SARAWAK STATE FLAG AND STATE ANTHEM: A REFLECTION OF THE HEART AND SOUL OF THE PEOPLE
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The Flag
Quite easily overlooked in the realm of vexillology is the flag of Sarawak, a state officially born in 22 July 1963 as part of the federation of Malaysia. Its stark similarity ~ the vividness of the combination of red, black and yellow ~ with the flag of another great nation, Germany, makes the Sarawak flag seem rather pedestrian to any Tom, Dick or Harry. But hidden in its ordinariness today is its resplendent genealogical history, which ironically predates its independence, back to the era when the first White Rajah, James Brooke (1803-1868) ruled and established peace against the marauding pirates in the kingdom.

Believed to be a derivative of his coat of arms, the first Sarawak flag introduced by the late James Brooke employed the St. George’s cross, with a hue of half blue and half red on a yellow background, and was first hoisted on 21 September 1848. Sarawak has ever since seen a fascinating metamorphosis in the design of this great symbol.

The first occurred on 7 May 1870, when the second Rajah, Charles Brooke, decided to change the color of half blue cross to black, and hoisted it on 26 September the same year to commemorate the birthday of the then Rajah Muda Charles Vyner Brooke. This model remained until 1973, to mark the decennial celebration of Sarawak's independence, when the then Chief Minister of Sarawak, Abdul Rahman Ya’kub added his personal touch by replacing the quondam flag with The Trisakti, along with a new state motto and anthem, “Hidup Selalu Berkhidmat” (Live To Serve) and “Sarawak Bahagia” (Blissful Sarawak).

Sarawak’s silver jubilee of its independence in 1988 again witnessed a makeover of the flag, from The Trisakti to what we see gloriously fluttering side by side with the Malaysian flag at the edifice of the Sarawak State Legislative Assembly today. It adopted a new state anthem, “Ibu Pertiwiku” (My Motherland), and motto, “Bersatu,
Berusaha, Berbakti” (United, Striving, Serving) to represent a milestone and the beginning of a new era for the people of Sarawak.

The Sarawak flag today is a curious conglomeration of a black and red stripe slanted across a striking shade of yellow with a nine-point star seated in the middle, each feature representing a certain characteristic personal to the struggle and experience of the people of this relatively young state.

The red stripe portrays the valor, determination and sacrifice of the people in their continuous struggle for development and majesty to build Sarawak as an exemplary state. The color is a symbol of supremacy of law and order, unity and stability of the multiethnic Sarawakians. The color black reflects the prosperity of Sarawak in terms of natural resources, which include oil, timber and precious metals, as a capital to drive the people forward. The nine-point star represents the nine separate Divisions of Sarawak, in which the residents live peacefully in a multicultural framework. It also typifies the noble ambition of the people to work together to enhance their standard of living and quality of live post Merdeka.

The Anthem
Dearly missed by every patriotic Sarawakian is the late Dato’ Haji Wan Othman Hamid and his musical composition, often nostalgically laced with his undying love for the state and the people. The most stellar opus in his legacy is indisputably Sarawak's present day state anthem, “Ibu Pertiwiku”, melodiously chorused to in the opening of all formal events held within the state boundaries. Written by the late Ismail Hassan, the lyrics evoke an esoteric medley of wistfulness and sentimentality that any true Sarawakian could definitely relate to. The song as a whole encapsulates the sense of belonging to a common birthplace, the quality of togetherness as a culture and the peace that it accrues.

The opening stanza of Ibu Pertiwiku ingeniously emphasizes Sarawak’s motherly role of providing a sanctuary for the beginning of life to her people. The first two lines repeat the leitmotif of ascribing Sarawak as a matter of political guardianship and a birthright. This is a euphemism to establish how strongly Sarawakians feel for their
birthplace, and how rightfully it is that they possess ownership of and control over it. The third line refers to Sarawak as “tanah pusaka”, literally meaning an inherited land, prized as an heirloom. The fourth, “tanah tumpah darahku”, literally means the land on which my blood flowed, to demonstrate the notion of having been born therein. Overall, this stanza captures the spirit of ownership transcending political rights as conferred by sheer chance of being born in this blessed domain. It is theirs, and they will guard it, protect it, and make it prosper against all odds thrown their way.

