Restless Spirits

north borneo

Text by

Bente Delmas

Paintings by

Sarah Lim

Toihaan Publishing Company
Kota Kinabalu

2000

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Tohaan Publishing Company Sdn. Bhd.
A913, 9th Floor, Wisma Merdeka,
P.O. Box 13908,
88846 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.

First published 2000

Restless Spirits
Text by Bente Delmas
Illustrations by Sarah Lim

Design and layout by Sarah Lim and Bente Delmas

Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Bente Delmas
Restless spirits / text by Bente Delmas ; paintings by Sarah Lim.
ISBN 983-40421-0-8
1. Ethnology—Sabah—Social life and customs. 2. Indigenous peoples—Sabah—Social life and customs. I. Lim, Sarah. II. Title.
305.800959521

Printed in Malaysia.

Foreword

In a land as culturally diverse as Sabah, seeing is believing. Set against one of the most enthralling mixtures of nature's many splendours, the tapestry of life in this northern "corner" of Borneo is a rich one. But where would or might one begin, if one were not from a culture indigenous to Sabah?

The views of life presented here are a combination of two talents, both amply focused on learning about the background and the business of everyday living among what would be the most colourful peoples and traditions that could be encountered. From afar, the Sabah scenery might be mistakenly assumed to be dominated by Mount Kinabalu, orang-utan and a cultural repertoire of several interesting dances. However, setting foot in this domain quickly establishes that the fascination occupies an almost never-ending realm. For Sabah is a land of many cultures, contrasts and reassuring comforts. From wherever one comes, the simple beauty of such an incredible range of subjects beckons the curiosity—from dance to superstition, language to dress, crafts to livelihoods, and seas to mountains—and in a moment one begins, even when not quite ready, to observe, absorb and understand.

It is the nature of life in this land that captivates. Sabah is a whirlpool of attractions. And the guides and commentaries, aplenty since two centuries ago, are astonishing in range and content. So one looks for a cross-section, if that is at all possible, recognising the diverse ways in which different cultures can discover and interpret other cultures. Here, the co-makers of this account have tried to record what they have discovered for themselves, a testimony of how refreshing and enjoyable Sabah has been, and is, in their eyes.

Tengku Datuk Dr Zainal Adlin
Chairman,
Sabah Tourism Promotion Corporation

Preface

"Restless Spirits" was born one early morning in a coffee shop in Kota Kinabalu. It started off as a blurred idea of portraying the aspects of life in Sabah that surprise, touch and amuse us. Inspired by the people, an exceptionally colourful lot, our blurred ideas slowly became fixed in frames.

Sarah has lived in Sabah for the last 11 years. She spends her days painting on her cool terrace from where she has a magnificent view of Mount Kinabalu. I am a novice in Sabah as this is my third year. My journalistic background, Sarah's paintings and a joined restlessness seemed to be the perfect match. Since the decision of actually making a book, we have had a great time exploring Sabah and its people.

We are not social anthropologists and the stories presented are based on what we have seen and been told. One day we received a serious warning. "Don't go to that village. They will take your genitals and place them on your shoulder if they don't like you". We were lucky. They liked us!

Sabah is the place where everybody has a story to tell. They all know somebody that knows somebody that has seen somebody that has experienced something. We have used some of those stories and apologize if our interpretation is imprecise. The cultural gap is huge and something like 100 different dialects makes understanding complicated. Our book covers only few indigenous groups and we apologize to all those we did not mention.

We hope you will enjoy your journey through our book. It might be a romantic view, seen by two romantics, but that is how we want it to be.

Introduction

Sarah and I are Orang Putihs, white people and are not to be mixed up with a more native creature—the Orang Utan, man of the forest. The Orang Putih came to the northern tip of Borneo in the 16th century. The natives were so impressed by the size of their noses and bellies that they named the Proboscis monkey—the least attractive of its kind, with a huge red nose and a matching belly—the Dutch monkey.

Members of the Orang Putih "tribe," which includes anybody with white skin, are not recognised for stunning beauty. Our Cyrano de Bergerac features and pinkish, freckled skin are, amongst the golden splendor of the natives, simply not regarded as pretty.

The indigenous people of Sabah are closely linked with their kampung (village), as the various tribes come from different kampungs and in many cases the name of the village clarifies to which tribe they belong. The Orang Putih "kampung" is huge. Distributed from Australia to Norway, South Africa to America, it is a global kampung linked in one all-purpose name, "Orang Putih." Even though the geography doesn't tie our "tribe" together, a wish for adventure does. And the white man's tales of this bizarre land has challenged many dreamy individuals throughout the centuries.

The first brave explorers were nothing less than astonished. They arrived in a land where leaves fell from the trees and walked away and where people perceived half-animals, half-humans. One overwhelmed Norwegian insisted he found humans with tails. (Carl Bock 1881: The Head Hunters of Borneo).

They discovered Terra Incognita and sent excited letters home. Many of their experiences were published in Europe, but nobody would jeopardize their life to verify the stories of the head hunting, piracy and cannibalism of North Borneo which were without doubt, very upsetting. The spine-chilling news got plenty of attention and since then, nothing much has happened to change or remove the exotic label. The Orang Putih wrote about a land remote and blurred, promising and spine-tingling, somewhere where fables and the truth were totally muddled and where they explored the fantasies from their childhood.

Fortunately, things have changed as the "wild man" has been "tamed" for nearly two centuries. Today it is most unlikely for anyone to cut a path through the jungle and discover some unknown tribe and show the famous lighter and mirror. Nobody will be carried away by such "novelties" anymore, as the local people have 4-wheel drives and are linked to the inter-net.

Still, there is something about Sabah, something mystical, impenetrable and wild. It is nature and geography at its best—beautiful diverse rain forests, high mountains, deep valleys, dense jungle, swamp forests, mighty rivers and 14,000 km of coastline.

The amazing mix of indigenous groups blended with the rich geography can carry anyone away in their imagination.

The British first came in 1882 and set up the North Borneo Chartered Company. Exploitation of Sabah's resources such as diamonds, gold, minerals, oil, rubber, and timber, was the aim. The obstacles were plentiful, and so varied that the Shangri La of natural treasures became a economic disaster. The company was more successful in teaching the locals "proper" manners. Since head hunting was expelled from the English "guide of good conduct," they were told the impoliteness of the habit, and eventually, gave it up.

Few landmarks remain from the British Colonial period (1882–1963) as Sabah was severely bombed during the Second World War. In 1964, after independence from the British, Sabah helped form the Malaysian Federation together with its neighbouring state Sarawak. They are the two most unspoilt states of Malaysia, but there is a time limit if you want to discover something irreplaceable. Speedy development in Malaysia and the vision of becoming an industrialised nation by the year 2020, may put an end to the romantic image of Sabah as one of the last strongholds of human diversity.

The city of Kota Kinabalu is Sabah's capital. I arrived with the old explorers memoirs as my reference and the modern architecture of the city came as a shock. To my personal thrill I soon discovered that the new city is filled with amazing contrasts and that ancient superstition and high tech live side by side amongst the shopping centres. The local people are still getting used to the modern lifestyle. This adjustment is for many a huge step away from their traditions.

It is Sunday morning in Gaya Street in Kota Kinabalu. The weekly street fair portrays the incredible mix of people and beliefs. A medicine man is selling traditional medicine and is gathering a huge pile of 50 Ringgit notes. So is the next stand selling VCDs.

In the distance, the impressive cloud-dotted Mount Kinabalu (4095 m), the resting place of all spirits, is keeping a close eye on the market activities.
The doctor turns towards the mighty mountain and mumbles a spiritual blessing before he hands over the mysterious cure.
He is a Hill Dusun, a tribe living on lower slopes of the mountain. He and his clients make up this fascinating, peaceful and multicultural population. They are definitely a mixed people in a mixed world. Some women are wearing Muslim headscarfs, some are wearing miniskirts, and others are in the traditional sarongs.

The population of Sabah is roughly two million. Some experts claim there are at least 32 indigenous groups and around 100 different dialects (the Orang Putih group is not counted). This is a significant number considering that the indigenous groups are only one third of the population. The remainder is made up of people with origins in West Malaysia, China, India, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Scientists are still arguing over the real number of tribes and I am certainly not interfering with that discussion. The certainty

is that intermarriages down the centuries, with few written records of the past have made it difficult to define the ethnic groups.

The Sabahans may have merged their identity with all this intermingling. In exchange they have created harmony. Not many places on earth can promote religious toleration. One church in Kota Kinabalu welcomes 14 different faiths.

A non-judgemental attitude carefully preserves the tolerance amongst the different faiths. This is combined with an easygoing, relaxed approach as time passes a little slower here and no one seems to mind if the bus is late or never arrives at all.

I believe the Orang Putihs have a lot to learn in Sabah as the western logic we apply to life is not necessarily the only and best solution. The local people's way of reasoning is uncomplicated as they accept their destinies with ease and cheerfulness.

I genuinely envy their pleasure and wish I could insert some of this unfussiness into my own life.

Some of the stress-free living has crept into my life in Sabah though. This has definitely something to do with the soporific tropical climate.

The American writer Agnes Keith put it this way in her famous book (Agnes Keith, 1939, Land Below the Wind)

" The climate of North Borneo is warm. Day in and day out the temperature averages about 88 degrees Fahrenheit, and the humidity is very high. It is not a distressing climate, but it makes you too content to sit and do nothing. If you go to bed tired at night, you wake up so in the morning. There is never anything in the air to make you say briskly: How invigorating! One may say: How delicious, how fragrant, but one sits down and relaxes even while saying it."

Agnes Keith got to the heart of the matter. It is very warm and the heat is a valid excuse to postpone nearly everything and wait for the rain to cool down the humid air.

The humid air slows us down. In fact it slows everything down and that might be the reason why the air still seems to keep a vital grip on something that holds the ancient superstitions alive. Something never mentioned in the history books. Something undefined that bonds the people.

Something that says;
Don't worry, be happy!"

The Kadazan

He was singing in the darkness. A beautiful, melancholic song, sung on the top of his clear baritone. Mattheus, our Kadazan guard, enthusiastically sang the same delightful song every night. I knew only the title, "Jambatan Tamparuli," but imagined those foreign words to be the most passion filled love story or maybe a hymn dedicated to the beauty of Sabah. The, for me, highly romantic song, "Jambatan Tamparuli" woke me up many times. Little did I know that Mattheus spent his nights singing about a missing shoe. That all those wonderful and tender verses told the following: A women went to the market in Tamparuli and bought new shoes. She lost one in the river crossing the jambatan (bridge). That endless song is recounting her loss and difficulties in crossing the bridge with only one shoe.

Mattheus belongs to the biggest indigenous group in Sabah, called the Kadazandusun. The group contains 10 different tribes, 14 different languages, and roughly 400,000 people. Mattheus is a pure Kadazan from Penampang outside Kota Kinabalu. His people were in former times forced inland by the frequent raids of the brutal pirates that struck horror into the inhabitants by the South China Sea. The numerous pirate attacks and slave-taking of the past explain why most Kadazan are still to be found in the interior.

Head hunting used to be considered a well accepted activity until the head hunters were converted by the Roman Catholic Church in the late eighteen hundreds. The brave missionaries literally risked their heads in their effort to spread their message inside the jungle. Initially they had to convince Dintas, the female leader of the Kadazan people. Father Jackson made the trip to meet Dintas and was astonished by the power of the hardworking queen. She listened carefully to Jackson's message and decided it was good. Her approval opened the doors to the mission, even though she never became a Christian herself.

Dintas kept her animistic faith, which today is a dying belief amongst the Kadazan. A few elderly Bobohizans (animistic priestesses) still perform the spiritual rites, but their profession is definitely out of date. Young Christian girls don't choose the 10-year spiritual study as a career and the strictly oral rituals disappear with the Bobohizans. The scientists and linguists literally race against life itself trying to record the animistic chants.

