

# Migration, its benefits and

By Andy Chua

RONALD Ngilai anak Sungai was only seven-years-old when his parents left their longhouse and moved to Sibu.

Their 42-door longhouse, Rumah Manja, is on the outskirts of Durin, about two hours' road journey to Sibu.

Ronald said the family's only option was to migrate to Sibu as the only job at their longhouse was padi planting.

They left their grandparents at the longhouse to attend to their padi fields and only visited them during the Gawai season.

During Gawai, their longhouse, like any other, is packed with people returning home to celebrate the occasion with loved ones.

There are two schools at his longhouse but Ronald had his primary education at SRK Perbandaran No 2 and later SMK Bukit Lima - both in Sibu.

He completed Form Five last year. Like any local native, whose roots are from the traditional Iban longhouse, Ronald is not choosy about jobs, now working as a bell boy at Li Hua Hotel here. The pay is low but he is not complaining.

There are six other longhouses next to his. And most of the youths there with Primary Six education have to continue their secondary schooling in urban schools. And most have experienced a cultural shock in the totally different environment of the town.

The school drop-out among the community is exceptionally high. Ronald knows that longhouse youths of his age generally have low education. And most end up as general workers either in the construction industry, hotels, eateries, and just any jobs they can find. He also knows many of his longhouse folks are working in Sibu, Kapit, Kuching, Bintulu, Miri and even in Semenanjung Malaysia.

Meanwhile, 15-year-old Jason anak Naga, was seen wandering at the Sibu Bukit Lima children playground with two friends, Rony anak Jay, 12 and Wilson Lori, 6, one Thursday at 11.30 am.

He told me his family had migrated from their longhouse in Julau last year. He stopped schooling in Primary Six and had worked for about a year in Sibu at RM30 a day as an odd job labourer in the project to build a drainage system at Jalan Lada.

"With the project over, I am now jobless," he said.

On why he quit school, he replied his father, being a construction site worker, could not afford his education and moreover, education for rural folks like them was not important.

Tuai Rumah Ngabong, 64, of a longhouse at Nanga Setapang Sungai Musah in Katibas, about five hours' express boat journey from Sibu, had also migrated to the urban area.

Making the move 24 years ago, he now resides in Song. At his age, Ngabong is still energetic, transporting fellow Ibans from their longhouse to the town in his van.

He charged RM40 per trip. A steady income is the reason why he took the drastic step to migrate to the town. In the village, he had to farm to earn a living.

Fellow occupants of his longhouse of 19 families had also migrated to the town six years ago.

Those who migrated may have abandoned their longhouses but they still return once in a while to clear their land and maintain their orchards.

"There are some who come back to harvest their padi twice in a year. Other than that, they stay mostly in the town," Ngabong said.

His longhouse was gutted by fire last August - a few years after the occupants had migrated. He has since started building a new one at the same site at Sungai Muyun, Jalan Takan, in Katibas.

With the project 90 per cent completed, Ngabong is dead worried whether his former anak biak will return ... now that they are used to urban lifestyle.

From the feedback he received, some of the land owners chose to stay in the town because they did not have money to build a house on their land; so they were forced to migrate to earn a living.

"There are also those who don't even have a piece of land to build a house on. Their only option is to migrate to the town; at least there, they have some place to stay such as in a make-shift hut at their workplace," he said.

Like other Ibans, Ngabong once went as far as Brunei and Sabah in search of work, especially in 1958. He recalled his earnings enabled him to buy an eight-acre land at only RM350 in the early 60s.

Longhouse folks nowadays, he said, migrated to the town because they wanted get away from the sedentary rural life of farming. Those who migrated, he added, grabbed whatever jobs they could find in the town ... as construction workers, general labourers or shopkeepers.

At their longhouse in the interior, no matter how hard they worked in the farm, they were still poorer than those having migrated to the town.

This is because there is no market value for their produce in their village since nobody wants to buy them because the farmers are producing the same things. It is also not easy to sell them to the town folks due to transport problems.

Ngabong has since been used to town life and is not ready to return to his old lifestyle.

The availability of basic infrastructure facilities, such as clean water and electricity in the town also attracts the rural folks. Only some longhouses in the rural areas enjoy these facilities.

According to the Iban community leader for Sibu, Temenggong Adrian Ringgau, the lure for a better life is the driving force behind rural folks migrating to the town.

"Life is of course rosier in the town as most facilities are available. People also migrate because they want their children to have better education as colleges are found in the town."

However, he has a word of caution for those who want to move.

"You should not migrate just because your neighbours are doing it. When you jump on the bandwagon, you may feel out of place in the new environment."

Those who do not have the necessary skills usually end up struggling to make ends meet.

Due to the lack of skills and ignorance of urban life, they will not be



able to find a stable job. Their earnings are usually hardly enough to keep them going.

