

Feudal control over native hospitality
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THE ANTIDOTE Sarawak natives are famed for their hospitality. A hungry traveller in rural Sarawak will almost invariably find a host village willing to take him in, and feed and shelter him for the night.

In local mythology, Keling, a demigod and idealised warrior emulated by Iban men, has a penchant for bejalai, the tradition of wandering the earth. Keling often appears to longhouses as a stranger, in human likeness.

Villagers providing a gracious welcome are showered with blessings, while the converse is true for those who turn the stranger away.

NONEThe Penan are also well known for treating strangers kindly. Whether from the 15,000 settled or semi-settled majority, or the 500 or so remaining nomadic hunter-gatherers, the Penan share their food with travellers they meet in the forests, as well as with one another.

Sharing resources is a deeply ingrained Penan tradition known as molong. According to ethnographer Wade Davis, refusing to share or see hun, is one of the worst offences known to the Penan. Davis has pointed out that the Penan have no traditional word for 'thank you' or 'thief'.

After headhunting rituals faded away a century ago, mistrust between the different ethnic identities, notably between the two largest Dayak groups, the Iban and the Bidayuh, has largely given way to a common hospitality.

Many rural Chinese communities have been living in Sarawak for over a century, and it can be argued these Sarawakians too are 'native' - though the prevailing mood of bumiputera tub-thumping would, of course, drown out any such discussion.

The rural Sarawakian Chinese, including simple Foochow farmers in Sibuan and Sarikei, also display a strong tradition of extending hospitality to strangers, and of being willing to collaborate with other ethnic groups.

sarawak natives dayakA quarter of the pupils in rural Chinese vernacular schools are Malay, Melanau or Dayak, a symbiosis that keeps these schools afloat, while providing a consistent level of education for a large number of rural natives. Many Malays, Chinese and Dayaks in small towns are fluent in Mandarin, Malay and Iban, and inter-ethnic marriages are common.

Some rural Kelabit, Kenyah and other Orang Ulu (or people of the highlands) have worked together with Penan communities that have settled nearby. These communities have imparted to the Penan their expertise in farming hill padi, navigating rivers with longboats, and negotiating for allocations from the bureaucracy.

The Penan, in turn, have shared their renowned skills in hunting and tracking with their new neighbours.

Sarawak's feudal politics

This common hospitality towards strangers, and co-operation with other groups, does not imply that ethnocentric politics has no place in Sarawak. Ethnic feeling remains a driving force in Sarawak politics, though not to the same fevered degree as in Peninsular Malaysia.

Demagogues of all stripes in Sarawak have encouraged divisive ethnic politics since the formation of Malaysia in 1963. They have prospered through political patronage and a strategy of playing off one ethnic group against another.

NONE One reason for the success of these demagogues is that deference to hierarchy, within each individual ethnic group, is a common feature among most Sarawakians.

Sarawak Malays and Melanaus have a well described feudal system. Despite the prevalence of crippling poverty in many Malay and Melanau areas, as any visit to Samarahan or Daro will show, they show little sign of the political awareness sparked off by Anwar Ibrahim's persecution among urban peninsula Malays.

The Chinese have traditionally worked within a regimented, hierarchical clan network, although many younger urban Chinese have recently shown resentment of the domination of the majority-Chinese Sarawak United People's Party by business interests.

Many Kelabit, Kenyah and Kayan, and other Orang Ulu groups, making up some 5 percent of Sarawak's population, continue to honour strict social strata, featuring, for example, inherited allocation to the nobility, the peasantry or the slave class.

NONE The comparatively egalitarian Iban and Penan have scattered grassroots networks of opposition to the powerful timber and oil palm industries backed by government ministers.

But the Iban and Penan are hamstrung by poverty and a low level of formal education.

A large proportion of the Penan are also handicapped by poor access to basic social services, including Mykad and voting rights, while many Iban are held back by the twin scourges of alcohol dependency and corrupt political leaders.

Government threats

The feudal norm explains why a Bernama report of June 28 - in which the state minister for infrastructure development and communication (and former school principal) Michael Manyin threatened tribal leaders such as temenggong, pemanca and penghulu with sacking if they "support the opposition" - barely raised any eyebrows in the local press.

"Tribal leaders are the government's agents in developing local communities and are not supposed to go against the government," he was quoted as saying.

Manyin emphasised that tribal leaders are appointed by local government and not by election, as is traditional among many Iban longhouses.

"No voting or election is needed in appointing a new tribal leader as he will be appointed according to the approval given by the district officer, division resident and state secretary," he stated.

penan benalih baram blockade 270807 Village heads or ketua kampung are given a monthly stipend of RM450, a sizeable sum in rural areas where monthly cash incomes are miniscule. The BN-led administration has repeatedly dismissed village heads it has accused of opposing

logging or the coalition itself.

State officials stopped village-chief allowances to seven Penan headmen in Baram in 2008 because the villages were involved in claims of native customary rights to land against logging companies.

The headmen were accused of being "anti-government". Six Bidayuh village chiefs in Bau and Lundu were sacked two years ago, after they were accused of campaigning against BN in the 2008 parliamentary elections.

The BN remains confident that Sarawak's natives will remain its staunch supporters in the upcoming state elections. But political observers ask: can crude political control over headmen extend to every single villager for all eternity, and can any 'fixed deposit' be certain to last indefinitely?

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