

Tribune

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HIGHLIGHTS

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Twitter can shed light on what you eat and why



T7
A-listers Douglas, Zeta-Jones split, for now at least

STORIES FROM BARIO - PART 1



ASSISTANT Minister of Tourism (Local Events & Products), Datuk Gramong Juna (left) enjoying Kelabit culinary masterpieces with Sarawak Immigration Director, Datu Robert Lian (second left) and Patron of Pesta Nukenen Bario, Gerawat Gala after declaring open the food festival. PHOTOS: ADELINE LIONG



LAWAS Member of Parliament, Datuk Henry Sum Agong (centre) enjoying traditional food on the last day of *Pesta Nukenen Bario*. With him are Patron of Pesta Nukenen Bario, Gerawat Gala (left) and Pemanca Philip Lakai (right).



ORGANISING Chairperson of *Pesta Nukenen Bario*, Esther Balan Gala (right) admiring the beads that Datin Catherine Gramong has just bought.

Kelabit culinary masterpieces draw the crowds

BY ADELINE LIONG

THE eighth *Pesta Nukenen dan Kebudayaan Kelabit Bario 2013*, known in English as the 8th Bario and Kelabit Highlands Food and Cultural Festival, took place in Bario from July 25 -27 this year.

It was declared open by Assistant Minister of Tourism (Local Events & Products), Datuk Gramong Juna and closed by Lawas Member of Parliament, Datuk Henry Sum Agong.

International President of *Pesta Nukenen Bario*, Lord Medway Jason, who could not attend this year's festival, said in his message in the souvenir programme: "*Pesta Nukenen* is part of a growing calendar of many extraordinary events that the Kelabit community plans, manages and organises in the Kelabit Highlands, in Sarawak and other parts of Malaysia."

He said he believed that many of the developmental challenges that the communities, regions and nations faced around the world

today were more safely and creatively addressed when they were approached with the kind of values that the Kelabit community had used to slowly grow *Pesta Nukenen* - working together.

Jason added: "Now in its 8th year, *Pesta Nukenen* has brought in sponsors, links and smart partnerships that have already changed many lives around the world.

"More importantly, I think it also serves as a beacon. It is full of innovation. It offers a fascinating example of how a community-led model for social and economic activity can bring a full economic and cultural revival in rural areas.

"It is also very encouraging to see the approach both supported and protected by the State and Federal Government - and long may that continue.

"It demonstrates imagination and great courage."

Jason added that it was an honour for him to be associated with the festival and to serve as its International Patron.

Patron of *Pesta Nukenen Bario*, Gerawat Gala said since its humble beginning eight years ago, the festi-

val had become a premier event in the Kelabit calendar and caught the attention of the Ministry of Tourism as well as local tourism industry.

Organising the festival annually for the last eight years was an achievement that the Kelabit community should be proud of.

He said *Pesta Nukenen Bario* was intended as an eye opener for potential investors and collaborators who wished to work with the local community to develop the vast tourism potential of the Kelabit Highlands.

"I believe that eco tourism can be one of the important economic catalysts for the future progress of the Kelabit Highlands," added Gerawat.

He said the success and sustainability of *Pesta Nukenen Bario* would very much depend on the continuing involvement and commitment of the Bario community, the town, Kelabits and continuing support as well as assistance from relevant government agencies and the private sector.

As in previous years, this year's *Pesta Nukenen Bario* was well attended by Kelabits from near and far as well as foreign and local tourists and food lovers.

The crowds could have been bigger if there had been more Twin Otter flights, especially from Miri to Bario.

Pesta Nukenen Bario, founded in 2006 as a community-owned food and cultural festival, is run by the women's and youth groups with support from the Rurum Kelabit Sarawak Association.

Organising Chairperson, Esther Balan Gala said the objectives of the yearly festival were to promote the ethnic cuisine and food of the Kelabit community and to preserve and revitalise the community's traditional values as well as cultural practices.



Datin Catherine Gramong, wife of Assistant Minister of Tourism (Local Events & Products), shakes hands with the villagers from Arur Dalan.

At this year's *Pesta Nukenen Bario*, Kelabits were not the only people who appreciated their ethnic cuisine.

Foreigners from as far as United Kingdom and Europe were also savouring the fresh meat, fish, rice, wild vegetables and shoots from either the jungle or gardens of Bario.

Dato' Isaac Lugun, President of Rurum Kelabit Sarawak Association and Chief Executive Officer of Samalaju Industries Sdn Bhd, was openly hunting for *kelatang*, grubs of weevils that live in the wood of several different trees, on the last day of the festival.

The *kelatang* were so much sought after as a food item, disappeared as fast they appeared at the stalls.

