

Travel and Adventure: Borneo's annual harvest festival keeps the culture alive

by Robert Ragaini

KOTA KINABALU, Borneo - "Here she is, Miss Americ ..." Wait a minute. This isn't Atlantic City. That isn't Burt Parks. And those are certainly not All-American beauties. A beauty pageant it is, but not for Miss America. It's to select the Harvest Festival Queen of the Kadazandusun Tribe of Borneo. Yes, Borneo.

BORNEO FESTIVAL - Young women are dressed in traditional tribal costumes to welcome dignitaries to the opening ceremonies of the annual Kaamatan Harvest Festival in Kota Kinabalu, Borneo. CNS Photo by Robert Ragaini. **FESTIVAL FOOD** - Exotic, colorful and very sweet fruit drinks are popular at the annual Kaamatan Harvest Festival in Borneo. CNS Photo by Robert Ragaini. **YOUNG WARRIORS** - These days, young tribal 'warriors' need wheels to get around. These young men will perform at the festival. CNS Photo by Robert Ragaini. **ORANGUTAN** - At the Sepilok Orangutan Sanctuary in Borneo, orphaned orangutans are reintroduced into the jungle from which they were taken. CNS Photo by Robert Ragaini. **FISH MARKET** - Fish of all sizes, colors and shapes from the South China Sea are prepared at the waterfront of Kota Kinabalu in Borneo. CNS Photo by Robert Ragaini. Kota Kinabalu, a city of some 400,000 inhabitants, is the capital of Sabah, one of two states that comprise the Malaysian portion of Borneo. The rest of the island is shared unequally by Indonesia and the Sultan of Brunei.

The third-largest island in the world, Borneo is in Southeast Asia. K.K., as Kota Kinabalu is called, was once a sea village, with homes, mosques, stores and schools perched on stilts above the South China Sea. These days it is a mixture of both future and ancient traditions. The view from waterfront rooms in one of K.K.'s new hotels takes in an island across the bay completely girdled with timeless communities still hovering over the water. Proof that old K.K. is not just a memory.

In the afternoon when the fishing boats come in, dozens of fish mongers chop, scale and filet just-caught fish on wooden tables spread across the waterfront. While they work they bellow prices at customers, mostly women in long pastel dresses, heads covered by colorful scarves, towing obedient infants. A few yards away, smoke pours out of charcoal fires where the new catch is grilling. Men in work pants and lightweight shirts carry crispy-hot fish to families sitting at oilcloth-covered tables. The price is right, the meal delicious and everyone has a sea view.

Near the shadow of the Meridian Hotel, Muslim women stand behind tables heaped with oranges, papayas and watermelons. On the sidewalk, tailors make alterations on antique, foot-pedaled sewing machines. Behind a warehouse, after a backbreaking day's work on the boats, young men leap in the air in a ferocious game of volleyball.

Every year on May 30 and 31, in a field a half-hour from the city, tents with white canvas peaks crowd up against thatch-roofed houses built of aged timbers. Men and women stroll from one to another. Some wear black suits with gold piping; others wear sarongs. Teenagers in a variety of costumes chew gum and yawn while waiting to welcome dignitaries to the latest Kaamatan Harvest Festival. In this field, as in so many places in the world, an attempt will be made to hold onto the cultural traditions of a people in the process of losing them.

Legend has it that in prehistoric times, the Kadazandusun people, a rice-growing tribe in what is now Saba, suffered a great famine. The only daughter of the Almighty Creator offered herself as a sacrifice. Following his daughter's instructions, the god strewed pieces of her body over vast fields. From each grew a different life-giving plant. Some of the rice was placed in a jar, from which, on the seventh day, the spirit of the maiden miraculously emerged. It is the representative of this spirit that the beauty pageant selects.

Though the winner will not be chosen until May 31, on May 30 the contestants parade in their costumes from the main building with its modern stage to the traditional houses. Under ever-increasing heat, the women, many of whom look like supermodels, maintain their smiles while pumping hundreds of hands.

As people awaiting the dignitaries sweltered in the sun at last year's festival, a young woman stepped onto the outdoor stage. She, too, wore a costume. Borneo hip-hop. Mike in hand, she belted out what could have been American pop if it wasn't for the local dialect of the national language, Bahasa Malay. At the side of the stage, teenage boys wearing headdresses with three-foot-long feathers rocked with her. Not too long ago, the Kadazandusuns were known for their habit of hunting heads. Now digital cameras, Japanese cars and computers have taken the place of blowguns.

A tradition that has not died is that of drinking rice wine on the final days of the harvest festival. At 9:35 a.m., a man who was already honoring his ancestors stopped by. When he learned he was chatting with an American, he hastened to assure him that the festival is not religious. "America," he said, and flashed a thumbs-up sign.

At 10 o'clock, speeches started on the stage. The dignitaries arrived and were predictably boring. The boys in the feathers, now wearing jeans and T-shirts, trailed their headdresses behind them.

Steps from the stage, ladies chopped red-hot peppers in a perfect replica of a traditional longhouse. Edging the field, vendors served late breakfasts of skewered chicken wings, satays with peanut sauce, grilled stingray and freshly cut pineapples and mangoes. At an outdoor buffet, a charming woman described the dishes she had prepared: chicken livers in black sauce, beef with coconut, and chicken in "many things."

Japson Wong and Priscilla Shin are Chinese-Malaysian university students who speak excellent English and have volunteered to help visitors. At an elaborate outdoor buffet, they created, for my benefit, a typical lunch. Next to a heaping pile of rice they spooned jaruk - pickled cucumbers, carrots and pineapple. Then they dug into paku-pakis, a salad of small ferns, dried prawns, chunks of grouper and coconut. Talus goreng is a whole shelled egg, baked, then fried to crisp the exterior. The sauce - sweet, sour, spicy and brown - smells wonderful. The last bit of rice disappeared under ladlefuls of ayan (chicken) goreng (fried) with tomatoes and chilies. And that doesn't count the drinks: coconut milk, sugar cane juice, limeade with sour plums, rose syrup with milk and moon-shaped pancakes with peanuts and sugar for dessert. Beats the heck out of hot dogs.

Later in the day, the dignitaries walked, with dignity, from house to house, where they were feted with food, local dances and song by each tribal subgroup of the Kadazandusun tribe. In one, a band of warriors hopped between bamboo poles being smacked together by tribal maidens. They must not have been using much force. If they were, several warriors would have been permanently crippled.

Like all country fairs, the Kaamatan Harvest Festival is a certain percentage authentic, a certain percentage hoke. But, since this is Borneo, not small-town America, it is 100 percent unique.

IF YOU GO

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In or near Kota Kinabalu, the Filipino handicrafts market, the Mengkabong water village, the Monsopiad cultural village and the Chinese Buddhist temple are worth visiting. You can also raft on the Padas River and climb Mount Kinabalu, the highest mountain in South Asia.

A short plane ride takes you to Sandakan and the Sepilok Orangutan Sanctuary, where orphaned orangutans are reintroduced into the wild. While you watch, these "men of the forest" suddenly emerge from the jungle to feed. Raised by humans, "They've lost their natural instincts," an employee said. "They want coffee for breakfast and bananas, fried. 'We don't eat raw.'"

Robert Ragaini is a freelance travel writer. © Copley News Service