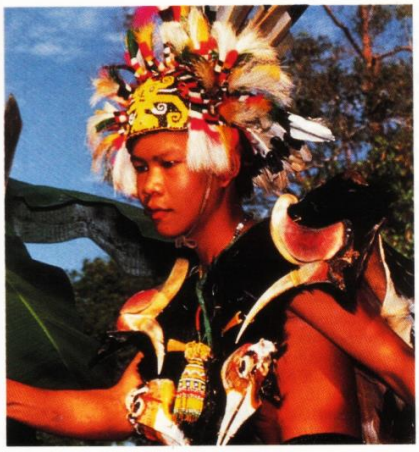


A Kenyah Dayak dancer (left) with a traditional string instrument; Kenyah Dayak dancers (above) wearing headdresses decorated with hornbill feathers

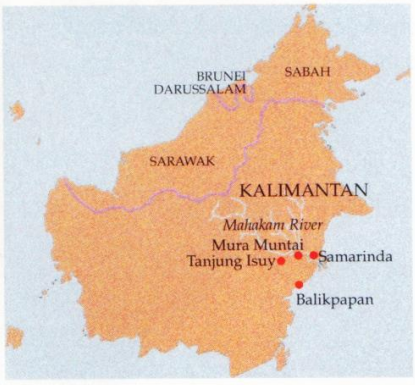
Up a lazy river

Julia Griffith took a slow boat to visit the once-fierce Dayaks of Kalimantan. Photographs by **Annemarie** and **Holli Hollitzer**

The name Borneo has resonated since Victorian times with images of Dayak headhunters, poisonous blowpipes and the White Raj. Fortunately, the place is more hospitable these days. Kalimantan—the name derives from Malay words meaning "river of diamonds"—is the Indonesian part of Borneo.

The vast majority of Kalimantan's five million inhabitants live in the coastal towns and along the rivers of this flat, non-volcanic island which grows each year as the mangrove fringe creeps to consolidate new land in the shallow Makassar Straits.

Kalimantan is rich in natural resources and the multinationals are there for the timber, coal, oil, gas and gold. Many are in Balikpapan, the boom town of East Kalimantan which overlooks the Makassar Straits. Against the sky, American and French oil and gas rigs stand silhouetted.



Most tourists come to Balikpapan to prepare for a trip upriver because, despite the intrusion of new ways and new technology, this is still Dayak country. Some 200 different communities of former headhunters live in traditional longhouses where they weave itak, cloth made of rattan coloured in soft, natural dyes. This is the land of the women with the long ears, of the black orchid, the hornbill, and the proboscis monkey.

The way to reach the Dayaks is to travel the biggest river through East Kalimantan, the Mahakam; 400 kilometres of navigable river from Longiran to Samarinda on the coast. The first 200 kilometres, springing out of the Müller Range in central Borneo, wind through a series of dangerous rapids that choke off all river traffic except for the occasional longboat. As the hornbill flies it's only 175 kilometres but the navigable river is old and takes its time, flowing in huge bends through the flat green jungle. Grass islands and rogue logs float in the current, threatening ships' propellers.

Samarinda, at the mouth of the Mahakam, was the model for Joseph

Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* (1895). Long before the British and Dutch traders, the Chinese were trading with Borneo for rhinoceros horns and hornbill ivory. More recently Malay and Chinese pirates were attracted to the river mouths by the funeral canoes of the inland Dayaks which came floating downriver with headless corpses, and packed with treasures of beads, gold and diamonds. Efforts to ascend these rivers to the source of the wealth were thwarted by the fierce tribes which ruled them.

Now the way inland is peaceful. People travel the ancient river roads in diesel-engined, double-decker wooden ferries. Sitting on the deck of our houseboat, we could sit and watch the river slide by. Maybe we'd catch a glimpse of the freshwater dolphins that live in the river or see the huge hornbill swoop overhead. The hornbill's call of hoots followed by whooping chuckles building to maniacal laughter has led to the locals calling it the "chop down your mother-in-law" bird.

Another sound along the river is the wailing call to prayer from the mosques, central to the life of the towns along the way. But where the river people are Muslim, the Dayaks are mainly Christian or follow the Kaharingan religion. Nowadays US-based evangelical faiths have made inroads into even the most isolated communities. The Christian missionaries allowed a happy blend of traditional religions with the new.

All Dayak religions were concerned with attracting good spirits and chasing away evil ones. Head-hunting, which was effectively stopped after the Second World War, was an essential part of this spirit manipulation. The spirit of the severed head was cajoled or forced to help the captors, helped along with offerings of food, drink and tobacco. Heads could ensure a good crop, ward off disease and generally bring success to the village.

