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A SHORT WALK THROUGH SARAWAK

- The Sarawak Cultural Village Revealed -



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Photos by
Wayne Tarman

Published By



In Association With



Sarawak Cultural Village
Sara Resorts Sdn Bhd

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NASKAH PEMELIHARAAN
PERPUSTAKAAN NEGARA MALAYSIA

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INTRODUCTION

Since its opening in 1991, the Sarawak Cultural Village has become one of Malaysia's best-known and best-loved visitor attractions, and an important showcase for Sarawak's cultures and traditions. It has won a host of awards, both as an attraction and as a centre for the performing arts. Over 70,000 visitors a year pass through its imposing wooden gates to enjoy the 'Sarawak Experience.'

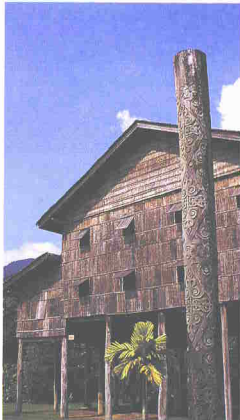
Sarawak Cultural Village is often referred to as a 'living museum,' but this is only half the story. The Cultural Village is a living, thriving community, a 'village-within-a-village,' where many of the staff and performers live, work, marry and bring up families, devoting their lives to promoting and preserving the culture and traditions of their beloved Sarawak.

The basis of the village is the house - remarkably accurate re-creations of the types of houses used by Sarawak's main ethnic groups. The longhouses are inhabited by the Iban, the Bidayuh and the Orang Ulu. More conventional yet equally fascinating homes are dwelt in by the Malays and the Chinese. The magnificent tall-house is home to the Melanau, and the nomadic people do not live in houses at all. Irrespective of their lifestyle, you will visit all of these homes and meet the people who live there on your short walk through Sarawak.

You will notice as you pass through the village that - unlike other museums - none of the exhibits are labelled. This is not an oversight; it is a reflection of Sarawak's rich oral heritage. Sarawak's indigenous people had no need for the written word. Instead every community had its bards; its singers and storytellers who memorised the tribe's history from their elders, and passed it down from word to word to an enthralled audience during long, dark tropical nights in the longhouse.

Sarawak Cultural Village also has its bards; storytellers who describe their culture and traditions to you as you experience them, hands-on, in authentically reconstructed traditional buildings. Yet no matter how skilled these storytellers are, they can only tell you so much, and they can only answer the questions that you ask them. After you leave a longhouse you may wonder what that intricate-looking contraption was for, or on the plane home you may question why one tribe's way of life differed from another's. This is why we produced this book; not to replace the storytellers, but to complement what they tell you.

Site, clockwise from left: The Orang Ulu Longhouse, seen from the lake. The Melanau Rumah Tinggi (Tall House). Bamboo bridge leading to Bidayuh Baruk. Malay woman wearing songket shawl and batik headscarf. Playing the sape on the Orang Ulu longhouse verandah.



A SHORT WALK THROUGH SARAWAK

When you enter the Sarawak Cultural Village, you are issued with a passport, to be stamped in the home and building you visit. This is a useful record of where you are going and where you have been, as the village is not laid out in a row. Instead, it is designed to show the connections and linkages between people and their environment that exist in Sarawak (see map opposite). In other words, the Village has one great advantage over the outside world; rather than travelling from one territory to another by spending days in a longboat, you cross cultural and geographic boundaries in a two minute stroll along the plankwalk.

The Village is structured to reflect a journey through the entire state, with the lake at its centre representing the rivers that are the lifelines for so many of Sarawak's communities. First time visitors will find it easiest to follow the circular, anticlockwise route around the lake, as described in the book. But the beauty of the Sarawak Cultural Village is that you can return to it time and time again, visiting those houses in whatever order you wish, and getting to know the people who live and work there.

From the reception area, your journey begins with a symbolic crossing, a simple bamboo bridge that carries you deep into the Sarawak countryside (the faint-hearted can use the footbridge) into the land of the Bidayuh people. You are no longer in riverine Sarawak, you are in the hills of the limestone mountains that dominate Southwest Sarawak's unique landscape. The building you come to is certainly not for living in, and it's nowhere near running water. Welcome to the Bidayuh Baruk.

THE BIDAYUH LONGHOUSE

BIDAYUH BARUK

Baruk is a strange, octagonal construction with a conical roof, guarded at the approach by a family of wooden figures to the right of the path. As you enter, you hear the beating of war drums and the storyteller, dressed in the simple black costume of the Bidayuh, invites you to sit down. Two girls, clad also in black trimmed with red piping, perform a simple dance of welcome. A fire burns in the *baruk*, and as your eyes become accustomed to the light you will see why. A fire is kept burning at the centre of the room, and above the fire, blackened human skulls hang from the ceiling.

Baruk is the head-house of the Bidayuh, a place to store the heads of the defeated enemy, a place for warriors to gather and talk about half-forgotten battles. The storyteller explains the architecture of the *baruk* – a solid ironwood frame, wooden walls, a springy bamboo floor and a thatched roof with moveable panels for ventilation. Then he or she describes how the heads are processed and stored.

Heads have a great deal of spiritual power, and if they are treated with respect they can bring good fortune to the community. Therefore the fire is always kept burning to keep them warm, burning 24 hours a day, every day of the year. There are also offerings for the heads; samples of food, betel nut and betel nut, as well as ritual decorations and fetishes. Behind the offerings, a set of gongs hangs, ready to summon the spirits for important rituals.

In earlier times, out of respect for the heads, only fully-fledged warriors could enter the *baruk*. A man would only be selected as a warrior when he has proven himself as a skilled hunter. Once he had taken part in a successful head hunting raid or war party, the head man of his longhouse would award him the title of warrior and give him a new name to reflect his high status.

THE BIDAYUH LONGHOUSE

When you enter the *baruk* you are almost at the entrance of the Bidayuh longhouse, where you will see a thick bamboo tube, thicker than a man's arm, carrying water into the longhouse. This is the genius of the Bidayuh; they are master engineers in bamboo, using elegantly designed networks of pipes to carry water from mountain springs that are often kilometres away. This has many advantages; spring water is invariably cleaner than river water, so the risk of water-borne disease is small; the community is not dependent on the river for its water supply; the longhouse can be built up in the hills close to the rice-growing land; and a secluded location offers the longhouse protection from enemies.



*Above: Spirit mask from Bidayub Baruk.
Left: Bidayub girl in traditional working clothes.*

Below: The Baruk – exterior view.



longhouse itself reflects the Bidayuh obsession with bamboo. The main support poles are made of ironwood or some other tough hardwood, but the floor and all the smaller structural elements are bamboo. The walls and roof are made of *attap*, although where it is available Bidayuh will use sago palm thatch, which is much more durable. The longhouse, like all houses in Sarawak, is not a communal home but a series of individual apartments laid out in a row and following the contours of the hillside. Each family's apartment is divided into three parts: an open verandah (*tanju*), a covered verandah (*awa*) and a living area (*ramin*).

Inside on the *tanju*, as you enter, a group of ladies dressed in simple black smocks are winnowing and husking hill rice. Winnowing is done with a scoop-shaped tray of finely woven bamboo, and the rice grains are tossed in the air and caught, while the breeze blows the chaff to the chickens waiting expectantly beneath the longhouse. It appears to be a very simple task, but it requires a certain knack to avoid feeding the rice to the chickens as well. Husking is harder work. Larger quantities are processed using a large wooden grinder comprising two solid wooden rollers placed on top of each other and rotated. Smaller amounts are simply placed in a wooden mortar and pounded with a long, thick wood pole. Two women working in rhythm can process a fantastic amount of rice using this simple method - two Bidayuh women, that is - visitors who try their hand usually run out of steam after a minute or two.

Inside the *ramin*, more bamboo is in evidence. There are floor mats, sleeping mats, baskets, backpacks and fish traps woven from this versatile material. Bamboo is even used in cooking; fish, vegetables and rice are steamed in bamboo tubes over an open fire (using bamboo logs, of course) in a way that the residents proudly refer to as their "jungle microwave." Bamboo is not the only material used by the Bidayuh. *Rotan* (rattan) is used to bind the beams of the longhouse together (no nails are used in its construction), and to make fishing nets and ropes, such as the ones supporting the wooden swing which is used in rituals for the healing of the sick.

Family heirlooms are scattered around the room, including brass gongs and Chinese vases, a woman's dresses costume with heavy brass coils which are worn around the legs, and an embroidered sarong and loin cloth made of tree bark. A human-like wooden figure, about a metre tall, looks at first glance like part of a bizarre fertility ritual, but is in fact a sugar-cane crusher, used to make one of the finest Bidayuh delicacies - *tuak tebu* (sugar-cane wine). A small fire burns constantly in the kitchen, the smoke helping to preserve the rice and baskets stored in the loft and keeping the *attap* roof free of mice and insects.



