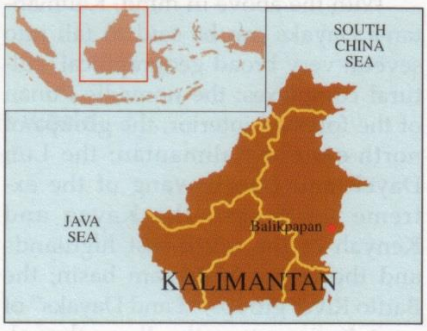
Getting into the spirit of things

The spirits take part in the Dayaks' daily life through dances featuring the *hudoq* masks (above), each of which represents a distinct deity; a Dayak (following page) performs a war dance



They might share a world of shamans, artwork, body decorations and spirits, but **Kal Muller** reveals that Kalimantan's Dayak tribes are a mix of distinct and captivating customs and traditions

The inland tribes of Kalimantan (formerly Borneo), generically called Dayaks, fascinated the island's early explorers and continue to attract today's travellers. Their huge, stilted longhouses, striking and beautiful art, and their head-hunting captivated European adventurers and early ethnographers.

The name Dayak is derived from the words meaning "inland" or "up-river" peoples. In the past, though this is not true today, it implied "backward". But the people gathered under the term "Dayak" are members of a culturally and linguistically diverse set of tribes, much like the Indians of the Americas.

Many anthropologists have stumbled in their attempts to classify the various Dayaks into neat categories. The variations in languages, art styles, customs and history are too great. Even the broad "inland tribes of Borneo" has important exceptions. Much of the confusion stems from a long history of large- and small-scale migrations within Borneo, a result of population pressures, communications and warfare. Groups sometimes adopted the language, rituals and other customs of their neighbours, then brought this mixture of tongues and traditions

with them when they moved on. Although warfare no longer exists, villagers still shift location frequently in search of easier access to outside goods, markets and jobs.

With the above in mind, Kalimantan's Dayaks can be said to fall into several very broad geographical/cultural complexes: the nomadic Punan of the forested interior; the groups of north-eastern Kalimantan; the Lun Dayeh and Lun Bawang of the extreme north-east; the Kayan and Kenyah of the north-east highlands and the upper Mahakam basin; the Barito River groups; "Land Dayaks" of west Kalimantan; the Iban, though most of these live in Sarawak; and the "Malays" or Islamised Dayaks.

All Dayak religions were concerned with attracting good spirits and chasing away evil ones. For most groups, head-hunting was an essential component of this spirit manipulation. Once a head was chopped off and brought back to the longhouse, its spirit was cajoled or forced to help the captors. To ensure the spirit would readjust to its fate, the skull was honoured and treated with offerings of food, drink and tobacco.

Dayak artwork, aesthetically equal to the best produced in Africa or Melanesia, also served to control the world of spirits. These ethereal entities—either permanent deities or the spirits of human beings—decided on matters of sickness and health, the quality and quantity of harvests, and success in head-hunting. The latter, of course, led to added spirit-power. Quite simply, spirits controlled everything that really mattered.

Both the Dutch and the British effectively confined Islam to the coastal areas, and to the mid-reaches of the great Mahakam and Kapuas Rivers, to where it had spread in pre-colonial times. But with the advent of Christianity and the eventual ban on chopping off heads, Dayak religion and art lost their foundations. However, even today, under Western clothes and a superficial layer of Christianity, many of the traditional ways remain.

The Dayaks still prepare their fields using the ancient but serviceable slash-and-burn method; they still comb the jungle for game and forest products; they don traditional garb at times of celebration, if not every day; and in some areas they still live in longhouses. In all the Dayak areas a generalised belief in the world of spirits is very much alive. The Kaharingan religion, a traditional faith, has even—with a few modifications—received government approval as part of the catch-all category of "Bali-Hinduism".

In general, the further one travels from the coast, the more evident is the traditional way of life: shamans curing disease, body decorations, rituals, longhouses and, of course, the spirits. Nonetheless, US-based evangelical faiths have made inroads into even the most isolated areas, to the detriment of traditional customs.

The nomadic Punan

In the past, hunting-gathering nomads, generally called Punan, wandered to and from temporary sites deep in the most remote forests of

The most elaborate mask-spirit representations are those of the Kenyah, whose art style is the most baroque of the Dayaks (left); seated on a coffin, a Dayak shaman chants to accompany the soul of the deceased to the land of the dead (below)

Borneo. Bands of Punan wandered the rainforest in splendid isolation, and with complete self-sufficiency. Their forest skills are almost legendary, and some 19th century accounts claimed that they had tails, lived in the trees, and could smell men from several kilometres away. Today, almost none maintain the ancient lifestyle.

While the process of Punan settlement into permanent villages had begun before the colonial government arrived in central Borneo, it accelerated during the first decades of this century. The Punan groups today have all built huts in permanent locations.

Still, many continue to take long treks in their beloved forest, bringing home still valuable jungle products: rattan, resins, camphor crystals and aloes wood, as well as the occasional bezoar stone from the innards of certain monkeys and used in very expensive Chinese folk remedies.

The Kayan and the Kenyah

The Kayan are found chiefly in the central highlands of east Kalimantan, although there are a few Kayan villages along the upper Kapuas River. One of the most successful Dayak groups, in the 18th and 19th centuries they spread from the Apokayan to Sarawak, the Mahakam Basin and the Kapuas. These now scattered groups maintain a homogenous language and set of customs.

The Kayan society was strictly stratified into feudal classes: top aristocrats, nobles, commoners and slaves. Each class had its rights and obligations which were defined down to minutiae. Although the power and privileges of the aristocracy has been greatly curtailed, this class still commands a great deal of respect.

Members of the traditional aristocratic families hold whatever local political positions are allowed, and they are consulted in all important matters by fellow villagers. It is not unusual even today for the aristocrats to receive free labour for their fields, "gifts" of firewood, choice pieces of game, and general assistance whenever it is required. The traditions of the Kayan, including rice cultivation, woodcarving, metal working and social structure, have spread over the northern half of Kalimantan.

The Kenyah are an odd group of various origins, and they speak languages that are not always mutually intelligible. Some were originally forest nomads who stayed under Kayan patronage. They gradually replaced the Kayan in the Apokayan, and some later migrated into Sarawak and the Mahakam River basin.

Like the Kayan, the Kenyah are now rice cultivators, with a stratified society. Their villages are generally large, with many longhouses, some containing more than 2000 people. The Kenyah are famous for their woodcarving, which is distinct and florid, and their music, dance and colourful costumes. G

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