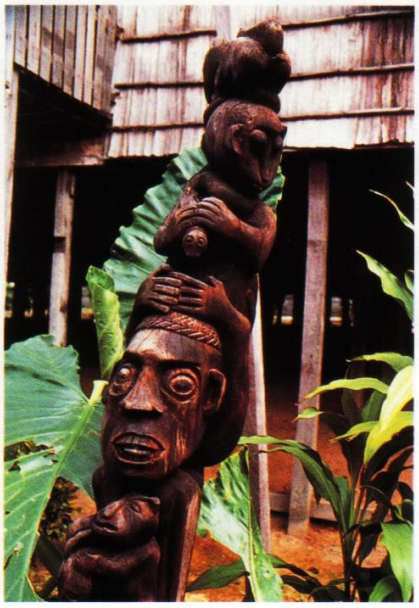
They were an essential part of all the important rituals of everyday life. Head-hunting also allowed young men to show off to young women and their peers. Successful head-hunters were allowed to wear special tattoos and decorations such as clouded leopard fang ear plugs.

The lethal weapon in head-hunting was the mandau, a machete-like sword made from local ore, its handle often made from carved deer antler and decorated with human hair. After the mandau the other important weapon was the blowpipe. A small sharp blade at the end of these two- or three-metre-long pipes served as a spear. The pipes consisted of a single piece of hardwood filed down the centre to spin the dart on the straight course. The blowpipe is not straight but subtly curved to compensate for the downward sag resulting from holding by its extreme end. In the hands of a master it can be accurate to within a range of 70 metres and was an extremely effective and silent weapon in jungle warfare.

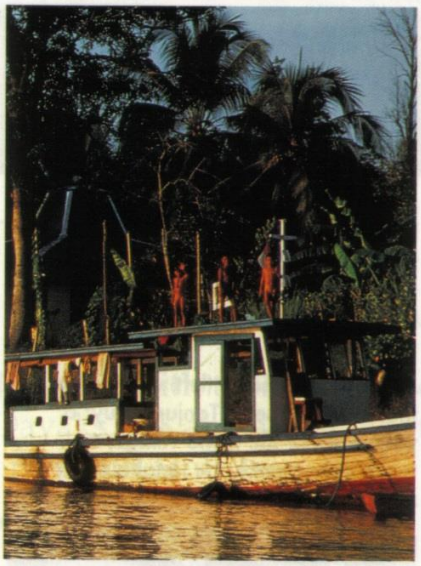
Dayak men walk about with a mandau and a small blowpipe slung from a belt around their waist. They may not have used them in anger for a long time but our guide assured us that they would feel undressed without them.

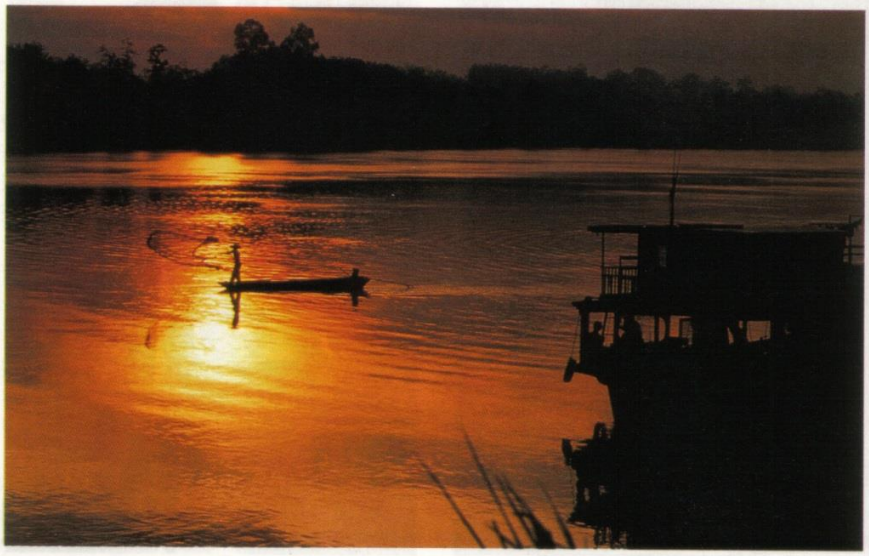
Almost all the region's 400,000 Dayaks are now subsistence farmers whose rice-based diet is supplemented by hunting with dogs and fishing. The cash economy in the Dayak areas is minimal and gathering rattan and working for timber companies are the most important sources of income.

Most used to live in longhouses, built on three-metre stilts and sometimes 20-metres long, but recent administrations have made efforts to break up these communal dwellings



A group of dancers (left) outside their longhouse at Tanjung Isuy; a young girl of the same village; a totem pole guards the longhouse at Mancong village





Water, water everywhere . . . the morning is often misty on the Mahakam river; riverside youngsters are happy to see passers-by; houseboats moor at Melak

where up to 50 or more families share one building.

Within the longhouse each family has its own sleeping room and kitchen at the back. The remaining half of the building, a long gallery running its entire length, was like the back street where children could play and women weave rattan and gossip and men could carve wood and plan the hunt.