Above: Awa (verandab) of Bidayuh longhouse



Crushing sugar cane



Sijan carving a blowpipe dart holder

the rear of the *ramin*, framed by the open door, a man is carefully carving all kinds of serious handicrafts. This is Sijan anak Eson, *Pengbulu* (chief) of the longhouse, one of the village's original residents. What makes the village unique is that many of the buildings are still inhabited; for example, Sijan gave up his position as *Pengbulu* in his home village of Serian, near Serian, to live with his family in the longhouse as leader of the village's Bidayuh community. He still earns his living in the same way, however. He is from a long line of master bamboo carvers and continues to practise his ancient craft in the village.

Beautifully engraved blowpipe dart holders are the most popular items with visitors, ideal for making all sorts of small items, but Sijan can make almost anything from bamboo, including household and cooking utensils, and even a highly accurate blowpipe fashioned from two tubes inserted one inside the other. The most amusing item is the *krumboi*, a Bidayuh version of maracas with two river snail shells mounted on a piece of forked bamboo, creating an unbelievable noise when shaken. The snail shells have another ingenious use, as weights for the *z*, a throwing net used to catch small fish and prawns.

In the next-door *ramin*, Sijan's daughter Mary is weaving mats, bags, wallets and purses from bamboo, cutting fine strips of the material and dyeing them to produce intricate geometric patterns. She has been weaving since childhood, and learnt the craft from her mother, Tumej, whom you met outside, husking rice and demonstrating farming techniques.

DAYUH FACTFILE

There are roughly 156,000 Bidayuh (formerly known as Land Dayaks) who form about 8.3% of Sarawak's population. They can be divided into five distinct sub-groups - Jagoi (Bau & Singai), Biatah, Bekar-Sadong, Salakau and Lara - each speaking distinct dialects. The Bidayuh live in Southwest Sarawak, in the countryside around Kuching, where they grow hill rice and cash crops such as pepper, cocoa and rubber, as well as fruit and vegetables. They are believed to have migrated here from West Kalimantan (Indonesia) as early as the 13th Century, and many still have strong family ties with communities over the border.

Most Bidayuh are Christian (they were the first people in Sarawak to convert to Christianity), but traditional feasts such as *gawai dayak* (harvest festival) are still celebrated, although only a small number of people practice the traditional religion, a combination of animist and Hindu-Buddhist influences. The decline in traditional beliefs has also brought changes in living patterns, and the majority of Bidayuh have left their longhouses to live in *kampungs* (villages) in modern wood or brick houses. A few well preserved longhouses still exist however, and can be visited on a day trip from Kuching.

Opposite: Bidayuh woman in traditional costume. Beads, basketry and brassware are used for decoration.



THE IBAN LONGHOUSE

ing the Bidayuh longhouse, the path takes you towards the lake. As you near the Iban house you may be challenged by a fully armed warrior, with sword, shield and hornbill feather head-dress. Once he has made sure you come in friendship, he will perform a brief dance to welcome right there on the plankwalk, in accordance with Iban tradition. As he leads you to the longhouse, you notice wooden guardian figures, similar to those of the Bidayuh, but gathered together in a small wooden hut with offerings of food, tobacco and betel nut. Wooden longboats are parked underneath the longhouse, ready to transport their owners to the farm, or to war.

Enter the longhouse via a typical Iban staircase - a thick hardwood log with notches cut in it for steps. A good sense of balance is required, as the handrail is a modern invention designed for sure-footed visitors. In times of war, a log ladder could simply be pulled back into the longhouse to prevent enemies from entering. This particular longhouse is divided into two sections; an old-fashioned temporary longhouse (designed to last for 10-15 years) made with hardwood supports, bamboo floors and tree bark walls; and a more modern, 20th Century longhouse, solidly constructed from *belian* (ironwood) with ornate carved detailing. The roof is made from *belian* shingles, fire-resistant and able to last for up to 40 years.

The layout is similar to the Bidayuh longhouse. There is an outside verandah (*tanjong*) for work-related activities, a covered verandah (*ruai*) for social and public activities, and a row of private apartments (*bilek*) for cooking, eating and sleeping. The main difference is that the open and covered verandahs are separated by a wall. As you enter, *Penghulu* Edmund, the resident chief of the longhouse, invites you to sit on the *rotan* mats laid out in the *ruai*, and two young women perform a dance of welcome. This is followed by a young man demonstrating the *ngajat*, the famous warrior dance of the Iban, where the dancer demonstrates how he fought and killed his enemies. The *ngajat* is slow, elegant yet explosively powerful, and leaves you in no doubt that the warriors of yesteryear were formidable opponents.

Entering the *bilek*, you see one of the great Iban traditions; a woman is sitting at a backstrap loom weaving a *pua kumbu*, the exquisite ceremonial textile used for all important rituals. The *pua kumbu* is one of the most attractive and unusual textiles of Southeast Asia. It is woven using the double-ikat technique, where both the weft and the warp (the vertical and horizontal threads) are dyed with the pattern before the cloth is woven. This requires a phenomenal amount of skill and knowledge from the weaver, as *pua kumbu* designs are very complex. Motifs include guardian figures, rice goddesses, crocodiles, snakes, dragons and all kinds of geometric designs. In fact, certain designs are so difficult to execute - because of their complexity and the power and danger



The Iban longhouse seen from the lake



The ruai (covered verandah) of the Iban longhouse. Note the carved hornbills (kenyalang) on the left.

the spirits depicted with in them - that a woman who successfully weaves one can achieve the social status as a great warrior. The weaving process is surrounded by taboos and superstitions which safeguard the well-being of the weaver. For example, in the past it was taboo to weave in public. Instead, weavers would weave in hiding places such as the attic above the *bilik*.

In the *bilek* next door, a lady is sitting by a small oil stove cooking *kuib jala*. These are rice-flour cakes made by pouring the cake mix into hot oil through a perforated ladle. The result is simple and delicious, and is used by Ibans to serve to guests with tea and coffee. Freshly made *kuib jala* is available for sale if you want to take a few home.

Exploring the *bilek* further, you can see all kinds of household items, such as nets, fish traps and cooking utensils, many similar to those made by the Bidayuh. The family's heirlooms are also on display; ancient Chinese jars, brass cannon from Brunei, and bronze gongs from Brunei and China. Outside in the *ruai*, you understand why the Iban have no need for a *baruk* (head house) - a bunch of carefully smoked and preserved skulls are hanging from the ceiling opposite the *Pengbulu's bilek*. These heads were taken in wars and head hunting expeditions in earlier times, as the practice was gradually stamped out by the White Rajahs and finally eradicated in the 1920's. Nevertheless, the heads are still very important to the community, as the spirits within them help to make the rice fields fertile, and they are taken down and presented with offerings at all major festivals.

Outside in the *ruai* is a *sungkup*, a freshly painted hut ready to be placed over a tomb, to keep the spirit of the deceased warm and dry in the world of the dead, and to hold offerings such as food, drink and tobacco to make life in the spirit world a little more comfortable. On the wall of the *ruai* are thin carved wooden spikes with small squatting figures on top. These are *tuntun pati*, charms used to lure wild pigs into a nearby trap, and to warn passing humans to be careful where they tread.

The focal point of the *ruai*, however, is two carved and brightly painted wooden hornbills (*kenyalang*). These are used to celebrate *gawai kenyalang* (the hornbill festival), one of the two great Iban festivals, celebrated by the people of the Batang Ai and Rejang river systems. The other great festival is *gawai antu* (the feast of the spirits, after which the *sungkup* is placed on the ancestor's tomb), celebrated mostly by the people of the Kalaka and Saribas rivers. The *kenyalang* may only be carved by a mature man who has achieved all his ambitions in life, and then only when he has had a dream instructing him to carve it, as such a task involves disturbing very dangerous spirits.



Above: Iban couple in ceremonial costume



Making knih jala



Weaving the pua kumbu on a backstrap loom

The final item you will see in the Iban longhouse is perhaps the best-known, and certainly one of the most popular. *Tuak* is a delicious and potent wine made from glutinous rice, and is drunk by the Ibans not only at festivals, but also whenever they have an occasion to celebrate, or just when they want to relax. The bottles on sale here are brewed by the ladies of the longhouse, and should be drunk in moderation if you want to enjoy the rest of the village.

IBAN FACTFILE

The 552,000 Iban are the most numerous of Sarawak's ethnic groups, comprising 29.4% of the population and speaking a language distantly related to Malay. The largest concentrations are in the Batang Lupar River Basin and Middle Rejang River areas, but the pioneering Iban spirit has seen them set up thriving communities throughout the state and even as far as neighbouring Sabah. Formerly known as Sea Dayaks because of their seamanship and involvement in piracy, they were once Borneo's most feared headhunters. They migrated from the Kapuas River Basin in Kalimantan around the end of the 15th century AD, conquering vast areas by driving out the existing inhabitants or assimilating them into Iban culture.

Most Iban still choose to live in longhouses, and their culture and way of life is focused on the shifting cultivation of hill rice, but nowadays they also grow cash crops such as pepper, rubber, cocoa and oil palm. Social organisation is classless and egalitarian, with neither clans, hereditary chiefs (headmen are elected), aristocrats or slaves. Social status can be earned however, through a family's achievements, either in war or in weaving; Iban men are superb warriors and Iban women are superb weavers.

