

The Tagal System in Sabah

Lessons to be Learned from Local Communities

By Herman Schotz

When travelling through Sabah one comes across 'tagal' signboards – often on the banks of rivers or not far away, or on roads leading to rivers. A whole series of interdictions warn even the non-initiated that fishing here is prohibited. I have often wondered about this 'tagal', though it evidently did not struck me as curious that fishing should be forbidden in certain rivers, especially close to larger settlements and towns. If everybody went fishing indiscriminately our rivers here would soon be empty, though other human activities work towards the same goal: indiscriminate dumping of waste and even toxic substances and their subsequent damaging impact on the ecosystem are unfortunately rarely considered. This in turn is sad because it turns out that 'tagal' is actually quite an old way of managing one's natural resources, especially when it comes to rivers. It used to be a common understanding that rivers and water sources were to be protected for the healthy and good life of the people. To-day, 'tagal' is still a community initiative, and villages declare often voluntarily a certain stretch of river – usually the closest two or three kilometres up and downstream of the village – 'tagal'.

'Tagal' in the various Dusun languages of Sabah translates loosely as 'don't take' and a stretch of river that is declared 'tagal' is thus off limits for fishing. 'Tagal' areas often include 'lotung', i.e. stretches where the river is particularly deep and ideal for fish breeding. The idea is to allow nature to replenish its fish-stock naturally, and disturbing a 'tagal' area is enforced through the Native Court and heavy fines can be imposed, ranging from money over chick-

en and pigs to buffaloes for the most serious transgressions.

It is said that 'tagal' has been around for a long time though I have not come across any concrete evidence. And old man once told me – remembering dimly something of 'tagal' in the past – that: "Yes, there was something, but in that case we 'tangkap dua, tiga ekor tanga malam, sukup makan bah..." (we caught two, three fish in the middle of the night, enough to eat...). Despite my lack of concrete evidence it is not astonishing that the local communities should have had certain systems of management of their natural resources even back in time. At first glance it may seem hardly logical: before the 70's, before heavy logging polluted many rivers, communities grew bigger and before land started losing its spiritual value and became a commodity that could be sold for hard cash, the rainforest of Borneo was abundant with food resources for the locals. Communities were small and widely scattered throughout Borneo, with vast uninhabited stretches of jungle in-between which replenished quickly, and naturally, what the people hunted or gathered for their survival. But the locals also planted rice. Be it in permanent, flooded rice fields (ranau) or on hill slopes (tumo) through slash and burn those fields had to be managed cunningly to maintain their fertility. In this light it only seems normal that rivers also should have been managed in a certain way, though modern-day 'tagal' is certainly more organised, better surveyed, and more widely practised.

'Tagal' signboards sometimes include a sketch of the stretch of river which is 'tagal', indicating clearly the borders to non-locals. But more often than not 'tagal' signboards only men-

tion prominent features along the river – a 'lotung', or a particularly huge boulder, a bridge etc – known to all the locals as border markers. The village on the river is often right in the middle of the 'tagal' stretch, thus forcing the inhabitants to walk up or downstream to go fishing. This reduces human impact on the fish population not only in the 'tagal' area, but also further up and downstream as less people go fishing due to the long distance. In larger settlements the government encourages rearing fish in ponds and the local people get assistance from the Department of Fisheries as this further helps protect the natural fish population. The Department of Fisheries in Sabah also plays a number of different roles in the Tagal System.

Once a year – or twice, depending on the communities – a 'buka tagal' day or two is held: the 'tagal' restrictions are lifted and the whole community gathers for a merry day of fishing in the 'tagal' area. Depending on the areas the yield can be huge, and 'buka tagal' is always accompanied by a day of merry making, where one also meets relatives and friends. The catch is then shared amongst all the 'tagal' members – each household of a village is member, and thus everybody gets a share of the day's fishing. In remote areas the fish is immediately gutted and mixed with 'pangi' (Pangium edule), the seed of the kepayang tree (in Malay: buah keluak). The fermented, dried and pounded seeds contain natural preservatives and let you keep fish, or meat for a long time even when you have no fridge or freezer. Some of the fish is of course eaten right then and there...

Despite the 'tagal' system in Sabah, the general attitude towards greater environmental

protection is still slack. Even in 'tagal' areas most people have no qualms about using the river as a convenient way to flush away garbage – usually of the 'non-compostable' sort... this has dire impacts in the river further downstream, made worse by large farms (animal and vegetable) which discard waste and where pesticides and fertilisers leach into the water. And my all-time favourite is washing cars in rivers. I simply refuse, though my friends urge me and say "come on, everybody does it". Exactly – with that attitude we are still a far way from realising the need to protect our water resources. But younger generations bring more conscious attitudes, and there is certainly hope for a future of Sabah's rivers. 'Tagal' is a very good and promising start, and even Peninsular Malaysia is looking into this system for her own rivers!

Buka tagal in Kg Pongobonon where the whole village participates.



Rosalia Clement of Kg Pongobonon with one of the sinsilog.

"Happy Faces"

