness and remnants of their old customs because of the influence from Tom Harrison when Southwell returned to the Kelabit Highland in 1947 in which he also found their (Kelabit) interest in Christianity were merely superficial.

During the revival period, many villagers would walk on foot for two or three hours just to attend revival meetings that comprised five (5) villages according to Bulan which would sum up to nearly 500 people that had attended.



Fig. 8: Revival Night Meeting at the Common Gallery (tawa) of Bario Asal Longhouse. People came from the villages to the north and south of Bario, 1974

During one of the interview sessions conducted with the participants, this photo was introduced into the mix. Many of the participants that responded to this photograph were taken down to memory lane. Some of their responses were:

“Wow this photo really brings back old memories. I used to remember following my parents on foot through the jungle for many hours carrying a basket (uyut), while my mother will carry my sister on her back just to attend prayer meetings. We would walk all the way to Bario Asal longhouse. There were no roads back then”

(“Yes, everybody had to go. None of our parents would let us stay at home. Even my younger cousins would go to these meeting”)

“That is a lot of people for a night prayer meeting. How would you all go back home in the dark?”

(“We don’t even go back at night because sometimes these prayer meetings during the revival would go on till the next morning. By the daytime we would start walking back home”)

Many of the younger participants knew about the Bario Revival and knew details that happened during the early days that started the movement. In respect to the traumatic and burdensome nature of the previous belief system of the Kelabits before accepting Christianity, through listening and inheriting stories of the past especially the Bario Revival, there is a greater sense of historical awareness among younger generations. Younger generations can better understand the events that affected the lives of their parents and grandparents by being exposed to the stories of their family's experiences. This may result in a deeper grasp of their environment and a greater appreciation for the struggles and supernatural experiences of the generation before. In fact, all the participants that were younger than 40 years old has deemed that the 1973 Bario Revival to be a pivotal moment in the Kelabit's history and when probed about it, most of the younger participants said that they grew up hearing stories and testimonies directly from their grandparents or parents who went through the Bario Revival period. Growing up, these younger Kelabits were taught by their predecessors about Christianity and were brought up as Christians as even some Christianity celebrations were incorporated into their lives such as Good Friday, Easter Sunday and Christmas. This is because unlike the Dayaks and the Gawai celebration, the Kelabits do not have a celebration for their harvesting season.

Even as Hirsch depicts trauma as a trigger towards bringing forth this generation of post-memory, this also allows a stronger sense of empathy to be present as the result of post-memory. Younger generations can better understand other people's pain and develop a deeper appreciation for the challenges of those who came before them by hearing the stories of those before them.

“It must have been very hard for the folks back then before accepting Christianity. The stories I’ve heard from my grandparents regarding the olden days were not pleasant. I am glad that we as Kelabit have progressed so much compared to back then. Lives are much easier now”

-JB, 35 years old, Bario

From listening to the stories and supernatural stories that had occurred during the Bario Revival by their parents and grandparents' generation, a stronger sense of identity may result from post-memory. Younger generations can better comprehend their own identities and the identities of their families by hearing the stories of their forefathers' experiences. This may result in a deeper awareness of their own history and culture as well as a stronger appreciation for their own heritage and culture. The use of photo elicitation to explore the concept of post-memory highlights the potential of photography as a tool for evoking and exploring memories of traumatic events. It can create a safe and comfortable environment for individuals to share their experiences and emotions and can provide a tangible reference point for discussion. Photo elicitation can also provide valuable insights for researchers, helping to create a more nuanced understanding of family or collective history as participants construct their identities and experiences around photos (Bruner, 1991).

In conclusion, the concept of post-memory, as proposed by Hirsch, highlights the ways in which traumatic events experienced by previous generations can affect subsequent generations. Photo elicitation provides a valuable tool for exploring these memories and understanding how individuals relate to their family or collective history. Using photos, individuals can evoke and share their memories and emotions, and researchers can gain valuable insights into the impact of traumatic events on subsequent generations.

Photography in the Community

Over the years as more visitors go to Bario, many of these visitors came with their cameras to capture the moments that they experience. Photos had become a way to relive the moment and to remember the memories that they captured. Bario and its people had become a part of these visitors' memories, especially through photographs. This is the same for the Kelabits who live there. Back then, having their photos taken was considered a rare occasion as not many could afford to own a camera, let alone how to operate one. Many would

consider having their portrait photos taken to be a luxury and even if they want one, they must go to a photo studio in urban towns such as Marudi or Miri to get one which means taking a 45-minute flight out.