Those in their early 20s would be lost in urban society and out of frustration, may get involved in unhealthy activities.

Temenggong Adrian advised these people to stay put and make full use of their land for farming commercial crops such as oil palm, pepper and padi.

"Good infrastructure facilities are now available in most rural areas and with the active involvement of the Agriculture Ministry to increase food production, it is better for rural folks to continue farming than migrating to the town," he said.

There are, however, some who have been successful after migrating.

"It depends on the individual. Those prepared to move will find it easier to adapt to town life and slowly gain a footing," he explained.

Temenggong Adrian himself migrated to the town in 1927 from his longhouse at Sungai Bawang Tuah when he was in his early 20s.

"With education, I managed to find a job in the civil service and adapted to town life. All my eight children have either completed their university education or are presently furthering their studies," he said.

Sarawak Dayak National Union (SDNU), Sibu branch secretary William Baja described the "pull and push" factors as the force behind the Iban migration to the urban area.

"One pull factor is job opportunity in the town. Another is the desire to experience urban life."

"In a town going through rapid development, there are entertainment centres, better recreational, education and health facilities," he said.

On the other hand, the push factor is such that the rural folks are being "forced" to migrate as the could no longer cope with rural life.

"Life in the very remote area is difficult. The people there have no proper communication facilities such as telephone, road networks, public transport service, and all these make it difficult for them to make a living," William Baja noted.

With rapid urbanisation, where some towns such as Sibu and Miri are on the road to achieving city status, the rural folks are equally excited and they migrate to the town to see how they could fit in.

"Unfortunately, many got displaced as they were simply not prepared for the fast pace of urban life," he added.

Studies have shown the large migration of rural families to urban areas in Sarawak has also brought about serious social implications. A noticeable number of children has dropped out of school as their parents are unable to meet the financial demands of urban life.



RONALD ... needs a job



SCHOOL DROP-OUTS ... (from left)

Statistics show 70 per cent of rural school children in Sarawak have stopped schooling or are not prepared to go further while they could. There were 21,648 school drop-outs in the State between 1998 and 2000.

According to the Population and Housing Census of Malaysia, 2000, the rural-urban population ratio in Sarawak is getting narrower.

Statistics showed in the period under review, there were 963,232 (47.6 per cent) people in the urban area and 1,049,384 (52.1 per cent) in the rural area. The total population of Sarawak based on the statistics then was 2,012,616.

As a demographic comparison between major towns in the State for the same period, Kuching had 85.5 percent in the urban areas and 14.5 per cent in the rural, Sibu (79.6 per cent and 20.4 per cent), Bintulu (74.3 per cent and 25.7 per cent) and Miri (76.3 per cent and 23.7 per cent).

Migrants to urban areas are mostly Ibans who form the biggest number (in terms of ethnic groups) in the State's total population. There were 603,735 Ibans based on the Sarawak Population Statistics 2000.

# and problems



ADRIAN ... promise of better life



WILLIAM ... avoiding hardships



TJS ... (from left) Wilson anak Lori, Rony anak Jay and Jason anak Naga

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The Chinese were next with 537,230 followed by Malays (462,270), Bidayuh (166,756), Melanau (112,984), and other Bumiputeras (117,690) and others (8,103).

The population in the State's major towns increased by 200,000 in 1980 to 960,000 in 2000.

According to the national census, in 1980, only 34 per cent of the population lived in the urban areas in the country, including Sarawak. Ten years later, the figure jumped to 52 per cent.

The incidence of poverty in the country was 52.4 per cent in 1970. By 1995, it had fallen to 9.6 per cent. Ten years later, it was further reduced to 6.1 per cent. All these were as a result of government strategies aimed at poverty eradication.

The poverty level, however, rose again in 1999 to 8.1 per cent as a result of the Asian financial crisis. All in all, about 70 per cent of Iban youths have migrated to the town, leaving their elders behind.

A preliminary study by the Social Development and Urbanisation Ministry indicated the rate of school drop-outs would further escalate if left unchecked. Most of these drop-

outs were schooling in their villages until they followed their parents to the towns or city.

In moving to the town, the parents were unable to find stable jobs and thus, their children's education suffered.

Longhouse life is simple and most parents do not need a lot of money to keep their children in school. In the town area, they need to have ready cash for transport and other necessities.

According to the Assistant Minister for Social and Urbanisation, Dublin Unting Ingkot, some parents, in their desperation to seek employment, moved from place to place and this seriously affected their children's education.

Most migrants would return to their villages once their work contracts expired.

It is not unusual to find children of these rural migrants loitering around squatter areas or at construction site even during school hours.

Most rural migrants were, in fact, unaware of the difficulties they would face trying to adjust to a new environment.

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