

SARAWAK PEPPER:

COMING HOME

by ANNA SULAN MASING

In London cold puffs of winter wind blow under the door of the café where I'm writing up my notes from my recent trip back to Sarawak. Intending to post a #TBT on Instagram, I flick through phone photos from a year ago, in France. Right now, three spaces simultaneously exist around me: my adopted home here, my home-of-holidays, Europe, and my home in Sarawak.

I am Iban, a tribe from Sarawak on the island of Borneo. I grew up in Sarawak and New Zealand, but I am now living in London on romantic pretences that only a post-colonial child can grasp; because the stories of England permeate my narrative of the world. The bustle of the metropolis, however, and the easy access to Europe are all far more complex than I imagined. Yet, London feels all mine because I've chosen it to be my home, and the photos remind me how spaces collide in unexpected places.

In a small French village, 'Sarawak pepper' had been written in chalk on a restaurant menu-board. I stared in disbelief: Sarawak, a strip of jungle running up the north-side of Borneo, a place so far away that at first I hardly recognised the word.

One of my earliest memories of Sarawak is of the family farm at Nganga Majau (Mouth of the Majau River)—outside the town of Kapit near the border with Kalimantan—where the slick, yellow-brown clay is wet from the many feet clambering up from the riverbank; where the jungle is thick and the morning mist, rising from the river, makes you believe in myths and legends.

I am wearing a red t-shirt, running up the slopes up to the house through the spiralling towers of the pepper vines, their leaves so vivid and sharply light-green they look neon against the thick rainforest behind, which is only just held at bay by wire fencing. From the house perched up on the crest of a hill, you could watch the boats turn off the Balleh River (the main 'highway') and into the Majau River's clear gentle waters.



Breathless I am in the house standing on the tattered, pink floral lino, feet stained with clay. My grandmother is by the fireplace, my aunty pounds tapioca leaves. That sweet, fresh green scent is still in my nose even now.

This, Kapit and Nganga Majau, is home because most of my family still live here. Home because when I disembark at the Kapit wharf I take a deep breath and feel I'm six again. Hotter than the city, the heat sits tacky on your arms. The coffee is sweeter. The noodles are hand-pulled on a large round table in the café. As the sun begins to set I crave soy, chilli, cracked pepper and fresh lime with fatty pieces of BBQ'd wild boar dipped into it. And cold Tiger beer.

People travel to the daily market in long-boats, sometimes from hours away. There are stalls of only a square foot, with plastic-coloured bowls holding different types of chillies. Tables bend under jackfruit and other jungle harvests and sweet, chewy pastries cooked on the spot

to nibble while you browse. Fish—some still alive—are in buckets filled with water. It is organised chaos. People stare at me, asking if I'm my father's daughter. I nod, explaining in halting Iban that I don't speak the language anymore. But they ignore the fact and say how they remember me as a child, running around the place. I had perfect Iban then.

Kapit, last town before the interior. Like the last frontier. In my mind it holds back the jungle where civilisation has staked no claim—a vision built on stories of adventure and conquest. But despite being so far in the interior, Kapit has always been a trading post. Chinese merchants have settled in the region since the early 19th century when they brought ceramics, beads, and a work force.

Kapit's reputation suits the wilderness. The Iban, 'head-hunters of Borneo', were originally Sea Dayaks—called pirates by the Sultan of Brunei—and fought into submission by James Brooke, an Englishman with a big ship and big guns. Brooke forced the warring Iban up river into the interior to places like Kapit and into conflict with the Orang Ulu, an indigenous tribe.

War, farming, and migration influenced the way these communities lived—their regional rituals, ceremonies and stories. The Kapit Iban are distinct from the more peaceful Iban further down river. The last native peace treaty in Sarawak was signed in Kapit in 1924. Though the two events aren't directly related, the Sarawak Department of Agriculture was formed at this time when a British director of agriculture was appointed.

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Ibans usually live in a longhouse—a 'village' consisting of family rooms (bilek) and a communal veranda. Iban families farm independently but live together.

My family's story is different. We come from a longhouse about six hours on a long boat from Kapit—depending on the levels of the Majau River. But my grandfather separated from the longhouse with his young family and built the farm at Nganga Majau where he cultivated rubber trees, and reared cattle, goats, and chickens. He was a big thinker—business minded my dad tells me—and he thought that living in the longhouse would not be the right kind of environment or ambience for his business activities. It was unusual to move away from the 'village' but it paid off. My dad says I am like my grandfather; can't keep still, always looking for new things to do, build, change, create. Even my generation is still considered 'from' that longhouse. In fact, as I'm beginning to understand, it is the river that binds us together. We're all one: the Iban from Majau.

