

By HERMAN SCHOLZ, The Flying Dusun

# The Rungus



**T**he Rungus in the north of Sabah (Kudat area) are arguably the most traditional ethnic group here. They remain remarkably strong in this time of transition, and keep up with an age-old lifestyle. Their life, as that of most tribes in Borneo, turns around rice: the preparing of the padi field, or the clearance of a hill plot, the growing of rice and looking after it, and finally the harvest. Large coconut and banana groves enable the Rungus to get cash, but in all, their traditional life-style suits them very much and seems to keep them out of trouble and stress.

The Rungus seem to have been the last Dusunic immigrants to Sabah to settle here permanently, long before the arrival of the British. They have up to-date conserved much of their cultural heritage. The Rungus are a sub-group of the Kadazan-Dusun, with a distinctive language and a few dialects, architecture, adat (customs), and outfit. Many people still, especially from the elder generation, dress the way they have attired when they were still unaffected by outside influences, and it is presumed that most of the other tribes of the Kadazan-Dusun community had similar dresses and attires: simple black sarongs for the women, wide black trousers for the men and beaded accessories.

A visit to an indigenous longhouse is a tremendous and exciting experience. In Sabah, there are only a few places that do cater for tourists on a regular basis, such as the Bavanggazo Longhouse, or the Tinangol Longhouse. These places come with certain facilities that make the stay for foreign travellers and visitors more comfortable. However, travelling in the area of Kudat, taking some abandoned road, stalking along rivers and through lofty coconut groves, one will still come across the tradi-

tional longhouse, minus the thatched roof. Corrugated iron has replaced atap, demanding less maintenance. The Rungus Longhouse is quite different from the Murut Longhouse, equally to be found in Sabah. The houses are not perched on excessively high stilts, they are usually only about three to five feet above ground. The roof is low, and in olden times, longhouses of 75 doors have existed. Now they rarely exceed 10 doors, along the communal gallery that has an elevated platform of split bamboo. The house is framed by outward sloping walls of wide-spaced poles. This provides ventilation and a comfortable sitting area for work, relaxation and socialising. Where there is a longhouse, some 'one-family' houses might exist, and they often look as if they had been cut out of the original longhouse, like a piece of cake.

Dogs, chicken and other domesticated animal abound in the clearing where the houses stand, and kids too young to help with the daily chores play in the sand. They will quickly announce the arrival of a stranger, and whoever passes will be invited into the house for a rest. During the hot afternoons, a palpable laziness prevails in the houses. People doze on the platform in the gallery or work on some handicraft if they are not at work in the fields, or catch fish and crabs. When everybody comes back from work in the late afternoon, the gallery bounces under the many feet.

At a longhouse it is always possible to stay over night. One has to enquire for the chief of the house, who will accommodate the strangers. Against exchanged goods (or money...), he also provides food. With some luck one is invited to taste some

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