

Christian Influence in the Bau-Jagoi Bidayuh Traditional Funeral Customs

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Abstract

The arrival of Christianity in the 19th century has greatly affected the traditional beliefs and customs of the Bidayuh in Sarawak, Malaysia. One of the rituals affected is that relating to funeral customs. This paper focuses on the influence of Christianity and modern lifestyle on the traditional Bidayuh funeral rites in this 21st century. The data were gathered from two funerals of traditional Bidayuh in Kampong Duyoh and Suba Baru of the Jagoi area; in Bau district. Traditional Bidayuh funeral customs are heavily influenced by their animistic beliefs and pagan/traditional rituals. Typical to any of the traditional funeral amongst the indigenous tribes of Borneo, a Bidayuh funeral is advised by a traditional priest. It is also a common trait to see it as a communal event where the whole village is involved during the wake and the funeral procession. With the conversion of most Bidayuh into Christianity, the traditional Bidayuh funeral and rites have been a rarity and exclusive only to those pagan Bidayuh. Younger generations are not exposed to the rites and tradition as funerals are in accordance to the Christian rituals. Even with the last remaining pagan Bidayuh, Christian influence could be seen in the traditional Bidayuh funeral rites and rituals.

Keywords: funeral, customs, rituals, Bidayuh, Christianity, traditional

1. Introduction

Sarawak, the largest out of the 13 states in Malaysia consists of various ethnic groups, with a mixture of cultural heritage and customs. These ethnic groups include the Iban, Sarawak Malay, Bidayuh, Melanau, Kelabit, Kayan, Kedayan, Kejaman, Kajang and more than 26 other indigenous communities.

Out of these indigenous communities, the Bidayuh is the third largest ethnic group after the Iban and Sarawak Malay. They make up 8% (198,473) of the 2.4 million total population of Sarawak (The Official Portal of Sarawak Government, 2012) and is one of the most diversified group besides the Melanau. This is because there have been numerous debates on the number of Bidayuh groups in Sarawak. For one, Chang (2002, 2004) has defined them into four main Bidayuh namely, the Bau Jagoi in Bau District, the Bukar-Sadong in Serian, the Biatah in Padawan and the Salako-Lara in Lundu District, while Bonggarra, Kayad and Campbell (2017) stated that there are actually six Bidayuh groups based on their language division specifically the (1) Biatah group, (2) Bau-Jagoi, (3) Bukar-Sadong, (4) Tringgus/Sembaan, (5) Salako and (6) Rara.

Table 1. Bidayuh groups and villages

District	Bidayuh groups	Dialects
Kuching (Penrissen and Padawan)	Biatah	Biatah, Bibenuk, Bipuruh, Bistaang, Bisapug, Pinyawa', Biya etc...
Bau	Bau-Jagoi	Jagoi, Singai, Serembu, Bratak, Gumbang
Serian	Bukar-Sadong	Bukar, Sadung, Tebakang, Sadung Bunan, Sangking, Mentu Tapuh
Bau, Penrissen, Padawan	Tringgus/Sembaan	Sembaan, Tringgus Raya, Tringgus Bireng
Lundu	Salako	Salako
Lundu	Rara	Lara, Rara-Bakati'

Source: Bonggarra, Kayad, & Campbell, 2017.

These groups differ not only in terms of their language but in some aspects of their cultural practices as well.

Most of the traditional customs are now at lost because the majority of Bidayuh are now Christians. Although there are some who are still practicing the traditional customs, their number is relatively small and most of them are the elderly folks.

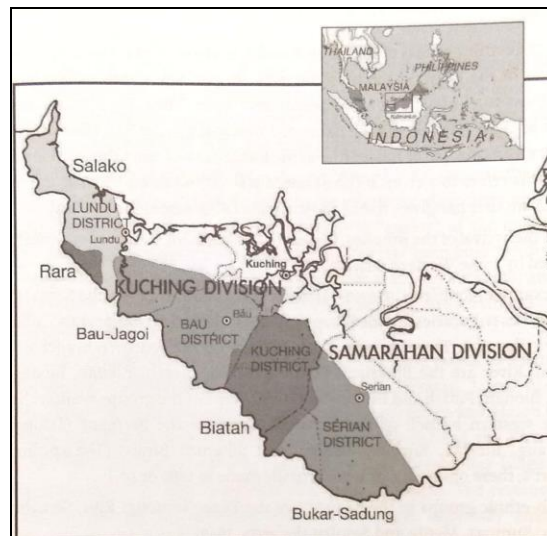


Figure 1. Locations of Bidayuh villages in the four districts in Sarawak

Source: Rensch, Rensch, Noeb, & Ridu, 2012.

