Bulan Ipang (left) seeks edible ginger flowers in the Borneo jungle; another woman inside a community longhouse in Sarawak, Malaysia

Grandmas Left Lonely

City life beckons the young people of remote Borneo

WITH BRICK-RED BEADS around her head and a machete in her hand, 65-year-old Bulan Ipang smiles as she slashes her way through a tropical thicket to find a fresh, edible ginger flower. The air is sweet and filled with birdsong. The Borneo jungle "is always my home," Ipang says. But her eyes well with tears when she speaks of her seven grandchildren: "All of them are living in the city."

Ipang lives in the Kelabit Highlands, a remote region of Malaysian Borneo, where villagers traditionally dwell in communal longhouses scattered throughout the rainforest. For centuries, the environment sustained a few thousand members of the Kelabit tribe, who hunted, foraged and farmed rice. Turboprop planes or a monthlong trek were the only access to their jungle homes.

But rural life is changing. A logging road sliced through the forest a few years ago, connecting Ipang's village of Bario with the Borneo coast. Almost 80 percent of the region's forests have been logged since 1990, so, for many, hunting and foraging are no longer sustainable options. Yet "there's no job for us," says Bario elder Jenette Ulun, who has watched three of her children move to the capital of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. She sees them only once a year, for holidays.

Her kids have joined a wave of Kelabits attending college and building new lives in Malaysia's cities. "After studying, they get jobs, marry, have families," Ulun says. Many don't return to the highlands until they retire.

"Of course, the younger generations do need education," says Supang Galih, an elder in Pa Lungan village, a four-hour hike from Bario, "[but] it's a great change for our local people." Pa Lungan has so few youngsters that locals joke the village is becoming a retirement home. Still, it's no joke that seniors often face their later years alone now.

Traditionally, Kelabit families lived in multigenerational homes, with children acting as caregiving "insurance for their parents," Ulun says. Not any longer. These cultural shifts are particularly rough on grandmothers, according to gender studies scholar Hew Cheng Sim, whose research shows "neglect and loneliness" among elderly Kelabit women.

In earlier times, friends gathered around family fireplaces, filling longhouse corridors with conversations and warmth. Today, longhouses turn dark and quiet at night, since few residents remain full-time. Only during national holidays do extended families reunite in many villages.

"It is sad," Ulun says, though she doesn't know "what we can do to overcome that."

A job is one potential fix—helping women both financially and socially. Ipang started guiding tourists on short treks to find edible flowers, ferns and greens. Other women welcome strangers into their homes, for camaraderie and cash. Lonely after her husband died, Sina Rang Lemulun opened a home-stay in the Bario Asal Longhouse, continuing a Kelabit tradition of welcoming visitors. Feeding and housing travelers lifts her spirits, although now her biggest problem is saying good-bye to new friends. All these departures, she says sadly, "that is the only thing I dread."

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