

Year of the Bull Rushes in for Chinese Indonesians

January 24th, 2009 by Ilana Tulloch and Laura Beavis

Hot on the heels of the regular new-year, Chinese Indonesians have begun their own New Year celebrations, which according to the western lunar calendar falls on the 26th of January this year.

During the Soeharto regime Chinese-Indonesians weren't allowed to publically celebrate their New Year.

More than a decade on from Soeharto's demise, Ilana Tulloch and Laura Beavis look at how the celebrations have spilled into Indonesia's streets and asks whether the long era of discrimination against ethnic Chinese-Indonesian's has passed.

Jakarta's Chinatown, Pasar Glodok, is always crazy; but at this time of year there is even more excitement.

Hundreds of people have gathered to pray at Han Tien temple. Nervous sparrows sit in crowded cages, awaiting their release.

Chinese New Year, or Imlek, as it is called here, was declared a national holiday in 2003.

Before that, over three decades of the Soeharto regime, any celebration of Chinese culture was forbidden.

Ethnic Chinese-Indonesians suffered constant discrimination. They were required to carry special identification, abide by curfews and refrain from using or learning Mandarin.

University student, Javelin Wendiady, can still remember the subdued nature of past Imlek celebrations. She welcomes today's party atmosphere.

"I think because the ambience, the ambience of the Chinese New Year, you have the ornaments, you have the Barongsai, and it is allowed, it is not prohibited like in the Soeharto era. Like we know that like celebrating but not really celebrate. We cannot be as clear that we are having the Chinese New Year. It's very close and not very much ambience. So you don't have the Barongsai, and you don't have, usually in Chinese New Year we have red, all the places are red and have the ornaments, but we don't have that in the Soeharto era, so we don't get the ambience, we don't get the ambience of the Chinese New Year."

Angie Moniaga, a fellow university student, experienced racism, even though her parents attempted to shield her from it.

"They didn't tell me but I know it by myself, because when we walk on the street, someone can call at me like 'Chinese! Chinese!' like that. Yeah, it was kind of depressed, that someone talk to you like that. It's better now, still a little discrimination but not as bad as in Soeharto era."

Benny Setiono is the head of the Chinese-Indonesian Association in Jakarta. He says there is less discrimination now, but many Chinese-Indonesians still pay bribes when dealing with bureaucrats.

“If there still is, it’s not in the shape of discrimination but more when Chinese-Indonesians process identity cards, visas, passports and citizenship. It’s not discrimination though, it’s corruption.”

When Indonesia’s economy crashed in 1997 and 1998 many took their anger out on Chinese-Indonesians.

Violent mobs roamed Jakarta, attacking and killing Chinese-Indonesian’s and destroying homes and businesses. Over 1200 people died in the riots.

As the current global economic crisis deepens, the question of whether this episode could be repeated has arisen.

Wahyu Effendy, head of the Indonesian Anti-Discrimination Movement, says some people are apprehensive.

“I worry about that maybe. Maybe some, not me, but other people worry that what happened in 1998 might still happen again. It’s about the financial, the economic condition of the people – the poor, maybe much more poor people. The political situation will be provoked, maybe due to the not good situation of the economy.”

But others are confident things have changed. Eni Mulia is a journalist in Jakarta.

“Now I think because of the free information and the free media, people can see Chinese people are not the only ones who have to be blamed in the financial crisis. They know how there are so many corruptors. I think this information is spreading wider and wider into the public. So me myself, I’m not so worried about the Chinese being blamed for the financial crisis.”

Today the sounds of the Barongsai, the traditional lion dance, fill almost every mall in Jakarta. Most Indonesians revel in the bright colours and happy sounds of Imlek.

For Eni, the New Year festivities are for all Indonesians.

“I think that it’s all the people, not only the Chinese, who can celebrate this cultural event. If you go to the public space like mall or park then there is a Lion Dance to celebrate New Year. You can see that all the people gather there no matter that they are Chinese or they are Indigenous people or they are Muslim or Christian or Buddhist. They are all together and I think that they don’t think that this is something strange.”


But Benny Setiono advises Chinese-Indonesians to celebrate Imlek more quietly.

“Celebrate Imlek simply. Don’t do it with big parties. It’s about tradition, culture and religion. It’s better like that. Don’t spend too much money, don’t have big parties. If you can, use your money to help our brothers and sisters who are less fortunate than ourselves.”

As Indonesians brace for a period of economic hardship, Angie Moniaga thinks the coming Chinese zodiac year might hold the answer.