1.1 The Bidayuh Community

The Bidayuh is believed to be one of the earliest inhabitants of the Borneo Island (Minos, 2000; Keppel, 1847; Hampson, 2016; Geddes, 1957). They are said to have originated from either the mid-Pacific Islands of Polynesia (Keppel, 1847; Low, 1848) or part of the Austronesian speaking group from the Southern province of China (Bellwood, 2007). Both theories were supported to some extent by evidence of similarities in terms of linguistics (root words), archaeology, customs and cultural practices. Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig (2020) in the *Ethnologue* report reported that the Bidayuh language belonged to the Austronesian-Malayo-Polynesia branch (from Southeast Asia and Oceania regions) which share similarities with the indigenous groups in Indonesia, the Philippines and Madagascar.

The early settlements of the Bidayuh are believed to be in the coastal areas of Western Kalimantan, Indonesia (Chang, 2002). Chang (2002, 2004) stated that in the 1380s the Bidayuh may have first settled in Sarawak, namely Sungkung Mountain, Bugau and Gajing Mountain. Due to several factors including land for farm, political differences, diseases and village expansion, the Bidayuh moved to other areas and built many villagers, namely within the Sarawak borders. Some of these places include Rabak Mikabuh in Penrissen, Singai Mountain and Bratak Mountain in Bau, Bukar-Sadong area in Serian and Lundu district.

The Bidayuh is often referred to as 'Land Dayaks' because their settlements are mostly found within the vicinity of the mountains in the Kuching and Serian divisions in Sarawak. The word 'Bidayuh' itself is a native word which means 'Bi-' or 'people of' and 'Dayuh' which means 'land'. Therefore 'Bidayuh' refers to 'people of the land' (Chang, 2002).

1.2 The Bau-Jagoi Bidayuh Group

The Bau-Jagoi group is one of the six Bidayuh groups in Sarawak, Malaysia. They are believed to have been part of the Bratak group before establishing their own Jagoi group. According to Chang (2002, 2004), there are two versions of the history of the Bau-Jagoi group. For the first version, it is said that under the leadership of a man named Bari, the group left Rabak Mikabuh in Penrissen and migrated to Paya Pais and finally settled on Bung Jagoi (top of Mount Jagoi). Whereas the other version stated that under the leadership of Panglima Makabang, some of the people from Bung Bratak followed him to the foothill of Bung Jagoi (Mount Jagoi) and there they established a new village (Chang, 2004). They later went up the mount and built a new village there better known now as Kampung Jagoi/ Jagoi *Dorod* (Chang, 2004). Today, there are ten villages within the Jagoi area, built around the Jagoi Mountain and their population is about 7000 (Bau District Office, 2014).

2. The Traditional Religion of the Bidayuh Bau Group

Among the traditional or pagan Bidayuh, an ethnic group in Sarawak, Malaysia, death meant going up into the sky, *Rongit* to be reunited with the spirits of the ancestors, *Iyeng Sumuk Babai*. The traditional Bidayuh believed that when one dies, their spirit would go up into *Sibayan*, the Bidayuh version of afterlife and it is believed that everything would be the same as it was on Earth except that there would be no diseases, war and hardship.

The traditional Bidayuh believed in the existences of spirits around them, better known as *Iyeng* or *simonggi*. One of such spirit is the spirits of the ancestors, *Iyeng Sumuk Babai*, who they believed watch over them; thus, it was important that good relationship and communication was kept ensuring that the ancestors always bless them and protect them from danger. Their daily lives intertwine with the spirit world which is believed could either be affecting them positively or negatively. Based on the notion, they believe that these spirits have a significant role in protecting their health, livestock and farm as well as condemning them with sickness and misfortune if these spirits are not pleased with them. However, when it comes to misfortune it may be due to the work of evil spirits or simply because the good spirits are not pleased with the people. It is believed that the spirit can be easily provoked if certain taboos have been broken; mostly by not observing the dos and don'ts of *adat*. Besides that, they believe that the spirits of the dead may wander the Earth, thus scaring the soul out of the living (Nuek, 2002).