Most modern Ibans are Christian, but they still enjoy their traditional festivals, including *Gawai Dayak* (harvest festival, celebrated throughout Sarawak on the 1st and 2nd of June), *Gawai Kenyalang* (hornbill festival, Rejang area) and *Gawai Antu* (festival of the dead, Sri Aman area). The traditional Iban religion combines augury, dream omens and Hindu-Buddhist beliefs, worshipping a triumvirate of gods under the authority of Singalang Burung, the bird-god of war. Many older Iban men have exquisitely tattooed bodies (beware tattooed finger joints - it means the wearer has taken heads!), although this practise is slowly dying out. What is not dying out, however, is an appreciation for Iban culture. Despite modernisation, there are still literally thousands of Iban longhouses throughout Sarawak, and there is a strong cultural awareness amongst young urban Ibans.

Opposite: Iban woman in her ceremonial finery. Note the delicate silver bead-dress and over-skirt made from silver coins.



THE PENAN HUT

After the Iban longhouse, the plankwalk continues away from the lake, leading to a few simply constructed shelters (*sulap*) made from bamboo, tree bark and palm fronds. Waiting to greet you are the Penan nomads, the men clad only in simple bark loin cloths and the women in plain brown jackets. The fire that is burning by the first hut has a powerful, fragrant smell; it is *kayu as*, an aromatic wood whose scent is said to drive away evil spirits. Above the fire, fish or meat are smoking on a simple metal grille, and on a shelf above the smoker, valuable jungle herbs are hung up to dry. These include *tongkat ali* ("Ali's walking stick"), a plant which most Borneo people believe can cure virtually anything, including old age and even lack of desire! If you want to try the remedy for yourself, sticks of the magic herb are on sale for a modest sum, and the friendly nomads will tell you how to prepare it at home.

The huts are, of course, a permanent feature of the village, but in the rainforest a Penan family can construct a simple overnight shelter in less than an hour, and a sturdy shelter such as those here, capable of lasting a few weeks or more, in less than half a day. The hut is basically a two-tier arrangement, with sleeping mats laid on the top layer and the family's belongings (which have to be carried wherever they go) stored underneath. The woven *rotan* sleeping mats have beautiful geometric patterns, reflecting the weaving skill of the Penan women, who can also make bags, baskets and backpacks from materials they gather in the forest. The only items they need from outside are cooking pots, steel to make knives, shotgun cartridges, salt and occasionally tobacco. They trade for these with jungle produce such as *gabaru*, *tongkat ali* and camphor wood, and by selling their superb woven handicrafts and the occasional blowpipe.

A Penan blowpipe is much prized by men of other ethnic groups, because of its superb quality and accuracy. Just off to the side of the encampment is a frame used to construct the blowpipe, and if you are lucky you may see one being made. First, a two-metre long piece of *belian* hardwood is cut and placed in the frame. The bore of the pipe is drilled from underneath, using a simple iron drill and literally weeks of hard work. When the bore is finished, a red-hot iron is passed through to seal and smoothen it, and then the rough exterior is trimmed and smoothed, and finally polished with a rough, sandpaper-like leaf from the forest.

The result, after about a month of full-time work, is a weapon that is deadly accurate in expert hands and can kill a wild pig at a range of up to 80 metres or more. The penetrating power of the bamboo dart is considerable, and the Penan use their expert knowledge of jungle plants to produce a poison for the darts that can kill a large animal almost instantly, yet leave it safe for human consumption once the flesh near the entry wound has been cut away.

continued on p. 22



NAN FACTFILE

Sarawak's 10,000 Penans, roughly 2,500 are still true hunter gatherers, inhabiting the forests of the Upper Baram, Upper Rejang and Limbang areas. The others now live mostly in settled longhouse communities, as the increased pressure of development and the advantages offered by "civilization" have encouraged them to give up their nomadic way of life. Largely because of their nomadic lifestyle, less research has been done on the Penans than on the other ethnic groups of Sarawak. However, the similarity of their language and culture to those of other river peoples has led some anthropologists to suggest that the Penan are not a people who moved to discover farming. Rather, they are believed to have descended from migrants to Borneo, who gave up a settled agricultural existence to wander amongst the abundance of the rainforest sometime around the 12th Century AD.

Whilst the Penan are renowned hunters, their staple food is the wild sago palm, which they crush to extract sago flour. They also supplement their diet with tubers, including tapioca and cassava, which they frequently plant and return to when grown, and fish and prawns from the rivers. They live in small groups which can range from a single family to as many as 100 people, but the average group size is about 30. Social organisation is classless, with a headman chosen for each group by mutual consent. The group will settle in an area until the sago runs out or the supply of wild animals is depleted, then move on to another likely spot, returning to favourite haunts at regular intervals.

Few of the settled Penans have converted to Islam or Christianity, but most still follow traditional beliefs, as do virtually all of the nomadic Penans. Beliefs revolve around animism and the appeasement of spirits: every animal, tree, river, stream and rock in the jungle has its own spirit, and people must keep their relationship with these spirits harmonious in order to survive and prosper in the jungle. This is done by offering apologies to the spirits before cutting a tree or killing an animal, and leaving out offerings when an animal is slaughtered and cooked. Of course, the spirits don't always have to know what humans are doing. Men on a hunting party will never refer to their quarry in case the spirits frighten it away, and they never refer to each other by name in case angered spirits overhear them and use the name to take revenge.

The Penan are probably more at home in the rainforest than any other people in Asia. In fact they are so much at home in the jungle's permanent shade, that they are often reluctant to emerge into bright sunlight. For a nomadic people, the Penan have a very sophisticated grasp of the arts; Penan women are excellent weavers of *rotan* basketry, and Penan men can fashion and play a wide variety of musical instruments, most of which are made from bamboo for easy transport or disposability.

from p. 18.

Visitors who want to try blowpipe shooting themselves are most welcome; there is a small shooting range next to one of the huts. It's not as difficult as it looks; you just remember to keep both eyes open, rather than squinting like a rifle shooter, and aim along the length of the pipe. At this



close range (less than 15 m) there is no need to compensate for height. The dart is released with a smooth, steady breath - think of the first puff of blowing up a balloon, rather than trying to blow out a candle. Once you have hit the target a few times and think you're ready to go hunting in the rainforest, one of the nomads will show you how it's really done, holding three or four darts between his teeth and releasing them in rapid succession like a machine gun. Some Penans can shoot with such accuracy that the first dart is often split by the second.

The blowpipe is not the only means of catching wild pigs. Behind the encampment the nomads will show you an animal trap. This simple but effective device, made from rotan, wood and bamboo and laid across the trail and hidden under leaves, is powerful enough to immobilise a large animal,



or a careless visitor who insists on testing the trap himself. From the Penan encampment, trails lead up into the jungle at the foothills of Mount Santubong, and real wild pigs and deer occasionally wander down these trails, so for humanitarian reasons the traps are only activated when visitors are present.

THE ORANG ULU LONGHOUSE

In the Penan Hut the path veers back to the lakeside, crossing a small stream. To the right just above the stream there is a set of stairs leading to a small waterfall, where Orang Ulu maidens frequently sit to chat with their friends. If you stop here when anyone is around, they will be happy to pose for photographs against the scenic backdrop. Returning to the path, you may hear a faint haunting melody being played on some kind of stringed instrument. The source of the melody is the resident *Pengbulu* of the Orang Ulu longhouse, playing a *sape*, a traditional harp-like instrument which he has carved himself from a single piece of wood. As you enter the Orang Ulu longhouse, two girls perform a welcoming dance to the music. When he has finished playing, the *Pengbulu* shows how the *sape* is made. If you are captivated by the instrument he will even make one for you and teach you how to play it, but it's probably a lot easier to buy one of the cassettes on sale here.

The storyteller will explain the features of the house, which differs from the Iban and Bidayuh longhouses in a number of ways. It is massively constructed from *belian* or a similar hardwood, and even the floor is made of sturdy wooden planks. There is no uncovered verandah, as the Orang Ulu believe that farm work should be done at the farm, not at the longhouse. The covered verandah does not form a straight row, but juts out prominently at the centre of the longhouse, to provide space for the headman and his family to entertain visitors on behalf of the longhouse. Instead of carvings, the building is decorated with spectacular murals using a spiral "tree of life" motif. At the centre the mural is populated with human figures permitted only to aristocrats. As you move away from the centre of the longhouse the murals become simpler, with dog and dragon motifs for the middle classes and simple geometric patterns for the lower classes.

At first glance, the interior of the longhouse appears similar to those of the Iban and Bidayuh, but there are significant differences. Almost every object you see is decorated in one way or another. The longhouse is bedecked with *bunga jaraw*¹, sticks of wood carefully shaven to resemble a head of blonde curls. The sun hats hanging on the wall are woven from many-coloured strands of rotan, to give a stunning geometrical effect. Simple wooden baby carriers, worn like backpacks, are made beautiful through the application of beadwork motifs. In fact beadwork is to Orang Ulu what weaving is to the Iban; the highest expression of their art. Valuable glass beads from all over the world have found their way to Sarawak for centuries, and Orang Ulu women have used them to decorate and embellish almost every aspect of life.

