

Lesson 10 – Resource Sheet 3

Indigenous languages

The Dayak people of Borneo



Dayak children



Dayak man using a blowpipe

The Dayak are the native peoples of the island of Borneo, which forms part of both Indonesia and Malaysia. Today, there are about 5.9 million Dayak people, the majority of which live in East and Central Kalimantan (Indonesia) and Sarawak (Malaysia). Those still living a traditional way of life have done so in harmony with their lush rainforest home for thousands of years.

Guided by an ancient codes of behaviour that restrict access to the forest and its resources, the Dayak use their Indigenous knowledge to manage their environment sustainably, with practices like shifting cultivation and agro-forestry. In this way both humans and nature benefit.

Traditionally, the Dayak were animist in belief (animal worshippers); however, many converted to Islam and since the 19th century there has been mass conversion to Christianity.

While many Dayak people continue to live in longhouses that traditionally served as a means of protection against slave raiders and inter-village conflict, the nuclear family is the basic unit of ownership and social organisation in Dayak society.

In the past, the Dayak people practiced headhunting. The coming of Christianity and laws banning the practice resulted in it dying out. The weapons used by the Dayak included the spear and blowpipe, each with a deadly poisonous tip.

Dayak people speak a variety of related languages and dialects, with each being distinct to a particular area and cultural group. While each group also has customs, laws, territory they have enough in common to distinguish them from other groups of people living in the region. While the various dialects are, for example, all quite distinct they are derived from a common source – the Austronesian languages group.

Many of Borneo's languages are spoken nowhere else. It is estimated that around 170 languages and dialects are spoken on the island and some by just a few hundred people. There is, therefore, a serious risk of some of these languages (and their related heritage) disappearing.

Today, most Dayaks are bilingual (speak two languages), in addition to their native language they speak Malay or Indonesian, depending on which part of Borneo they live.