



Twilight of the Punan

The sun sets on the 60-year old community of Kg Sukang, though symbolically, the Punan may be living out a 60-year old sunset. Abandoning their nomadic life to live together with the Ibans and Dusun, the Punan have always remained on the other side of the Belait river. Pictures: BT/Mark Esplin, Daniel Wood



THE people I spoke to told of their fears that Kg Sukang's days as a thriving community are numbered. People are leaving – slowly, surely – taking with them their young, and along with that, the future lifeblood. Hj Mohd Noh, current village head, grimaced as he traced out a possible future of fewer residents, older people.

He is also the son of Kg Sukang's visionary founder, who, after the Brunei Rebellion in the early 60s, called upon the nomadic Punan of Ulu Belait to settle together with Iban and Dusun peoples in a new community of a birthing Brunei. They agreed, and came to live in a longhouse built for them across the river from the main settlement, the very same that they today reside in.

Luyah anak Keling, the 90-year-old Punan patriarch, slept alone in his room when we came to visit, visibly older and frailer than photos I've seen of him from last year. They say he is a fond favourite of the Sultan. He confirms the same lament of the village head, though not quite in sad tones: there are fewer Punan living here; his children have left the longhouse, as have his grandchildren.

He spoke to us through Unisi, one of the

few young men I saw at the longhouse, his Malay and Iban mix of speech having proved difficult for me to fully comprehend. They expected us to be filming their way of life, and were prepared to go through the performances.

But when I put to them questions about their past and their future, the idea that things have changed and could change more... the answers seem to suggest that they don't see things the way I do.

"It was not easy of course to move into a house back then. We Punans had never had to cut down a tree, or plant paddy. But we slowly learnt. As you can see, most have moved out of the village into the towns," Luyah tells me, as if still wondering what I'm trying to get at.

I ask: if people are leaving, doesn't it seem that this way of life, already changing, will disappear one day? Luyah and Unisi shake their heads, the concept sounding alien to them.

Even Wudik, who spends most of his time out on his own, is convinced that his way will go on indefinitely. "I worked these lands after the people before me left. After I leave, others will work the lands. This will always continue. That's why I stay out here. If I leave, someone else will stay here."

The Punan children cannot imagine leaving the village. When I ask eight-year-old Ujang if he wants to leave, he frantically shakes his head. "I want to be a policeman here," he says without being asked. He is even afraid that he will be moved out to another school, not aware that he is still able to learn there for another four years.

Disambiguation

It may be necessary to address the ambiguity about the Punan of Brunei in the context of the Penan/Punan tribes of Borneo. Sarawak accepts its Penan to be unrelated to the Punan of Sarawak, who are a larger group of tribal people. The Punan of Kalimantan are considered both by Indonesia and Sarawak as unique, descendants of Yunnanese Chinese. All three tribes are considered to be part of the larger Dayak race. Having spent time with the Punan of Brunei in Kg Sukang, it is almost for certain that they are the same people as the Penan of Sarawak. They share a nomadic and unwarlike past, have the same unique hairstyle and trademark blowpipe and darts. They claim to speak the language of the Sarawakian Penans. It is not known how they came to be called Punan in Brunei; the reporter believes they are in fact Penan but for purposes of clarity, will use the spelling of local convention.

His nine-year-old sister, Nurasipah, has been to the city, but she also displays a deep love for her place of origins. "I like gardening, playing with my siblings. I will be a teacher at the school here."

Their two elder siblings (they are nine or eight, they can't agree) have already left Sukang for secondary schooling.

Wudik, who has spent much time outside Sukang when he has work to do, reacts when I suggest to him that he moves to the city.

"What would a person from here do in the city? What would a city person do here?" he laughs, dismissing the very suggestion.

The youth are disappearing, and the old don't have much time left. When they pass, they will take with them much knowledge and memory. Even Luyah, who has the most memories, struggles to remember when I asked him the story of how the Punan came to be.

"We believed that a god made all the people. Some said other people made the Punan from earth. We believed that when you die, you enter the earth, the wood, the rivers. This is just the same as what people believe now. How can there be people without a god?"

Hjh Siti Khatijah, the Iban dowager of the main longhouse, is the only other person who can tell me an old folk tale. "The crocodiles and humans used to live in peace a long time ago. The crocodiles so badly wanted to taste human flesh, but agreed to leave them alone if they gave them gold, which the humans did."

However, one day the pact was broken. A crocodile ate a human. The humans were outraged, everyone clapping and booing. But the crocodiles explained: one of the baskets carrying gold had a hole, and was empty, so

the fee wasn't paid in full. The humans made up for it, but to this day, we slap the sides of the boat whenever we go out, to remind the crocodiles of our agreement."

She reminds me many times, however, that she is a Muslim now and that those tales are only stories.

Luyah is also a Muslim now, and was formally recognised as a Brunei citizen only last year. Many of the Punan, like the Dusun and Iban there, have converted to Islam. It is somewhat superficially, as I noticed, for the majority of Punan still practise their old ways of life. They still use their Punan names too, treating the new Muslim name as an alias.

Roslan Ratu of Pusat Da'wah Islamiah happened to come by the village when I was there, with a team of about five people, handing over some food supplies and repairing a home of a new convert with new planks.

"About 70 to 80 per cent of the Punans are Muslims now, and more are converting. We come here quite regularly to help out the *mualaf* (new converts). Assistance includes a small monthly contribution of \$60, or a generator if they don't have one. We also help to fix wiring, or like today, repair their homes," he reveals.

A noble gesture as required by religion, but I can't help wondering if the assistance affects free will.

I spent so little time in Kg Sukang, and it's difficult to put to fact my observations without the taint of anecdotal evidence. The one thing for sure is that change is constant — and quick — for the Punans of Brunei.

Change is necessary. Good. Inevitable. So change they must. But the Punan have an entitlement, as much as we do, to embrace it on their own terms. **The Brunei Times**



The only children still residing permanently in Kg Sukang are the Punan, all below the age of 13. Thirteen of them are also the only ones still studying at the primary school there. Fewer children have been going to the school, although this number is expected to rise in the new intake, with several children registering for Primary One and only one Primary Six boy graduating.