¹ This is an Iban word. Iban is widely used as a *lingua franca* by the Orang Ulu, who speak more than 20 different languages and dialects.



Front view of Orang Ulu longhouse. The projecting verandah denotes the beadman's quarters.



Orang Ulu woman performing the fan dance with bornbill feather fans.

They wear many-stranded bead necklaces for ceremonial occasions, with beadwork caps upon their head and beadwork purses in their beadwork handbags.

There are many activities going on around the longhouse; what you will actually see depends on the time of year. Beneath the longhouse, men may be building sturdy longboats from just three planks of hardwood. There is a blacksmith's forge a few metres away from the longhouse, where knives and swords are made using a bellows made with a feather piston to heat the fire. The Orang Ulu are superb swordsmiths and when they have completed their razor-sharp blades they fit them with beautiful handles carved from bone or hornbill ivory, and decorated with tufts of human hair from the heads of their enemies. At the front of the longhouse is a small rice-barn; rice is usually prepared and stored in the padi fields, not in the longhouse, so that food supplies are safe from fire. A small plot of tobacco has been planted to supply leaves for one the Orang Ulu's two favourite vices – conical cigarettes rolled with strong dark tobacco wrapped in a palm leaf. The other favourite is the chewing of betel nut.

Also at the front of the longhouse is an ornately carved wooden pole with a small, brightly painted hut mounted on top. This is a *klirieng*, a burial pole for the dead. The remains of the dead aristocrat (cold earth graves are good enough for commoners) are placed in the hut for burial, so that the spirit of the deceased can enjoy the view of the river and rainforest, and act as a guardian against bad spirits that may threaten the longhouse.

ORANG ULU FACTFILE

Orang Ulu (lit: upriver people) is the collective term for more than twenty different tribes and sub-tribes who inhabit the interior of Sarawak. They comprise roughly 113,000 people, forming 6% of the population. The biggest groupings are the Kayan and the Kenyah and their various sub-groups, who together number about 50,000. The balance is made up of Lahanan, Kejaman, Penan, Punan, Punan Bah, Ukit, Berawan and others, who also inhabit the upriver areas and grow hill rice or sago, and the Kelabit and Lun Bawang, genuine highlanders who grow wet rice and rear buffaloes.

Some groups, such as the Kayan and the Kenyah, are just a small part of much larger populations inhabiting central and northern Kalimantan, while others, such as the Punan Bah, and the Kejaman, comprise a single longhouse of a few hundred individuals. Little is known about the early history of the Orang Ulu tribes, but many are believed to have migrated from the Yunnan region of southern China between the 10th and 12th Centuries, as some of their languages and customs are similar to the peoples from that region.

continued on p. 10



Inside the verandah. The stylized human faces on the support pole denote an aristocrat's quarters.



Shaping a pole to make bunga jarau decorations



Orang Ulu girl wearing beadwork cap and shawl.

Christianity is firmly embedded amongst the Orang Ulu, with the Catholic and Evangelical churches being most prominent. However, many people still follow *Bungan*, the traditional belief system combining animism with a belief in one supreme god. In fact, *Bungan* has undergone something of a revival in the last 30 years, adapting itself to encompass modern values, technologies and ambitions. Irrespective of religion, modern Orang Ulu are great believers in education, and this has led to many of them holding prominent positions in politics, government, business and society, frequently out of all proportion to their small population.

The Orang Ulu as a community are very active in maintaining their traditions and values. Most rural people prefer to live in longhouses or traditional villages, although many of their interiors would make the average city dweller goggle-eyed with envy. Some traditional values are slowly disappearing however. Aristocratic Orang Ulu women would decorate their arms, legs, hands and feet with densely patterned tattoos as a mark of status, but this is becoming less and less common. Also dying out is the tradition of extending earlobes with heavy brass or gold rings; older women proudly display extended earlobes, but younger women are becoming less and less keen on extending their ears, particularly if they live in the city.

One tradition that is not dying out though is Orang Ulu hospitality. Visitors to an upriver longhouse will be escorted to the headman's apartment and greeted by a traditional praise-singer, a woman who spontaneously composes a ballad of the visitor's exploits and achievements, accompanied by a *sape* player. Betel nut will be passed round, as well as strong local cigarettes and *borak* (rice wine - local church denomination permitting). Serious festivities are expected to last until daybreak, when visitors will have their faces smeared with greasy soot from the kitchen fireplace and then get thrown in the river to wash away the effects of the night before.

THE MELANAU TALL HOUSE



The Melanau rumah tinggi (tall house)

The next part of your journey through Sarawak brings you downriver, to one of the most imposing wooden structures you are ever likely to see in Southeast Asia. This is the rumah tinggi, the tall house, traditional home of the Melanau people. You enter the high-house through a central staircase which brings you to a large gallery, decorated with all kinds of masks, tapestries, bamboo fetishes and carved wooden figures. Sitting amongst all this, at a small altar surrounded by gongs, jars and lighted candles, is a slim, vigorous looking man in late middle age, bearing a neatly-trimmed moustache. This is Pakchik (Uncle) Ishak, the *Pengbulu* of the Melanau community. Like most rural Melanau, Pakchik Ishak is a farmer and a fisherman, but he is also something else; he is a *Bebayub*, a shaman, one of the very few people alive who can carry out real Melanau healing rituals.

Pakchik Ishak is here to explain some of the items he uses in his healing art. If you are lucky, you may actually see a healing ritual in progress,² but they do not take place every day because of the strain on Pakchik Ishak's constitution, and the fear of offending the spirits if they are required merely to perform, not to heal. The keys to the ritual are the *blum*, carved wooden sickness figures that represent the various diseases of the body and mind. The purpose of the ritual is to drive the spirit of the sickness out of the body and into the corresponding *blum*, which is then placed in a small boat and washed away to sea.

For a fuller description of Pakchik Ishak's art, see the profile on page 51.

Having described some of his healing techniques, Pakchik Ishak hands you over to the storyteller. He goes on to explain the structure and the contents of the high-house. It consists of three galleries, built on massive belian poles and standing some 20 feet (6 metres) above the ground. The walls are of local hardwood, the floors of tough, springy *nibong* palm wood, and the roof is attached with sago palm. The sturdy construction is designed to protect the coastal-dwelling Melanau from pirates; the staircase can be pulled up, barring access into the house; there are slits in the floor through which to stab spears and fire muskets; the roof can be jettisoned in segments should an enemy set fire to it; in the highest part of the house is a secure chamber where the women and children can take refuge.

The lower gallery is used for Pakchik Ishak's healing rituals; the upper gallery, which is at right angles to the front of the building, is a traditional living area. Each family occupies a small living and sleeping room, and cooking is done in a communal kitchen at the rear, to help prevent fire. Above the living gallery is the traditional head man's quarters, the largest and highest room in the house. This is decorated with the family's heirlooms, including Chinese and Bruncian brassware and muskets. At one end is a bedchamber containing a large, ornately carved wedding bed, which has been used by all the newlyweds in the community over the years. Behind this is a small hatch leading to the secure hiding place.

Scattered around the house are the utensils necessary for everyday life; fish traps, sago beating and pulping tools, fishing harpoons and a number of weapons. Although the Melanau are not a warlike people, they learnt long ago how to defend themselves, using fishing harpoons, Bruncian muskets and small cannon, and swords made by their Iban and Malay neighbours.

Leaving the house, you notice some young men swinging on a large swing suspended from the house. They are practising for the annual *Kaul* ritual, a festival of thanksgiving for the spirits of the sea. One of the high points is the *tibau*, a game where one man starts to swing on a giant swing, and is joined by more and more others, so that eventually the rope is hidden by a cluster of swinging humanity. Eventually, someone loses his grip and the whole group come crashing painfully to earth. If you visit the village around *Kaul* time (usually mid-April) you should be able to see the game in progress, and for two months beforehand the high-house is decorated with bunting, bamboo decorations and small, exquisitely carved wooden boats that are designed to carry offerings to the spirits of the sea.

Before you leave the house you should take a look at the sago processing hut. Here whole sago logs are brought for processing to extract the starch. First the bark is stripped off, then the starch is rubbed with a rough file to produce a coarse powder. This is mixed with water to form a pulp.

Opposite: Melanau Shaman Ishak bin Bekir performing the *payun* (beating ceremony)



and the starch is trodden out through a *rotan* mesh. The resulting mash is then strained through sieve to form small round pearls which are brought to a charcoal oven for drying. The resulting pearls are served with fish and vegetables, or made into cakes and biscuits.

MELANAU FACTFILE

Sarawak's 107,000 Melanau form 6% of the population. They live mostly along the coastal strip between Bintulu in the north and Kuala Rejang in the south, although there are isolated communities as far upriver as Kanowit on the Rejang, and many have moved to the urban areas. They speak a number of different dialects, although most Melanau will use the dialect from the Mukah area to communicate with others. Like the Orang Ulu, with whom they may share a common ancestry, little is known about their distant past. They are believed to have arrived in Sarawak between the 10th and 12th centuries, possibly via the Philippines, but linguistic studies suggest they originate from the Yunnan area of Southern China, like many of Southeast Asia's peoples. Until the last century Melanau communities thrived far upriver, but as they refused to become assimilated by the aggressive and expansionist Iban or kowtow to the White Rajah's forces, most withdrew to the unpopulated coastal areas and developed a unique lifestyle and culture on the fringes of the peat swamp forest.

