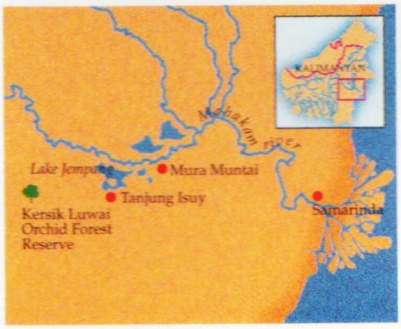


Top: a Kenyah Dayak dancer; above: a rare black orchid (*Cologenia pandurata*) just opening up at Kersik Luwai National Park

Land of The Black Orchid

Slowly but surely the traditional life of the villagers in remote East Kalimantan is changing. Words and pictures by **Holli** and **Annemarie Hollitzer**

"Not much further now," our guide reassures us. "Maybe just a 20-minute walk." We have just climbed out of a rusty old Landcruiser lacking springs and shock absorbers, and are sore but relieved to arrive in one piece. The rough road was covered in muddy puddles, and crossing flooded creeks added excitement to our adventure.

We follow the park ranger on foot and hurry along the sandy path with our camera equipment. Kersik Luwai, a 2000-hectare Indonesian national park, has 27 species of orchids, including the extremely rare black species, *Cologenia pandurata*. Our eyes search the undergrowth for our first glimpse of this legendary flower but all we see are the more common green pitcher plants. Suddenly the ranger pauses and lifts his hand. We stop in silence as if we have located a rare and shy animal. "Over here," he whispers, and there it is—a delicate black orchid just opening up.

Later, my wife and I welcome the chance to stretch our legs during our third breakdown—not too far, we are assured, from the village of Eheng. "Maybe dirt, maybe water in the gasoline, but not much further now," claims our guide. We have our doubts. We feel we have been stranded in the middle of a jungle far away from civilisation. But it is not long before we have

Green pitcher plants waiting for their prey at Kersik Luwai

company. First two Dayak women wearing wide-brimmed hats and carrying woven baskets hurry past. Then a shy boy arrives. On his shoulders are two red-and-yellow-beaked black mynah birds who look at us inquisitively. The boy is on his way home after taking his pets for a walk through the forest. The mynah bird, or *tiung*, is greatly valued for its ability to imitate the song of many birds as this talent can be used to help capture other birds. To catch birds, a tame *tiung* is tied to one end of a pole where it will attract other birds onto the sticky opposite end of the pole.

This time our driver is right. An hour later we step into Eheng, a traditional Benuaq Dayak village. Eheng has one of the last functioning longhouses in the district. The village elder shakes our hands and explains that we are the first tourists to arrive since the recent heavy rains.

As we walk to the *lamin*, the elevated longhouse, we are quickly surrounded by excited children, barking dogs and hungry piglets. More than 200 villagers live in this 70-metre-long structure. Notched timber poles act as ladders to get to its three entrances. From the communal front porch a row of individual apartments opens up to the back. By now all windows on the porch are filled with curious villagers looking down on us.

"How are you going?" asks a pale-skinned woman from one of the windows. "If you want to come up you have to climb the *tangga*, the ladder."

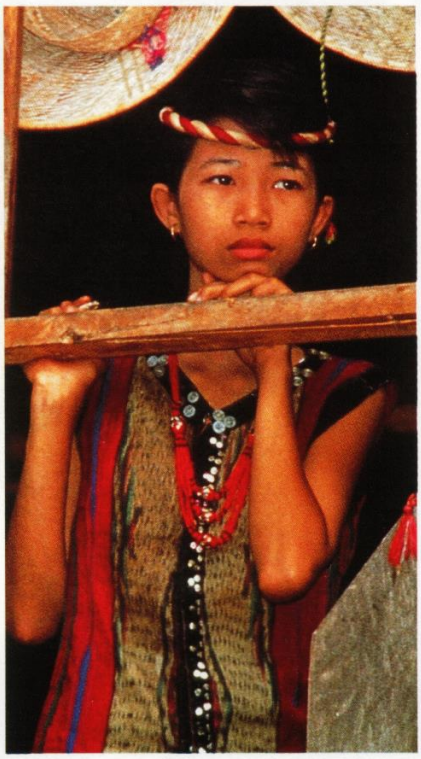
We cautiously make our way up the notched pole and step into a long, dark room busy with activity. There are shrieks from playing children, crying babies and squealing dogs. Groups of women sit on the floor plaiting intricate baskets and weaving small pieces of cloth in traditional Dayak designs. Some men carve totems while others are rehearsing on drums and gongs.

"Have a cuppa first," offers our host as we sit down on the slatted timber floor. We shake hands with a middle-aged Australian couple. "We are tourists just like you," the woman says. "We only arrived here two weeks ago to visit our son Michael, who is now a local."

Michael Hopes is a tall but frail-looking Australian anthropologist in his late 20s who, for the past six months, has been sharing the simple village life of the Dayaks while researching their traditions for his PhD thesis. He talks passionately about his research.

