



KG. KIAU NULUH, KOTA BELUD, SABAH MALAYSIA



Center of Excellence



Located at the foot of Mount Kinabalu in the border of Kota Belud and Ranau district, the village of Kiau is one of the highest villages found in Sabah. The village is divided into three areas, namely Kiau Bersatu, Kiau Taburi and Kiau Nuluh each having its own village head. The total population is around 2,300 people with a majority from the Dusun Kiau descent. In Kiau Nuluh the population is 960. The distance from the city of Kota Kinabalu is 79 Kilometres and takes around 2 hours to reach the village. The geographical area of this village is hilly and the weather reaches 16-10 degrees Celsius at night. The village is on the border with Kinabalu Park and the customary region is partly included in the gazette of Kinabalu Park. In terms of infrastructure, the Kiau Nuluh has facilities such as paved roads, a primary school (used by three villages), electricity supply, street lights, a community hall, a Catholic church, an SIB church, a Surau (muslim prayer hall), a field, public toilets, a bus stop, the GOMPITO building, a pre-school, a clinic building, a pineapple factory, small grocery shops, and a gravity-fed water supply.

HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY



Their origins can be traced back to the 1800s as ethnic Dusun from Nunuk Ragang. At that time, the people were hunters and gatherers who lived a nomadic lifestyle. They eventually settled in the Mesilau area near the foot of Mount Kinabalu. According to a legend told by the Kiau community, the ancestors of the Kiau community chose the site of the settlement because during a hunt they came across an area with a spring. When they drank from the spring they heard the cry of a Kologiau bird (making a sound like Kiau Kiau Kiau). After they drank the water, they found that they were full after just one sip (they call it "noiyau"). Since that incident, their ancestors decided to settle in the area and named it Kiau. They have already lived here for more than seven generations.

LIVELIHOOD

Sustainable farming is still the main source of income for the community, not only for subsistence purposes (hill paddy, corn, banana, local vegetables) but also for market purposes (pineapple, lemongrass, cacao, yam, rubber, coffee). The indigenous community practise rotational farming when planting hill paddy. They use the same area but change lots by rotation to allow soil fertility to restore. Normally, used paddy fields will be planted with short term crops (corn, pepper, vegetables) or left fallow to restore soil fertility. There is a community-based enterprise run by the women in the village, Koonduan Kiau Nuluh (KKN) which has about 60 members and produces pineapple-based products such as juice, chutney, jam, and wine. The pineapples are sourced from the villagers themselves ensuring the price is stable and supporting community livelihood. However, when there is not enough products to be sourced by the community, they purchase from the outside.

LIVELIHOOD

Life in this community is not static and livelihood is expanding into other areas. Due to the proximity to Mount Kinabalu and Kinabalu Park, many of the community members are involved in the tourism industry such as being licensed mountain guides, porters, or offering home stays for tourists.

Community based tourism is helping to retain the youths and as they do not need to find employment outside the village, and older people are able to continue working as long as they are strong. They think the tourism industry can be a viable economic opportunity for them as long as they themselves are able to control and decide how the tourism practices are run and it is also a good opportunity for them to show people about their community and their sustainable forest management practices.

In terms of gender roles, traditionally women take on more domestic duties while men are responsible for earning income to support the household. For those without young children, they work together, especially in tending to the fields. Although agricultural activities are done collaboratively, men tend to go to the fields earlier than women as women have more responsibilities in the house. When it comes to decision-making, some women make more decisions within the family compared to men. In terms of leadership involvement at the village level, women are also given the opportunity to participate in meetings, where they voice opinions related to village administration. Women's participation in these meetings is usually more substantial than that of men. Women are also engaged in church and village organizations.

GOVERNANCE/DECISION-MAKING

The village administration structure is led by the village chief who is elected by the community which manages cultural and traditional affairs related to the residents of Kiau Nuluh village. Additionally, the village chief is assisted by the Chairman of the Village Development and Security Committee (JKKK), who is elected by the government to oversee village development matters. This committee has 12 other members and when addressing any village issue, the JKKK leadership will engage in discussions with its members before making decisions. It will also convene meetings with the residents to explain decisions and gather suggestions or opinions from the community regarding the issue.