In its essence, photography is considered one of the ultimate tools in capturing a moment and its surroundings as evidence with a realistic approach. Just being able to remember things of the past has a significant impact on how we remember them. This is relevant today in the lives of the Kelabits as remnants of the second world war is still visible in the surrounding area, albeit those remnants are being swallowed by the elements, some of the old photographs from the war serves as a reminder of the involvement of the Kelabits in aiding the war efforts where history is being reinforced with visual evidence and goes further as compared to oral tradition.

Some of the older photographs were taken by explorers, researchers, and missionaries. As years goes by, some of the Kelabit will go on to take pictures of themselves from their own cameras. Through photographs, one can even experience the feeling of nostalgia whenever we see photographs from the past. Some of these photos include a portrait of themselves or their loved ones whether they are still alive or have long passed away. It portrayed how the people used to dress themselves whether it be for leisure or formally, social, and communal activities and the landscape of an area that is familiar to them. Photographs also record significant social and family events. Through these old photographs, many Kelabit today reminisce about the old days as they recall the memories of when they were younger.

Clear blue skies, golden fields of paddy, the beautifully abstract colors of the traditional clothing gears, tall strong mountain range as far as the eye can see; this will tickle the curiosity of any traveler looking for a new experience. Vibrant traditional clothing, alluring traditional folk dance, mesmerizing smiles and unique culture certainly captures the heart of many photographers. Bario is indeed a picturesque location in the northeast of Sarawak as it is one of the highest settlements in the state, where the skies appear much bluer than the coastal urban cities. Bario was dubbed the 'Land of a thousand handshakes' by several adventuring bloggers and is being heavily promoted by the state tourism ministry (Sarawak Tourism Board) as part of Sarawak's ecotourism and cultural tourism destination.

Photographs that are aesthetically pleasing to the eyes will capture the attention of the viewer as even the state's tourism board included beautiful photographs to promote the Kelabit Highlands. As the folks in Bario are moving their economy towards ecotourism, many of the guesthouses and homestay owners use stunning photos as part of their marketing strategy to attract visitors. It is evident that one can see the beauty that the Kelabits experience through photographs, yet at the same time one can also see these images may convey the challenges that the community faces. This shows how individuals or the community give meaning to their social world through interactions that is enhanced by this photo-elicitation method (Blumer, 1969)

CONCLUSION

As time moves on through the ages and has caused changes towards the Kelabit communities in the Bario Highlands, photo-elicitation has been proved to be effective in collecting ethnographic information that bridges the past and the present. From this research, we had determined that the Kelabits has indeed exhibit symptoms of a "generation of post-memory" with the aid of photo-elicitation method. In anthropology, photography has proved itself to be crucial mediator anthropological research to transmit reliable data (Mifflin, 2012). We should not be afraid to use visual aids as an alternative method in our research, especially photographs that is not only captured by researchers but also provided by the subjects of one's research. The participants will respond more responsively and enthusiastically when conducting an interview with photographs as compared to a traditional interview, especially when using this theoretical lens, researchers would be able to analyze how photographs elicit responses that reveal cultural and social meanings (Harper, 2002)

This approach does have its fair share of weaknesses. There will be biases both among the participants and the researchers as well regarding their understanding of the photographs. Besides that, some of the participants may also lack the capabilities to catch up or grasp the use of digital media and modern image consumption such as social media and the advent of the use of modern smart phones that many has considered essential in capturing images. There is also the consideration of consent when using photo-elicitation by which there is tension between the desire to capture the image of the social world with regards to informed consent and subject anonymity

(Harper, 2005).

Through photographs, reveal insights into examining the people's interpretation of one's identity and history and to determine the extent of how far a generation of post-memory be able to bridge the gap of a memory that belongs to the generation before them. It allows people that is in the future to be able to see what was happening at the time of the capturing of the image, further encasing that moment in frame which will allow for a more in-depth analysis and in this case, through photo-elicitation. Photographs also allow behaviors that were captured to be examined and interpreted by those in the future and thus help researchers to understand the thought processes. The thoughts and feelings of both the participants and researchers that leads to the creation of their interpretation towards the photographs may not always be definitive. Yet, this will be able to create a new meaning from the readers of this research thus proves that photo-elicitation can indeed be used as a tool to create meaning.

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