Modern Melanau are the most religiously diverse and tolerant community in Sarawak. Muslims, Christians and Pagans live happily side-by-side, respecting one another's beliefs and even attending one another's feasts and festivities. This diversity and tolerance has benefited the Melanau greatly in the 20th Century; friendly, outgoing and unaggressive, they have done very well in the educational system and have had a very significant impact on politics, business and public life. Unfortunately they do not live in high-houses any more – the last inhabited one, where Pakchik Ishak was born and grew up, burnt down in the 1970s. Nowadays their villages are very similar to those of their Malay neighbours, elegant wooden town houses built on stilts, with a jetty at the back for tying up the boat and floating sago logs for processing. There is still one thriving Melanau longhouse at Kuala Rejang however.

The Melanau are absolutely fearless fishermen, putting to sea in all weathers, and are among the best boat builders in Sarawak. Visitors to the small town of Mukah, near Sibu, can spend hours browsing in the small boatyards and chatting to the boat builders as they construct beautiful and very seaworthy small craft from jungle hardwoods. Fish is an important component of the Melanau diet, and a visit to Sarawak is not complete unless you take the chance to try some *umei* and lime juice. The invention of *umei* is attributed to a hungry Melanau fisherman who devised a way to 'cook' the fish he had caught without lighting a fire and burning his boat in the process.



Melanau couple in formal clothing



A side view of the Melanau rumah tinggi (tall house)

THE MALAY TOWN HOUSE

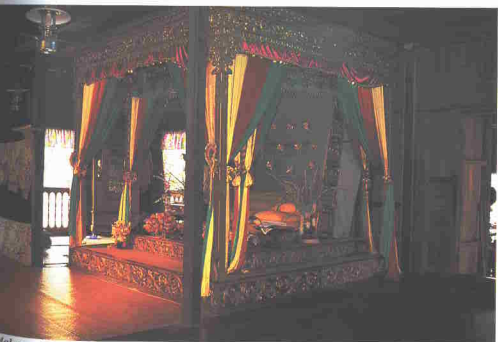
The next stop after the Melanau Tall House is a large shed, open on all sides, where a group of young men are amusing themselves. This is the top-spinning area. Top spinning (*main gasing*) is one of the favourite sports of the Malays, and is a lot more difficult than it looks. This is not a pastime for children; it is taken very seriously and team competitions are organised between different villages. The small tops, made out of solid hardwood, are flung from the hand and spun with a cord wrapped around them. They are then picked up using a taut string and placed in the playing area. There are two objectives in the game; duration of spin and knocking your opponent's top out of the playing area. You will definitely be invited to have a go, and after a few attempts you should get the hang of it. Remember to tell them if you are left handed, as the cord must be wound in the opposite direction. Left handers are highly valued in *main gasing*, as a top spinning rapidly in the 'wrong' direction can wreak havoc with an opponent's tops.

The Malay town house itself is an elegant, spacious and airy building, raised on stilts for cooling and ventilation, the kind of place that would belong to a prosperous farmer or a small trader in the last century. It is made entirely out of high quality hardwoods, with *belian* shingles for the roof. All the borders and edges of the house, such as roof joists and pelmets, are decorated with carved friezes depicting floral motifs. As you enter the house you are welcomed by the 'owner' and invited to take a seat in the living room, which projects from the front of the house. The ladies of the house play *bergendang* music to welcome you, beating small drums and chanting in accompaniment. The furniture is solid-looking and elaborately carved, and on the floor two girls are playing *congkak*, a strategy game involving the moving of coloured stones around a wooden board. An embroidery frame stands in the bright light near the large French windows, whilst the rest of the room is lit by oil lamps. On the wall are kites (another great passion of the Malays), and to one side is the *bilik sembahyang* (prayer room).

The house differs from a Peninsular Malay house in a number of ways. The small verandah at the front is a Sarawakian invention, probably borrowed from the Iban or Bidayuh. The *belian* shingled roof is also unique to Sarawak; in West Malaysia concrete tiles, planks or *attap* thatch are used. The carved friezes, whilst clearly Islamic in form, have been heavily influenced by Iban style. The items in the house reflect some of Sarawak's other cultures, for example Melanau and Orang Ulu sun hats adorn the walls, and are worn instead of the traditional West Malaysian headscarf when working in the rice fields.



The Malay town house



Malay wedding dais. The colours represent Islam (green), royalty (yellow) and bravery (red). The screen behind which the female musicians perform is on the left.

It is the centre of the house that is most fascinating; the place is all decked out for a wedding and preparations are in full swing. In the middle of the room is a wedding dais, decorated with flowers and gifts, and hung with drapes in three colours; green for Islam, yellow for royalty and red for bravery. On the right hand side of the room is a traditional wedding bed, awaiting the bridal couple; on the left there are seats for the musicians and an area screened off behind a large curtain. At a traditional wedding, most of the festivities take place the night before, when it is taboo for men and women to socialise together. The fun loving Malays have found a way round this small problem however. The male musicians sit on the 'public' side, playing fiddles and accordions, whilst the female drummers and singers are seated behind the curtain, but they make music together. Male guests dance the *joget* (a kind of laid-back rumba) until far into the night, but you are sure to be asked to learn a few steps on a hot sultry afternoon.

Exploring the house further, you will see the storage area in the attic, and a large, well equipped kitchen with charcoal and oil stoves at the rear of the house. The kitchen is not merely used for preparing food though; ladies with extensive knowledge of jungle herbs and potions use it for making *jamu*, traditional medicine. Anyone wishing to try some of the herbal remedies and potions can buy them here for a few Ringgit.

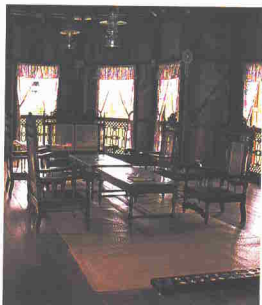
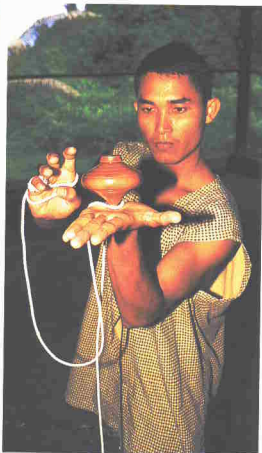
Opposite, clockwise from top left:

Malay couple in formal dress. Both are wearing gold and silk brocade kain songket.

Main gasing – a top spinner displays his skill.

Living room of the Malay town house. A congkak board is in the foreground.

A musician serenades the wedding guests.



MALAY FACTFILE

The Malays, numbering around 408,000, make up 21.7% of Sarawak's population. They are exclusively Muslim, following the Sunni branch of the faith like their cousins in Peninsular Malaysia. Sarawak's Malay community has a diverse heritage; many are descendants of Brunei Malays who converted to Islam in the 14th Century; some are descendants of migrants from Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi and Mindanao; and some are descendants of indigenous tribes who converted to Islam many generations ago. In fact in Sarawak the term Malay effectively covers all indigenous Muslims except the Melanau, the Kedayan and the Bisaya, who have distinct and separate cultures.

Traditionally the Malays are wet-rice farmers, growing rice on irrigated padi land in the coastal areas. However, in Sarawak many Malays have been town dwellers for centuries, engaging in trade and commerce, and running the administration, a tradition that was continued under the Brooke Rajahs. The coastal Malays of the Saribas area have always enjoyed excellent relations with their Iban neighbours, and frequently joined forces to challenge the rule of the Brookes, or to engage in trade or even the occasional act of piracy against their old rivals in Santubong and Kuching.

Historically, Sarawak's Malays looked to the Brunei Sultanate for spiritual and political leadership, but with the Sultanate's decline from the late 18th Century onwards, they became more independent and assertive. The Brunei heritage can still be clearly seen in the courtesy titles used by the Malay gentry; names are frequently prefixed with *Abang*, *Awang* or *Pengiran* (M) or *Dayang* (F). Whilst they were generally loyal subject of the Brookes, who respected their autonomy and their crucial political role, the Malays were staunchly anti-colonial and were the leading players in the anti-cession movement that lasted from 1946 until Sarawak became independent with the formation of Malaysia in 1963.

Sarawak Malays have taken multi-culturalism to heart, and this is reflected in their unique dialect, which is heavily influenced by other local languages. Bahasa Malaysia speakers may find this somewhat confusing. If you order a coffee and the waitress relays your order as '*kopi sedikit*' this doesn't mean she's ordering a small one, just that *sedikit* (a little) is often used in place of *satu* (one). In the Kuching area, people tend to roll the 'r' on the tongue, much as the French do, whilst in the north the Brunei influence is very apparent, with people using '*bab*' or '*pun*' for emphasis rather than '*lab*.' Purists will also be alarmed the large number of Hokkien and Iban words in the vocabulary. There's no need to worry though; everybody can speak crystal clear Bahasa Malaysia when they have to, and English is widely spoken.

