

GAWAI DAYAK FESTIVAL

The Gawai Dayak festival is celebrated yearly on 1 June in Sarawak, is both a religious and social festival. Gawai means ritual or festival and Dayak is a collective name for the tribes of Iban, Bidayuh, Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit, Murut and more.

Tracing its roots back to as early as 1957, the Gawai Dayak festival was formally gazetted on 25 September, 1964 as a public holiday in place of Sarawak Day. The first official celebration being on 1 June, 1965, Gawai Dayak became a symbol of unity, aspiration and hope for the Dayak community and is an integral part of Dayak social life today.

Preparations for the festival begin early with brewing of *tuak* (rice wine) and traditional delicacies like *penganan* (cakes from rice flour, sugar and coconut milk). On Gawai eve, glutinous rice is roasted in bamboo known as *ngelulun pulut*.

The celebration starts on the evening of 31 May with a ceremony called *Muai Antu Rua* (to cast away the spirit of greediness), signifying the non-interference of the spirit of bad luck in the celebrations. Two children or men each dragging a *chapan* (winnowing basket) will pass each family's room in the Iban longhouse with each family throwing unwanted articles into the basket. The unwanted articles are then tossed to the ground from the end of the longhouse for the spirit of bad luck.

Around 6pm, the offering ceremony known as *miring* will take place, with ritual music; *gendang rayah* being performed beforehand. The feast chief will thank the gods for the good harvest, ask for guidance, blessings and long life as he sacrifices a cockerel. Dinner will then be served, while everyone talks and mingles awaiting for midnight.

At the stroke of midnight, a gong is sounded and the *tuai rumah* will lead everyone in drinking the *Ai Pengayu* (tuak for long life) at the same time wishing each other 'long life, health and prosperity' (*gayu-guru, gerai-nyamai*). A procession to welcome the spirits known as *Ngalu Petara* ensues with a procession walking up and down the entire length of the longhouse.

The celebration now gets merrier with dancing and traditional music being played. Others will recite *pantun* (poetry). Other activities that may follow the next day include cock-fighting, blowpipe demonstrations and *ngajat* (dancing) competitions.

On this day, the homes of the Dayaks will be open to visitors. In the longhouses, a practice called *masu pengabang* takes place where guests will be served with *tuak* by the host before they can enter the longhouse.

The Gawai Dayak festival may last up to several days, with visitors being welcomed to the homes of the Dayaks throughout the festival. It is also this

time of year that many Dayak weddings take place, as it is rare for all members of the community to assemble at the longhouse at one time.

In Sarawak's capital city of Kuching, the festivities and celebrations of the Gawai Dayak commence even a week before with enchanting street parades and cultural activities. On the eve of the Gawai, a beauty pageant is held crowning several Gawai Queens, one for each Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu communities.

Some notable places to visit during the Gawai Dayak festival are The Skrang River, The Lemanak River, Batang Ai and Annah Rais.

Gawai Dayak is one of the best times to visit Sarawak as the festivities are aplenty and the lifestyle comes alive, embracing visitors within the celebrations.

For more information regarding the Gawai Dayak Festival, please contact the Sarawak Tourism Board at +6082 423 600, email them at stb@sarawaktourism.com or surf www.sarawaktourism.com.
