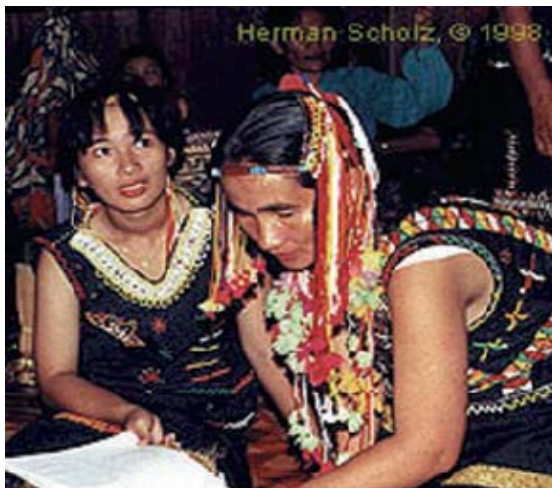


Tina'uh

A Tahol Murut wedding ceremony

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The 'bride' in full traditional attire



Preparations...

Heirloom jar with tapai

Introduction

If you are invited to a Murut Wedding, you should by no means decline. Especially not if it is not just a simple wedding 'Malay Style', but a 'tina'uh', or 'bului'.

Both, the tina'uh and the bului are highly traditional affairs, and they are best described as the last handing over of the outstanding dowry that was initially agreed on for the bride. The bului ceremony is even grander than the tina'uh, but this text will content itself to explanations pertaining to the tina'uh of the Tataluan Murut.

A tina'uh can be held two years after a young man has taken a Murut wife, in a ceremony called 'limpoho'. This was once the official wedding ritual and procedure of the Sepulut and Pensiangan Murut. Often, the young husband won't be able to pay his debt so quickly. The 'pulut' (dowry) for a Murut girl can amount to up to 40,000 Ringgit in heirloom goods and cash, and thus frequently the tina'uh is only held twenty years after the limpoho. Sometimes, the man has taken another one or two wives by then ...

The tina'uh is in danger of disappearing, as are so many customs. It is becoming rarer, nowadays, that the parents in law of a young man require the limpoho, which will then automatically call for the tina'uh or bului later. One of the reasons for the disappearance of this custom is that it is very labour intensive. Murut parties are beyond description, to say the least, and preparations for a fully-grown tina'uh can involve an entire village for more than a month. In our modern times, they are not very practical affairs any more. Our lives are ruled by schedules and duties, to many of which the Murut have now also yielded - in the name of progress. Yet, in remote, rural areas, where people are called poor because wealth and progress is still measured by money and technical advance, limpoho's are still customary. There, life follows the little disturbed and spiritual age-old rhythm, with its intricate social pattern, that once dominated the entire of Borneo.

When a tina'uh is going to be held in a village is subject to long discussions amongst the village elders. Many aspects have to be considered, amongst others to make sure that everyone summoned will be able to attend. As a general rule, a season of good rice-harvests is likely to be followed by some tina'uh's. This was the case in 1998. Though vast parts of the country suffered from an exceptionally long

draught, in the heart of Sabah, the harvest was extraordinary.

The Date

It was decided that on July 11, 1998, Makinik should pay his final dowry to Korom, the headman of Labang and father of the 'bride': Makinik had been married just over 20 years to Sangkina, a daughter Korom had with his first wife. The date for the festivities was settled in a discussion between Korom and all the 'tuan rumah' (heads of the individual households) of his longhouse, since the party would involve everybody of the family.

During the discussion all the tuan rumah will determine whom they invite from their family branch for the festivity, and whom they invite as 'sumaang': helpers during the party. Then, it will be decided what the invitees are to bring to the tina'uh: being officially invited to a tina'uh is more of a summons than anything else, and involves considerable costs in the first place, and probably a long journey back to the kampung (village). But there are very good reasons for many Murut living and earning their lives in town to take part in the ceremony, even if it temporarily disrupts their programmes. Nowadays, the requests, which can range from money over gold jewellery to buffaloes, next to the gongs and beads that are compulsory, are put down in written form. They will be sent together with an elaborate 'buyuung', an intricate rattan basket. The buyuung is reminiscent of even older traditions, when invitations were not sent in written form. The complex patterns woven into the basket, the quality of the weaving and the rattan chosen were of importance and significance lost in time. Yet, those who receive the basket will still judge the coming event by the designs of the buyuung, and the quality of the rattan used, as well as its weaving textures. The baskets are sent out through a special courier, the 'angkaunan', the post-man in Murut language. Next to the requirements in goods, an invitee also gets to know if he has to 'buka tapai', and what the price of it is. The custom requires that the first drinker of each tapai-jar pays a certain amount when he 'opens the tapai' (buka tapai) to defray the owner of the tapai. Furthermore, above the jars are suspended and for sale strings of beads, fruits, sweets, cigarettes and meat pickle - of course the purchase of it is not quite voluntary. Here again, the invitee is bound by customary regulations, and he has to suspend money (the 'pamarahan') for the goods he purchases.