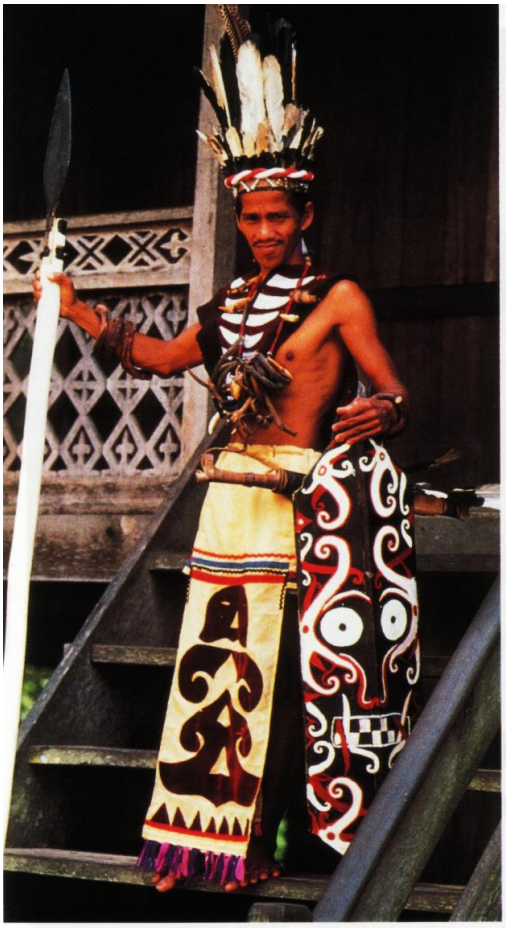
Each longhouse is protected by its own totems consisting of intricately-carved fierce men and women and the animals and birds of their world. You can stay in a longhouse at Tanjung Isuy. You leave behind the houseboat for a day and a night and take a motorised canoe with tarpaulin cover against the sun and sudden squalls. You cross Lake Jempang, vast and blue under a Turneresque sky which merges with a ribbon of land on the other side.

There live the Benuaq and Tunjung communities of Tanjung Isuy. Despite the efforts of the churches, the incidence of illiteracy and stillbirth among the Benuaq is the highest of all Kalimantan's Dayak groups.

In the longhouse, while you settle yourself into the guest rooms, the resident Dayaks patiently set out their carvings, rattan baskets, itak cloth, blowpipes, mandaus, beads, drums made from wood and deerhide. You can also buy baby carriers, sometimes encrusted with beads, coins, bear claws and dog teeth as magical shields against psychic and physical dangers.

The Dayak carvings are often in black wood and show long-eared, androgynous squatting people with a snake or crocodile curving from the mouth down between their legs to join a monkey on their back.

The rattan shoulder baskets are intricately-patterned and practical, made from a tough, parasitic vine hundreds of metres long which clings to the forest with many thorned tentacles. The black dye to make the patterns comes



from a local plant. Shapes and symbols vary from community to community but, distressingly, you can now find "Souvenir from Balikpapan" woven into some.

You can try your hand at the two-metre-long blowpipe in the village of Mancong, across Lake Jempang and along the Ohong river. The river is narrow and edged with an intense variety of trees often standing in the hot, thick water, which is brown and shiny like chocolate sauce. This is the jungle.

Tiny macaques watch you from the trees and suddenly in the still heat you'll hear the crash of proboscis monkeys hurling themselves about, too quick to be caught in a photo.

In the Dayak community at Mancong the longhouse has been rebuilt and the local people dance their traditional dances to the sounds of the gamelan orchestra. Witch doctors in their colourful, strongly patterned skirts and headdresses dance and chant and touch your forehead, benvolently it seemed. Boys perform the behempas, a traditional fight using rattan sticks and wicker shields. They show their welts afterwards with pride.

Farther upriver you may see the two art forms which are practised on the human body: the long ears and tattoos. Long ears were considered objects of great beauty. Women would pierce their ear and add weighty bronze earrings to stretch the lobes. But it is a dying practice. Nowadays younger women don't do this. Our guide told us that older women with long ears living in Samarinda cut off their stretched lobes.

Tattooing also belongs to an earlier time: all the major experiences of a Dayak's life, whether a dream or an adventure, were commemorated with a ritual tattoo. Men wore tattoos on their chests, throats and arms, women on the wrists, feet and ankles. Tattooists worked as a couple, the man to trace the symbol and the woman to open up the wound and hammer in the carbonised wood dye.

Disembark at Melak, a day's sailing from Longiram, for the two-hour drive to Eheng where a traditional Dayak Tunjung community still lives in its long house. At Eheng the people keep their animals under the longhouse including the black fat-bellied pigs.

Modern technology is present in the chief's house in the one television and satellite dish, donated by the government. Nearby is the weekly market where travelling Javanese sell clothes, headache pills, plastic brushes. Here you can buy some amazing T-shirts. The spirits of the Dayak communities will need all their guile to manage the onslaught of the new technologies to protect what is valuable in their traditional way of life. G

Dancing at Tanjung Isuy (top); a man in traditional dress at Mancong; Kenyah Dayak artwork; a rare black orchid just opening at Kersih Luwai National Park

Julia Griffith is an Australian writer; the Hollitzers are Australian-based photojournalists