

Dayak

Profile

Dayak is a generic term used to categorize a quite large group of indigenous peoples of the island of Borneo. The island is in fact divided between three countries: Indonesia, the Malaysian Federated States of Sabah and Sarawak, and Brunei Darussalam. Indonesian Borneo or Kalimantan (as it is now known, is itself divided into four provinces: West Kalimantan, Central Kalimantan, East Kalimantan, and South Kalimantan. There are by some estimates approximately 450 ethnolinguistic Dayak groups living in Borneo, though they are generally viewed as sharing a number of similarities in languages, living styles (most of these groups traditionally lived in longhouses), customary laws (known as adat), etc.

Most Dayaks are Christian or Kaharingan, a form of native religious practice viewed by the Indonesian government as Hindu, although by Western standards it would be regarded as a pagan religion because of its shamanic rituals. A smaller but increasing number of Dayaks adhere to Islam. There may be between 2 million and 4 million Dayaks in Indonesia, among whom can be found the Ngaju Dayak, Penan, Murut, Maanyan and Lawangan.

Dayak have traditionally lived in longhouses and made a living through shifting agriculture and as manual labourers in urban areas, though this pattern has begun to be modified in more recent years, partially through government efforts to modernize the Dayaks. Most are now settled and cultivate rice, though some such as the Penan remain nomadic hunter-gatherers.

Historical context

The Dayaks probably migrated into Indonesia as part of the Austronesian migration from Asia some 3,000 years ago. They have a long history of struggle for autonomy. Since the southern coast of Kalimantan has long been dominated by the politically and numerically dominant Muslim Banjarese, Dayaks sought government recognition of a 'Great Dayak territory' in 1953. When these efforts failed, a rebellion broke out in 1956, culminating in the establishment of the new province of Kalimantan Tengah in 1957. After the 1965 PKI (Communist Party of Indonesia) coup attempt, many Dayaks were killed after being caught in a conflict between the army and ethnic Chinese guerrillas. Dayaks were often viewed with suspicion by the authorities as separatists and atheists. Negotiations began again in the 1970s between the Dayak and Jakarta over recognition of the indigenous religion of the peoples of the province. This process culminated in official recognition in the 1980s.

However, the Dayaks were increasingly threatened after the 1970s by the arrival of hundreds of thousands of mainly ethnic Javanese and Madurese sent or enticed to settle in the Kalimantan provinces by the Indonesian government as part of its transmigration (transmigrasi) programme. In the province of Kalteng alone, for example, the population rose from 200,000 in 1930, to 500,000 in 1961, and to around 2 million by 2006. Most of this population increase was caused by migrants from Java, Madura and other parts of Indonesia. The government's policy of encouraging transmigration has caused the Dayaks to become increasingly marginalized in their own land.

In addition, the Dayaks' traditional slash-and-burn agriculture and forest foraging activities have been curtailed by the government's establishment of timber concessions and rubber and palm oil plantations – usually granted without recognition of their traditional rights over land or resources and without any compensation – which resulted in the clearing of millions of hectares of forest. According to one estimate, more than 2.5 million indigenous peoples, including Dayaks, were displaced in Indonesia by logging and other activities in the 1970s alone.

It is that context which partially explains the large-scale violence against some of these transmigrants which occurred in 1997, 1999 and 2001, when armed Dayaks, together with indigenous Malay groups, started attacking and expelling Madurese and other 'invaders'. At least 1,000 ethnic Madurese, maybe many more, were killed during this period, with tens of thousands more seeking refuge in cities or in other parts of Indonesia.

Ironically, the departure of so many transmigrants and the gradual increase in decentralization of power has meant that Dayaks have regained a degree of control over local affairs in the Kalimantan provinces, while few of the Madurese or Javanese who fled have returned since 2001.

Current issues

Despite increased decentralization in recent years, the Dayaks in parts of Kalimantan continue to face threats to a number of their rights on two main fronts: (1) from an inability to legally protect their traditional land uses and ownership from logging, mining and plantation activities supported by state authorities, and (2) the refusal of authorities to give any further official space to their languages and cultures, either in education or administration, and the subsequent dominance of non-Dayaks in many areas of public life in Kalimantan institutions, the latter continuing to reinforce the former.

The massive destruction of Kalimantan's rainforests is continuing largely unabated, deeply threatening the Dayaks' traditions and livelihoods. The remaining forest cover of Borneo in 2005 was only 50.4 per cent according to the World Wildlife Federation, down dramatically from 74 per cent in 1985, despite a February 2007 announcement by the governments of Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia to protect some 220,000 sq km of tropical forest in Borneo. In 2006 and 2007 the Indonesian authorities approved the establishment of a number of large palm oil plantations by Malaysian and Chinese companies in Kalimantan (and Papua). In one case, approval was given illegally by the Governor of East Kalimantan (a non-Dayak central government appointee) who was subsequently jailed for his actions, though not before much of the forest in an area of around 1 million hectares was destroyed. In August 2007 CERD showed 'concern for a plan to establish oil palm plantations over some 850 kilometers along the Indonesia–Malaysia border in Kalimantan as part of the Kalimantan Border Oil Palm Mega-project, and the threat this constitutes for the rights of indigenous peoples to own their lands and enjoy their culture'.

Oil palm plantations – and the floods in the rainy season and choking brush fires in the dry season that have come with deforestation – are a continuing, and increasing threat for Dayak communities who have been unable to oppose these schemes. There are continuing reports of the military intimidating anti-logging Dayak activists to protect the loggers, or of community leaders being swayed by bribes or threats to approve these plantations.

The use of Dayak languages in schools in the parts of Kalimantan where they are the majority or live in substantial numbers remains largely illusory or simply prohibited. Government officials tend to be non-Dayaks who do not speak the local languages. Democratization has by and large not empowered members of this minority, as they continue to be under-represented at all levels of government and politics.