

TAILPIECE: MAN AND MAIAS

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The Earl of Cranbrook is well known for his long association with the people of Sarawak. His work on swiftlets that began in the 1950s inevitably brought him into contact with the cultures of the various Dayak groups, including the Ibans, giving him a deep understanding for their *adat* (beliefs, laws and traditions). He also learnt their language, making him almost certainly the only Iban-speaking Lord, before the House of Lords was reformed in 1999. It therefore seems fitting to end this special volume with a short piece that illustrates how such *adat* can support the respect that indigenous people may have for their wildlife.

Back in 1981, WWF-Malaysia sent me to Sarawak to help the Forest Department there with its orang-utan conservation work. This work took me deep into the forest, near the Kalimantan border, and involved many a night in Iban longhouses. Once, when I was in the Batang Ai area, long before today's Batang Ai National Park was established, a Tuai Rumah (headman) told me the following story:

In my grandfather's time, a man died and the people laid him out in the *bilek* (room) for burial the next day. But early on the following morning, when his son entered the *bilek*, his father's body had gone. Instead, there was a maias (orang-utan) standing there, and the maias said to the man, 'I am your father. I am not dead, but because I have turned into a maias, I can no longer live in the longhouse. I must go and live in the forest. But because I am your father and I am joining the other maias, we must have a bond between people and maias.'

So saying, the maias gave the man a ring and said, 'Keep this ring for eight generations. So long as you and your descendants have the ring, the people of the Batang Ai must regard all maias as their family. Do not harm us and we will know that you are our friends, and good fortune shall be yours.'

With that, the maias left the longhouse and disappeared into the forest. His son kept the ring carefully and right now it is in the hands of his son's family, although they moved to the new settlement along the Sungai Skrang some years ago.

Because this happened, we the Iban people of the Batang Ai do not hunt or kill any maias and that is why you can see many of them in our area. They even make their nests where we can see them from our longhouses. We have six more generations to go of this peace between us and our maias neighbours. After that, who knows? I shall not be here.

I have often thought about this tale. And I have often thought about how there are many orang-utans in the Batang Ai, yet almost none in similar, nearby areas. I even saw orang-utan nests in the tops of rubber trees near the longhouse where the man told me his story. Is it true? I only tell you what I heard. You can decide for yourself what you think is true in your world. But I do know that a world with this story is a better place for maias than a world without it. And for all of us who are interested in the conservation of wildlife and their habitats, it reminds us that we must engage indigenous communities and others for conservation. The law that protects orang-utans in the Batang Ai area is exactly the same as that which protects them in adjacent forests, but it is only in the Batang Ai catchment that we could readily see orang-utan nests so near to human habitation, at least when this story was first written.