

## Expert in UNIMAS



**Name:** Professor Dr Poline Bala FASc

**Current Position:** Director, Institute of Borneo Studies, Professor of Anthropology and Sociology

**Institutional Affiliation:** Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)

**Campus Location:** Kota Samarahan, Sarawak

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## Expertise & Research Domain

### **Keywords/Tags:**

1. Indigenous Knowledge Systems
2. Digital Heritage
3. Community-Led Innovation
4. Digital Inclusion
5. Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)
6. Sustainable Tourism
7. Social Impact Assessment
8. Indigenous Data Governance
9. Anthropology of Development
10. Borneo Studies

Professor Dr Poline Bala is a social anthropologist whose work bridges Indigenous knowledge, digital innovation, cultural heritage and community-led development. Over more than three decades, her scholarship has examined how Indigenous and rural

communities negotiate development, borders, technological change and the stewardship of cultural and ecological knowledge.

Her pioneering and collaborative work includes the award-winning eBario Project, for which she served as Team Leader, and subsequent rural digital transformation initiatives; the eBorneo Knowledge Fair, which advances an engaged model of knowledge exchange; the Bario Food & Cultural Festival (*Pesta Nukenen*), developed as a community-led platform linking food heritage, culture and sustainable tourism; digital inclusion work with Orang Asli communities; Community-Led MOOCs; and participatory community mapping and digital heritage in the Kelabit Highlands.

Across these initiatives, a consistent principle is that communities should not be treated merely as research subjects or recipients of development, but as partners, innovators, knowledge holders and co-producers of knowledge. Her work combines ethnography with participatory mapping, digital technologies, community-based research, social impact assessment and policy engagement.

Her later and current work extends this approach through a major long-term programme of cultural-site mapping, community GIS and digital heritage in the Kelabit Highlands, alongside Indigenous data governance, biodiversity, nature-based solutions and Forest Carbon, social impact assessment of Indigenous livelihood programmes, and community-centred approaches to heritage and cultural landscape stewardship.

Through the Institute of Borneo Studies, she brings academic research into dialogue with government, civil society and Indigenous organisations, contributing to technologically innovative, culturally grounded and community-centred approaches to sustainable futures.

**Research Specializations:** Indigenous knowledge systems; anthropology of development; Borneo studies; digital inclusion and rural transformation; digital heritage and cultural heritage stewardship; community-led innovation; community-based participatory research; sustainable tourism; social impact assessment; Indigenous data governance; biodiversity, livelihoods, nature-based solutions and climate communication.

**Research Methods/Technologies:** Ethnography; qualitative and mixed-methods research; community-based participatory research; participatory GIS and community mapping; oral history and visual documentation; focus groups and stakeholder consultation; social impact assessment; digital heritage and telecentre-based approaches

## Academic & Professional Background

**Highest Degree:** Ph.D. Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge

### **Key Previous Appointments:**

1. **Director**, Institute of Borneo Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) – 2019–present
2. **Professor**, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)
3. **Associate Professor**, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)
4. **Senior Lecturer**, Faculty of Social Sciences, University Malaysia Sarawak, Course: Contemporary Issues in International Relations, International Organizations, ASEAN Politics- (2008-2013)
5. **Deputy Director** of the Institute of Social Informatics and Technological Innovation (2008-2018)
6. **Lecturer** of Faculty Social Sciences, University Malaysia Sarawak,
7. **Courses:** International Organizations; Modern Political Thoughts; Introduction to Anthropology and Sociology; Introduction to Political Science; Social Movements; Contemporary Issues in International Relations; ASEAN Politics (1998-2007); Sociology of Development; Gender, Class and Ethnicity; Social Theory
8. **Tutor** of Faculty of Social Sciences, University Malaysia Sarawak – (1996-1997)
9. **Researcher** of Graduate School University Kebangsaan Malaysia – (1994-1995)
10. **Temporary Teacher**, SMK Batu Lintang, Kuching – (January 1993- December 1993)
11. **Office Secretary** Borneo Adventure, Miri – (December 1989 – October 1990)

### **Visiting Fellowships/Positions:**

1. Institute of Mountain Science, Shinshu University, Japan – (July 2024)
2. Southeast Asian Studies, Cornell University Ithaca New York, USA – (April – May 2022)
3. Visiting Scholar, Center for World Austronesia and Indigenous Peoples (CWAIP) National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan – (12 August -16 November 2019)

### **National Appointments & Advisory Roles:**

1. Member, Majlis Sejarawan Negara (National Council of Historians), 2025–2027 — appointed to Malaysia’s national council bringing together historians and scholars to contribute expertise to the understanding, documentation and interpretation of the nation’s history.