Preparations

Once everybody is invited and able to come, which in a big family clan is not always the case (a new date would have to be agreed on), the tuan rumah will start with the preparations for the party. One to two months before the event, tapai has to be prepared. Immeasurably old and valuable jars, some dating back to the Ming Dynasty (1644 and earlier), will be filled with cooked cassava root (ubi kayu). The yeast added to the cooked tuber will cause its fermentation, and when later water is poured over the mixture in the jar, we get the famous tapai. Some of the jars are so big that it requires up to three 'karung' (50kg rice-sacks) of cassava root, or about 45 kg of the potato. These jars will be in the main display, but numerous 'pemahamis' have to be prepared, jars with tapai that will replace the big ones once they are finished. Then, fish and wild-pig pickle (lamba no papait / assi) has to be prepared, and for this the men must go hunting; the women have to weave baskets, string beads, and heirloom has to be gathered. The whole is a rather frenetic activity in a usually quiet Murut settlement, requiring the help of everyone, young and old. Furthermore, since usually a multitude of guests is expected, houses might have to be enlarged. Should the house be big enough, the kitchens will have to be extended for sure! In the case of Makinik's tina'uh, Korom's seven-door longhouse could well accommodate the expected crowd of roughly 300 adults and as many children. Nevertheless, some relatives who arrived early built a temporary house, quaintly thatched with palm leaves in the absence of more modern building materials.

For a tina'uh, a 'sangiang' has to be erected in front of the longhouse, as well as in the gallery, where the tapai is to be served. The sangiang is a peculiar construction serving only one function, if not merely to indicate the intention of holding a tina'uh: to receive the dowry and display it. The wealth and importance of a Murut still depends and is judged on how many sampa (jars), especially old ones, and how many gongs, heirloom beads and belts he can provide to pay for his bride. Of course, in olden times heads taken in battle only would add to the importance of the man, and the 'tengkorak' were then also displayed on the sangiang. Now, one is more likely to find a brand new TV set on the sangiang than a fresh, blood-dripping skull. Hopefully...

Curiously, the decoration of the sangiang, which consists of poles of softwood trimmed with wooden shavings (ingkuhun), occur through-



Murut girls in their traditional best

out the whole of Borneo, and not only with the Murut!

I was invited to Makinik's a tina'uh in Labang. As a non-Murut, this did not incur further cost on me than the purchase of some two dozens of chicken. Others accompanying me moaned about the expenses they had, and how difficult their life was, and how bad it was to be a Murut anyway. Against all my efforts to instill some pride in their ancient culture, young men like to complain about the price of a Murut girl. Eventually, taking a wife is cheaper nowadays with the introduction of the Malay style wedding, but that seems to be of little comfort to the men. In the end, this new form of marriage also means less parties. There are always two sides to the medal. Yet, the manifold social pattern that ruled and continues to rule the life of many Murut left them with a barely hidden thrill in anticipation of the tina'uh. Ultimately, this is more than just an exceptionally big party, or entertainment. Decided to learn more about the custom I myself ended up with feverish excitement even before I was on my way to Labang.

It was not the first time I was in this far outpost of civilisation. Upon entering the village I saw immediately that the preparations for the tina'uh were in full swing. Some of the houses had been connected together with covered passages, and there was that unmistakable platform in front of the main longhouse, the sangiang, telling everybody that a tina'uh was going to be held. I was warmly welcomed, despite the hectic activities. Men were cutting and sawing, building and nailing. Others were painting and arranging wooden parangs that would later be for the children, now also busily engaged in the preparations, running errands and carrying barang. Though I have been to Murut weddings and other parties before, and I am somewhat accustomed to the sight of endless rows of jars, a surprise awaited me in the gallery of the longhouse: the seven tuan rumah had placed no less than 29 huge heirloom jars in a splendid arrangement (at that moment I had no idea that there were roughly another 200 pemahamis waiting...). They were, for both, security and traditional reasons, encased in a special construction under the sangiang, in the middle of the house. Korom himself provided five tajau, destined to be opened by as many of his invited relatives. Korom would receive the money for the 'buka tapai', and in return not only provide the tapai, but also jeruk (meat pickle), more buyuung for the 'akiliimpoh', the sales of the rattan baskets at the end of the party, and the famous 'kampung rice'.

Seeing such frenetic activities, and being not exactly a help I kept myself quiet in some corner, occasionally taking some photos. As the invited relatives came in, the sangiang in front of the house started bending under the load of jars and gongs. With each landing of a boat, which was made audible over a long distance by the sounding gongs, more people came in. The boats were loaded to a dangerous level, which seemed to concern nobody except me. Dogs jumped lightly on shore, then the men climbed out and fastened the boat, babies were handed over, then followed jars and gongs, poultry and personal belongings. The grandmothers and grandfathers were the last to leave the longboats, climbing gingerly, but equally full of joy up the steep banks of Labang. Those who arrived by car - usually in tattered old landrovers that somehow still made it over the badly maintained mud-track to Labang - announced their arrival in like manner with gong-beatings.