In former times the bringing home of a fresh head would require many jars of the traditional tapai—a rice wine without any ambitions of getting into the list of "fine wines." The lack of fresh heads nowadays has not reduced their tapai production, only their reason for celebration as the Kadazan are and have always been, a fun-loving people. Harvest festivals and weddings are elaborately celebrated. Gong-beating, eating, dancing and tapai drinking the order of the day. The harvest thanksgiving celebrations reach every little kampong (village) and last for a whole month, in May or June. During this extended party period, they dress in their elegant black and gold costumes and perform the Sumazau (traditional dance).
A loud cry from a male starts the toe and sole movements of the females. Accompanied by gongs, the male dancers lift their arms, cry and move exactly like the hornbill. They always make the dance seem so simple, moving up and down light as feathers. I used to think I moved with the same elegance until my husband asked if I tried to imitate a Boeing 747. (I have not danced the Sumazau in public since that loving comment).

The Kadazan are no longer only devoted to their farms in the interior, but have vital political power and are an essential part of the modern Sabah.

They make a curious blend of new and old. Once I saw a young Kadazan man chatting away on his mobile phone from his kampung house while his grand mother was performing an animistic ritual in the background. The old folks' ancient culture, mixed up with the gadgets of the new generation is surely making a fascinating picture.

A story from a kampung in Kuala Penyu, south of Kota Kinabalu goes like this: The Kadazans, the Malays and the Chinese each received their own form of writing from God. They had to cross a deep river to get home. The Malay safeguarded his writing inside his songkok. The Chinese held it high over his head and the Kadazan simply kept it in his pocket. The Kadazan words naturally got soaked and disappeared forever.

A Chinese told me this legend and the Kadazan version is without doubt very different.

I am still wondering though, does the loss in that legend have something to do with Mattheus lovely song about something as unpoetic as a shoe? On the other hand, is it any better to make one about a Yellow Submarine?

The Last Bobohizan

Gun is a priestess of the animistic belief. She must be more that eighty years old, her body is tiny, her face all wrinkled and she is tired. Very tired, but she can't claim her retirement yet, as there is nobody to take over her job. She is a medium and one of those rare people working as a communicator between the living and dead. She signifies the very end of the animistic belief in Sabah.

"Come on Gun, you'll be late," yells the driver and Gun is doing maximum speed on her weak legs. She "runs" down the hill dressed in a black sarong, a black little blouse, some charms and a frightening spear. Soon she will be the centre of a three day long ritual. She spits out her betel nut and enters the car. She looks at me and wonders what I am doing there, but says nothing. "She can not speak as she has to save her strength," says the driver.

We are going to Montsopiad Cultural Village. A Kadazan village, 20 minutes outside Kota Kinabalu, functioning as a living museum where the traditions of the tribe are kept alive. Gun is having a little nap beside me. She needs it, as the following three days are going to be a marathon. Every seventh years all spirits around Montsopiad communicate with the humans through the Bobohizan. This is an ancient agreement, and the spirits occasion to complain, get some presents and have a good meal. This is going to be the last time the Bobohizans perform this ceremony as they are old and there is nobody to take over. This message has to be explained to each of the spirits in order to maintain the peace in Montsopiad.

The spirits are plentiful, 42 skulls are hanging in the roof in the skull house. They are all enemies, obtained in disputes, by the fearsome warrior Montsopiad (16–17th Century). The spirits in the skulls need special awareness, as well as those outside the house.

Gun is coughing and wakes up. We arrive and she leaves the car to meet up with her colleagues. They are all students or novices, as they have not finished their long studies to become real Bobohizans. They are the same age as Gun and one of them is very nervous. "I don't know if I have the knowledge and remember everything," she says. The others calm her down and say it will be fine and that she knows enough.

The coming three days are one long impressive performance. Gun and her students are doing their best to calm down, negotiate and meet the needs of the numerous spirits.

They are invited down from Mount Kinabalu, as the mountain is their resting place. When they arrive they enter Gun. Her legs start to shiver and she speaks and chants an archaic language. She sacrifices blood from two hens and two pigs, she cries out when the spirits are too demanding, chants endless tirades in the secret language and dances around the skull house light as a feather. She is old and she looks even older after her show and both Sarah and I hope she can finally retire.

A woman stays close to Gun for the whole of the three days. She is getting as much attention as the Bobohizan as she is a remarkable character. She is dressed in a peculiar way with a very short skirt, a very skimpy top and an amazing amount of jewellery and make up. She is around 60 years old and shows a keen interest in the ritual. She is a local, living in Las Vegas. This is the first time she has come back to Sabah since she moved many, many years ago. She came back to what she left, to the rituals she remembered from her kampung where her grandmother was the Bobohizan. The betel nuts keep her busy as she is preparing them cautiously for Gun and the students. "This has always been my job," she say with great enthusiasm, just as though she only left yesterday and this kind of ritual happens every day.

The skull house feels crowded. There are not so many people though, as most of them have converted to Christianity and Islam and do not attend pagan rituals any more. It still feels crowded, but it is definitely not the right time to ask Gun, "Excuse me Gun, how is the attendance today?" She is busy chanting, kneeling in front of a scared pig tied to a bamboo stick. The poor beast is facing death and has just seen his friend suffer and eventually pass out as a sacrifice to the blood-thirsty spirits. Blood, sweat, dust, and only Gun knows what makes it hard to breath inside the skull house. We decide enough is enough and escape out in the sunshine. The lady from Las Vegas waves a little goodbye and we leave the gongs and the spirits behind.

Only time will show if Gun and her students succeeded in the grand task of bringing all the spirits to eternal peace. We will see the outcome of the peace conference in seven years time. Will they rest in peace when it is due for the ancient agreement or will they postpone Gun's retirement for another seven years?

The Kadazan Medicine Man

"I don't know why I can heal people. I often ask myself, why me?" says the Kadazan medicine man. It is early afternoon and he is getting ready for his first patients. The waiting patients have picked a number, just like in the bank. We came first and have number one neatly written on ours. It feels embarrassing to take up his time asking questions, as the room behind us gets crowded with suffering people. Some are carried, some walk with difficulty, others are in visible pain. They all take a number and sit down on the benches in the temple-like room. The "doctor" is sitting on a straw mat, behind a coal cooker surrounded by herbs, plants, needles, small red knots, bottles and smoke.

"It came to me through a dream ten years ago. I was asleep and dreamt about a man I did not know. I heard his name many times and knew he was in pain. When I woke up I went to see a friend and told him about my dream. He said he knew the man and we went to see him. Within one hour I was somehow inside that man and removed his pain. That's how I understood I had received a gift of healing," he explains.

Our scheduled time is over, we thank him and join the others on the benches. Number two kneels in front of him and he looks straight into her eyes. His face is slowly changing from someone pleasant to someone very ugly. He pulls out invisible stuff from her body, chants and does hand movements over her head. An assistant is holding up a round red pillow behind the patient's back, preventing the spirit from passing through her body and hitting us, seated on the benches. He suddenly gets hold of something and throws it over to one of his many students seated in front of a multi-religious altar. She catches the "thing" and starts to shiver violently and tries to get rid of the "thing" through singing mantras and touching the many statues on her altar. Buddha, Shiva and others are represented. The magic is broken by the ringing sound of the telephone. The medicine man stops the nerve-racking treatment immediately, and picks up the phone. After a short conversation he puts down the phone and finishes the cure. He rubs his hands with a strong oil, picks up a red knot, chants and hands it over to the woman. The red knot is protection against evil forces and will look after his patient until the next session.

A young girl dressed in white is sitting in front of us by the altar. She is removing leaves from a branch and is one of 40 students learning the art of mental and physical healing. "Do you see the skinny woman over there? She couldn't walk and all the doctors in town had given up on her. Now, she walks and is getting stronger every day", whispers the student respectfully.

The "doctor" now wears his normal amiable face. His assistant asks number three to come up on the platform. A couple, with a dollhouse between them kneel in front of the "doctor." A little chant, some hand movements and the obligatory red knot are enough to clear the miniature house of bad spirits. We consider case number three quite undemanding compared to the previous patient.

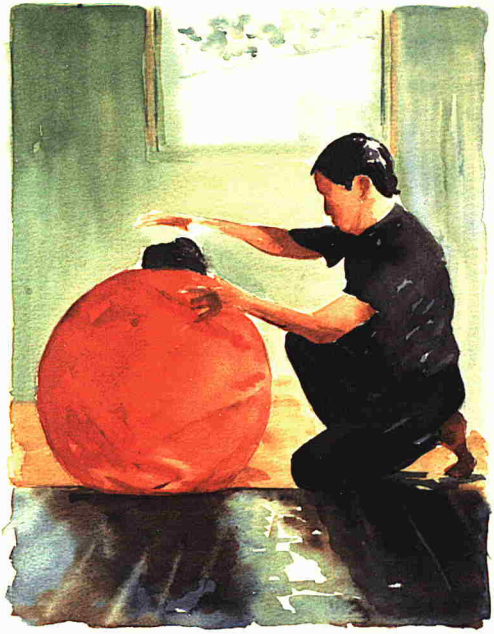
Nobody pays the medicine man. Before we left, he told us: "This is my mission and I

do it simply to help. A box of needles is all I ask for."

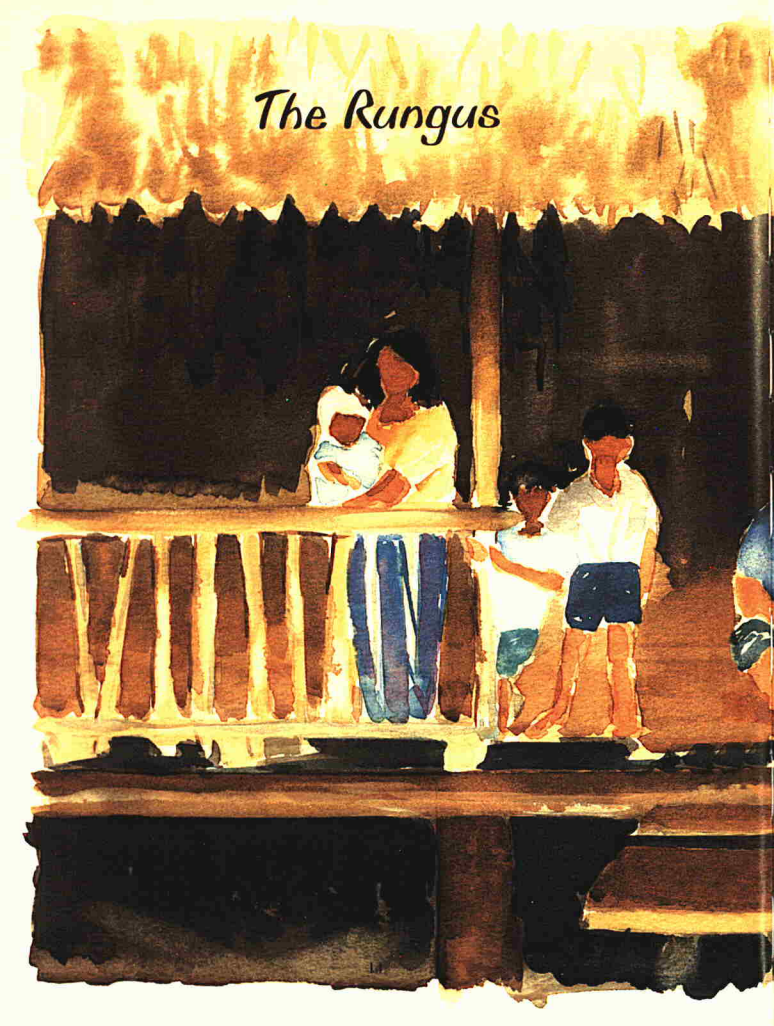
His mission is tough.

"I work one day and rest the next, then I go back to work again. I use all my energy in re-establishing both the physical and mental balance," he says and reaches out for the constantly ringing phone. The familiar ringing of the phone is somehow reassuring and makes the place less weird.

We can't pay in needles, as we generally don't carry boxes of them around. We leave the highly spiritual room with a red knot each. The big question remains, what to do with a red knot? Is it prudent to jeopardize our luck by throwing it away, or should we hold on to the knot forever?

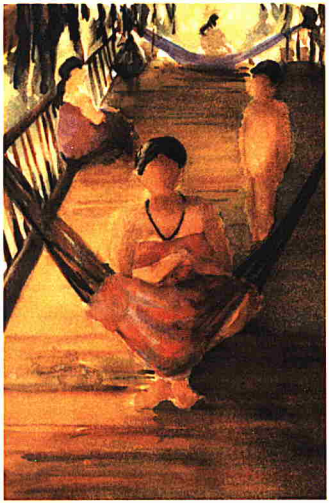


The Rungus



The Rungus people live in the Kudat peninsula on the northern tip of Sabah. A sub-group of the Kadazan family, the 40,000 Rungus mainly live in longhouses, speaking their own language and performing their ancient rituals. They are holding on to a culture often described as untouched by modernisation.

