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A fully decorated sangiang with beads, tapai and 'pusas' food



Part of the dowry assembled on the exterior sangiang

The Party

The arrival of the guests took place over three days. Everybody took temporary residence in the dewan (community hall) of Labang, where the inhabitants of the different households and the sumaang in Korom's longhouse served lunch. A minor drinking party in anticipation of the big feast started impromptu on the verandah of the dewan. When the sun set on the third day, the last of the invited arrived, and soon everybody changed into traditional outfit: the ladies donned their elaborately beaded black dresses, and wore ancient carnelian tiaras. The men put on equally colourful shirts but instead of the 'avu', the loincloth, they wore less traditional but more decent (or so they were told) trousers, also studded with innumerable beads. We all waited in great excitement when Korom finally proceeded to the opening of the tina'uh. Standing at the bottom of the sangiang, he officially opened the ceremony with an ancient 'haiang', a head-hunter's sword, with which he sliced a section of bamboo filled with blessed water. Then, in a speech addressing the long departed he told us of the importance of honouring traditions. The father of Sangkina did a similar speech, and also cut a bamboo section containing blessed water. It was only now that everybody was allowed up the sangiang, and under the clamour of countless gongs we could inspect the dowry closer. Makinik and Sangkina were sitting on a dais, receiving the wishes of everybody. It was now that we got a first taste of tapai. For this special occasion the Murut here make 'linahas', a sweetish and not too strong wine made from rice, instead of cassava tuber. Now, the gong-players went seven times around the berian on the sangiang. Then they proceeded to the house where by now everybody had taken quarter. Here again, the players went seven times around the sangiang, hidden behind many lengths of cloth. I found myself having suddenly a heavy gong hanging from my shoulders, and when I protested that I did not know how to play it I was simply instructed to beat it. I did my best to hammer more or less in the general rhythm of the frenetic crowd, to frighten away any evil intended spirit. I am sure it did have its desired effect! During the chaos, the 'antalan' ensued: the bringing of the berian into the house for assessment by the

families. All of a sudden, the gongs and the clamour stopped. Expectation was high and tense in the air. In the dim light of the kerosene lamps shiny faces and gleaming eyes were fixed upon the sangiang. Finally, it was unveiled, and the moment was magic, the silence supreme. The overwhelming feelings that very moment were palpable, and I felt myself like a little boy back in Europe, on Christmas Eve, when we were at last allowed to see the mystically lit Christmas tree. But no sooner the jars were revealed, the silence was over and everybody talked at once. The display was appreciated and judged, and for the prestige of the house this is a crucial moment. There better be no fault-pas, or mistake in the display, or else the makers would have to pay hefty fines. But it was perfect, and somehow each man found the jar he was supposed to open. The buka tapai fee was paid, and soon men were happily slurping away tapai. The next few days would diffuse in a timeless merry making, in a happiness and carelessness that to experience is a privilege. In our hectic world I have the feeling that not even Christmas provides us with a term long enough to indulge in this perfect and innocent 'laissez vivre'. We were drinking, and eating, sleeping, and drinking again. We were having fun in the water, we paddled up the river, we joked and teased, played and laughed, and time seemed to stop for the very sake of the feast. Even those who worked hardest during the celebration enjoyed themselves, rewarded for their enormous efforts by the tremendous success of the tina'uh. Buffaloes were slaughtered, and the ladies ensued in long discussions over the arrangement of beads in the 'bobok', which determined the number of buffaloes to kill. Chicken followed each other in rapid succession into the cooking pot, and the families of the tuan rumah, and their sumaang were busy to provide the drinkers, who followed each other in equal rapid succession, with hot soup and pickled meat and fish.

During eating hours, long rows of food would be displayed from one end to the other of the longhouse, and then be distributed to the respective families. During the short sleeping hours, the whole space would be taken up by bodies lying criss-cross over the floor, more or less grouped by families. At any time, walking through the longhouse gallery one had to be careful not to step on either food, or people...

The party lasted five days and four nights. When the participants went on their long journey home, their initial expenses had been rewarded manifold. Karung's of the much coveted Murut hill rice went with them to Keningau, or even as far as Kota Kinabalu, together with loads of pickled meat of wild boar and fish, all items that the families would never be able to produce, not to talk of purchase in the cities. And besides being very much appreciated as foods, the pickle and rice maybe used in another ceremony. Thus, even in this time of transition, when only too little value is given to old ceremonies and knowledge, this age-old institution of the traditional wedding procedure of the Murut has found a place in our society. An old and not at all odd custom with new meanings, surviving in modern times because of its practical value.



Tapai drinking 24 hours a day!

WHERE TO STAY

Winner Hotel
Phone: 60 088 243222
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The Palace Hotel
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