2. Member, Malaysia Open Science Steering Committee, Academy of Sciences Malaysia.
3. Member, Advisory Committee on Banknotes and Coins, Bank Negara Malaysia, 1 January 2024–31 December 2026.
4. Working Group Member, National Planetary Health Action Plan (NHAP) — Research and Education Pillar, 31 October 2023–7 May 2024.
5. Ex-Officio Member, Board of Management, Pustaka Negeri Sarawak.
6. Subject Matter Expert, Task Force on Advocacy, Awareness and Capacity Building (AACB) and Public Participatory Platform, Water Sector Transformation 2040 (WST2040), Academy of Sciences Malaysia, September 2020.
7. Technical Expert, SIRIM QAS International Sdn. Bhd., December 2021.

**Professional Affiliations & Community Leadership:**

1. Senior Vice President, Rurum Kelabit Sarawak.
2. Member, Board of Directors, Borneo Research Council, from 6 September 2021.
3. Editorial Board Member, Melayu: Jurnal Antarabangsa Dunia Melayu, February–April 2025.
4. Member, Board of Trustees, World Vision Malaysia, 1 July 2012–30 June 2015.
5. Member, Technical Committee, Way Forward for Bridging Digital Divide Programmes, Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister’s Department, 2014.
6. Consultant Expert, ASEAN project “Promotion of Rural Women’s Livelihood with ICT Use,” ASEAN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Korea (MOFAT) and Asia Pacific Women’s Information Network Center (APWINC), Sookmyung Women’s University, Korea, 1 March 2011–28 February 2012.
7. Technical Expert, Community Mapping of Cultural Sites in the Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak, funded by the US Embassy and Oxbridge Society, 1 August 2008–31 December 2010.
8. Consultation Expert/Presenter, eBario Project: Bridging the Digital Divide between Rural and Urban Communities, National Information Technology Council Meeting chaired by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, 22 March 2010.
9. Technical Expert, Special Event on Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D): Issues and Challenges for Rural Communities, Swiss Commission on the Information Society and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Berne, Switzerland, 26–27 March 2003.
10. Discussant Expert, Asian Regional Expert Consultation on Rural Women in the Knowledge Society, FAO, Hyderabad, India, 16–19 December 2002.

## Teaching & Supervision

Teaching Philosophy/Approach: I approach teaching as a process of learning to see society from more than one standpoint. Students are encouraged to connect social theory with lived realities, especially those of Malaysia, Southeast Asia and Borneo. My teaching combines critical reading, ethnographic sensitivity, discussion, field-based examples and research-led inquiry. I emphasise that methods are not merely technical procedures but ways of producing responsible and situated knowledge. In supervision, I work closely with students to sharpen their research questions, strengthen conceptual clarity and develop confidence as independent scholars. International students are supported in understanding local contexts while being encouraged to bring comparative perspectives into the classroom and their research.

Sample of Courses Taught:

SSF3103 – Final Year Project I

SSF3044 – Sociology of Development

SSF3034 – Final Year Project II

SSF2034 – Social Theory

Additional teaching areas: Introduction to Anthropology and Sociology; Social Movements; Political Thought; International Organisations; ASEAN Politics; Contemporary Issues in International Relations.