The second stanza begins with an identifying marker of unity of the people, through the use of dulcetly-sounding assonance of “mesra” and “bahagia”, meaning gregarious and blissful. It is followed by “damai muhibah sentiasa” (peaceful and always cooperative) to create a resounding rhyme. The remaining lines incorporate the motto of Sarawak, “Bersatu, Berusaha, Berbakti” which means united, striving and serving for a beloved Sarawak. Note the use of the word “cintai”, which is an adjective to describe a love as in that between lovers. This is an astute personification to accentuate the nature of the sentimental relationship between Sarawakians and their homeland. Simply put, this stanza seeks to remind us that it is unity and cohesion of the multiethnic people of Sarawak which has opened the door to peace and harmony as they work together hand in hand for the betterment of this land that they call home.

The third stanza opens by highlighting how the “Land of the Hornbills” is part of Malaysia. This can be understood to reflect how Sarawakians perceive their integration to form a political entity with the rest of Malaysia as pivotal to the identity and development of Sarawak herself. It reinforces that already solid sense of patriotism in being a Sarawakian to Malaysia as a sovereign country. The next line illustrates how the peace and prosperity that Sarawakians revel in as a blessing from God. Here we can infer how much is the life of the people of Sarawak influenced by one common force, which is religion. The third line rejoices in the hope that Sarawak continues to be blessed, and the fourth line elaborates it as a core of the people’s struggle, before the diminuendo is finally sung with “berjaya berdaulat” to conclude the success of Sarawak in maintaining its sovereignty. We cannot help but to taste
the sweet flavor of optimism expressed by this stanza, with the unquestionable faith Sarawak has in its membership with Malaysia, how there emanates a longing for continuous blessing upon this land in the embodiment of peace and prosperity common to every single Sarawakian there is.

**Sarawak**

What makes Sarawak truly unique is how diverse the population is. At 2,399,839, the population of Sarawak can be broken down into 40 sub-ethnic groups, all of them boasting a distinct language, culture and even lifestyle, with the Ibans dominating the statistics, followed by the Chinese, Malay and others such as the Orang Ulu and Penan. The question that begins to manifest would be whether or not Sarawak can live up to the spirits it has portrayed in the flag and the anthem?

Theoretically, a multiethnic demographic presents an administrative difficulty, as different people would understandably hold a different worldview, and may have different wants and needs. However, Sarawak defies this hypothesis and has illustriously managed to maintain a harmonious atmosphere among her people hitherto.

For starter, Sarawak is known globally as a tourist destination, given its unique terrain and diverse flora and fauna, not to mention the people. The Sarawak Tourism Board plays a significant role in ensuring that Sarawakians capitalize on this uniqueness. The Sarawak Cultural Village for example, is a phalanx of ethnic dioramas founded to envelop the essence of this multicultural phenomenon where visitors get to witness and experience the actual lifestyle of Sarawakians, including their wooden houses on stilts, traditional food and folk dances. This village is also given the honor to host the Rainforest World Music Festival each year, where an exquisite showcase of world music is played to an audience of varied nationalities. This effort in a sense elevates the status of each one of Sarawak’s ethnic group, lending them a sense of pride and ultimately the appreciation of their mutual differences.
Another glaring conundrum lies in the realm of religion: how do people of such a diverse situation compromise? Interestingly, the people of Sarawak however thrive in having different beliefs. As a sign of solidarity with Malaysia, Sarawakians uphold Article 11 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia and respect religious freedom, and even celebrate it with various festivals such as Gawai Dayak and Christmas by visiting friends and sharing gifts if not good food. They seem to enjoy the hustle and bustle promised by the sometimes clashing celebrations with absolute joy and well wishes. A visit to the night market would prove to be a delight, as hawkers of Chinese descent would have no qualms chattering with their Malay competition as the Bidayuh lady in the opposite is busy chewing on betel nuts while waving for the next customer to be enticed by her wide array of “lemang”, “belacan” or the notorious “ulat sagu”.