Sarah and I headed north, loaded with sweets for the children and a great feeling of adventure.



"You see longhouse, follow me," said a bus driver we met in a little market along the road to Kudat. His bus was filled with small curious schoolchildren screaming: "What is your name and where do you come from?" The muddy track demanded all our attention. Sometimes there was no track, just mud. The bus driver turned left and pointed further into the jungle. "Go there," he yelled and disappeared in sludge and waving children. After some challenging kilometres of tricky manoeuvring we found some longhouses, camouflaged in jungle materials of bark, palm leaves and bamboo. A man sat on the stairs, studying the smoke from his homemade cigarette. A puppy had passed out beside him. I asked him if the puppy is OK. "Puppy... ohhh that one dead," he muttered and got back to the pastime of cigarette-smoke-watching.

"Can we please come in?" we asked, and he nodded something that sounded more like yes than no. We decided the grin expressed genuine hospitality. The ladder was carefully checked as we climbed up. Each time someone chooses to build separately from the longhouse, a pig is slaughtered and the blood smeared on the ladder. There was no blood, but a bright sign on the top saying: "Patricia and David's wedding suite." The young couple had recently married and moved into the end compartment. Their door was closed and a group of betel-nut chewing women with red-stained teeth safeguarded their privacy.

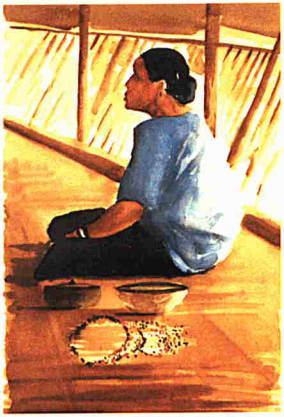
It was dark in there. Strips of sunlight danced through the bamboo slats and gave just enough brightness to highlight the people's silhouettes along the gallery. The activity was astonishing. Children raced up and down, up and down and their joyful screams gave the dim surroundings a cheerful atmosphere. The women threaded beads in the semi-darkness. How they found the right colour of the tiny beads was far outside our comprehension. Hundreds of microscopic plastic beads are threaded into an

intricate design that eventually becomes a vibrant necklace. Each necklace tells a story of love, hunting or other aspects of life. Every so often, the women reached out for their beautiful brass betel nut boxes. It seemed like a full time occupation only to prepare and chew the stimulating little nut. They offered us a nut, but one glance at condition of their teeth and we turned their offer down. They giggled and continued to bead in the darkness.

Dunk, dunk, dunk, a monotonous sound came from the centre of the gallery. A young woman with a baby attached to her back was separating the rice from the husk with a tree trunk. The heavy tool moved rhythmically, one two, one two. The tiny baby was lulled to sleep by the repetitive movements.

Further down, a body disappeared in a hole in the bamboo floor. An old disabled man was feeding his chickens in a cage under the house. When he eventually lifted himself up, he greeted us with a huge black grin. His colourful headgear seemed glued to his skull and some 50 chickens were happily feeding in the hole.

The longhouse seemed to provide something for all needs, but before construction the village had to be assured the site was good.



The priestess placed seven grains of rice under a ceramic bowl for a night. All seven grains were there next morning and the site was considered good. If some were missing it would have been a bad omen. We did not meet the priestess as she was on holiday in Kuala Lumpur. Her absence confirmed the fact that the Rungus are not living on their own sheltered planet, but now and then join in the outside world, far away from seven grains and longhouses.

The longhouse is logically long, but they don't become long all at once. They start with one single apartment with a raised sleeping area and an enclosed room with a wide corridor that runs across just outside the door with a twice as wide multifunctional raised section. The family and selected friends join in and add similar apartments to the original house and it eventually becomes a longhouse. It was surprisingly cool inside.

Steven, a young boy told us that all longhouses are built on an east-west axis to keep the damp and heat outside. He sleeps on the soft bamboo floor in the raised section together with the other boys above the age of ten.

Only thin walls separates the families and the maintenance of privacy seemed difficult. For us, the lack of privacy explained why the Rungus people average only three years in the same longhouse. A young pregnant girl joined us. She is 19 years old and is expecting her fourth baby. Her situation was evidence that we were wrong and that maybe they have too much privacy.

Between the three longhouses, the day's football match was in progress. Steven excused himself and disappeared into his apartment to change. Women and children turned around in the gallery and got a fragmented view of the muddy football field. They yelled supportively to encourage their favourites. Nobody could ever guess that the players belong to a tribe living in one of the most remote parts of North Borneo. Like any team around the globe they had their numbers stitched to their T-shirts and they dream of becoming professional football players. The possibility that soccer "head-hunters," searching for new talents, will ever find their way to the Rungus longhouse is as dim as the light in the gallery. Steven, our preferred player, was number nine. Before he raced down the ladder and joined his team, he said: "We are after all, in year 2000." He looked around, shaking his head, as if he could not understand he still lives in a longhouse.

The cigarette-smoke-watcher did not let our departure or the football match interfere in his studies. The puppy, covered in flies, is hopefully removed from the main entrance by now. Apart from that, nothing much differs one day from the other in a Rungus longhouse.

Oyong, a Rungus in the City

Oyong, 29, is number seven in a row of twelve children. He comes from a longhouse in Tambuluran, a village in the Kudat region. His date of birth; 01 December, is considered a lucky number amongst the Rungus, and has given him advantages in life his sister and brothers can only dream about.

We met Oyong in a five star hotel in KK. While waiting for him in the lobby, Sarah and I blamed each other for not choosing a less pompous place as we worried he would feel lost and nervous in the luxury. We wasted our time worrying, as Oyong's first words were "I spent all night in the nightclub on the first floor."

The Rungus in front of us is very "modern." Dressed in T-shirt and trousers, with a hand-phone in his pocket, he is not precisely like the Rungus people we met before.
Oyong grew up in a longhouse, slept with all the other kids on the gallery, listened to all the ancient stories and observed sacrifices to the spirits. He was the chosen one to leave the house with 14 doors, to study and to become the pride of the family.

"I am the only one in my family to have education. The money I send back home, is a big help. I am working as a technician for the Water Company. When I come back to the village I can feel my achievement, it makes me different. My brothers and sisters envy me, and my life in the City, but for them, it is too late as they have many children. It is the seafood that makes them so fertile." (Seafood must have been his mother's favourite dish.) "When I go home I am bored after three days, there is nothing to do in Tambuluran," he says. He is regarded high above all the others and doesn't take part in the thousands of tasks that make up a living in the longhouse, like fishing, drying the fish, cultivation of rice and fruits, slaughtering and the preservation of the meat.

His family owns five buffaloes, received as a part of the bride wealth for his many sisters." My father, now passed away, used to plough the fields with them. Today they are only used to pull heavy things. Oyong is looking up for the first time.

He has been so nervous and his eyes have been glued to his shoes for the last hour.

His hand-phone rings and the short conversation seems to calm him down. He must have been thinking over and over again; "What on earth shall I say to those Orang Putihs?"

Oyong moved from the longhouse when he was 18 years old. Many things from his past are blurred, but he says without any hesitation; " My family is Christian now and we don't practice the animistic belief anymore, apart from sacrificing some chickens, pigs and buffaloes to keep the spirits happy." His words tell of an open-minded approach to Christianity where ancient beliefs are as important as the bible. "If somebody dies, the body has to be buried as soon as possible to avoid cats from jumping over him. If they do, that body will surely wake up again," says Oyong.

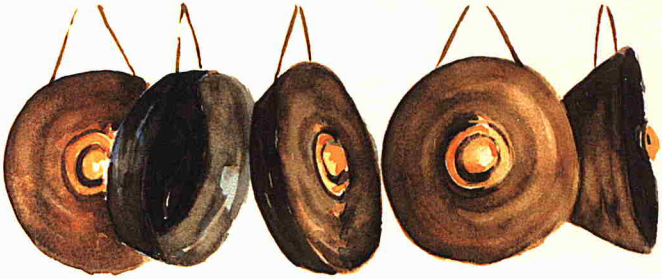
"During my father's time, crimes were severely penalized. If someone had an affair with someone else's wife, he would be placed in a bamboo fish trap (bobo) and set on the river to die." He looks up again, to see our reaction, and enjoys the feedback of disbelief and horror. "No, no, don't worry, we don't do that anymore, but the headman in the longhouse still acts as a judge. He is chosen for his knowledge of our customs, and it is up to him to solve problems." And there are many problems as life in a longhouse is a cramped existence and disputes are unavoidable.

"The continuous quarrelling was the most miserable part of my childhood," says Oyong. The paper-thin walls separating the families provide barely any privacy. Quarrels rapidly become public affairs and the headman's skill in diplomacy and customary law, is essential to calm down the fury and re-install stability. "I remember those peace-making sessions. The rule is; if any blood emerges during the dispute a chicken has to be sacrificed, if no blood, a gong will do as compensation."

All these questions are probably making him a little home sick. He is two hours away from his family, but sees them only two times a year. "What I really value amongst my people is the solidarity. They quarrel and fight, but they are there for each other when needed."

Life in Kota Kinabalu is far-away from the team-spirit in Tambuluran. Oyong has become an atypical Rungus with both the freedom and the burden to settle his own problems. Nearly, anyway, as some few precious charms given to him by his parents, guide him in the concrete jungle and reminds him, that whatever happens, he is a Rungus.

The Gong Maker



"I had a dream," he says. He is sitting on the stairs playing on an instrument with two strings (Sundatang). "In my dream I learned how to make gongs. The next morning I made my first gong and this is the result." His eyes sweep over the gong handicraft factory.

Tung tung tung, a muffled deep sound comes from the shelter where the gongs are tried out. The gong maker shakes his head. It is obviously not the perfect sound, not the sound from his dream. He is dressed in little shorts and the Rungus headgear—a square embroidered piece of cloth creatively folded and tied in a knot around his head. Tung, tung, tung, a bright smile appears and thousands of wrinkles changes his face. That's the sound of his dream.

The gongs are made of brass or bronze and were initially traded from Brunei. Tied up in the daily lives and cultural traditions of the natives, the gong is the backbone instrument in ritual music for birth, marriage, harvest, death, love, battle and storytelling.

The gongs made by the Rungus people are made from galvanized iron sheets. The more costly ones are mainly imported from Brunei. They are often used as bride wealth and we see a beautiful old gong costing 4200 ringgit.

Jasslly is related to the gong maker. He left the village in search of a more "modern" lifestyle in Kota Kinabalu. After some time he felt homesick and moved back to the village. He missed the rhythmical sound of the gongs and the close relation to nature. His huge Harley Davidson is a remainder of another life. Jasslly beats a gong, listens, beats it again and nods to himself. His dream taught-teacher nods happily from the stairway leading up to a small traditional hut. Jasslly is the right man to continue and fulfil his dream.

Next morning some gongs are displayed at a weekly market nearby. The gong maker is seriously dressed up for the occasion and little reminds me of the man on the stairway. Huge sunglasses cover most of his face and he is a frequent customer at the tapai (rice wine) stand. I ask him if he can take a photo of us. He takes ten in a row, ten blurred photos of us in the distance, seen through dark sunglasses and some litres of tapai.

The Asian Beast

There are 130 million domestic water buffaloes on earth. It must have been very difficult to count them, caked in mud with only the nostrils exposed to the world.

The buffaloes have the unfortunate reputation of being very stupid. Maybe, rather than look down on them we should envy their acceptance and patience, waiting all their lives in a filthy hole to finally end up as the main course in somebody's marriage.

The water buffalo with its massive shoulders and its barrel chest can feed an entire village. Liason, a Kadazan from Papar has four children. He married off his two boys and paid the bride wealth of 6000 Ringgit twice. The money should include the water buffalo, but as he says; "You know mam, one village invites another and they invite the next and eventually one buffalo is only enough for the starter."

He holds up his empty hands to illustrate his personal bankruptcy.