### **Supervision Capacity:**

#### **Current PhD Students**

- 1) Localization of Sustainable Development Goals within the framework of a local conglomerate - Cahya Mata Sarawak - King Michael King
- 2) Research on School Administration Opinions, Attitude and the Role they Play in Emphasizing Environmental Awareness and Conservation through Extra - Maybal Polycarp
- 3) Women, Work, and the Green Economy: A Case Study of Homestay and Basket-Making Entrepreneurs in Bario, Sarawak - Lilla Raja
- 4) From Ritual to Resilience: Exploring Gawai Nyobeng in the Context of Indigeneity, Policy, and Economic Development - Malcolm Mindang Anak Ronny
- 5) Sarawak's ESG Transition and the Governance Gap - Esther Mujan Balan
- 6) Building Progress: Analyzing State Policies for Dam Construction and Their Socioeconomic and Environmental Impacts - Evvia Veno
- 7) From Risk Assessment to Social Return On Investment (SROI): An Integrated Approach to Community Disaster Resilience - Brian Brandon Majirik
- 8) To Be a Sa'ban: An Identity Despite the Odds? - Alasdair Donald Clayre Blance
- 9) Governance and Sustainability Challenges in Indigenous Communities of Borneo: A Study of the Penan and Punan Communities' Displacement, Deforestation, and Resilience under ESG Principles - Johaness Tenny

- 10) Microfinance and Women's Empowerment in Uganda: A Case Study of Market Women in Kampala City - Maureen Nansamba

### **Master's Students – 2**

1. Integrated Digital Geoportal for Community-based Cultural Heritage Research and Management - Bryan Anderson Anak Wis
2. From Jakarta to Nusantara: A National Resilience Strategy? - Hasani Edelin

Undergraduate's Students - 10

### **Selected Publications:**

1. [Changing borders and identities in the Kelabit Highlands: Anthropological reflections on growing up in a Kelabit village near the international border](https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=MusSMVoEAAAAJ&citation_for_view=MusSMVoEAAAAJ:LkGwnXOMwfcC)  
([https://scholar.google.com/citations?view\\_op=view\\_citation&hl=en&user=MusSMVoEAAAAJ&citation\\_for\\_view=MusSMVoEAAAAJ:LkGwnXOMwfcC](https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=MusSMVoEAAAAJ&citation_for_view=MusSMVoEAAAAJ:LkGwnXOMwfcC))
2. Masyarakat Kelabit: Tradisi dan Perubahan Sosial 2026  
([https://scholar.google.com/citations?view\\_op=view\\_citation&hl=en&user=MusSMVoEAAAAJ&cstart=20&pagesize=80&citation\\_for\\_view=MusSMVoEAAAAJ:NJ774b8OgUMC](https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=MusSMVoEAAAAJ&cstart=20&pagesize=80&citation_for_view=MusSMVoEAAAAJ:NJ774b8OgUMC))
3. Challenges and opportunities in introducing information and communication technologies to the Kelabit community of North Central Borneo  
([https://scholar.google.com/citations?view\\_op=view\\_citation&hl=en&user=MusSMVoEAAAAJ&citation\\_for\\_view=MusSMVoEAAAAJ:u5HHmVD\\_uO8C](https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=MusSMVoEAAAAJ&citation_for_view=MusSMVoEAAAAJ:u5HHmVD_uO8C))
4. [Digital inclusion of the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia: Remote virtual mechanism for usability of telecentres amongst indigenous peoples](https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=MusSMVoEAAAAJ&citation_for_view=MusSMVoEAAAAJ:SdhP9T11ey4C)  
([https://scholar.google.com/citations?view\\_op=view\\_citation&hl=en&user=MusSMVoEAAAAJ&citation\\_for\\_view=MusSMVoEAAAAJ:SdhP9T11ey4C](https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=MusSMVoEAAAAJ&citation_for_view=MusSMVoEAAAAJ:SdhP9T11ey4C))

### **Selected Research Projects & Signature Initiatives:**

#### **Selected Funded Research Projects**

Major programme funding: Across her major community-based digital inclusion programmes, particularly eBario and the Telecentre Programme for Orang Asli (TPOA), she held lead roles in large-scale research and development initiatives with cumulative funding approaching RM10 million. Alongside these were smaller targeted grants supporting specific strands of research, including community mapping, Indigenous knowledge, heritage documentation and participatory research.