The Kiau Community Conserved Forest was the main hunting grounds for villagers from Kiau before it was gazetted as part of Kinabalu Park in 1964 and then excised in the 1980s when the Kinabalu Park boundaries were revised. Kiau villagers had applied for Native titles in phases with the Land and Survey Department.

Applications during the First Phase were processed and several villagers managed to obtain land titles. However, land applications during the Second Phase were frozen because the area had been declared a water catchment. In 1999, the community formed a Peoples Organization (POs) called GOMPITO (Association for the Conservation of Traditional and Natural Heritage / Koisaan Momogompi Tinungkusan Gulu-gulu om Kotolunan Sandad). And in 2001, the community through GOMPITO, decided collectively that the 1,204 acres of forest would no longer be a hunting ground but would be conserved as their the Kiau Nuluh/Bersatu Community-Conserved Forest Area governed by their principle of 'Gompi Guno'. This principle is to take only what you need, and protect the rest. The community forest area is also governed by their own community protocols which must be followed by all to protect the forest. This protocol is the result of community documentation and input from community representatives during community meetings and workshops between 2015 and 2018.

GOVERNANCE/DECISION-MAKING

The community-conserved forest is believed to be inhabited by forest spirits/creatures, who are sensitive towards the behaviour of the people who enter it. Thus, the rituals Mamason and Mamatang have to be conducted before entering the area. 7 betel leaves, 7 betel nuts, 7 kirai (nipah leaves), a fistful of sigup (tobacco), a pinch of rice (uncooked), a box of matches and a pinch of tapu (lime/calcium) are presented as Tinggaton (offerings) during the mamason ritual before entering the forest. Meanwhile, mamatang is conducted for safety while in the forest and when an individual wishes to collect resources in the community forest. This ritual is carried out according to the needs of each specific area, but also consists of presenting offerings to the forest spirits/creatures. The community believes that each area has a guardian and hence the Mamatang ritual needs to be conducted for the area they want to enter. During the ritual, the forest spirit is told about the purpose of the visit, and asked permission and protection during the time the people are in the forest.

Meanwhile, the Kiau community also practice Boros Puru (forest language). They believe that a long time ago, in a story from their ancestors, the forest guardian had told them to speak in Boros Puru (forest language) while in the forest. They have to speak in Boros Puru in order for the forest guardian to recognize and understand them when they are in the forest.

Therefore, the use of the forest language is compulsory while in the community forest. The Boros Puru has 156 words. There are also several taboos associated with entering the forest, each of them linked to a story passed down from the ancestors. They believe that if they do not use Boros Puru or follow the taboos to respect the forest guardian, calamities or disasters will befall them and the community.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GOVERNMENT

The relationship with the government is not always smooth as there are some in the government that do not recognize Indigenous Peoples rights to the lands. Through the continuous efforts of community leaders to negotiate and advocate, they were finally able to convince and get some recognition for a part of their forest. It also helped that there were a few states legislative representatives that supported them and brought their demands up to the government. The process is lengthy however, and strong cooperation and collaboration between leaders and the community as well as having unity with a clear vision and mission is key, so that everyone is on the same page and have the same goals.

The community has always been engaging with Sabah Parks to find a common ground of cooperation. Several projects such as the Ecolinc project (a project by Sabah Government to link Kinabalu Park and Crocker Range Park) helped recognize their efforts in taking care of their community-conserved forest. However, their concerns are still on the limitations of accessing the forest for hunting, resource collection, agricultural activities and customary land ownership in the area. Currently they are included in the Kinabalu Geopark initiative where their culture, heritage and their connection with Mt. Kinabalu is recognized and highlighted as values to the geopark. In 2022 the community was awarded Best Community Eco-Tourism Management in Sabah Parks and Friends of Conservation Award from Sabah Forestry Department.



RELATIONSHIP/S WITH OTHER INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Kiau village has a good relationship with other villages along the Kedamaian river. This is important as they all depend on the river as an important water source, and thus needs to be protected upstream as well as downstream. To retain good relations, they for instance invite them to join their yearly harvest and thanksgiving festival (Kokotuan & Moginakan). The community still practices the tradition of mogitatabang or helping out one another when it comes to tasks, especially during the planting and harvesting seasons for rice. There are some issues related to outsiders trying to access their resources but they can be resolved due to the strong community protocol.