THE CHINESE FARMHOUSE & PAVILION



The Chinese farmhouse surrounded by pepper vines

The last stop on your journey, the Chinese farmhouse, portrays how a typical Chinese farming family might have lived in the late 19th or early 20th Centuries (and apart from the addition of a few modern amenities, little has changed even today). Made of wooden planks with an attap roof and a beaten earth floor, it is similar to houses found in Southern China. The entrance leads you straight into a large kitchen, which also doubles as living room. On the left as you enter is a Buddhist/Taoist shrine, dedicated to the Buddha, Tua Pek Kong (the Chinese God of Prosperity) and various family deities. Like any farmhouse kitchen, it is primarily a place of work; the only concession to leisure is an old wind-up gramophone and a selection of 78 rpm recordings of pre-war Cantonese ballads. Farming equipment is hung in racks in the walls or stored at the rear of the kitchen or in the outhouses, and the kitchen itself is full of equipment for processing rice, birds nests, rubber and pepper. In fact the various stages of birds nest and pepper processing are laid out on the kitchen table for you to see, and you can buy the finished product direct from the producer.



Interesting household items include a clog-maker's last, surrounded by typically Chinese clogs (wooden shoes), a shoulder yoke for carrying vegetable baskets, and an abacus for calculating the moon accounts. There is also a rice husking machine, far more complicated than that of the Malayuh; the user grabs a bar at the end of a long pole and turns the grinding stone by moving the handle in an elliptical arc. This is very tiring work, but wonderful for the waistline. Once the rice is prepared, it is cooked on a large wood-fired stove at the rear of the kitchen, where you will also see a bamboo dumpling steamer.

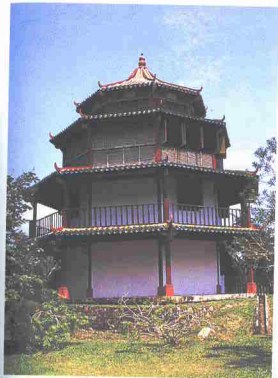
In the adjoining bedroom the furnishings are very simple and practical. A hard platform bed, with usually hard carved wooden pillows, is protected by a mosquito net. Next to it is a baby rocker, the sling suspended on a long metal spring. There is one item in here that does not reflect the austerity of the rest of the house though; a massive, brightly coloured papier mache lion's head. This is used in the lion dance, a ritual guaranteed to bring good fortune to any important event, such as the planting of the rice crop or the birth of a child. Outside in the garden, fruit trees and vegetables are growing to keep the kitchen supplied. A little further away, rows of tall pepper vines provide the farmer's cash income (Sarawak is one of the world's largest pepper producers and the crop has been grown in the state since 1869).

While the farmhouse shows the lifestyle of a hard-working peasant family, the more well-to-do Chinese would relax in a beautiful summer pavilion, reached by crossing a small bridge over a stream, just like the willow-pattern crockery designs. This is the modest pavilion of a middle-class land-owning family, and has three stories. Pavilions have no ritual function; they are the Chinese answer to summer houses or gazebos, a place to hold parties or just relax and drink refreshing green tea on a hot day. Coincidentally, the farmer's wife has a small tea stand at the pavilion, perfect for a quick drink before completing your short walk through Sarawak.

CHINESE FACTFILE

The 522,000 Chinese make up 27.8% of Sarawak's population, and possess a vibrant, thriving culture. There are eight major dialect groups represented in Sarawak's Chinese population, encompassing Buddhists, Taoists and Christians of various denominations. Chinese traders have been visiting Sarawak since the 7th Century AD, but the modern Chinese population stems from successive waves of immigration from Southern China, from the 18th Century onwards.

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The Chinese pavilion



Chinese girl in traditional dress with fan

8
y to the success of the Chinese in Sarawak is specialisation. Upon arrival, each dialect occupied a separate geographical or economic niche, and practised a particular trade, ss or profession for generations, helping one another through clan associations, name es and trade associations. These specialisations remained very distinct throughout the e Era and the colonial period, and it is only since the 1960's that the distinctions have faded what and the various dialect groups have merged into the economic and political stream.

akkas, the largest group, were originally indentured labourers in the antimony and gold in Bau, but with increased immigration in the 19th century many became farmers and ns. The Hokkien, by comparison, came to do business, and opened grocery shops and g companies in every corner of the state. These were the people who were expressly den by the White Rajahs from staying overnight in longhouses, in case they should pass business acumen on to the "innocent Dayaks."

oochow came to the Rejang Delta to grow rice, moved into pepper and rubber growing, the town of Sibu, eventually came to dominate the timber business, and have since moved anking and property development. The Teochew have progressed in a similar fashion to the ien, branching out from farming and trade into the professions. The Chao Ann arrived as ns and carpenters, and have become very prominent in the construction industry, whilst the onese, like Cantonese everywhere, have turned their hands to virtually everything.

urse hard working Chinese have to stop for food, so the Hainanese moved in and created e restaurant sector, as well as owning most of Sarawak's coffee shops and bakeries. But the most ual success story of all is that of the Henghua. Originally fishermen (a trade which many of still practise), they became skilled in repairing boats and engines. This led them into the ness of bicycle repairing by the turn of the century. From these humble origins they came to inate the motor vehicle trade, a very valuable niche indeed in Sarawak's fast developing omy.

factor that unites all of Sarawak's Chinese communities is a belief in hard work, good luck spiritual harmony. You have to make your own way in life, but you also have to make your luck.

PERFORMANCE – SARAWAK COMES ALIVE



The Orang Ulu feather dance. The hornbill feather fans are used to imitate the movements of the bird.

From the pavilion, the path leads back to the main administration building, where you can visit the handicrafts shop and bookstore, or try some authentic Sarawak food in the restaurant. You should not linger too long though, because the gongs are sounding. From all over the village, men and women are marching towards the sound of the gongs, summoned to play their part in the climax of your visit, the theatre show.

The small theatre is laid out in a semi-circular fashion, so that the audience feel closely involved in the action both on and off the stage. Brightly clad musicians sit cross-legged at the back of



The joget, a very popular Malay dance.

the stage, surrounded by an exotic mixture of instruments; brass gongs, *kompang* drums, *sapes*, zithers and nose flutes compete for space with more familiar items like accordions, electronic keyboards and electric guitars. The overture is played, and the show begins. It is performed by some of the people you have met on your cross-cultural walk, and its purpose is to reflect Sarawak's traditional music and dance, and to entertain.

formance is completely revised and re-scripted every three months, but essentially it features the core elements of Sarawak culture. There is always a central theme; it may be a Malay wedding, the inauguration of one of the Brooke Rajahs, or an Orang Ulu tribal gathering. The costumes are always spectacular, and have won a number of prestigious awards for the designers, who design them themselves.

For the theme, the show comprises a succession of dances and sketches which reflect Sarawak's cultural wealth and diversity. You may see an Iban warrior performing the slow, stately *ngajat* dance, or sometimes the *ngajat kayu*, where he dances whilst holding a large anvil between his teeth. Bidayuh dance is usually performed as an ensemble, where men in long, flared skirts circle gracefully around girls wearing brass and copper leg ornaments. Chinese culture is often represented by the *joget*, danced solo or group-style and resembling the *joget* or by a group performance based on the traditional martial art of *silat*.

Malay, with their wealth of cultural heritage, may be represented by the raucous clashing of cymbals in a lion dance, or by a gentle and delicate butterfly fan dance, where the dancers mimic the movements of the insect to the strains of the Chinese violin, the *er-bu*. The Orang Ulu community have a great deal of material to choose from; you might see a hornbill dance where the dancers hop about imitating the unusual movements of the bird, a fan dance or a solo warrior dance, full of grace and power. The Melanau also have many different dances, the most spectacular is the pole dance, where a group of dancers position a pole in the middle of the stage, which is climbed by one of the male dancers, who then spins around the top of the pole, supported only by his stomach muscles!

At the end of the show, dancers descend into the audience, persuading spectators to come on stage and try the dances themselves. The dancers are very polite, and accept an unenthusiastic refusal with good grace, unlike a real longhouse, where guests are expected to participate or suffer the consequences. The easiest is the *joget*; almost anybody should be able to perform a passable imitation of a Malay wedding guest. Others are more difficult; nobody should attempt the *ngajat* unless they are certain their knees can stand the strain. This is a wonderful opportunity for gleeful friends and family members to take that once-in-a-lifetime photograph, and to bring home a memento of the finale to your short walk through Sarawak.

clockwise from top left:

fan dancer

adjustments to the Orang Ulu costume

rice-harvesting dance



A GLIMPSE BACKSTAGE

studied grace and calm of the performers is the result of years of practise, and does not in any way reveal the hectic goings-on backstage. During the show the wings and the dressing rooms are a hive of activity. Dancers perform lightning-quick costume changes between sets, grab a drink and check their make-up; the wardrobe mistress runs around with needle, thread and safety pins performing repairs on the move; and the choreographer and dance teachers carry out minute coaching of new moves and routines.