The beast used to work as a tractor in the rice fields. His day was 10 to 12 hours long, heavy, steady and enduring, without rebelling against his destiny in the murk. You don't often see them working today though, the tractor is a quicker substitute and the buffalo has time for his dearest pastime—mud bathing.

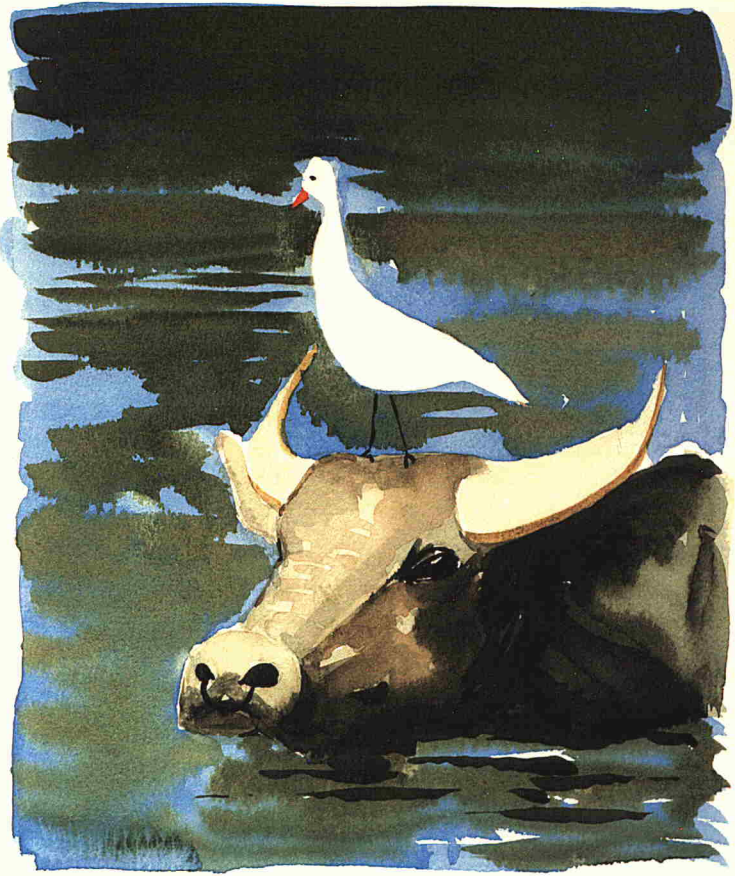
One should not underestimate the value of the creature, even though mud bathing is not regarded as a momentous occupation. The water buffalos have more serious tasks in life. He or she is a major measure of wealth and serves as well as a spiritual sacrifice. When somebody dies, a buffalo is sometimes slaughtered so his spirit can accompany the soul of the dead person to heaven. Due to the price of the animal, this does not happen often. A chicken is a much cheaper alternative.

Six nostrils are sticking out of the mud. The huge bodies are covered in stiff, brownish flakes of murk. Graceful white birds with long legs and a noble profile are working on their back. The beauty and the beast have an agreement. The gorgeous bird is keeping the giant's back free of insects, in return the bird secures a safe foundation and resting place.

Suddenly, huge bubbles rise from underwater and burst on the surface. A sound like distant thunder spoils the total stillness and the buffalo closes his eyes in pure pleasure.

What a moment... breaking the wind, mud bathing with friends and with his associated beauty defending his back against small enemies. Life is maybe not as miserable as it looks for the water buffalos.

The Dalai Lama proclaimed "If you have three moments of happiness a day, you are happy." Let's believe this theory includes the nostrils in the mud.



The East Coast Bajau

The east coast Bajau live in small pile-house settlements dotted along the South-eastern coast. I met a little group living on a tiny island outside Semporna. The only male, and obviously the Headman, had a rather extended family of three wives and 20 children.

"We stay here for a couple of months to gather shells and sea slugs to sell to a Chinese trader on the mainland," he said. Small mountains of empty shells, scattered all along the beach and the huge amount of sun drying sea slugs indicated that they soon would leave the island in search of the Chinese man.

They are known as Bajau Laut, are Muslims and are part of the large Bajau speaking group. Why and how they settled on these shores is uncertain and the following legend is a romantic version,

"Once upon a time a Johore Princess disappeared at sea during a storm. The Sultan of Johore organized a group of people to search for her. Unfortunately, the lost Princess could not be found and the group could not find their way home. They settled around the coastal areas of Borneo and you still find them there." (Clifford Sather, 1997. The Bajau Laut).

Living conditions seemed rough in the tiny offshore community. The lack of fresh water, vegetables and comfort made me wish that the Princess had never left her balcony. The headman proudly showed me the huts in between the drying sea slugs, and his second wife gave me a lesson on how to make sun block out of rice-porridge and seaweed.

Sabah's mixture of superstition, religion and traditions is fascinating. The Headman I met, believed, as his ancestors did, that destiny is pre-determined by supreme forces. To my personal dislike they also believe women are just like fish and must be disposed of quickly before they spoil. As a result they marry between the ages of 13 and 16 years old. After marriage they are expected to become pregnant before the henna nail-polish, from their wedding day, vanishes completely. Normally between three and four months.

A beautiful, chubby little baby was carefully manoeuvring around the hills of sharp shells. His mother showed me nine fingers to tell me his age. Only nine months old and already given advanced swimming lessons. A newborn has to be named within the first two weeks. Names are highly personal in nature and must be unique. The environment is often limited to the sea and the village and names from the maritime milieu are popular. Whole families are named after different boat engines such as: Johnston, Honda and Evinrude.

When bad luck prevails, the bad spirits are sent away on miniature vessels. They probably hope a good spirit will send me back to them, as money never came as easily as the day the blond woman appeared, paying a fortune for a white sand stone and believing she left with a pearl.

I left the village in a hurry when I understood that the chief wanted me as his fourth wife.

A Bajau Market

Sunday market in Kota Belud is a crowded affair. Tiny buses from every little settlement in the area are making slow progress towards the tamu (market). Some huge water buffaloes are blocking the road, but the people inside the buses, crammed like sardines, show no impatience. They simply wait on their uncomfortable seats.

Most of them are Bajau. According to their own legend, they originally came from Johor in West Malaysia. They were fishermen and settled on the coast of Semporna. Some of them, for some reason, got separated from the group, changed their lives and started up as farmers by the fertile foot of Mount Kinabalu. These people never got used to walking. Being used to boats, they soon found another means of transport, the pony. Where the pony came from is just as uncertain as where the Bajau came from. The certainty is, that they found each other and started a long-term relationship.

The Bajau and their ponies appear at a huge tamu, called a Tamu Besar, once a year, both brightly decorated in their best outfits. There are no ponies this morning, only these buffaloes moving incredible slowly. These monstrous beasts are for sale in the shadow, under huge trees nearby. A good one can cost up to 2000 Ringgit. They are a measure of wealth and an important part of the bride dowry.

The tamu in Kota Belud has been of great importance for the last 200 years, when the ethnic chiefs in the area came to a peaceful agreement and decided that the tamu

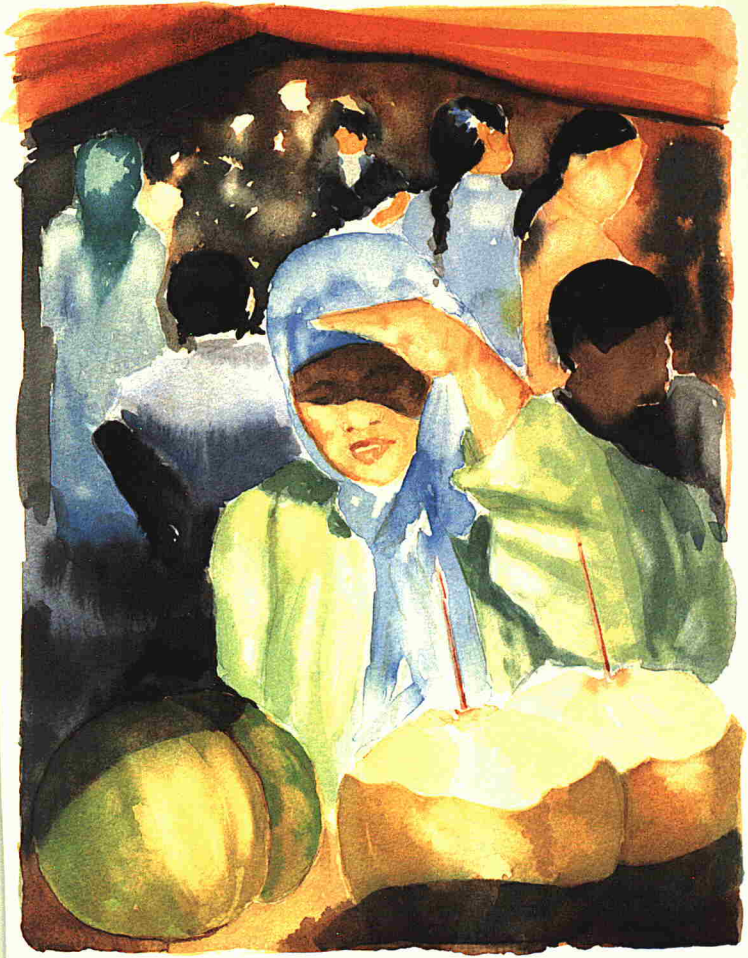
should be strictly for commercial reasons and all tribal disputes had to be settled elsewhere.

The Bajau are mainly Muslim and many of the tiny women in the mini buses leave only their faces exposed to the bright sunshine. Their way of veiling is nothing less than creative and it seems like any piece of cloth will do.

A towel, a bed sheet, an old T-shirt, or whatever is available. The Bajau men are easily recognised as they also wear some kind of head-gear. The most fashionable is the Italian gangster hat.

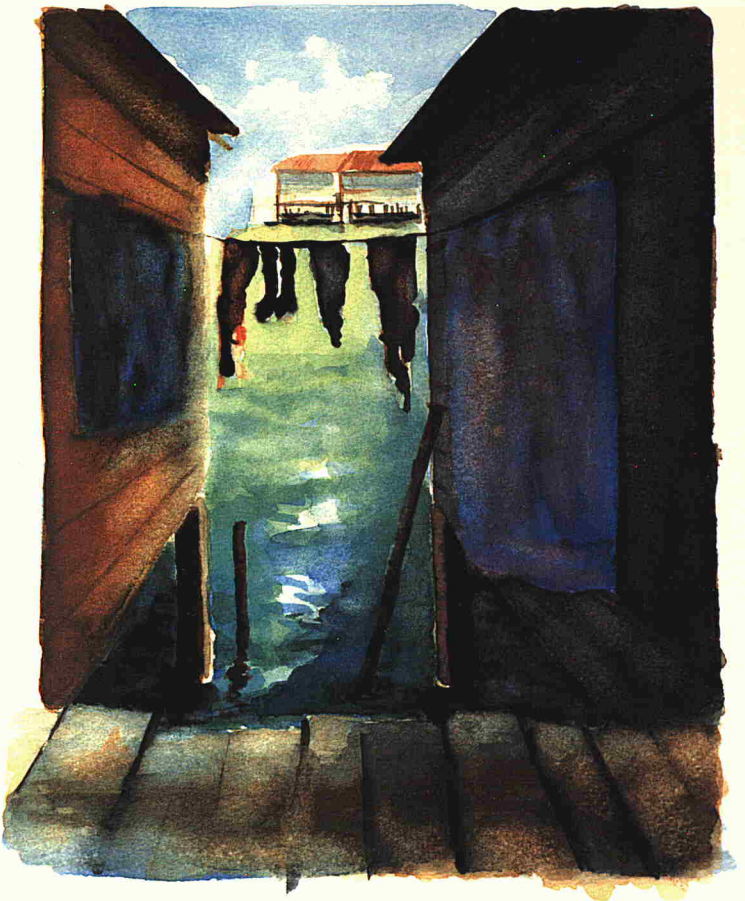
The women sit together in small groups, selling their numerous specialities, such as dried sea horses, betel nuts, plastic in all forms and colours, dried and fresh sea cucumbers and tobacco with tiny bamboo straws, serving as cigarette paper. They are big smokers and from a distance smoke signals are covering the tamu. The men hang around the coffee shops, smoking and discussing. Their small size and excellent horsemanship makes them perfect jockeys. Many race in the Royal Sabah Turf Club in Kota Kinabalu and their enthusiastic discussions are probably related to the next race.

