

# DANCE TRAVEL

## Dancing at Gawai Dayak

Gawai Dayak is a harvest festival celebrated in June in Sarawak, on Malaysian Borneo.

**Carole Edrich** watches some of the dances marking the festivities

**A** delayed flight between Kuala Lumpur and Kuching on Borneo got us to Sarawak Cultural Village far later than originally





planned. With so much to fit in (the village is an award-winning "living museum" and as such represents all the cultures found in the area) and only an overnight stay, I worried that the dance component might be left out.

I need not have worried. After a cool drink by our longhouse

we were welcomed traditionally with a circular Tari Mandau (Mandau dance), which we were then taught. Gongs and drums created a visceral rhythm, which changed subtly over time.

The moves, symbolising huge flapping birds and hunters squatting behind boulders, were

simple in intent, but difficult to do. The Mandau is performed by all, but we women were encouraged to make smaller, more graceful movements, while the men were allowed much more exaggerated moves that looked really fun.

Later, after a tour of the 14 acres of humid and mountainous equatorial environment, and before a traditional Bidayu tribal dinner, dancers wearing headdresses of huge tailfeathers introduced us to the Tari Mandau Kinya, traditionally performed for returning wartime heroes.

The Dayak peoples of Borneo comprise about 200 distinct

river and hill dwelling groups and Gawai (harvest thanksgiving) was first formally recognised in 1964. Although steeped in past headhunting traditions, nowadays the only head removed is of a cockerel sacrifice to harvest gods and Aiman, my driver, told me that Gawai Dayak hospitality is so famous that non-Dayaks like him do their best to get invited too.

Before leaving we were introduced to the intricacies of other tribal dances in a huge, traditionally-built meeting room. The guest-welcoming Tari Giring-Giring had dancing couples wielding noisy bamboo

stick rattles. Tari Gelang Bawo, the story of a chieftain's son demonstrating his hunting prowess, was performed with karate-style accuracy.

Tari Gelang Dadas showed how a woman looking for enlightenment was given the supernatural powers of snake- and eagle-like movement. Tari Mangetam, an expression of harvest thanksgiving, featured moves showing the farmers' work throughout the seasons, while in Tari Kancet Papatai male dancers took precise and energetic steps over and under their shields, armour and swords.

After drinks and a communal dance, we started our long trip home. I hope one day to return, visit each of the tribes represented and learn more of their cultures from their sources. However, for the limited time we had in Sarawak, we were given an excellent if rather rushed view. ●

Gawai can be celebrated for anything between two days and six weeks, depending on the tribe, although the local Sarawakian holiday is the same two days in June. Check online before going: <http://tinyurl.com/d82eggg>

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