

Tadau Ka'amatan: Gratitude, Reverence and Celebration

By Melissa Leong

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“Our plates were spotless after every meal. To leave a single grain of rice untouched was utterly disrespectful,” I had heard my grandmother once say. Many of us underestimate the importance of rice, particularly to the Kadazandusun community. It is more than sustenance. For generations, long days in the paddy fields have been the livelihood of many families, and rice embodies the trials and tribulations of life. Above all, the spirit of rice is revered and honoured and there is no better time to witness this mystifying ritual than during the Harvest Festival, also known as Tadau Ka'amatan.

Sabah celebrates this annual festival every May with complete grandeur. Each district holds its own Ka'amatan celebration, with the festival culminating during the Grand Finale on 30 and 31 May at the Kadazandusun Cultural Association (KDCA) Hall. Despite all the merry-making which takes place throughout the month in various locations, the true essence of the festival lies in the age-old beliefs and rituals practiced to this very day.

The Kadazandusun believe that rice has a spirit, which they refer to as bambarayon or bambaazon. The rice spirit lives in the paddy fields until the time of

harvest, when the spirit is invited to 'move' to the rice store in the barn. However, before the harvest can begin, a female high priestess, known as a bobohizan, must go to the paddy fields and select seven of the best rice stalks. These rice stalks are then taken to a protected area while the rest of the crop is harvested. When the harvest is done, the seven stalks are presented to the owner of the rice field, symbolizing the homecoming of the rice spirit.

The magavau ceremony will then take place. It is usually performed in the paddy field on the night of the first full moon after the harvest. This ceremony refers to the gruelling task of searching and salvaging 'lost' or 'strayed' bambarayon/bambaazon, which can happen when rice grains are not handled properly or are disturbed by pests. The ceremony is led by a male bobohizan holding a sword. Behind him is a chain of female bobohizans, who chant ritual versus to summon home the missing spirits. Each time a spirit is recovered, the men will call out the pangkis, a shrill cry to indicate triumph. Traditionally, this ceremony can take place for hours and it is important that throughout the ritual the priestesses walk in a line with their hands on the shoulders of the person in front of them, forming a chain. This is to ensure

that nobody stumbles or strays from the line, thus angering the spirits.

Another crowd-pulling event during the Tadau Ka'amatan is the Harvest Queen Pageant, better known as the Unduk Ngadau. There is more to the pageant than crowning the fairest of them all. The Unduk Ngadau represents the sacrifice, beauty and honour of Huminodun, the only daughter of the almighty Creator, Kinoingan who, according to legend, was sacrificed to end a great famine. The story goes that her flesh and blood gave life to many of the crops we have today. They believe her head gave rise to coconuts, her flesh became rice, her teeth maize, her blood red rice and her knees yams. Today, the Harvest Queen Pageant is a grand spectacle with beautiful maidens representing the various districts in Sabah. This is the best time to see the ladies don authentic traditional costumes, each district with its own unique style.

Tadau Ka'amatan is truly a time of merriment, respect and, above all, thanksgiving. To truly appreciate the unique bond of the Sabahan people and their pride in maintaining age old customs and beliefs, come and celebrate the spirit of Harvest Festival.