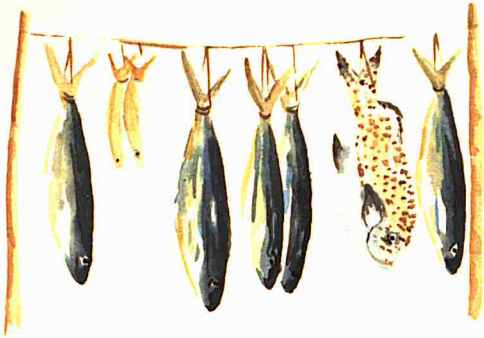
The sun is getting very hot and the smell from all the dried delicacies is getting rather interesting. We leave the strong aroma, loaded with fresh vegetables, and of course, the odd sea horse.



Kamit in the Water Village

We are inside a stilt house in Mengkabong water village near Tuaran. Our host and his family are sitting on the floor with Sarah and I. Comfortable chairs line along the walls, but for some reason, they are not in use. Kamit, our host, is talking about his life as a fisherman and a rice farmer when his wife suddenly recognizes us. "Ohh…, you are one of those red people," she says. Her husband and son hush her down, a rather difficult task as the old women loves to chat or rather comment and disagree with her husband. "Red people," she says and gives both of us a serious inspection. For her, all white people are dressed in red life jackets as she has only seen them in the tourist boats visiting the mangrove and the village.





The Mengkabong village houses roughly 5000 people, they are Muslim and belong to the Bajau tribe. "I was selected as the headman, but found the responsibility too overwhelming," says Kamit. The main reason he turned the offer down was his concern about the family, as vendetta is a familiar term in the Bajau society. They call it Samaii and our host is one of very few knowing how to cure the curses of Samaii.

"If somebody doesn't like you or you have done anything to upset someone they can put a paste of ill will on your arm," says Kamit. The scary paste contains liquid from dead humans, rats, lizards and other dreadful stuff. "They will place it on your arm and within moments your whole body will be covered in a rash that eventually turns black if you don't cure it," explains Kamit.
He knows the cure. His remedy is a little stone that looks like a crab. He found the crab stone one day and could feel its power. "I put the stone in boiling water and it makes the water all bubbly. The patient has to drink and wash with the sparkling water and the rash will disappear," says Kamit. The restoration to former health also includes chants and some additional mysterious charms. His tiny wife used to make the horrible Samaii stuff. It is hard to believe that the tiny cheerful old woman in front of us had ever have been able to make something so nasty.

"Today we only cure," says Kamit and starts the preparation to get up on his 90 year old feet. The truth is that he gets up quicker than us and he doesn't seem to suffer from muscular cramps. We limp out in the sunshine and into the family boat. Kamit jumps onboard, the 25 hp starts with lightening and thunder and we are off to see the rest of the village.

Small huts on stilts, some with electricity and some without, some with fresh water and some without. No red people today, only millions of plastic bags floating in the water like giant jelly fish. In between the plastic, the fish traps, crab traps and prawn traps have known no change. They are made mainly from bamboo in the old way.

"I have been a fisherman all my life. Chinese men used to pick us up in their boats in the morning and on a good day we fished 100 kilos," says Kamit. In front of all the houses trays of fish are drying in the sun and small children are playing joyfully amongst all those traps, plastic bags and dried fish.

We pass by a Bajau graveyard. Yellow and white strips of tissue indicate the place, as the dead have special power and their resting place is sacred amongst the Bajau people. "You must never remove a strip of tissue without replacing it as that brings really bad luck," says our host. He shivers in the heat and his little crab stone is obviously too weak a remedy against those forces.

The Sea Gypsies of Semporna

"They are of this nature, that they know no other homes than their boats. They are such enemies of the land, that it does not get from them the slightest labour or industry, nor the profit of any fruit. All of their work is in fishing and by this the barter for what they need. As they put down very few roots, they move easily to other parts, having no fixed dwelling than the sea." (Francisco Combes, 1667. The Philippine islands)

Combes wrote this in 1667, and with his words in mind I realized that the more than 300 years between our visits, had had little impact on the Sea Gypsies of the Sulu Sea. They are the poorest of the poor, drifting away on a life-long voyage, with survival as the only target. Most of them pagans, without nationality; illiterate and isolated with their houseboats (lepa) as their sole property. I met a drifting family between the islands off Semporna. They launched a tiny miniature lepa onto the water. That little vessel, decorated with flowers and dried fish was out on a mission. The task of the ten centimetre long craft, was to find the spirit of the Great grandfather and get a blessing and a kiss. Hopefully the gentle spirit of the ancestor would cure the feverish baby crying in his hammock. The parents and their eleven children under 13 years, studied me with hesitant interest from their 1.5-meter wide and 15-meter long lepa.
Birth control is unknown, and every year there is a new mouth to feed and another little person to protect from the unpredictable sea spirits. The newborn baby is immediately thrown in the sea for cleansing and blessing. The father dives in, collects the baby and returns him back to safety of the boat. This very first dip is an introduction to a life bound to the sea with the ocean as his only playground and food supply.

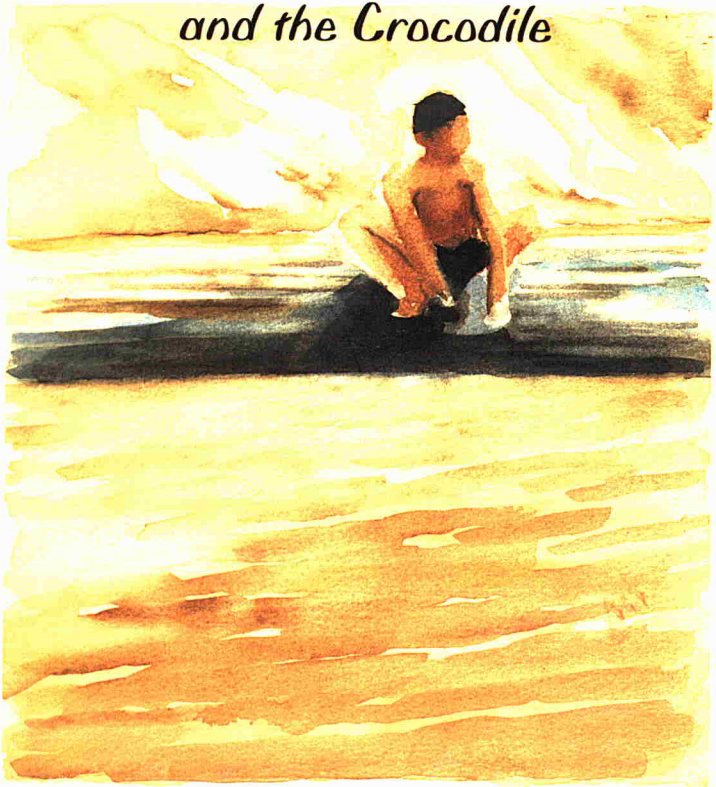
Time has made them at one with their wet surroundings. As a demonstration of his ability, the father dived in and disappeared under water for an awfully long time. His wife continued to repair a sleeping mat, hushed the ill baby and showed no concern. He emerged an eternity later, unaffected by the pressure on his lungs, threw the catch on board and vanished again. The older children started to inspect the scoop, containing some shells and seaweed.

The boat was cramped and living conditions hard. I was told they leave the vessel only for two reasons, either for fresh water or for burial of the dead as the land is unknown territory, scary and full of unfamiliar spirits.

At the end of March, Government boats are sent out to signal the forthcoming annual festival in Semporna. The boat dwellers decorate their vessels with flowers and flags, in the competition of the most beautiful lepa. First prize is the astronomical amount of 1000 Ringgit. The festival is the highlight of the year and the meeting place for romance. Men need their own boat before they can marry and start a family. At weddings the lepas anchor together and they have a floating party with the delicacy of dolphins as the main course. Miniature boats are set afloat to assure happiness, prosperity and fertility.

The sea was calm the day I met the gypsies and on my way back to Semporna, I passed the slowly drifting miniature boat in search of spiritual remedy for the baby. I realized their vulnerability and their unusual faith in destiny. What the future holds is as unpredictable as where the wind blows.

The River People and the Crocodile

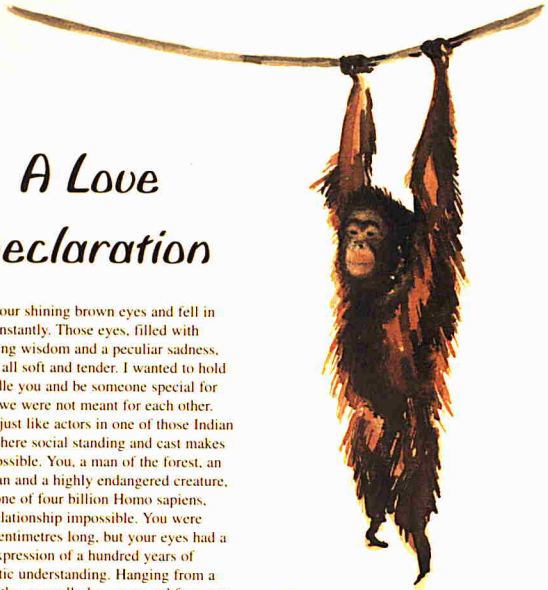


"Big, very big," he says and stretches out his arm to indicate the size of a crocodile he saw the other day. His name is Karim, a boat man, café owner, father of seven, fisherman and a Orang Sungai (A river man). "The crocodile I saw was big as this table," says Karim. The crocodile big table is at least five meters long and his relatives, parents and café guests are nodding. A sudden, unexpected energy strikes an old man at the corner table and he starts to walk up and down on the modest café floor. "No, it was this big," he says and the crocodile has grown some additional five meters.

There is no doubt that the crocodile was big, but how come Karim's tiny grand children are playing cheerfully around in that river? "Don't worry, mam, they are safe," he says and smiles knowingly. The 560 kilometre long Kinabatangan river is famous for it's wildlife and many endangered and unique species are living in the wetlands. Amongst them is the Proboscis monkey, the Orang-utan, Asian elephants, fresh water sharks, crocodiles and the rare oriental darter. The Orang Sungai have, in mutual respect, shared the river with the animals for centuries. Their Muslim faith prohibits hunting and the numerous species have always been left in peace.

The brown obscure water floats by Karim's café. They are still discussing the size of that crocodile, and no wonder, the size of that beast is worth a debate. Especially since the life of the Orang Sungai is closely linked with the horrifying monster. "The crocodile is the guardian of the river and to be bitten is a terrible dishonour and stigma. The wound makes it evident to everybody that the injured have not followed our rules. If he or she had, the crocodile would never attack," says Karim. They call it Bantang. I try to find out more about it, but the word makes everybody jump and avoid me. Karim tells me why; "You should not talk about it because once you know Bantang you have to follow our unwritten laws," he says. Some of them are easy to follow such as never leaving your shoes upside down. Others are more complicated as there is a whole set of rules about how to live to prevent the scandal of a crocodile bite. Karim prays to the river and the jungle daily to avoid tragedies. On top of that he also prays in the mosque five times a day. "I don't want to discuss this any further and I prefer you to be innocent and safe," he says. I agree, thank him and leave the little café in search of my shoes. Both of them are lying upside down, making a shocking example of my ignorance of the Bantang secrets.

Karim brings me back to my lodge in his long boat with his new electrical engine. He has already prayed to the river where he will spend the next two hours, cruising with tourists from all over the world up and down the unpredictable water in search of wild animals. His grandchildren are jumping from a tree trunk into their cognac brown playground. I still worry watching them disappear for small eternities, knowing that the size of that crocodile is still being discussed in Karim's café.