Issac later appeared with an

equally exotic food item - bee soup made of a few bees and bee grubs harvested from the honey comb!

Isaac admitted that his love for grubs was an acquired taste.

Born in Long Lellang, he said he used to eat a lot of the grubs when he was young.

"They were collected by my parents. My father, Maran Lugun is 84 now while my mother, Sinar Maran Lugun is 83," he said.

He has been visiting the Kelabit Highlands every year since the fifth *Pesta Nukenen Bario*.

"One of the main attractions for most of us from the towns is the opportunity to sample the food here," he said.

"If you notice, every village mans a stall. There are villagers from outside of Bario and they prepare different food according to different recipes.

"If you look at Kelabit food, like anywhere else in the world, necessity is the mother of invention. We cook in bamboo because it is a substitute cooking utensil and not because of the flavour.

"Kelabits wrap rice in *isip* leaves so that they can bring it to the farm. They keep the packets of rice in baskets to keep them warm.

"Kelabits cook rice twice a day, once for breakfast and lunch. They cook again in the evening after returning home from the farms.

"We smoke fish and meat a lot

not because of flavour but as a means of preservation.

"Over the years, more discerning food lovers appreciate certain flavours in the rice wrapped in *isip* leaves and in the smoked fish and meat."

As a result, Kelabit eateries and restaurants are springing up in Miri and Kuching, according to Isaac.

"As President of the Rurum Kelabit Sarawak Association, I am happy to see the commercialisation of Kelabit food.

"Commercialisation helps to refine the food and makes it more consistent.

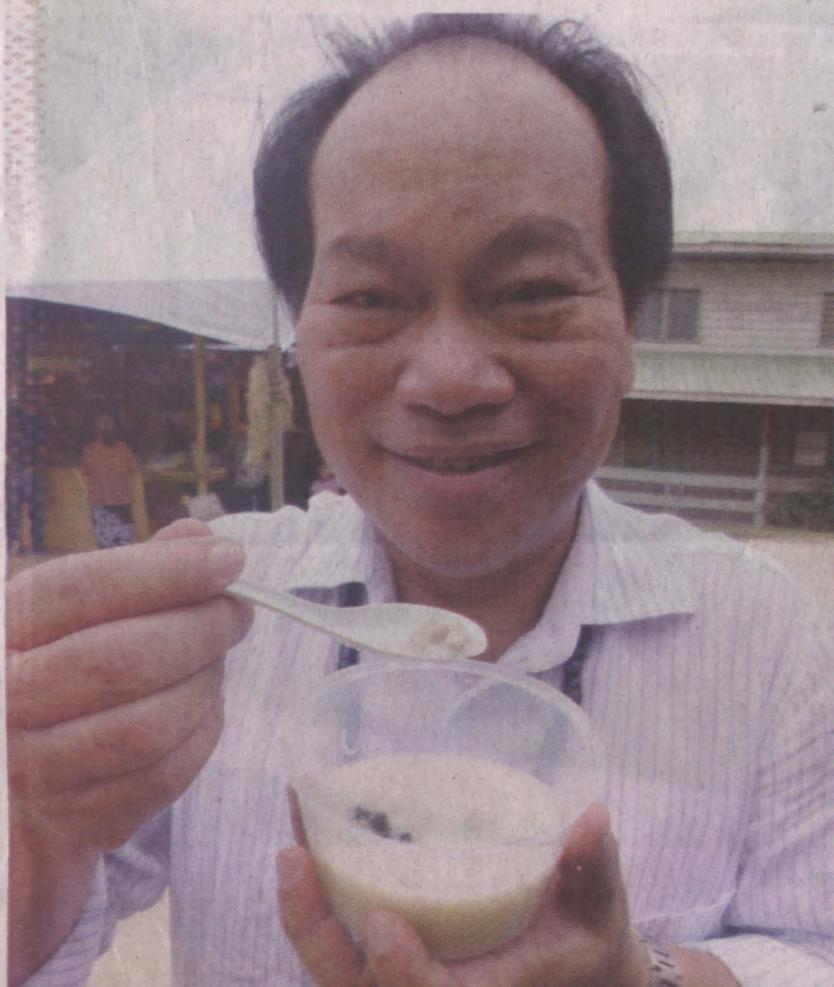
"I hope the festival will help to further refine Kelabit food preparation and presentation in our pursuit of a unique Kelabit cuisine," he said.

Esther Balan Gala, the Organising Chairperson of *Pesta Nukenen Bario* and owner of *Tribal Stove*, a Kelabit restaurant located opposite Hilton Hotel in Kuching, said the food at the festival was good.

