

Model state of unity and harmony

SARAWAK has close to 30 ethnic groups, each with their own identity, yet these races live in peace and harmony. The secret is tolerance among its people and a deep understanding of each other's culture and heritage, says Sarawak Deputy Minister of Tourism, Creative Industry and Performing Arts Datuk Snowdan Lawan, 50.

"Sarawak has been described as the model state of unity and harmony, where communities accept and appreciate one another despite their differences in beliefs. Having communal structures like rural longhouses has also contributed to this close-knit community,"

Snowdan, who hails from Banting in Sri Aman, adds that religion has never been an issue among Sarawakians, whether young and old.

"Intermarriages are also com-

mon among locals. So it's not surprising that a big family can have four festivals like Chinese New Year, Hari Raya, Gawai and Christmas. And festivals unite the communities as they strengthen our bonds and understanding.

"Akin to mother's cooking, all ingredients are in the saucepan, and the recipe serves a good meal. Diverse we may be, but we mix well. The chemistry product is unity."

Here are some of the main ethnic groups in Sarawak:

Iban – This ethnic group is the biggest community of Sarawak's population. Centuries ago, they were feared as headhunters and pirates. They are also known for their weaving and silversmithing skills. Notable Ibans are actor Henry Golding (of *Crazy Rich Asians* fame) and Miss Malaysia Universe 2020, Francisca Luhong James.

Bidayuh – As the second largest indigenous group in Sarawak, the Bidayuh are known as Land Dayaks. Traditionally, this community lived in longhouses, complete with a circular thatched house called *baruk*. Bidayuh cuisine includes *linut* (sticky sago paste), *krubar* (sweet sago pancakes) and *tobah* (preserved meat).

Orang Ulu – The "people of the interior", Orang Ulu is a term used to describe a group of 27

minor but ethnically diverse tribal groups in northeastern Sarawak. Within these tribes are the Kayan, Kenyah, Lun Bawang and Kelabit. They each speak a different language and practise a unique culture. The Orang Ulu community is famous for their intricate beadwork and other tribal crafts. In addition, they are known for the *sape* (boat lute), made famous by Orang Ulu musicians like Mathew Ngau Jau and Alena Murang.

Melananu – Melananu or A-Likou means river people in the Mukah dialect. This ethnic group lives mainly along the Rajang River in central Sarawak. They consume foods such as jungle ferns, *umai*

(raw fish seasoned with lime and chillies), and *siet* (sago worms). In addition, they celebrate Kanul Festival, an annual "cleansing" ceremony to ward off uninvited spirits and bad influences.

Penan – This nomadic community can be found not only in Sarawak but also in Brunei. As of 2016, Sarawak has around 25,810 Penans, according to the Penan Education Community Programme (2010 – 2020). They are noted for their practice of *molong*, which means never taking more than necessary. In 2019, *Paradise War: The Story Of Bruno Manser* was screened at the Zurich International Film Festival. It is about Swiss environmental activist Bruno Manser and the Penans, and their fight against logging activities in Sarawak's forests.