Over the years my family farmed many things. My dad—who studied in New Zealand and Australia and was the first Iban PhD graduate—returned in his late 20s for research, and tapped rubber with my New Zealand mother, who learnt Iban and how to cook over an open fire. Although the farmland might seem far from Kapit, it is also 'home'; the rivers connecting the places are part of home too; our journeys on the river, a rushing highway where we wave at the passing travellers.

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My most recent trip back to Sarawak was a quest to find out more about the cultivation of pepper. I had seen the word 'Sarawak' in France, on Michelin-starred menus in London and in European Christmas markets. How had this spice traveled so far from home?

In Kapit the air is still, and the heat is sticky—as always. I lie on my back with a book in one hand, bottle of water in the other. My stepmother tells me she has managed to organise a visit to a pepper farm. With my camera slung around my shoulders and notebook in hand, I slip into my flip-flops and we all jump into the four-wheel drive. Forty minutes later, at the end of a narrow road, we walk.

Flip-flops are the wrong choice of footwear! My stepmother and aunts are fine, but I skid and slide along the path still drenched after the morning rain, the wet clay squelching between my toes. The others have baskets on their backs. I don't know what they're for; there's obviously some bounty here to be brought back home. We arrive at a stream and continue to walk along its bank.

The farm is owned by Lungang and his wife, both are in their early 50s and, for five years now, its sole workers. Of the seven acres of farmland the flowering pepper vines entwined round posts take up only one. They have 70 vines, but will soon be planting a further 100.

One section of the farm has been newly burnt, ready to plant wet rice—which will be for family consumption, not to sell. They used

to grow hill-paddy rice, too, but they re-planted it with pepper as it has a higher, more valuable yield. The vines are mixed together—the old amongst the new—because, I am told, they grow better that way (no specific reason is given, just that they've learnt from experience). Pepper vines are highly sensitive plants, needing daily care. But they're less physically demanding than rice or palm (oil) trees, so it suits older farmers and women well.

The pepper berries are picked when they turn yellow. They are then air-dried in the farm under the sun for five days until they turn a deep brown, almost black. Each vine produces about 80kgs of peppercorns, valued at approximately \$2,200 MYR (£400) per vine, per crop—depending on demand in the marketplace. Pepper agents, predominantly Kapit-based Chinese, buy the harvested crop from the farmers. The vines are fed with fertiliser bought from the regional Agricultural Department, and so the government has some level of control over the produce.

The pepper cycle is about ten months from planting and it is possible to harvest all year around. Generally, this coincides with the annual May/June harvest in Sarawak, the time the indigenous tribes celebrate Gawai, a festival with stories, songs, dancing, eating and drinking tuak, the local rice wine. Traditionally the song-story of Gawai is declaimed by a trained bard, lasting three days and three nights. *Gawai* is fun, delicious, raucous—and a marathon!

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On the Lungangs' farm, I wander off and look at the plants, snap photos, feel the slightly waxy leaves between my fingertips. The rows of pepper vines are neatly organised, their varying sizes the only anomaly. Again I am struck by the colour of the leaves—the neon colour of my childhood memories. The jungle behind is a threatening contrast even in the afternoon sun.

My stepmother is sitting beside the stream. "The others have gone looking for snails; because it rained earlier, there should be lots," she tells me. "I couldn't see any, so I stayed here." Now the baskets make sense. I walk off to see if I can find the others. I sit on a rock, letting the river water run over my feet. Then I panic about leeches, jump up and head back.

I hate snails and the noise they make when eating them—crunch, suck, crunch, suck... I'm in the minority, though. At home it's the celebration of this particular harvest. The snails' glossy, black, triangular shells click against each other in the pot. They are cooked in water, very simply, with cracked Sarawak pepper and jungle garlic, then devoured by everyone.

Lungang's Sarawak Pepper Farm, Kapit

Farm age: Five years **Farm size:** Seven acres, planting another 100. **Pepper plantation:** One acre; 70 vines, planting another 100. **Pepper organisation:** Vines of different ages grown together uniformly, in straight lines. **Other produce:** Wet rice, one newly burnt section ready to plant for family consumption. **Pepper Vine Life Cycle:** Approximately 10 months. *Six months:* Branches are cut off the vines and re-planted. *May/June:* Harvest the pepper when the berries have turned yellow. On the farm, air dry under the sun for five days until berries turn deep brown. *Note:* After the harvest the vines are fertilised. The fertiliser can only be bought from the Department of Agriculture, Sarawak. **Each vine produces:** 80kgs (approx) **Income:** Around \$2,200 MYR (£400) per vine, per harvest. *Note:* These figures can vary, depending on demand from the marketplace. **Source chain:** Farm—Kapit—Kuching—Singapore—Global. The pepper is sold to pepper agents, predominantly local Chinese based in Kapit, and shipped up river to the Malaysian Pepper Board in Kuching. The Sarawak spice is then sent onto Singapore and exported to the best dining tables around the world.