#### **Project leadership**

1. Telecentre Programme for Orang Asli West Malaysia (GL/I03/07/2013/JAKOA(07)) — Head / Project Leader. A major community-centred digital inclusion initiative extending telecentre access and ICT-enabled community development to Orang Asli communities in Peninsular Malaysia.
2. Climate Change, Biodiversity and Borneo's Indigenous Peoples (GL/I05/MCUN/06/2020) — Head / Project Leader. Research linking Indigenous knowledge, biodiversity, livelihoods and climate-change challenges in Borneo.
3. Formulating a Digital Heritage Model for Community-based Preservation and Management of Cultural and Archaeological Sites in the Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak (I05/FRGS/2145/2021) — Head / Project Leader. Community-based digital heritage research integrating cultural landscapes, archaeological sites, Indigenous knowledge and participatory stewardship.

#### **Selected collaborative projects**

1. Impact Evaluation Study (Bario, Long Lamai, Ba'kelalan and Long Kerong) (GL/I03/IMPACT/2016) — Co-Researcher.
2. Capacity to Organize Massive Public Educational Opportunities in Universities of Southeast Asia (COMPETEN-SEA) (GL/I03/COMPETEN-SEA/2017) — Co-Researcher.
3. Social Innovation for Sarawak's Hinterland (I03/TDG/1762/2018) — Co-Researcher.
4. Forts and Its People: Social History and Collective Memory of Local Communities in Sarawak (GL/F06/FORT/2019) — Co-Researcher.
5. Formulation of TRIZ-based Sustainability-Oriented Innovation Model for Indigenous Knowledge Management (I03/FRGS/2009/2020) — Co-Researcher.
6. Ethnomedicine and Its Potential in Sarawak Borneo (UNI/F06/VC-HIRG/85497/P07-02/2022) — Co-Researcher.
7. Enhancing People, Public and Private Partnership Model in Managing Santubong Archaeological Heritage Site, Sarawak (UNI/F06/PILOT/85568/2023) — Co-Researcher.

#### **Pioneering & Signature Initiatives**

1. eBario and Highlands Digital Transformation — Team Leader of the award-winning eBario Project (December 2000–October 2004), a pioneering rural ICT initiative that explored community-centred Internet access and development in Bario, Sarawak. This work became the foundation for subsequent rural digital transformation initiatives centred on connectivity, telecentres, digital inclusion, community participation and the transformation of digital infrastructure into community knowledge and innovation platforms.
2. eBorneo Knowledge Fair (eBKF) — pioneering community-engaged knowledge exchange that brings researchers, policymakers, practitioners and Indigenous communities together in rural

settings, strengthening community voice, reciprocal learning and applied research partnerships.

3. Bario Food & Cultural Festival (Pesta Nukenen Bario) — one of the pioneers involved in establishing and developing a community-led platform linking Kelabit food heritage, culture, sustainable tourism, local livelihoods and stewardship of the highland landscape.
4. The Telecentre Programme for Orang Asli (TPOA) Peninsular Malaysia — community-centred digital inclusion and empowerment work in Peninsular Malaysia; the programme was shortlisted for the Times Higher Education Asia Technology Innovation of the Year Award in 2019.
5. Community-Led MOOCs — collaborative development of a participatory lifelong-learning model in which rural and Indigenous communities act as community scholars, facilitators, learners and co-producers of knowledge.
6. Kelabit Highlands Cultural Sites Mapping, Community GIS & Digital Heritage — Major Long-Term Research Programme. A sustained programme of community-based research documenting cultural, archaeological and historically significant sites across the Kelabit Highlands. Beginning with participatory cultural-site mapping and community GIS, the work has progressively developed into research on digital heritage, community-based preservation and management, Indigenous knowledge, cultural landscape stewardship and Indigenous approaches to the governance of heritage data. The programme has generated successive research projects, collaborations, publications and methodological development, and now forms an important foundation for her work on Digital Heritage Knowledge-Weaving and community-led heritage futures.
7. Social Impact Assessment of the LitSara® Indigenous Community Livelihood Programme — assessment of livelihood change, empowerment, inclusion, Traditional Knowledge transmission and ecological sustainability with Sarawak Biodiversity Centre and participating communities.
8. Demystifying Nature-based Solutions (Forest Carbon) among Indigenous Communities in Marudi, Baram — led an IBS multidisciplinary initiative to make Forest Carbon and related global climate frameworks more understandable and meaningful to Indigenous village communities.
9. Thinking from Borneo / Digital Heritage Knowledge-Weaving — ongoing conceptual work positioning Borneo as a site of theory production and advancing relational approaches to Indigenous knowledge, digital heritage and stewardship.