“This new year we are going to celebrate a bull year. The bull is like a hard working animal, so in this year many people think that people will have to hard work! (laughter)”

Indonesia's Illegal Bird Trade

February 16th, 2009 by Ilana Tulloch 

The Brahminy Kite, a small breed of eagle, is the symbol is of the Indonesian capital of Jakarta.

Ironically, in the city it represents, the Brahminy kite is practically extinct due to the thriving illegal trade of Indonesia's native birds.

While heavy fines are in place, and all species of raptor, or birds of prey, are protected, the illegal bird trade continues unabated.

Ilana Tulloch has this report.

On Kotok Island, part of The Thousand Islands belt, the Jakarta Animal Aid Network runs a rehabilitation center.

Here, illegally traded Brahminy kites and white-bellied sea-eagles are being treated and trained for their re-release into the wild.

This Brahminy kite, a recent arrival, was rescued from a house on The Thousand Islands where it was being kept in a small wooden box in a backyard.

It is one of 29 eagles currently being cared for at the centre.

Femke Haas, founder of the Jakarta Animal Aid Network, says a recent cigarette advertisement sparked local demand for the Brahminy Kite.

“There is a big commercial, and they are using this bird as their icon, and now many birds are being sought by private pet owners because they think it's cool to have these birds, since it's an icon for this big cigarette company. And actually you see this all over Jakarta and all over Indonesia, big pictures of this bird.”

Sugeng Purnomo, a Park Ranger on Pramuka Island, says keeping the demand for wild birds as pets is creating big problems, especially for eagles which have been re-released from the rehabilitation program.

“The majority of the eagles which have been released are trapped again by the community. This is one of our biggest problems. We work together with JAAN to increase awareness or information to the community that protected eagles aren't allowed to be kept at home.”

This includes going to schools to teach children about wildlife conservation.

Femke says the education programs are working. But she says the government could do more to prevent illegal trade in birds.

When Femke and her team started campaigning in 2004, in partnership with the national Forestry Department, the trade in illegal birds decreased significantly. And demand for the services of the rehabilitation center increased.

“We saw the trade in wildlife going down, for several years, like 2003, 2004, confiscations were running routinely and traders were indeed arrested and processed, it was a good time. But now the trade went up again, and it’s really sad.”

But Ben Saroy, head of the government’s forestry department in Jakarta, says protected species of birds are rarely found in Jakarta’s bird markets these days.

“Because the Forestry Department has been so active with our operations, we don’t find them anymore. A few years ago, you could still see them, but now it’s very hard to see protected species there. You can check”

The Pramuka bird market is considered to be the main gateway for Indonesia’s illegal bird trade.

Seventeen-year-old Khaleb goes undercover most afternoons at the Jatinegara and Pramuka markets. He is employed by the Jakarta Animal Aid Network to monitor the types of birds for sale.

I met him at Pramuka Market to hear the day’s tally.

“Today I saw one crested serpent eagle in Jatinegara. It’s not Indonesian, but from another country. When I’m monitoring I see an eagle almost every day in the markets. The most I have seen is up to five eagles, or more in one visit.”

ProFauna is another organization monitoring Indonesia’s illegal bird trade.

Tri Prayudhi is the group’s campaign officer. He thinks the government needs to do more to protect birds.

“I think their work at the moment is still really too little, because there are still birds being traded illegally in bird markets.”

The government has recently implemented a group called SPORC, the Forestry Police Quick Response Unit, whose role is to react quickly to reports of illegally traded birds.

The team’s leader Riadh says there are many obstacles to their work.

“The data and supervision/care concerning markets signals that there is trade of protected wildlife. The program from the office is dependent on funding too. Basically there is no time limit to smuggling. The traders do it between the times the officers are not controlling the markets. When we go to the bird market the traders hide all the proof and birds and the officers find nothing. We already know the traders but because we have the positive law we need the proof to catch the traders based on the articles that we accused to them. They need to be caught red-handed.”

But Femke says traders are being caught red-handed and when JAAN lodges a report nothing happens. She says the forestry department must be spending its limited budget on other problems.

“The forestry department placed priorities on something else. I mean, Indonesia also has big problems with habitat loss, illegal logging, and then there are the palm oil plantations that are popping up like mushrooms everywhere and destroying a lot of forest. And unfortunately

even there, not enough is being done to stop it by the authorities. So the protection of wildlife, it's of less priority for them."

Some people who visit the markets purchase illegal birds and then hand them over to non-government organizations like JAAN. But Femke warns that they may be endangering other birds by saving just one. Giving money to the traders only encourages demand she says.

"They see these birds in small cages and then they think it's a good thing to buy them, because then at least this bird is rescued but this is not rescuing this bird at all, because you are just putting money into the illegal trade. So it's better to just report to the authorities or to organizations like us, because then we will try to do what we can."