It is in the dancers' private world, and it is only when talking to them between shows that you can begin to realise the sheer mental and physical effort that goes into producing a show, and keeping it fresh and alive. There is no such thing as an Iban *ngajat* dancer at the Cultural Village, or a Borneo fan dancer. Everybody has to know everybody else's culture and traditions inside out, and be able to perform any one of Sarawak's countless traditional dance routines at a moment's notice. Dance training and fitness classes, conducted three times weekly by the village's five dance instructors and supervised by Jeff Zain (Dance and Activities coordinator – and star dancer) ensure a high standard is maintained.

To the un-tutored eye, Sarawak dances appear quite simple. The movements are generally slow, graceful and flowing, and appear quite effortless to the observer. But anyone who thinks it's easy should try doing this movement. Gently move from a standing to a kneeling position, keeping your knees together and your hands folded across your chest, and let yourself down slowly, without jerking. Then stand up again, equally slowly, without using your hands for support or assistance. Can you feel those thigh and calf muscles shaking? Are your knees going to hurt tomorrow? Can you even do it at all? This is one of the easiest movements, which the dancers perform 20 times a day, and they manage to keep smiling at the same time. No wonder that one of the most familiar backstage sights is a group of dancers lying flat out on the floor, totally exhausted.

Opposite: Backstage, dancers snatch a moment's rest and share a joke or two between lightning-quick costume changes.



ORIGINS OF THE VILLAGE

The Cultural Village grew from the need for a showcase of Sarawak culture. In 1987, the Sarawak Economic Development Corporation (SEDC) presented a proposal to the Sarawak State Government, and by early 1989 the project was under way. The objective was to reconstruct a village of traditional dwellings as realistically as possible, and the architect's brief was to use traditional materials throughout. Native craftsmen from all over Sarawak descended on Damai to construct the houses, a task made more difficult by the lack of a road link (the Santubong Road was only completed in 1991, so everything had to be brought in by ferry). The whole project was managed by SEDC's Director of Tourism & Leisure, with the assistance of the Sarawak Museum and community leaders from the various ethnic groups.

While construction was under way, the staff were training for their grand opening. With such an ambitious project it was essential to build a team who could live up to the expectations of the public. The key staff were only selected from thousands of applicants after extensive psychological profiling, and underwent weeks of team-building exercises to develop their confidence and communication skills, and to gain an in-depth understanding of one another's cultures.

Religious and cultural leaders were invited to carry out blessings or rituals necessary for the success of the project. Both the Malay town house and the Melanau tall house were blessed by the Sarawak Islamic Department. An ancient head ritual was held in the Bidayuh baruk to placate the spirits of the skulls being moved there. A pig was sacrificed in the Iban longhouse, and a lion dance was held in the Chinese farmhouse. These activities were essential as members of the respective ethnic groups were about to start living and working in these houses, and their mutual well-being had to be assured.

The Village opened in February 1990, and was immediately host to a group of VIP visitors. Prime Minister Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, who had visited the construction works, invited the delegates from the ASEAN-European summit to the opening ceremony, demonstrating enormous confidence in the Cultural Village staff.

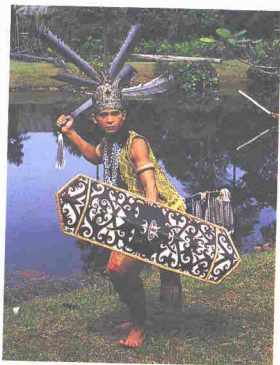
The village soon became one of Malaysia's best known tourism attractions. Virtually every head of state or head of government, and every celebrity who has visited Sarawak has had the chance to sample Sarawak culture and hospitality at the Village. In fact, the bamboo bridge leading to the Bidayuh baruk at the start of the village tour is nowadays known as the "bridge of fame" because of the household names that have been photographed crossing it. The village has continued to prosper and has won a host of awards along the way, including the TDC Gold Award (1990), the Sarawak Cultural Gold Award (1991), the ASEANTA Classic Award (1991), the ASEANTA Best Conservation Effort Award (1992), the Hornbill Tourism Gold Award (1994) and the National Heritage Festival Award (1994 and 1996).

PRESERVING AND PROMOTING SARAWAK'S CULTURE

The Sarawak Cultural Village is not only a visitor attraction. It is also a major resource for studying, preserving and developing Sarawak's culture. The Heritage Centre is run by Narawi bin Rashidi, one of the original team members, who is also the village headman of the staff community that lives in the Village. The heritage centre has a sizeable collection of publications, photographs, video cassettes and audio tapes that are made available to bona fide students and researchers. It also has an extensive workshop where traditional musical instruments and various artefacts are made, maintained and repaired.

The heritage centre is very active in working with schools, and also has a close relationship with Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). It also publishes books on aspects of Sarawak culture; Narawi has recently finished a book on the *sape*, the traditional stringed instrument of the Orang Ulu, and is working on a book about *bergendang*, the Malay chanting drums. The heritage centre is not just for dedicated researchers however. It also brings Sarawak culture to the people by hosting a number of folk music and folk dance festivals every year.

Of course, not everybody can travel to Sarawak to experience the Cultural Village. And as part of its brief to promote Sarawak's traditional dance and music, the Village organises shows, presentations and tours around the world. These are frequently done in conjunction with conferences, tourism fairs and suchlike, and the Cultural Village dancers and musicians have also charmed the audience at major international folk festivals and been performed for some of the crowned heads of Europe. So if you are a seasoned world traveller visiting Sarawak Cultural Village, you should bear in mind that the old-looking warrior clad in a loin cloth probably got more stamps in his passport than you have.



SARAWAK HANDS-ON

visitors find they want more than just a half-day tour. In fact some want to really get involved with Sarawak culture. This may seem a lot to ask, but the resourceful Cultural Village staff have a number of programmes and activities for them.

TRADITIONAL WEDDINGS

A conventional white wedding with bridal dress and morning suit is not for you, or if you want to affirm your vows in an exotic setting, a traditional Sarawak wedding at the Cultural Village is bound to be a day to remember. The village can host many kinds of weddings, but usually opt for a traditional Iban ceremony with the groom clad in spectacular warrior regalia and the bride bedecked with silver coins. An authentic blessing is carried out, and offerings are made to the spirits. This is great fun for the couple and their guests, but prospective grooms should remember that you need a well-toned body to look good in a loin-cloth. A great alternative for those with less perfect physiques is the traditional Malay wedding. Whilst the bride is clad in luxurious silks and covers her head with a gold brocade *selayang*, the groom wears a colourful, intricately patterned *baju melayu*, with a *songket* tied around the middle like a cummerbund, keeping the bride firmly under control.

TRADITIONAL CRAFTS WORKSHOPS

Workshops are also held regularly, and feature expert artists and craftspeople demonstrating how they work. Visitors can see how they choose their materials, and the cultural and religious significance of their work. Workshops include weaving of *pua kumbu* (Iban) and *kain songket* (Malay), wood and bamboo carving (Bidayuh, Iban and Orang Ulu), sword-making (Iban and Orang Ulu), tattooing (Iban and Orang Ulu) and beadwork (Orang Ulu). Visitors are welcome to try their hand.

TRADITIONAL FOOD AND COOKING

Visitors who wish to know more about the types of foods eaten in Sarawak, and how they are prepared, should attend one of the regular food fairs at the Village. These usually include live cooking demonstrations with natural materials, such as bamboo tubes for steaming rice and banana leaves for roasting chicken. Workshops are conducted with expert instructors, and visitors can try cooking authentic Sarawak delicacies (and of course eating them).

HEADHUNTER THEME PARTIES

If you want to experience real Sarawak hospitality, the Cultural Village can lay on one of its famous headhunter theme parties, either in one of the longhouses or in the mini-theatre. Young warriors display their skills and teach you how to dance the *ngajat* (much harder than it looks) whilst Iban maidens ply the guests with endless amounts of food and rice wine, served longhouse-style on a bamboo mat. Enjoyment is guaranteed.



GAWAI TOURISM NIGHT

This annual event was launched in 1996 as a showcase for Gawai Dayak, the harvest festival celebrated by many of the indigenous peoples of Sarawak. Gawai Tourism Night is a spectacular open-air theatre performance depicting the legends and history of the Dayak, Iban and Orang Ulu peoples. As well as the theatre show, there are sideshows, a food fair, cultural demonstrations, and even tuak-drinking competitions in one of the longhouses. It's great fun for all the family, so anyone visiting Sarawak towards the end of May should catch the show if at all possible.



Performing The Legend of Agan Tadun on Gawai Tourism Night

PEOPLE OF THE VILLAGE

RESIDENT MANAGER

people. Jane Lian Labang is the public face of Sarawak Cultural Village. She has been at the village from the beginning, working first as Cultural Activities Manager, then as Human Resources Manager, before becoming Resident Manager in 1994. Although she comes from the Miri Highlands, Jane grew up in Kuching as a member of the only Kelabit family in the area at that time.

As a representative of her people at school, she felt it important to introduce her teachers and classmates to Kelabit culture, and developed an early interest in the performing arts. She spent several years as a dancer with the Social Development Ministry and the Orang Ulu National Dance Troupe, starting at the age of 11. The dancing was part-time, as in the 1980's there were no professional prospects for performers in Sarawak, and she also studied Business and Marketing. It was not her first love, but she was in the right place at the right time. She answered an advertisement in the local newspaper and after surviving an intensive vetting process and three rounds of interviewing, became a key member of the original Cultural Village team.