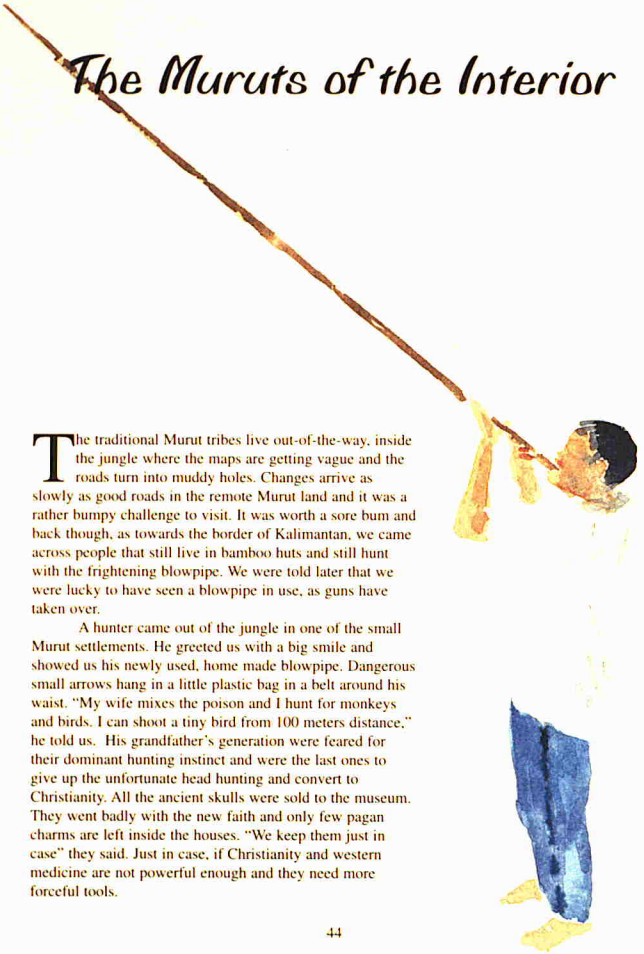
A Love Declaration

I met your shining brown eyes and fell in love instantly. Those eyes, filled with amazing wisdom and a peculiar sadness, made me all soft and tender. I wanted to hold you, cuddle you and be someone special for you. But we were not meant for each other. We were just like actors in one of those Indian movies where social standing and east makes love impossible. You, a man of the forest, an Orang-utan and a highly endangered creature, and me, one of four billion Homo sapiens, made a relationship impossible. You were only 50 centimetres long, but your eyes had a strange expression of a hundred years of sympathetic understanding. Hanging from a branch with an equally long arm and foot, you grinned at me and made my heart beat faster. Some naughty hairs were standing straight up on your head and made you totally irresistible.

I realized you were a flirter. You were a heart breaker and you enjoyed it. There were many of your kind in Sepilok Orang-utan sanctuary that special day, but you were the one that received all attention. Because you were different and because you adored hanging around being celebrated. I never learned your name and I was probably only one in the crowd during that day's afternoon feeding. Something in your smile was addressed to me though. You knew I was hopelessly love-struck and that I left Sepilok with many film rolls only of you.

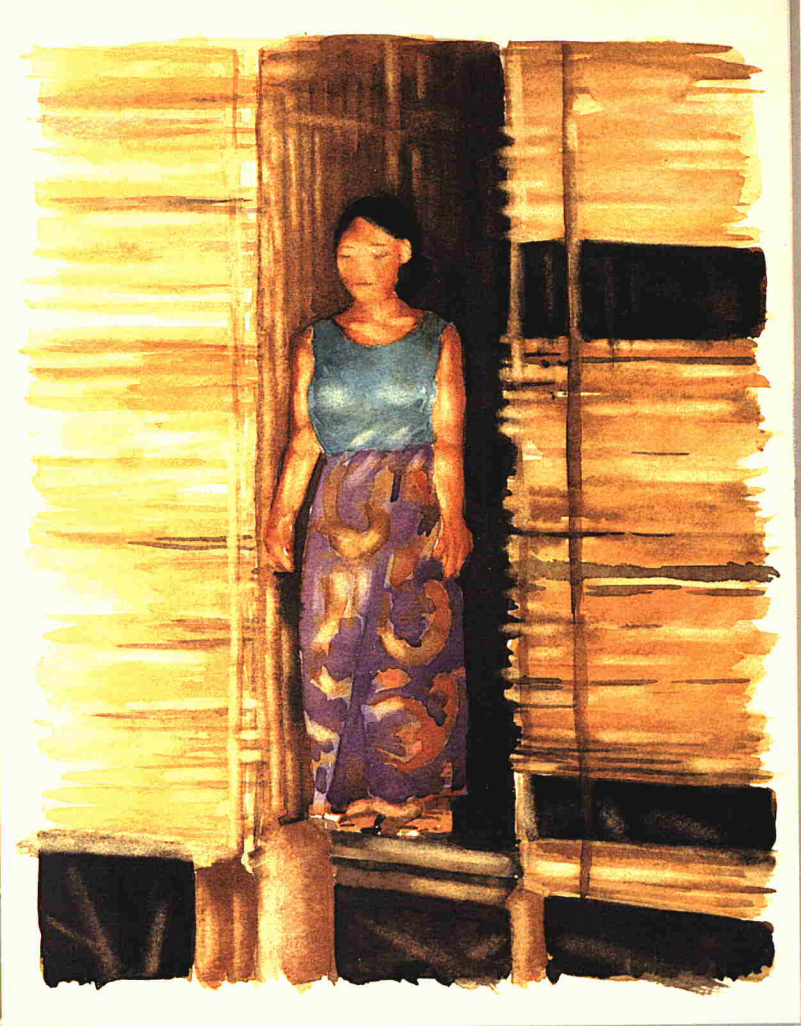
Looking at those photos transforms my heart into juice. Why? Probably because of your innocence and lack of bitterness towards my kind. Your wonderful eyes express only a melancholic wisdom, because you know that my category of Orang made living in your natural habitat impossible. You know that our development is considered more important than yours and that you are the one to suffer. I can only apologise and hope we have learned a lesson. Maybe you are the cleverer creature of the two of us. Our particular greed makes you neither cynical nor bitter. My little hairy friend, you have a "savoir vivre" we only can dream about, be quick, make many babies and integrate in the jungle. Don't think about me, after all, we are not meant for each other.

The Muruts of the Interior



The traditional Murut tribes live out-of-the-way, inside the jungle where the maps are getting vague and the roads turn into muddy holes. Changes arrive as slowly as good roads in the remote Murut land and it was a rather bumpy challenge to visit. It was worth a sore bum and back though, as towards the border of Kalimantan, we came across people that still live in bamboo huts and still hunt with the frightening blowpipe. We were told later that we were lucky to have seen a blowpipe in use, as guns have taken over.

A hunter came out of the jungle in one of the small Murut settlements. He greeted us with a big smile and showed us his newly used, home made blowpipe. Dangerous small arrows hang in a little plastic bag in a belt around his waist. "My wife mixes the poison and I hunt for monkeys and birds. I can shoot a tiny bird from 100 meters distance," he told us. His grandfather's generation were feared for their dominant hunting instinct and were the last ones to give up the unfortunate head hunting and convert to Christianity. All the ancient skulls were sold to the museum. They went badly with the new faith and only few pagan charms are left inside the houses. "We keep them just in case" they said. Just in case, if Christianity and western medicine are not powerful enough and they need more forceful tools.



At the beginning of the 19th century, when Sabah was Terra Incognita, British, Owen Rutter, wrote this about the Muruts: *"They are more or less naked except for a loin-cloth. These people are frightfully dirty and suffers from ulcers, sore eyes and skin diseases. The Murut is though perhaps the most likeable native of North Borneo, where it may be said that the further one goes from civilisation the pleasanter are the people met. They are hospitable, good humoured and honest, so honest that theft is almost unknown, except the occasional theft of someone's wife."* (Owen Rutter, 1929. Pagans of North Borneo)

The Muruts are known as the most colourful of all ethnic groups. Their legendary loin-cloth is replaced with Adidas shorts and their skulls with crucifixes, but they still carry out their most remarkable practice, the "Berian Mati." This simply means pay until you die, and is their extreme form of paying bride wealth.

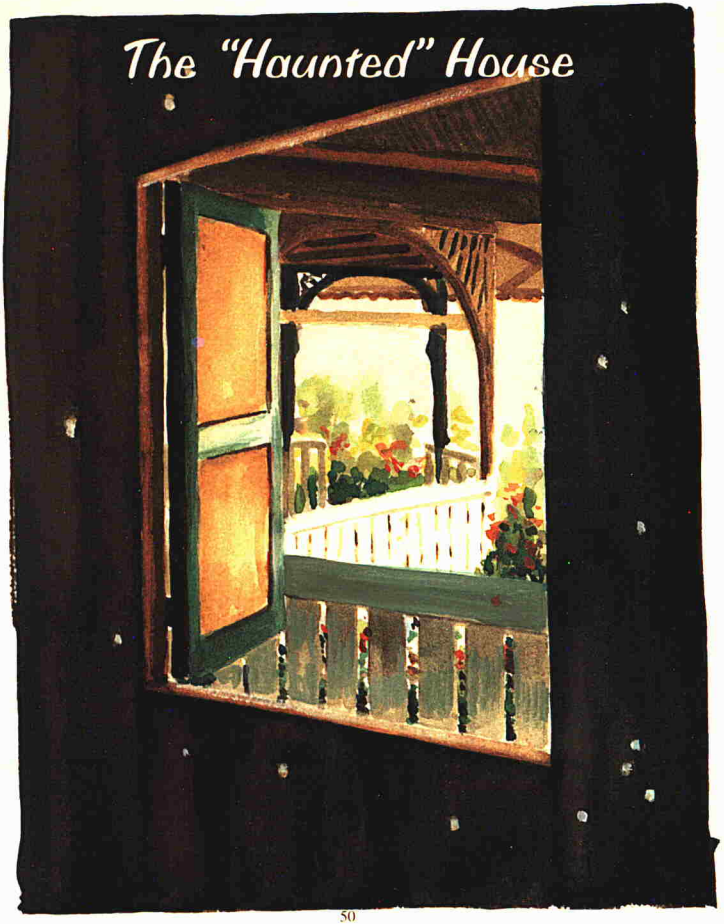
The bride wealth is paid by the man to his in-laws. It is said that the in-laws can pick whatever they like from the groom and his family. The groom continues to pay until his marriage is at least seven years old.
This is their social security system and when a daughter is married off, the money, jars, buffaloes, gongs, etc., are returned.

Tapai, the rice wine, is a vital part of life. They drink it out of big jars with a bamboo straw. The jars are the natural centre of all celebrations, actually so much in the centre, that it is an addiction to many. Everybody drinks from the same straw and in some villages, the church have put an end to all tapai drinking.

Our journey to Murut land was of both limited time and comprehension. We handpicked a guide that spoke the Murut language, but forgot to pay attention to his English. By then we were already half-way down the potholed track and we decided that a mute guide was better than none.

The friendliness of the Muruts needed no translation anyway and they became even friendlier when we started to buy their old hats and baskets and they actually earned money on what they saw as "useless junk."

The "Haunted" House



Our Murut speaking guide's English was rather rusty, but Joseph had another main quality, as he knew everybody in and around Keningau. The whole town was somehow related to him and that's how we met one of his numerous cousins, living alone in a colossal house called Rumah Besar (big house). The house is truly monumental and a testimonial of the Japanese occupation during the Second World War. The physical scars on the building, constructed in 1937, are scary. The bullet holes are so plentiful that the walls are nearly transparent and the bomb craters in the garden make the landscape hilly. Rumah Besar has the reputation of being haunted, as the in-house battles between the Japanese and the Australians resulted in lots of casualties. This house, constructed as an imitation of an early Malay Sultanate palace, is probably the only remaining building in Sabah telling the cruel reality of war.

The only inhabitant of the house is one of twenty children of the prominent District chief O.K.K Sedomon Bin O.K.K. Gunsanad (1894–1966). "I am one of the daughters from my father's third marriage. I stay in this house to honour him and his tremendous work for the welfare of his people," she says and leads us inside the battle memorial. "My family left the house in 1942 when the Japanese occupied the house and made it into their headquarters. The house was abandoned for 18 years and there is little left of former glory," she says. A huge empty dining passage makes her words obvious. "I want to restore the house and open it for tourists, but people say I have to build it into a kind of amusement park to make it interesting," she says. She is evidently not happy about that solution.

Her father was a famous Kuijau (a tribe formed by intermarriages between the Murut and the Dusun tribe). She leads us up the stairway where her father's awards are decorating most of the walls. Amongst them, a yellowish document declaring him: The Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, signed by Queen Elizabeth II.

