

31/03/1997

Orang Ulu of Belaga make peace

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was among the Malaysian leaders the Belaga community has made peace with after the lengthy petutung tana ritual or "peace-making" ceremony recently.

The event took place at the new Bakun resettlement site in the Koyan area, 39km from the RM13.5 billion hydro-electric dam site.

Standing in front of the Kayu Tapok offering altar, Kayan spiritual leaders (dayongs) Avun Emang and Anyie Awing praised Dr Mahathir, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud for giving the 10,000 Orang Ulu "a new life".

Calling out to the Bungan religion's deity Bungan Malan, Anyie from Uma Belor, Long Sah "A" (on the Balui river), said: "We thank Dr Mahathir, Anwar and Taib for the new life they have brought us... we ask (the deities) to help our people to be patient, have a good heart and solid thoughts so that we can live (at their new home) a pure, tranquil and victorious life."

The two dayongs representing 10 of the 15 longhouses affected by the dam project held this ritual of appeasing the deities Bungan Malan and her male partner Lake Peselong Luan as well as to ask them for protection and prosperity in their new RM300 million resettlement site. The site will have longhouses and a service centre equipped with medical, health and agricultural facilities.

Similarly, Christians from the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB or Borneo Evangelical Mission) held a ceremony at a separate site for the remaining five longhouses in upper Balui asking for God's blessing.

The petutung tana and Christian ceremonies, which were a follow-up to the Pela Daleh Hiung Hungei (appeasing of the spirits of Belaga district) - first held at the Bakun site in 1995 - fulfilled the spiritual requirements of the people.

It also signalled the beginning of an elaborate plan to move 10,000 Orang Ulu from Bakun to their new resettlement site by October.

It was a low-key affair, with only the president of the Majlis Adat Istiadat (Sarawak Customs and Traditions Council) Datuk Tra Zehnder and State Assemblymen for Belaga and district and longhouse chiefs, resettlement officials and Orang Ulu in attendance.

"Basically the ceremony was to formally tell the deities that since we have to move, we want their protection. We acknowledge that Dr Mahathir and the other leaders such as Anwar and Taib want us to have progress and catch up with the others. They have set very high goals for us and we feel that there is nothing wrong for us to aim for the same kind of life that other people are enjoying," he said.

The 10,000 residents from Bakun are expected to move in stages from their longhouse communities in the Balui river following the completion of their homes in the Koyan resettlement area.

One of the first longhouses that will have to move is Uma Bawang at Long Muru. Its chief Penghulu Lihan Hang, who was present at the ceremony, said: "We are ready to move when the signal is given."

Apparently the resettlement exercise will involve the use of scores of boats and vehicles, most of which will be hired from the residents themselves. It will entail moving household items, furniture and also domesticated animals and poultry to the Bakun site before being transported by land to their resettlement site.

Bato Kalo Tua Kampung (headman) Lating Avun, in his 50s, who arrived for the ritual a day earlier and sampled a meal of fish which was caught from the Koyan said: "I was quite surprised that there is a lot of fish in the river here. It is also much cleaner than the Balui."

During the ritual, the dayongs spoke to the deities through a chicken egg, slaughtered a pig, and raised a miniature ladder called san urip to the top platform of the altar on which was laid out food offerings and cigarettes for Bungan and Peselong.

The san urip symbolised the people moving to a new life which would propel them towards a better future.

Avun Emang, who was also involved in the pela Daleh in Bakun in October, 1995, was happy that their messages had been sent to the deities and that they had fulfilled the requirements of "cleansing" the area of unfriendly spirits and establishing peace in the Koyan.

"The last petutung tana ceremony was held a long time ago and we had to make several enquiries before conducting the ritual in accordance to the old customs (adat pu'un). However, in this ritual we used the Bungan religion rituals (the Bungan religion was founded by a Kenyah in 1948 and was only introduced to Sarawak in the early 1950s) and have as such fulfilled the requirements," said Avun.

The last petutung tana peace-making ceremony was held 73 years ago - on Nov 16, 1924 - between warring Iban, Kayan and Kenyah communities living in the Belaga-Kapit-Kalimantan region in Kapit, in the presence of Sir Charles Vyner Brooke, the third Rajah of Sarawak.

As a final symbolic gesture, a belawing urip (pole of life) was raised. Unlike in the past when the ceremony would have required the sacrificing of a human slave who would have been put in a hole before raising the six-metre pole, all that was needed was the blood of a sacrificial pig.

And instead of scores of people using rope or vines to pull up the massive belawing urip, an Orang Ulu youth manning an mechanically operated shovel, manouvred the pole into position as most of the Orang Ulu sat back, relaxed and watched as this modern contraption did most of the work.

Indeed, the culture of the Orang Ulu has changed, and whether for the better or worse only time will tell.

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