Jane is fully committed to the village, not just as a career but as a way of life. Her mission at SCV is to complete the process of transforming a living museum into a living community. Thanks to her role as human resources manager (in a department she set up herself) and now as resident manager, the village is gradually becoming an independent and self-sustaining artistic community. Already, one third of all the staff actually live in the village's residential area, and many have settled down and raised families there like Jane herself.

One of the achievements she is proudest of is introducing welfare benefits and facilities for the villagers, particularly a sports medicine service for the dancers. Jane is by no means content with her current achievements though. She is constantly seeking new means of funding to upgrade the facilities in the village and improve the remuneration and working conditions for the staff.

Jane has one very special ambition, to turn the village into a total cultural experience, where visitors do not only visit the village, but live there for some time as part of the community. This would entail providing additional accommodation and resources, not just for visitors who come to sample Sarawak life, but also for artists-in-residence who would use the village as a place of work and a source of inspiration. As Jane puts it, "Very much a creative type of community — the perfect sort of place in which to live."



Resident Manager Jane Lian Labang



Pengbulu Ishak bin Bakir

THE SHAMAN

Ishak bin Bakir has a very unusual job: he is the only shamanistic healer in Malaysia who draws a monthly salary. Pakchik (Uncle) Ishak originally came to Sarawak Cultural Village as *Pengbulu* (leader) of the Melanau community. He was recruited because of his enormous knowledge of traditional Melanau culture, including the famous healing rituals. Part of his task was to explain to visitors how Melanau healers use figurative carvings as a means of driving out disease from the body. Imagine everybody's surprise when it was discovered that he could not only describe the ritual, he could conduct it. He was in fact an experienced and accomplished *bebayub*, a spirit-medium healer, descended from a long line of shamens.

Ishak is still leader of the Melanau community, but nowadays he is also the village's healer-in-residence, tending to sick members of the village community and seeing patients from all over Sarawak. He is by no means an old-fashioned medicine man, however. He has the highest regard for modern medicine and always counsels his patients to see a doctor first. He feels his art is particularly appropriate where there appears to be no apparent organic cause for the sickness, or where it will not respond to conventional treatment. He mediates with the spirit world to treat and helpfully cure the maladies of the soul.

reasoning behind Melanau healing is that some diseases are caused not by conventional forces, but by the presence of a malevolent spirit. A human has no power to drive out this kind of spirit, so instead he must call upon the goodwill of the benevolent spirits to persuade the harmful spirit to leave the victim. The harmful spirit must also have somewhere to go, because otherwise he may take up residence in the body of the healer, or another member of the community.

In the healing ceremony (*payun*), the patient is placed on a large wooden swing, suspended between earth and sky. Ishak has already performed an initial diagnosis at an earlier appointment, and has determined what kind of spirit is affecting the patient. He then carves a small wooden statue of the spirit as a *blum*. These are of many different designs and each represents a different kind of spirit. When the diagnosis is not certain, more than one kind of *blum* is used. He burns incense and lights seven candles, which he places together in his mouth to purify his speech for the ceremony.

The *payun* may take a very long time, sometimes three days or more as the various spirits are appeased. As each spirit enters Ishak's body, he goes into a series of trances, speaking with the spirit. Each spirit in turn performs its own diagnosis, makes suggestions about the patient and lists a series of taboos that the patient and his family should observe in order not to further annoy the spirit world. Finally, when the various spirits are agreed on the nature of the disease and are satisfied that the ritual requirements have been met, they will call upon the spirit causing the disease to enter one of the *blum* figures carved for it. The *blum* figures are then placed in a small wooden boat (*rabung*) which will carry the malevolent spirit to its new home. If the cause of the disease is a forest spirit, the *rabung* will be placed on the edge of the jungle; if the spirit is a water spirit, the *rabung* will be placed in the river and washed out to sea. If the *payun* has been successful, the patient will then recover, sometimes after a period of convalescence.

Although Ishak comes from a family of healers, he did not choose to become a shaman. Instead, he was chosen by the spirits himself. According to Melanau folklore, people who recover from illness after undergoing a *payun* have demonstrated their own ability to communicate with the spirit world, and some experience revelations during the ceremony that equip them to become healers for others. Ishak suffered a serious illness as a young man, and during the *payun* that was performed for him, he felt the call to become a healer.

Ishak is very knowledgeable about Melanau healing arts, and is happy to demonstrate and explain the various aspects of the *payun* ceremony to visitors. However, the *payun* is the greatest of all healing rituals, held only for the very sick, and is very demanding for both healer and patient, so

Ishak will only summon the spirits for the full ritual if someone is genuinely and seriously ill. Otherwise, patients with minor illnesses will be treated with herbal remedies, sound advice about healthy lifestyles, and of course a charming bedside manner that would be the envy of many doctors.



The shaman must purify his breath with fire before summoning the spirits.



Ramli directing a water scene for Gawai Tourism Night



Rehearsals & training form a significant part of Ramli's work.

THE CHOREOGRAPHER

Ramli bin Ali has what he describes as "the best job in the world." As resident choreographer at Sarawak Cultural Village he is responsible for creating and producing all of the cultural shows and dance routines, not just for the village theatre show but also for special events, annual festivals and overseas tours. Watching Ramli in action it is hard to guess that dance is his profession. You are more likely to see him training a group of young warriors to perform a convincing mock attack on a longhouse, screaming at them to show more aggression like an army sergeant major.

ge, however, Ramli's style is much more laid back. He enjoys a warm relationship with the dancers who see him as a (rather youthful) favourite uncle, listening to their protests with an indulgent smile whilst cajoling them to try a routine one more time in order to get it right.

Choreographers work for months or even years on a single production, and they would be horrified by Ramli's workload. The village presents an all-new, 40-minute cultural performance every three months, which has to reflect the dance traditions of a host of ethnic groups, yet work as an integrated performance with a central theme. On top of this he has to prepare and rehearse the dancers for one-off special events, sometimes with only two or three dancers, as well as supervising their general training and fitness programmes.

Compared to Ramli, the workload is the least of his problems. He also has to be a consummate diplomat. With so many different ethnic groups in Sarawak, all with their distinct cultures and customs, he has to please a lot of people and be very sensitive to criticism. And he also has to create shows that entertain visitors and give them a realistic insight into Sarawakian dance. Some groups of people may feel that the routines are not sufficiently modern and sophisticated for their tastes, others will be pointing out that "it wasn't done like that in my grandfather's longhouse." The fact that Ramli can keep smiling and keep coming up with solutions is a tribute to his attitude and his skills.

Ramli has been a choreographer for more than 15 years, and has been Sarawak Cultural Village's chief choreographer since the very beginning, joining in 1989 with the task of moulding a group of inexperienced dancers into shape. His academic background has helped prepare him for his role. He has studied classical dance in Thailand and Indonesia, and modern dance in Australia and the USA. He is a permanent resident of the village, living here with his wife (who works in the village by Damai Lagoon Resort) and children. He describes life in the village as "living and working with your best friends." As for special ambitions, he has one or two.

One of these is to see traditional dance as having one serious limitation if it is to evolve into a modern art form; it is largely fixed on the floor, with no aerial movement. For Ramli, this limits its potential as a form of artistic expression, but of course he cannot experiment too much as visitors expect to see a traditional show. He hopes that as the village develops and expands its role he can choreograph a mix of different types of dance; traditional shows to document and promote Sarawak's cultural heritage, and modern dance workshops to push back the frontiers of traditional dance.

THE VILLAGE AND ITS SURROUNDINGS



The Cultural Village is laid out on a 16-acre site at the foothills of Mount Santubong (810 m), on the tip of the Santubong Peninsula, about 35 km from Kuching. The surrounding resort area of Damai is Sarawak's main beach resort area and offers a host of attractions and amenities to the visitor. There are two international resort hotels, an Arnold Palmer designed golf course, Malay fishing villages, open-air seafood restaurants and a superb trekking trail to the peak of Mount Santubong itself.



Damai is a perfect base from which to explore Southwest Sarawak. As well as having excellent amenities of its own, it is within easy reach of Bako National Park, Semengoh Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre, and historic Kuching, city of the White Rajahs.



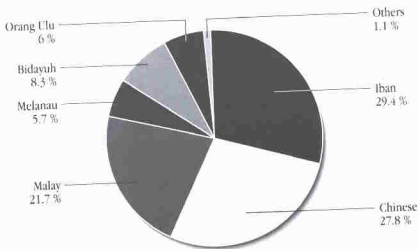
SARAWAK POPULATION STATISTICS

Total Population

1,874,900

Population By Ethnic Group

Ethnic Group	Population	Percentage of Total
Iban	552,100	29.4%
Chinese	521,600	27.8%
Malay	407,600	21.7%
Melanau	107,200	5.7%
Bidayuh	156,100	8.3%
Orang Ulu	112,800	6%
Others	17,500	1.1%



The above figures are based on the most recent information published by the Government Statistics Department (Mid-1996)

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