KNOWLEDGE MAINTENANCE AND SHARING

Intergenerational learning happens in the everyday life of the community. Children participate in farming and other activities of the family and learn from them. Most members of the community also still speak their mother tongue fluently as they practice it daily in their families. The youths are actively involved in cultural activities, often engaging in community activities and festivals and also traditional rituals.

Traditional singing and dancing are maintained because it is regularly being used in celebrations and festivals such as the Moginakan festival and weddings. This gives them a chance to try and practice this knowledge. There is also a cultural revival of finding unique things about their own identity as Dusun Kiau, and recently they have started learning to make their Dusun Kiau traditional costume called Rinongkitan. In terms of medicinal plants, most community members know the uses of common herbs that are beneficial to them, however for more severe illness, only experts such as bobolians and traditional practitioners know.

Due to the efforts of GOMPITO, some of the practices have already been documented such as the mamatang, mamason and boros puru. They are also doing activities to transfer the knowledge to the younger generation by bringing them into the community forest and learning about useful trees and plants for medicine, food and construction; learning how to make crafts (from the selection and harvest until finished product); Boros Puru and forest protocol; knowing the name, story and history of important sites in the forest. Through this the children and youths are able to learn and have a deeper appreciation of their identity and culture and will also take care of the forest in the future.



KEY CHALLENGES

Although we see that youths are actively engaged, the elders still worry that the participation of young people in community programs, especially those related to meetings, is lacking. The knowledge of the youth regarding cultural customs is also limited due to their lack of exposure, as many of them have migrated outside the village in search of employment and education. This migration has led to a decreasing youth population residing in the village. However, this issue have been improving with youths now getting involved in the community ecotourism activities and more awareness raising on culture and identity by GOMPITO.

Another issue the residents are facing is related to land. The village land has not been officially recognized therefore disputes over land and territory boundaries continue to occur among the residents.

As the community gets more recognition, more outside influence will enter the community. This can for instance be seen when more projects are entering from the government or non-governmental organizations, and more tourism activities are entering their village. Although the intentions are good and will bring economy to the village, the community must always prioritize their vision for the future and the benefit of all.

THE MEANING AND PRACTICE OF SELF-DETERMINATION

As Dusun Kiau, they believe that the forest and forest language (Boros Puru) are important to their identity. Traditionally, the forest has played a role as a source of food and medicinal plants. They believe that forest guardians and nature have to be respected, and that humans have a close and reciprocal relationship with nature. They only take what they need from the forest, for their own use and not for commercial purposes. All forest resources such as plants, animals, insects, soil, water and minerals have to be protected and they have taboos that have to be followed to ensure the continuity of their resources. The Mamatang, Mamason and Boros Puru cultivate a sense of appreciation and deep respect of the forest, its resources and the spirits living in it.

The indigenous community protocol, developed through an intensive participatory process over more than three years, is an embodiment of this cultural, biological and legal diversity. It showcases how closely the community's identity, culture, adat and ways of life depend upon their territory and natural resources, and how much they want to sustain them for current and future generations. The protocol also does not shy away from the realities on the ground. The community is facing challenges, but they set out how they would like to address those challenges in a respectful manner, drawing on customary, state, and international law.

Justin Dalansu



"I think the biggest strength of our community is that we are able to have a good cooperation between the 3 leadership bodies which are the traditional institution (village headman), government administrative body (JPKK) and the Peoples Organization (GOMPITO). This gives us a unifying voice to be able to communicate with outsiders whether it be government, companies or non-gov organizations.

Our practices need to be continued because in the past using these practices has contributed to the continued survival of the community in Kg. Kiau."

Daimah Suanti



"The Mamatang Sungai ritual is important as it is a sign of respect & reconciliation and asking for permission from the guardian of life in the river. So that the spirit of the river is happy, we also feel happy when taking resources from the river, our ancestors told us, and this continues to this day."

Lanting Lungkim



"One of the importance of this forest language is that all forest spirits will better understand and know our true purpose, wishes and request through communication using these forest language. It would be better if we were closer to them and could cooperate in fulfilling our request, and our own protection or safety would be guaranteed. That's the meaning of this forest language.

Even though our ancestors didn't follow any religion and only followed traditional religion, they were able to survive.

We are just ordinary people, we cannot see them. This is a one of our ways of showing respect by practising this traditional practice when we go into the forest."