In line with their beliefs, the Bidayuh hold onto the ancient religion or *adat oma*, which is not only closely associated to nature, but it is also in which their belief in the spirits is based on. Therefore, spirits and nature, especially the jungle are a significant element for the Bidayuh. The Bidayuh consider the importance to observe the *adat oma* or the old traditions to appease the good spirits and to fend off the evil spirits from disturbing living beings (Nuek, 2002; Rubenstein, 1973). The *adat* are rules that are established by the Bidayuh priest and priestess to prohibit acts which may provoke the spirits. As there are many *adat* to be observed and followed, it has become a responsibility for the priest, or *Kitua Gawai/Kitua Adat*, priestess or *Dayung Borih* and head of village to ensure the villagers obey and respect the *adat* as well as communicate with the spirits (Campbell & Mikeng, 2019).

The influence of nature and spirits are very evident in the Bidayuh daily rituals as well as special rituals. For instance, their rice planting cycle is very much influenced by the weather as well as the time and season of the year (Campbell, Ghazali & Suhari, 2017). This also depended on the spirits' permission and blessings. For everything that they do, especially where rice planting is concerned, a *gawai* or prayers and offerings need to be conducted in order to obtain permission and blessing from the spirit of the rice, *Iyeng Podi* and spirits of the ancestors, *Iyeng Sumuk Babai*.

In the Bidayuh belief system, *Topa*, a supreme higher being who controls everything is said to be at the very top of the system (Nuek, 2002). Most of their rituals, prayers and offerings were intended for *Topa* and the different spirits, but mostly *Iyeng Podi* and *Iyeng Sumuk Babai*. This is evident in their chants and blessing prayers in which the spirits of the ancestors are often mentioned:

Nah,

Ku mogan sumuk Babai ku,

De sun k una kira, na piker,ku,

De sun rubang, ruruo, sun sibayan,

Ku mogan Babai ku Kopier,

Dah tonga, bidotin de jowin ku,

Ku rie sina duoh eh.

Here,

I call upon the spirit of my ancestors

Who are in heaven,

I call upon the spirit of the spirit of Babai Kopier,

To appear before me

I want to speak and make a request from him

(Nuek, 2002, p. 78)

This particular prayer is said during a *bitapa* session in which a Bidayuh attempts to acquire supernatural power by meditating usually on the mountain tops deep in the jungle (Nuek, 2002). This prayer mentions the spirits of the ancestors and asked them to appear to the person saying the prayer while doing the *bitapa* ritual. This is only one example of how the spirits of the ancestors play a role in the lives of the Bidayuh.

The Bidayuh *adat oma* is said to have some similarities with the Hindu beliefs (Chang, 2002; 2004). For instance, Low (1848) claimed that the Bidayuh, similar to the Hindu, believed in a number of spirits of different divine orders. Chang (2002) stated that one of the deities' name, *Jewata* is similar to a Hindu god (p.1).

Archeological findings found along the Sarawak River basin and in some Bidayuh villages seemed to support this claim as well. For instance, findings of Buddha, Hindu figures and figures of cow made from stone similar to those of Hindu origin were found along the Sarawak River basin. These are believed to be connected to the beliefs of the ancient Bidayuh (Chang, 2002; 2004). Another evidence which was found in the 1840s in Sempro near Kampung Benuk/Segu, Penrissen was that of a stone bull which according to Chang (2002) represented the guardian of the temple of Siva.

Besides that, there were also similarities in terms of the customs and practices of the Bidayuh with Hinduism such as the cremation of the dead, forbidding beef consumption among the Bidayuh priestess or *Dayung Borih* (Nuek, 2002) and beliefs in the stars and heaven in connection with their daily activities and references to Hindu-like words in some of the religion rites (Minos, 2000).

This could be due to the influence of Hindu religion which spread throughout Borneo in the 14th century during the reign of the Majapahit Empire. Borneo, which was ruled by the Brunei kingdom was also controlled by first the Sriwijaya of Sumatra and later by the Majapahit of Java due to trading (Chang, 2002; Rousseau, 1989).

In 1885, the first Catholic Missionary came to Mount Singai to carry out their missionary works and provided education for the people (Nuek, 2002). From there, they spread on to other areas of Bau, including those of the Jagoi area. With the arrival of the Catholic Missionaries, more Bidayuh have converted into Catholics and in a way adapted to the new Christian way of living. This in turn, affected some of their old beliefs, customs and religion.

2.1 The Traditional Bidayuh Funeral Rites (Based on Nuek, 2002)

The traditional Bidayuh in the Bau area, mostly cremated their dead (Nuek, 2002). This was especially true in the olden days before the arrival of the Christian Missionaries around the years 1885. The main person in charge of handling the cremation of the dead is known as *pininuh*, a person highly respected and was believed to have high moral character (Nuek, 2002). The *pininuh* was a person who was either appointed or volunteered to handle the works and was a person who could perform the duty without being scared.