"Things are changing fast here in Kalimantan, and with the timber companies moving ever closer the life style of these Benuaq Dayaks is already affected. I am recording the impact of these fundamental changes on the Eheng people. There are many great pressures on their traditional way of life, customs and religious beliefs but, so far, they have been coping well," he says. "The culture shock is perhaps just as great for Mum and Dad on their first holiday away from Australia. It takes time to get used to sleeping on a hard timber floor, bathing in the creek and finding your toilet in the jungle. But they are managing quite well without electricity, running water, radio, TV and daily newspapers."

The man's presence in this tight-knit community has had little impact. He observes, listens and makes notes and, when he can, he follows the im-



Right: young dancer looking out from a window at Tanjung Isuy longhouse; below: young Kalimantan boy with two black mynah birds *(tiung)* on his shoulders

portant *belian* (shaman) around. Now everyone is busy preparing for an important ritual. In front of the *lamin* seven poles with square frames of wood are stacked to indicate to the spirits that a large burial ceremony is about to take place. Several bodies and bones have been exhumed and cleaned, and for the next few days the skulls will be carried in back-slings by the young children. Ritual dance performances will be staged, and the skulls will play an important part.

Our drive back to Melak is interrupted only twice by short stops to clean the carburettor. By now we are looking forward to the comforts of our 17-metre river houseboat and to exploring villages further downstream along the banks of the muddy Mahakam.

Next morning we are moored at Muara Muntai, and a new adventure begins with a side trip in a *ketinting* (a small motorised canoe) to a nearby Dayak village. When I see the narrow canoe with its huge outboard engine I hesitate and when the waves from a passing ferry dump several buckets of water into the canoe we almost abandon our plans. But our guide reassures us that it is perfectly safe; only twice has he capsized. We wait for a break in the river traffic to climb into the open boat. The two camera bags barely fit between us. Then

Left: the caretaker of Mancong longhouse dressed in traditional Dayak costume; below: carved totem poles outside Mancong longhouse

the large outboard engine starts up and there is no going back. Our *ketinting*, barely two inches above the waterline, carves its way at high speed through the muddy waters.

Half an hour later we turn into a tributary of the Mahakam. The river arm soon narrows and becomes difficult to navigate. We are heading into dense rainforest vegetation. Our boat glides slowly to avoid any snags in the muddy water. Often we have to duck our heads so as not to collide with low over-hanging branches. Our destination is Mancong, a village two hours upstream on the Ohong river. Here we will take a look at another longhouse, but one that is not occupied by villagers. Instead, the recently restored *lamin* is used as a museum. All families in this village live in single-family houses.

Our next stop is the village of Tanjung Isuy, and our boatman estimates it will take three hours to cross the large Jempang Lake in our *ketinting*. Most of the water's surface is covered by two-metre-high aquatic plants forming thousands of tiny islands.

The abundant bird life is impressive. White cranes and ibis are nesting in the lush foliage, and whenever our canoe comes too close, large flocks take off. Motionless birds sit on their fragile nests.

The channel between the islands becomes increasingly narrow and we travel at reduced speed. By midday we reach Jantur, a large fishing village that is the halfway mark on our journey. All the dwellings are built on stilts and connected by jetties and footbridges. Groups of women and children clean and salt freshly caught fish. Hundreds of woven mats with small fish laid out to dry cover most of the jetties. Market women in tiny dug-outs, loaded with beans, carrots, onions and red chillies, paddle among the houses.

Above: a traditional dance performance at Tanjung Isuy; left: traditionally tattooed hands of Kenyah Dayak woman holding hornbill feathers

It is late afternoon when we finally arrive at the empty jetty of Tanjung Isuy. We are stiff and sore after spending most of the day in the canoe, and are glad to get out. Our guide is puzzled that there is no one to greet us on arrival. It is eerily quiet and no children or barking dogs have noticed our landing at the jetty. The village seems deserted. Some of the houses we pass are empty and our guide begins to worry.

When I ask, "What's going on, where are all the villagers?" he has no answer. As we approach the market square we can hear the excited voices from a crowd of people. A tall man with a cowboy hat, chanting and making mysterious gestures, pours water from a bucket over men, women and children.

"We have arrived during a cleansing ceremony," our guide says. An old woman is seriously ill and the medicine man sprinkles holy water over her and other villagers to heal and protect them from evil.

The medicine man and the village elder suggest that they could organise a cultural performance. About 60 Dayaks will dress in traditional costumes and perform just for us. One of the village elders accompanies us to the ground outside the longhouse, where we watch a constant stream of people carrying instruments and costumes entering the longhouse. Inside, the Dayaks change from their predominantly western clothes into traditional costumes made from natural fibre, and animal hides. The men wear necklaces made from bone and animal teeth, and their headgear is crowned by black and white feathers from the rare hornbill bird. After cutting the welcome ribbon with a rusty old pair of scissors we step into the ancient world of the Dayaks. G

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