#### **Awards, Honours & Professional Recognition**

1. Fellow of the Academy of Sciences Malaysia (FASc), Social Sciences and Humanities — elected in recognition of distinguished contributions to social anthropology, Indigenous

studies, digital inclusion and community-centred innovation.

2. Pingat Darjah Utama Bintang Sarawak — Pegawai Bintang Sarawak (PBS), conferred by Tuan Yang Terutama Yang di-Pertua Negeri Sarawak, 14 February 2024.
3. Anugerah Kumulatif Tertinggi Penerbitan Dalam Jurnal Berimpak (Bidang Sains Sosial/Sastera), 2023.
4. Shortlisted, Times Higher Education Asia Technology Innovation of the Year — “Telecentre Program for Orang Asli,” 2019.
5. Gold Medal, iD-MAP (Interactive Digital Map), PECIPTA 2019, International Conference and Exposition on Inventions by Institutions of Higher Learning, Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia.
6. Gold Award, iD-MAP (Interactive Digital Map), AICAD 2018, 2nd International Conference of Art and Design — Invention, Innovation & Design (IID).
7. Grand Winner, Best Telecentre Innovation category — eBario Innovation Village, 1st Global Telecentre Awards, Telecentre.org Foundation, 2013.
8. Global Community Choice, Best Telecentre Innovation category — eBario Innovation Village, 1st Global Telecentre Awards, Telecentre.org Foundation, 2013.
9. Selected for biographical inclusion in the Encyclopedia of Successful People in Malaysia, Britishpedia, 7th Edition — biography published in the encyclopedia and Britishpedia online platform.

#### **Media & Public Engagement:**

1. **Panellist** for 2026 IdeaXchange Unity in Action: Harmoni-Mesra for Sejahtera Malaysia
2. **Facilitator** For the Community Centric Digital Government (CCDG) Journey (22<sup>nd</sup> October 2025)
3. **Speaker** for 2025 United Nations (UN) Kick-Off Asia Pacific Consultation on Indigenous Data Governance
4. **Speaker** for 2025 Workshop Bytes and Biomes : Navigating the Digital-Environment Nexus in Southeast Asia, University of Singapore
5. **Speaker** For International Seminar on Celebration of Peace: To Commemorate At The 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Peace Making Ceremony In Kapit (6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> December 2024)
6. **Panelist** at the 37<sup>th</sup> ASM IdeaXchange “Indigenous cultures,practices and views from Borneo towards the promotion of Planetary Health” (31<sup>st</sup> July 2023)
7. **Speaker** For Seminar on Ethnicity and Identity in Sabah for Policy Makers in Conjunction with Sabah State-Level Malaysia Day Celebration 2022 (21<sup>st</sup> February 2023)
8. **Speaker** for SBC Traditional Knowledge (TK) Seminar 2023
9. **Director and convenor** of Institute of Borneo Studies programmes linking Borneo scholarship with policy, community and public engagement.

10. **Contributor** to national and regional discussions on Indigenous data governance, digital inclusion, cultural heritage, community-centred government and planetary health.
11. **Regular speaker, moderator and resource person** for government agencies, universities, civil society organisations and Indigenous community forums in Malaysia and internationally.
12. **Features** Rainforest Child in the Two-Way Ticket, an ITV UK and Unicef Programme 1981; Barefoot Anthropologist, a BBC 2007 BBC documentary on Tom Harrison

#### **Languages of Instruction/Communication:**

1. English – Teaching, research supervision, academic writing, conference presentations, and international collaboration.
2. Bahasa Malaysia – Teaching, community engagement, public presentations, and professional communication.
3. Kelabit – Community engagement, fieldwork, and Indigenous knowledge research.

#### **Past & Present International Collaborations:**

1. University of Cambridge, United Kingdom
2. Cornell University, United States
3. National Gallery Singapore
4. National University of Singapore, Singapore
5. Goethe-Institut Malaysia
6. University of Queensland
7. Shinshu University, Japan
8. National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan
9. Academy of Sciences Malaysia
10. Sarawak Biodiversity Centre
11. Borneo Research Council