According to Nuek (2002), there are four different types of funerals, *Kobos Bodung*, for premature babies; *Kobos biasa*, for normal individuals, *Kobos Nyonung*, for influential and high rank individuals, *Kobos Ngiraras*, for a king or leader and *Kobos Biduyur*, a funeral held during an auspicious period of time.

As soon as an individual dies, the head of the village or someone appointed, would beat a gong to indicate the death of the person to the villagers. The body of the deceased would then be laid on a white piece of cloth, on the floor, covered by a piece of white cloth, somewhat like a mosquito net, next to a wall. The villagers would come to the house of the deceased and would stay up late to ensure that the house was never quiet. It was the believed of the traditional Bidayuh that if the house was too quiet, the evil spirit, *Tori Gasi* would come and disturb the deceased. A group of women, who specialized in mourning and crying, would perform the *Muas nosar* which was wailing out loud of words and praises for the deceased.

The funeral usually took place the next day either late in the morning or early afternoon. The body of the deceased would be wrapped with a mat or *kasah* and tied with either a rope or rattan string. The traditional Bidayuh believed that in the spiritual world, it is the opposite of what humans have in this world. Therefore, the deceased would be clothed in ripped clothes because in the spiritual world, ripped would be seen as new and fine (Nuek, 2002).

Before carrying the deceased to the cremation site, the last *Muas* or wailing would be performed, and some bamboo water containers and ceramic bowls would be smashed. Then they would bring the body to the cremation site. In the olden days, it was mostly on the mountains. A number of people would be carrying bundles of firewood for the cremation process. Upon reached the cremation site, those carrying the firewood must go back to the village immediately without looking back (Nuek, 2002). The family members must leave a few things at the cremation area, some of which must be broken. According to Nuek (2002), this is known as *baya kobos*, gifts for the deceased.

The *pininuh* would be left behind to perform the cremation ritual alone. Those who followed in sending off the deceased need to pick up thorny leaves as a means of protection against evil spirits. The leaves would then be pushed into the roof of the deceased's family unit and left there for three days, until they are disposed of by the family.

At the family unit, the *pininuh* would then take the piece of cloth which the deceased was laid on and crumpled it up and then touch everyone's forehead as a symbol of asking the deceased and other spirits to leave the family. Then, as a sign of blessing, the *pininuh* would swing a live chicken while chanting chants to bless the soul of the deceased.

The second night after the funeral, usually around midnight, there would be another ritual known as *notok uwi* which means the cutting of the rattan. This was performed by a *Sumuk Ngirarang*, an elderly woman who was an expert in the rituals of casting out evil spirits. During this ritual, a bamboo is put through the floor of the house corridor. It is then cut into half where the lower part would fall onto the ground below, indicating that all communication with the deceased was cut off (Nuek, 2002).

Most of the other types of funerals would be about the same except for *Kobos Bodung* and *Kobos Biduyur* where there would be no cremation. For *Kobos Bodung* which is for premature babies, the deceased would be placed in a basket known as *juwah tayuo* and hung on a tree in the cremation site left to decompose. For both *Kobos Nyonung* and *Kobos Ngiraras*, which are both for people with high ranks and influence, guns and cannons would be shot (Nuek, 2002).

3. The Influence of Christianity

This study analyses the influence of Christianity towards the traditional Bidayuh funeral rites and customs. Through ethnographic research of Bidayuh traditional funeral rites, we observed the changes and influence of new religions, especially Christianity in these traditional customs. Our analysis drew upon the Bidayuh Bau-Jagoi traditional funeral rites which was observed through participant observation as well as interviews with the elders and those knowledgeable in the village. The scope of study was done in Kampung Duyoh and Suba Baru, Bau located in the Bau District of the Kuching Division, Sarawak. For the purpose of this study, two elderly female and one male were interviewed. The male respondent is a shaman or pagan priest who performed the rituals during the funeral. As a pagan priest, he was given the responsibility to advise, conduct and lead the rites throughout the wake period, funeral and confinement period after the funeral. The priest or *Pininuh* is the only one left in Bau who specifically handles pagan funeral. As for the two females, they are the daughters of the deceased; both are in their 50s while one is a practicing Catholic and the other sister is a pagan. Both respondents provided perspectives and insights from both the Christian and Pagan Bidayuh.

The research took part in and recorded the traditional funeral rites which took place in 2018, April the 14th. The funeral took place with the passing of an old man from Kampung Duyoh Jagoi; he was one of the few old believers left in the village. The wake took place in his residence with the permission of his family members. The rite was recorded using a digital camera.