In the field of education, Sarawak is proud to have Yayasan Sarawak to oversee that every qualified Sarawakian deserving of decent educational path irrespective of his ethnicity, gets to attend university. Universiti Malaysia Sarawak was born to make that much more attainable, and has since produced excellent Sarawakian graduates who in turn have found employment in respectable agencies, therefore boosting the economy and raising the overall standard of living in this state. Schools have churned out exceptional individuals by promoting inter-division competition of sports and academic, in line with the spirit of cohesion as envisioned by the star in the state flag.

As an exporter of crude oil, timber and many other natural resources, Sarawak’s economy has tremendously prospered as the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita hikes each calendar year. In 2010 alone the GDP growth charted an increase of 4.5% compared to a decline of -1.5% in the previous year in spite of the global economic crisis, marking a healthy pattern in response to the contribution of every hardworking Sarawakian right down to the last agricultural farmer. The Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE) was launched on 11 February 2008 aiming to transform Sarawak into a developed state by 2020 by accelerating the state’s economic growth, as well as improving the quality of life for the people of Sarawak. Targeted sectors include tourism, oil, aluminum, metals, glass, fishing, aquaculture,
livestock, forestry, ship building and palm oil. This creates many job opportunities and will attract investors in the thousands, resulting in billions of Ringgits of income into the pocket of Sarawakians.

Perhaps the most riveting feature of Sarawak’s identity immersed in the splendor of its flag and song is how the people have banded together to create and make it. With the conclusion of the second World War came the proposal of joining Malaya, Singapore and Sabah to form Malaysia. This was considered ill tidings to many interested parties, from the vestige of the past communist relic left by the conflict between Japan and China, to a series of confrontations with neighboring state Indonesia. Even internally, an anti-Malaysia movement whipped up a storm to hamper unification process. Many lives were lost, battles fought and villages burned down in the process. But in every dark cloud, there is always a silver lining. The Cobbold Commission’s report on 1 August 1962 of the generally positive opinion of Sarawakians in favour of joining Malaysia was the first sign that Sarawak was ready to take control of its own future, and they have never looked back ever since.

The words of the late John F. Kennedy reverberate in my ears today. He once said, “let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”

No truer words were ever spoken.

A hundred years ago Sarawak was practically non-existent, known only vaguely to the most adventurous of European seafarers, maritime traders and pirates alike as a faraway paradise waiting to be exploited. Far from the imagination of my ancestors was the notion of having this wholesome integration of ethnic minorities and majorities, when tribal wars were workaday and harmony existed only in the fairy tales of small communities of Land Dayaks finding refuge on Mount Singai. And then came the colonists, the Japanese, the communists and finally today the K-pop fever. How the hell did we survive all that if what the flag of Sarawak and the state anthem represent are merely lip service?
From one of the poorest to one of the richest states in Malaysia, many a Sarawakian have shed countless of tears, blood and sweat to become what it is today, and will continue to do so for many more years. In retrospect, we were very poor then. Going back to my kampung took twelve hours of walking because proper roads did not extend as far out into the remote areas, and even if there were, we could not afford a proper vehicle. Going to school was a luxury to many people, and traditional mail was still not a proper mode of communication.

Today, here I am, typing out an essay in a language given by the people of the White Rajah himself, with the technology that came along with the impetus of knowledge transfer made possible by the painstaking synergy of my people in the past and present. I am proud to be part of this phenomenon called Sarawak, to have lived here my entire life and to have a fair share of that bittersweet symphony of laughter and pain just to make it better for me, my family and posterity. Having written this essay, I have come to realize how much respect I owe that glorious flag and what it represents. And while I take a break and reminisce, take a wild guess at what song is playing on my iTunes right now...

Ibu Pertiwiku indeed!
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