The many bullet holes in the walls, the big empty space and the darkness, give Rumah Besar a peculiar atmosphere. It is not difficult to imagine the smoke, noise, cries and malice of the last battle. The Japanese were trapped inside and the Australians fired through the walls in an inferno of blood and suffering.

"The Japanese casualties were buried right here in a mass grave in the garden. After the war the bodies were transported to Japan," she says. Rumours from the village say that the house is still haunted and she does not deny it. "It is a part of my life. If you want, you can sleep over tonight and hear for yourself," she says. We decide we need no further proof, as we definitely believe there are noises in that house that you need strong nerves to get used to. Neither do we need further evidence to decide that she is very courageous and that to make an amusement park in her family heirloom, would be a serious blunder.

The Dusun and the Caterpillar

Gompios Dangat was born in Ranau on the 25th of May 1935. Gompios entered this world in the same minute her grandmother died. This coincidence gave her the right to one healing power and her mother whispered in the ear of the new born baby that she was given the ability to heal poisonous caterpillar bites. Caterpillar in the Dusun language is Tompios so the name Gompios was the evident choice. "One touch is enough and all pain is gone," whispers Gompios. Her voice is sore due to throat cancer, but it doesn't stop her from chewing a little peculiar packet of leaves. "I burn the shell of a snail, crush it until it becomes all powdery, add some water and make a paste.

Then I pack it into two types of leaves, one fresh and one dried and chew it with tobacco," she says. Gompios makes one of the curious packets with great skill and plants it in her mouth with pleasure.

Awang, her husband, is a retired schoolteacher and the architect of the pinatambing (extension) of their house some kilometres outside Ranau by the foot of Mount Kinabalu. The extension is simply a banana-leaf roof with chicken-wire fence walls. An unusual assortment of objects is hanging from the roof, containing three pairs of animal teeth, the head of a hornbill and some dried leaves. The weird objects slam into each other in the breeze. Awang gives the collection an indifferent glance and says, "Oh those, they are only decoration. We converted to Christianity in 1951 and we don't believe in superstition anymore." Gompios is nodding from the corner confirming that the odd ornament simply makes it cosy. The charm subject is quickly changed. "We harvested 200 tins of rice this year, sufficient to feed the whole family until next crop," says Awang.

The Hill Dusun are rice farmers. No piece of land seems too steep, difficult or remote for hill rice. The areas around Ranau are covered in smoke. The dry day is ideal for burning the hillsides. The Hill Dusun practise shifting cultivation. The hillsides harvested this year, are left to fallow for some years in order to regain fertility in the soil.

"I wish my people could see their potential. They are so hard working, but the outcome of their efforts is next to nothing," says Juis. He is our Dusun speaking translator, normally working as a purchaser in Kota Kinabalu. "The Kadazan people cultivate rice as well, but on a bigger scale and with profit, while my people work all year around, 12 hours a day only to feed their family."

Juis is upset with the slow development of his people. His mother is more than 70 years old and is still working full time in the rice field. "I tell her to relax, visit her friends and spend time with her grandchildren, but she has known nothing in her life other than hard labour and is not willing to give it up," he says.

His mother is not the only one. We saw many doubled-up old women in the nearly vertical fields along the roadside. "Alone, I cannot change my people," says Juis. The moment he utters his desire for development, we pass an old wrinkly woman working her way up a steep hill, doubled up by the burden of heavy planks. She takes a little break to give us a wave and a big content smile. She smiled as if carrying the 50 kilos burden on her shoulder up the steep hill was nothing more a charming leisurely walk. Her little dog barked happily to illustrate the effortlessness of her stroll.

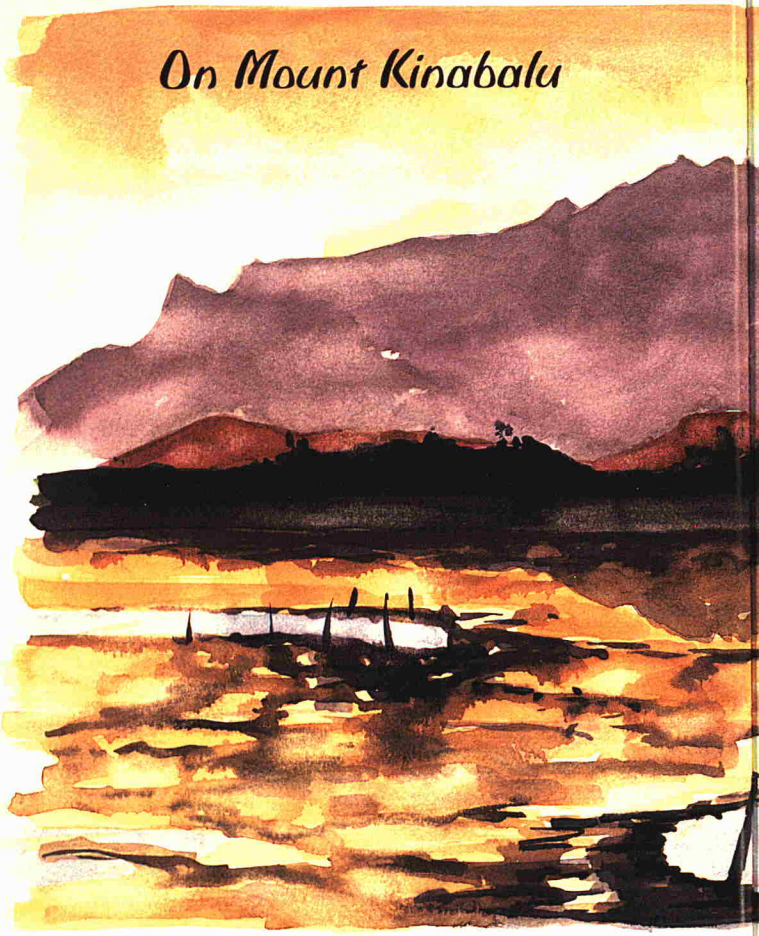
Rice

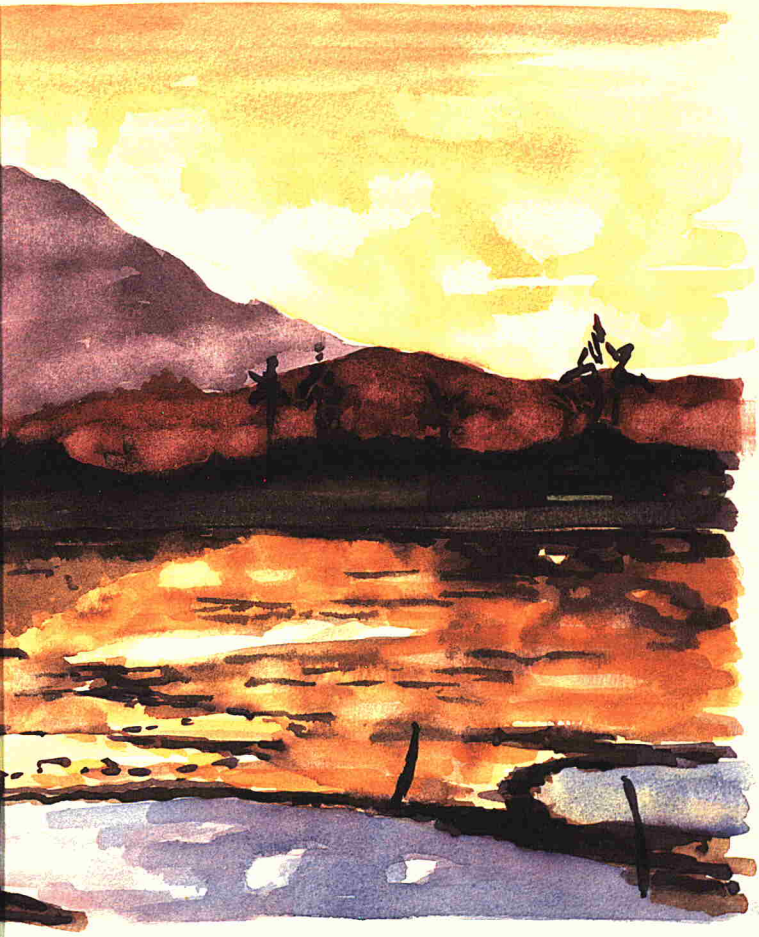
Awang and Gompios harvested 200 tins of rice. "I am very happy, it was a good harvest," says Awang. He leans backwards on his bench to straighten his back after the hardship of harvesting. They are preparing for the harvest festival at the end of May, the season of thanksgiving to the bountiful earth. According to tradition, every tiny particle of rice holds a spirit. The spirits live in the rice field until harvested and then move to the barn.

Wasting rice is regarded as a sin, both due to the spirit and the famine in Asia. Our hosts are Christians and they don't believe in the Rice spirit any more. What they do believe in is the well being of a good harvest, both physical and psychological as rice is equivalent to life itself and their staple food. The harvest festival is celebrated all over Sabah and is officially recognized as two days of public holiday. Gompios says that she only has a vague picture of the old days, the time before the sixties. When the festival was of a ritual character and the high priestesses sacrificed animals to the spirits in return for the rice. "This year we will have plenty of sport, a football match, the beauty competition and we will slaughter a cow to feed the entire village," says Gompios.

"Do you mean to sacrifice a cow?" I ask hopefully. They both look at me, in disbelief at my insistence on those spiritual things once again. I guess I have to admit the fact that I came to Ranau something like 30 years too late for these sort of questions.

On Mount Kinabalu





I met them at 2650 metres. They were climbing the mountain while I was descending. The difference between them and me was that I would never dream of climbing Mount Kinabalu again, while they climb the tallest mountain between the Himalayas and New Guinea every single day. I should have taken more notice of Major C.M. Enriquez, the author of the book: "Kinabalu: The Haunted Mountain of Borneo" 1927. He was number 26 to reach the summit and he clearly wrote in his book: "Not to be recommended generally for women."

The Hill Dusun women from the villages around Mount Kinabalu ascended like goats. Not only do they climb it, they carry all the provisions for all climbers up to the resthouse, Laban Rata at 3300 metres. Local backpacks made of rattan and bamboo were filled with Carlsberg beer, rice, gas, Coca Cola and anything a tired tourist might need after conquering the 4095 metre high granite block.

My muscles were burning in exhaustion and to meet the Hill Dusun carriers on their way up, with all that weight on their back, made me ache even more. Tall, super trained Orang Putihs (white people) give up half way, while the tiny Hill Dusuns steadily rise in rubber flip-flops.

From my point of view, they have the most dreadful job on earth. They seemed unaffected, but they surely could read the pity in my eyes. The same pity they read in any climber's eyes, as we know what it takes to climb the millions of steps—empty handed.

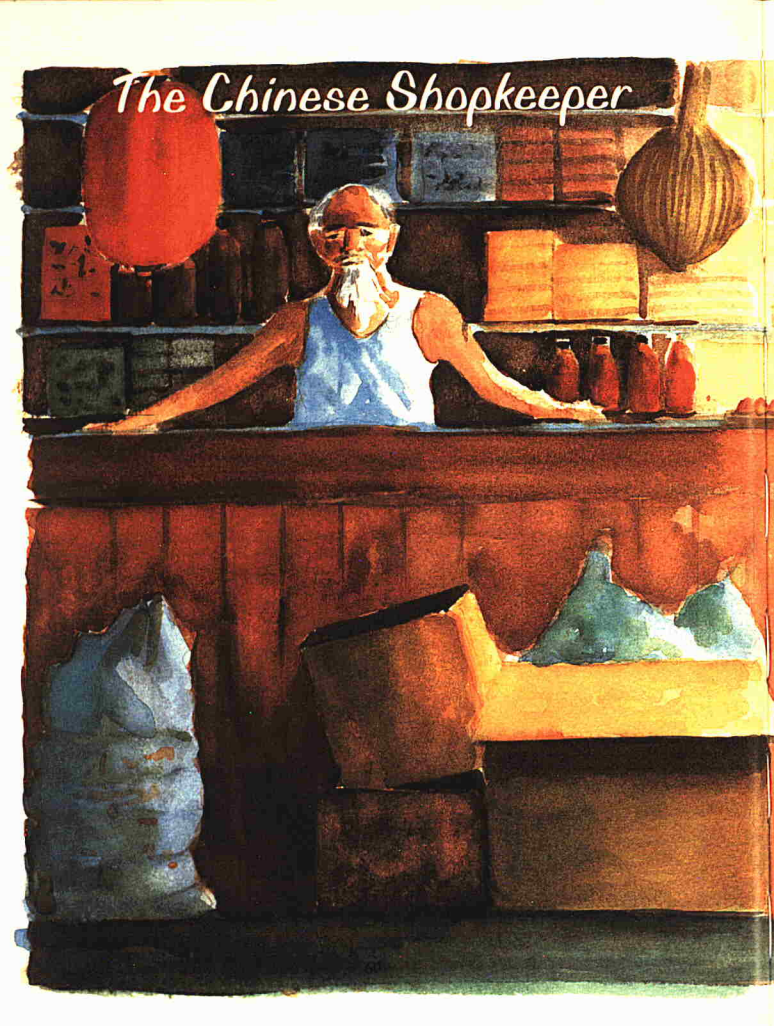
Major Enriquez did not reach the summit alone as his expedition was for several purposes including collecting butterflies, spiders, ferns and mosses. Apart from the scientific team there was one old Dusun priest. He had an important mission as his job was to keep the spirits happy and carry out the ritual sacrifice on the summit. Seven eggs, seven chickens and two gun shots were considered sufficient.