"The ways they cook the dishes are also unique.

"For example, they mince the *petai* and wild ginger before braising them together.

"This is something new for me because the *petai* seeds are usually served whole.



DATO' Isaac Lugun with his bee soup.



A CLOSE-UP of Dato' Isaac Lugun's bee soup.



COUNCILLOR Kijan Toynbee (left) having lunch with her daughters, Christine Toynbee (HR Manager IT, Shell) (second left), Amy Toynbee Balan (right) and son-in-law, Joseph Balan (Corporate Affairs Adviser, Sarawak Shell Berhad) at one of the stalls at *Pesta Nukenen Bario* on the last day of the festival.



LILLA Raja loves Kelabit food.

Petai or *Parkia speciosa* (bitter bean, twisted cluster bean, or stink bean) is a plant of the genus *Parkia* in the family *Fabaceae*. The *petai* plant bears long, flat edible beans with bright green seeds the size and shape of plump almonds. The seeds have a rather peculiar smell.

"I also like the use of the traditional pepper-like herb called *tenyem* which they use in soup.

"It is very nice and has a minty

taste," said Esther.

Esther also liked the *ipa'* leaves of a woody forest climber found in the higher attitude forest.

The *ipa'* is high in glutamate and traditionally used by the Kelabits as a flavour enhancer.

"It is nice. I have been using the dry leaves in my shop," said Esther.

"At the festival, we also have an inter-kampung competition. We want them to maintain their cooking skills. Every village stall has its own specialities."

Councillor Kijian Toynbee,

Political Secretary to the Chief Minister, has not missed the festival since its founding.

"They sell all kinds of food from the jungle which are very special.

"The festival also helps low income people by providing them an opportunity to sell all kinds of food.

What Kijian likes most are the *tengayan* (local spinach), *Ikan Semah*, Bario Rice and wild boar from Bario.

"Even the people of Kuala Lumpur appreciate our food which is very tasty."

Kijian, who hails from Bario Asal but now lives in Miri, bought a lot of *Ikan Semah* to share with her friends in Miri and Kuala Lumpur.

Meanwhile, Lilla Raja, a Kelabit businesswoman who lives in Miri, enjoyed the fried padi field tilapia (*luang tunee*) sold at Pesta Nukenen Bario.

She boarded the first flight to Bario on the second day of festival.

A founding committee member of the festival, Lilla said: "I love Kelabit food. In Miri City, there are two Kelabit stalls which are also frequented by other races.

"Wild food is not readily available in Miri. Food naturally draws people. Some of the food here needs special skills to prepare.

"For example, the rice has to be wrapped while it is still hot. I enjoy cooking and love coming back for the festival.

"I will bring some of the ingredients home, call friends up and invite them over for meals," she said.

Robert Chee, owner of Bario Highlands Country Cottage Resort, liked the Bario rice, *tengayan*, different types of *kikid* (porridge) and *kelatang* sold at the festival.

Married to Leni Long, a Kelabit from Ramudu which is about one hour's drive from Bario, Chee has been attending *Pesta Nukenen Bario* since its formation.

"The festival is an opportu-



DR. POLINE BALA (right) with Rubin Jala ak Ira Tanid.

nity for the villagers to showcase Kelabit dishes in one place.

"I appreciate the food. They are all organic. *Kelatang* is hard to get," he said.

"The fish and chicken cooked in bamboo are very nice and special," Chee added.

He said the festival had improved as the years went by.

"This year, I am joining in as a sponsor for the first time.

I want to revive interest in Kelabit cultural performances so I am sponsoring many cultural competitions like the *ngajat* for men and long dance for ladies as

well as *Ms Pesta Nukenen*."

Chee hoped that there would be more participation from outside Bario in the future.

"Logistics is a major problem. Many people were waiting at the Miri airport and they could not come to Bario because there were no extra flights," he said.

Dr Poline Bala, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) senior lecturer specialising in anthropology, sociology and Asian politics, also liked the *tengayan* and refreshing juicy Bario pineapple.

"The festival brings people together. One of the aims of the

festival is to renew interest in Kelabit traditional food.

"Kelabit food is interlinked with the landscape, culture and traditions of the people. For example, *tengayan*, the local spinach, is wild. It can only be found in the mountains here. It grows by the river bank and is a bit slimy."

"As for the Bario pineapple, it is said that those grown facing the morning sun are sweeter," she said.

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ROBERT CHEE.



ABOVE: FRIED padi field tilapia (*luang tunee*).

LEFT: POLITICAL Secretaries to the Chief Minister, Maurice Giri (left) and Councillor Kijian Toynbee savouring passion fruits on the first day of *Pesta Nukenen Bario*.