

# Archipelagic Memories

## At the Lau King Howe Hospital Memorial Museum

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Although East Malaysia shares some of the attributes of the British colonial administrative system that governed West Malaysia, its archipelagic character has helped sustain the Indigenous ethnic complexity within Malay identification, unlike on the peninsular. This distinction is evident in their respective institutional cultures, most particularly in hospital records. For example, in West Malaysia, the *Bumiputera* ethnic group absorbs Indigenous identities, and non-*Bumiputera* people are designated as Chinese, Indian and ethnic “others.”<sup>1</sup> Conversely, Sarawak, a state within the Malay Archipelago, is a multicultural state comprised of non-Indigenous and Indigenous groups, including but not limited to the Bataks, Bisayaks, Dayaks, Dusun, Kedayan, Kelabits, Kenyahs, Melanau, Murut, Punan, and Sekapan, who maintain their separate identities. The classification of hospital patients contrasts these broader racial categorisations in the West with the nuanced multiplicity of individual tribal communities in the East. The historical evidence of Indigenous presence in Sarawak extends beyond hospital records. Accounts of the treatment of Indigenous patients can also be found in smaller neighbouring districts, like Sibü, through community contributions to a hospital

museum. This paper explores a hospital museum as a significant repository of Indigenous memories and experiences that test postcolonial Malaysia’s multicultural boundaries.

This paper investigates the representation of Indigenous communities in medical museums located on the periphery of a network of medical institutions, typically concentrated in Singapore and spread throughout Malaysia. It offers a geomorphic interpretation of existing anthropomorphic studies typically conducted in this region, most notably by historians and medical anthropologists such as Lenore Manderson and Sandra Khor Manickam. The focus on medical museum architecture contributes to the history of medical practices in Malaya by identifying and analysing tangible artifacts that responded to colonial urban public health policies explored in Manderson’s research.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the focus on a medical museum builds on Manickam’s research on the intersection of indigeneity in Malaysia and decolonisation by providing an institutional representation of Indigenous memories and experiences.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the extensive research of architecture historian John Ting on Sarawak’s institutional architectural

history and riverways helps situate this research in archipelagic Malaysia.<sup>4</sup> This paper addresses the panel’s framing of archipelagics as a way to uncover the lesser-known aspects of multivocal and multi-ethnic diversity within Malaysia.

This study was primarily inspired by an extract from the Annual Reports by the Medical and Health Department of the Kuching General Hospital, which describes the breakdown in patient nationalities admitted to the Kuching General Hospital, Sarawak, in 1949 (Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> As the largest hospital in the state, the Sarawak General Hospital provided medical services to all major towns and deployed remote medical services via travelling medical contingents. While the hospital’s community and progress are commemorated through in-house publications such as the book *100 Years: Sarawak General Hospital Kuching 1910–2010*, the lack of a hospital museum on site prompted the investigation of a unique museum facility in the neighbouring district of Sibü.

In this paper, the Lau King Howe Hospital Memorial Museum in Sibü, Sarawak, has been selected for study, to analyse the historical relationship

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vii                      Appendix VII.

GENERAL HOSPITAL, KUCHING.

1 9 4 9

IN-PATIENTS

Total number of admissions during the year	5,207
Total number of male patients admitted during the year	2,772
Total number of female patients admitted during the year	2,435

NATIONALITIES

Americans	3
Arabs	3
Australians	4
Bataks	5
Bisayaks	1
Chinese	3,429
Dayaks, Land	512
Dayaks, Sea	402
Dusun	1
Eurasians	20
Europeans	67
Indians	179
Japanese	1
Javanese	29
Kedayan	1
Kelabits	6
Kenyahs	9
Malays	509
Melanos	16
Menadonese	6
Murut	1
Punan	1
Sekapan	1
Philipino	1
TOTAL	5,207 =====

Figure 1:  
Nationalities of patients admitted to Kuching General Hospital in 1949. (Excerpt from the Annual Reports by the Medical and Health Department of the Kuching General Hospital, Sarawak, 1949, 46)

between East Malaysian Indigenous communities and the colonial institution first introduced to Malaysia in the late 19th century. The paper contrasts the general hospital with the community hospital funded by a migrant minority. The Lau King Howe Hospital was established as the first general hospital in Sibu in 1931 with the financial support of Mr Lau King Howe, a Chinese migrant based there between 1916 and 1930. After the Lau King Howe Hospital was closed, the Memorial Museum was established at the former campus as a tribute to the hospital and the memories shared by the Sibu community, and as evidence of Chinese philanthropy. Alongside the preservation of key architectural features of the building's main entrance, a pond was added to memorialise the adjacent Rajang River. The river's periodic flooding transformed the community's relationship to the hospital, enabling Indigenous patients, who were forced to walk from remote areas or reliant on travelling dispensaries, to also arrive by boat, or to pass time by fishing from the verandah. Such recollections have been subsumed into the museum's collective story and retold by Indigenous museum curators, thereby forming what is presented here as archipelagic memories; memories that are

connected by riverine cultural networks and inter-ethnic reciprocity and practices of care in East Malaysia.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
The literal English translation is "son of the land," comprising of Malay and some of the Indigenous peoples of Peninsular and East Malaysia.
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
Lenore Manderson, *Sickness and the State: Health and Illness in Colonial Malaya, 1870–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
Sandra Khor Manickam, "Situating Thinking: Or How the Science of Race Was Socialised in British Malaya," *The Journal of Pacific History* 47, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 283–307, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2012.685346>.
4. \_\_\_\_\_  
John H. S. Ting, *The History of Architecture in Sarawak before Malaysia* (Sarawak: Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia, 2018).
5. \_\_\_\_\_  
Medical and Health Department, *Annual Reports: Medical and Health Department: 1948–1949* (Sarawak: Orders of Government by the Department of Statistics, 1950) 46.
6. \_\_\_\_\_  
Hospital Umum Sarawak, *100 Years: Sarawak General Hospital Kuching 1910–2010* (Kuching, Sarawak: Hospital Umum Sarawak, 2011).