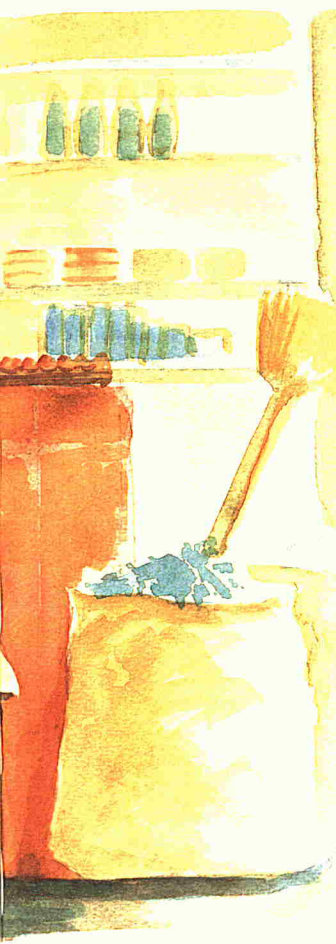
Kinabalu is a Dusunic word meaning, Sacred place for the dead.
It is believed that the spirit travels to the mountain after death. The hierarchy in the final resting place is simple. The good ones inhabit the summit and the bad ones the bottom.

Climbing Mount Kinabalu is not only a painful experience. It was my fitness level that restricted me in examining the famous flora and fauna on Mount Kinabalu. The mountain and its surrounding national park is considered a Mecca for naturalists and the place to look for rare orchids and Nepenthes (carnivorous pitcher plants). It is also the place to see the world's biggest flower, the beautiful, but rotten-smelling Rafflesia. The amazing variety of plants functions as the surrounding tribal pharmacy. Ninety different plants are used by local herbalists, often elderly women and men. The herbal medicines cure malaria, gastric ulcers, allergies, lumbago, poisoned animal bites, dandruff, etc. etc. The herbal remedy possibly gives strength to the carriers steadily bringing provisions up to heaven.

My Dusun guide, Francis, accompanied me in one blue and one red flip-flop, carrying an umbrella (and me) as his only luggage. He simply strolled the mountain I conquered, encouraging me, pulling me and healing my blisters.

Good advice to anybody thinking of climbing up to the top. Do it quick as that mountain is still growing and next year you will have another 1/2 centimetre to conquer.


The Chinese Shopkeeper



"Hello, anybody there," I shout into the long, messy Chinese shop. A little Chinese man wakes up from his chair, stretches for ages, and finally says, "Yes."
"I have pain in my back, do you have any medicine?" I ask. The little shop contains amazing numbers of, anything, really. Chinese lanterns are hanging from the roof. They are actually forcing back pain on anybody entering the shop as they hang very low and a lot of manoeuvring is required to keep away from the bright red paper lamps.
Prosperity, wealth and fertility form the backbone of Chinese culture and the key words are written all over the place. Tiny bottles are crammed into dusty shelves together with Chinese New Year banners and greeting cards.

"I have just the remedy for you," says the shopkeeper and climbs up the shelves quicker than an Orang Utan. He knows exactly where to find his stuff, in what I consider a complete mess. A little yellow box is handed over. "This is the very best, you will get your money back if it doesn't work," he says and puts the money in a worn-out shoebox he places somewhere in the muddle.

Some of the ingredients in the yellow box are: Male mouse droppings, Bishop wort, scorpion, Earth dragon, tiger bone, silkworm, rhinoceros horn, figwort and turtle shell. The following is written on the box: "This remedy contains 54 different ingredients and the compounding is very difficult and time consuming. We are confident that the sufferer will regain health and happiness by taking this pill."
I took one single pill and the back pain was gone for months. After the first visit I became a frequent client, always buying five yellow boxes. When the shopkeeper sees me now, he simply says: "five?" He must think I am abusing in order to achieve maximum health and happiness. The fact is that I don't buy them for myself, but for my suffering relatives in Europe. They are the ones abusing male mouse droppings, earth dragons etc…

"My" shopkeeper, Chong, is a Hakka Chinese. His father came to Sabah in 1920 at a time when the Chartered Company recruited Chinese labour from Hong Kong. He was supposed to work on the rubber plantations, but set up a shop in the interior instead. "You know, mam, the Chinese shop was the last outpost of civilization in those days and it would not surprise me if it still is", says Chong. He grew up in a shop, learned the trade and eventually moved to Kota Kinabalu where he set up a copy of his father's shop.

The Chinese in Sabah make up 12 percent of the population and are spread all over the state. They have a particular affinity for business and numbers and economically, the Chinese are a very important group in Sabah, as elsewhere. The Chinese form the backbone of trade in Sabah. Their numerous shops are open six days a week, twelve hours a day, except for Chinese New Year, when they all celebrate at least five days, as less than five is bad luck. During these days the importance of the Chinese becomes evident, as the task of finding a bottle of milk or some eggs becomes a day's project.

A Chinese will, without hesitation, ask you about your weight, age, salary, house rental and the price of your car. A Chinese woman once asked me if I was my sister's mother.

Weight is another delicate matter they undiplomatically bump into. Once at a party, a Chinese woman asked Sarah, "Is that very fat woman in the middle really you?"

She continued, "You must have lost a lot of weight since you took that photo."

"It was taken last week", muttered Sarah.

Ill-mannered, I thought, until I got more or less used to the indelicate style.

The archaeologists believe the Chinese came to Sabah as early as the 7th century. To be exact they found pottery by Kinabatangan river showing evidence of the first trading in 631 A.D. The largest Chinese group, according to the inter-net, is the distinctive Hakka. Over 1.2 billion Chinese proclaim their Hakka origin. It is said that the northern-most remote restaurant in the world, in the Arctic, is run by a Hakka. No surprise. If they can make money out of a restaurant in the ice, they will settle down and make the best of it.

The power of the wind

"Makan angin," literally means; to eat the wind. This low nutrition meal is the Malay way to say, enjoy your trip. Sabah is lyrically called; "the land below the wind" due to its location under the monsoon belt. This does not mean that the wind is neglected. In fact I have never been to any place where the wind is as important as in Sabah. To stroll along the beach and have one or two mouthfuls of breeze could in fact be fatal.

Alice is Chinese. She is a modern, highly educated lady and she, like all Chinese, is very aware of the destructive forces of the wind. She tells me, " After each childbirth I had to stay in my room for one month. I employed a confinement lady to look after the baby and myself. She took care of the two of us in the traditional way to avoid the wind and bring me back to my former strength." She looks at my face and says; " I know what you are thinking. That we Chinese are an incredibly superstitious group, but we are not the only ones. The Kadazan and the Malays are just as afraid of the wind as us."

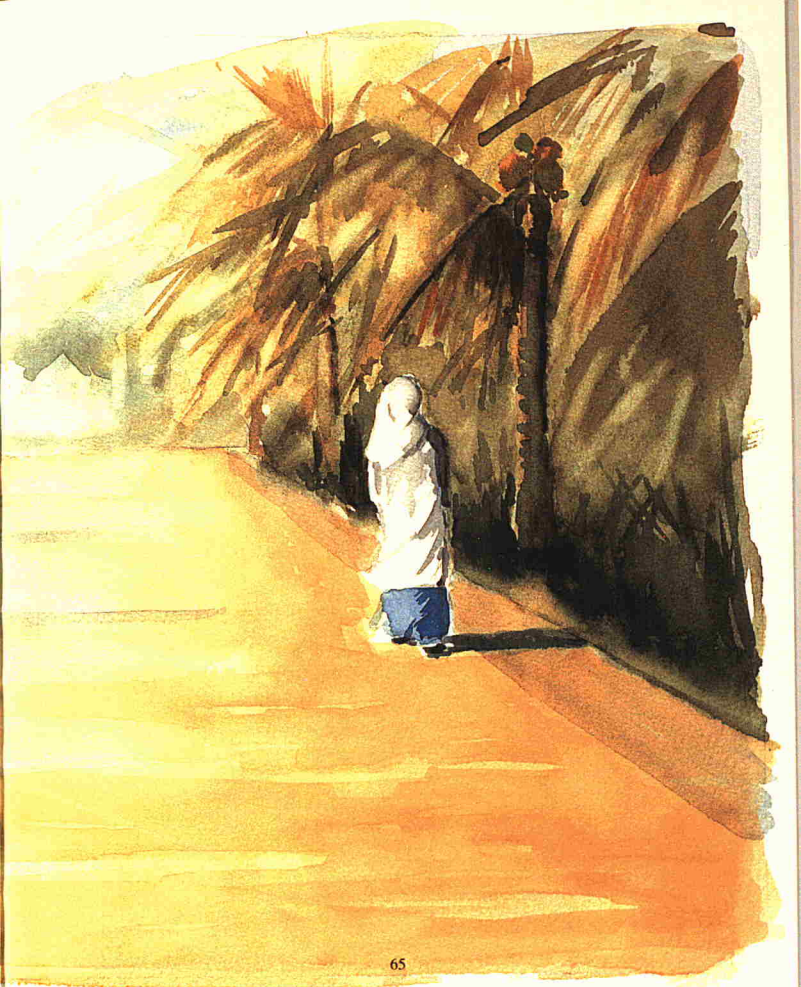
After the baby is born the mothers are not allowed to shower for a month. "Water is risky as it removes new strength. I had rashes all over my body after 30 days of sweating, and I still remember the first shower as one of those great moments in life."

The confinement lady, on 24 hour duty, lives in the same room and cooks all the meals. She doesn't have to open a single cookbook to make the "anti-wind" food. The menu is simply a lot of ginger and some chicken cooked in rice wine. Three times a day for 30 days, ginger, ginger and more ginger. "Ginger is known as the best remedy against wind and it prevents you from getting arthritis when you get old. It is really very good for you," says Alice.

The Kadazans and the Malays go through the same ginger cure after childbirth. In addition, the Malay women are massaged with a herbal remedy and wrapped with bandages around their bellies three times a day to get their shape back. The tight belly wrapping is highly efficient. On the 31st day after delivery the new mothers leave their bedrooms with flat stomachs as though nothing has happened at all.

Some women are now questioning the "anti-wind treatment," but their mothers, grandmothers, aunties, etc., know best. All those who did not listen to the ancient knowledge and walk with difficulty prove the theory. They are victims of the wind. The unwritten wind rules within the society are much stronger than the individual. "I honestly don't know if it works, but who wants to take the risk of jeopardizing the future by not obeying thousands of years of practice?"

"Definitely not me," says Alice.



Acknowledgements

A special Thank You to Suez Lyonnaise Des Eaux, without whose help this book would not have been possible.

To Mailien Matin, Juis Konsuling and Din Bin Kamit of Corporate Dynamics, Kota Kinabalu.

To Anthea Phillipps, Wendy Hutton, Lisa Campbell and Doris Undans.

To our husbands and children for their patience and support.

And lastly, to the people of Sabah for sharing their stories with us.