The influence of Christianity could definitely be seen in the traditional Bidayuh funeral rites which we observed. During the wake, while waiting for outstation family members and closed relatives; it is a norm to see well-wishers to offer solemn prayer and monetary contribution to the deceased. This is similar to the norm practiced by the Christians during the wake in which people of various age groups come and pay their last respects to the deceased. This is a stark contrast to the tradition in the olden days where it was a taboo to bring small children or have pregnant women when there was death in the village. It was believed that evil spirits are lingering around when there was death and could possess young children and pregnant women. Before Christianity, there was stigma towards death as the traditional Bidayuh believed in evil spirits lurking around the deceased, therefore it was forbidden for young children and pregnant women to enter the house or within the house compound of the deceased.

Another similarity to a Christian funeral rite is that the presence of family members and friends are welcomed to pay their last respects to the deceased. Their presence signifies not only respect but also support to the affected next of kin. This is one obvious attitude change being adapted by the Pagan Bidayuh as they might have experienced on how the Christian Bidayuh have managed the funeral differently. The wake and funeral are no longer a period of taboo, but it is seen as a social gathering for all the family members young and old, both male and female; getting involved for the proper send off. In the olden days, the deceased was always covered by a white cloth, somewhat like a mosquito net, hung from the ceiling.

Another aspect can be seen during the wake is the offering to the deceased. Wreath and flowers are seen pouring

in from relatives; a practice adopted from the Bidayuh Christian. In the olden days, there was no offering given from the community as only the shaman or the priest would prepare the offering for the deceased for the journey into underworld.

Besides that, a very obvious rite is, instead of the traditional cremation, the deceased was buried in the traditional Bidayuh cemetery also known as *pinungan*. For a while, cremation was still practiced in certain parts of the Bau area. In the research area, Kampung Duyoh, cremation of the dead was still practiced up to the 1930s whereby the cremation process was held on top of Mount Jagoi where the original Jagoi village was established.

However, since many of the villagers later went down Mount Jagoi and started living on the foot of the mountain, they found it tedious to bring the deceased body up the mountain. Therefore, in certain parts of Bau, for instance in Kampung Duyoh, the body of the deceased which was wrapped in a mat or *kasah* would be left at an area known as *pinungan* where the body would decompose and months later, when the decomposing process has completed, the bones would be collected. The bones would then be buried in a hole and left with no marks.

The traditional Bidayuh believed that graveyards are unholy places. In fact, it is considered as 'unclean'. That was why, only there were many restrictions and taboos which one needed to observe whenever one went to a graveyard. Since there were no marks at all to where the bones were buried, most of the places in which these bones were placed became jungles and some even believed it to be haunted. Now, the *pinungan*, which is situated at the border between Duyoh and Serikin, is an unmarked grave and has been converted into a Christian graveyard.

This practice of leaving the body to decompose may have also been a practice in other villages, for instance the Suba area. Before the Japanese occupation, the practice for funeral was that the body was left to decompose, but in the 1960s there was a pandemic which spread due to this practice of the leaving the decomposed body exposed. Therefore, the villagers then decided to burn the body instead after that. Because of that pandemic, they moved in further which is the current village, Suba Bau. In the 1960s, when the Catholic Missionaries arrived in in Suba Bau and Suba Buan, most of the villagers converted to Catholicism. Until the 1990s, the majority of the villagers, not only in Suba Buan, Suba Bau and Suba Baru but also most of the Jagoi area have converted into Catholicism.

4. Conclusion

Since the arrival of the Catholic Missionaries, the majority of Bidayuh have converted into Catholics, leaving a small minority still practicing their traditional customs, *adat oma* which was passed down from their ancestors. The traditional funeral rites in the village still retain some of the traditional aspects of the rites for instance the ritual of *muas* or wailing of words of praises for the deceased by a group of women is still being practiced especially while the deceased was still at home and before bringing to the burial ground. Besides that, the practice of putting a thorny leaf behind the ear to ensure that evil spirits do not follow those who go to the burial site and then later, upon arrival from the burial site, the leaves will be inserted between the roof of the deceased house is also another ritual which is still being practiced. Another practiced which is still followed is that only men can go to the burial site. This shows that to some extent, there is still the belief in evil spirits following those who follows the funeral procession.

However, our observations and interviews also revealed that Christianity has in some ways influence the traditional funeral rites. The most obvious being the burial of the deceased rather than cremation. Our interview revealed that not only is Christianity a factor which influences the change in this practice but other factors as well especially the pandemic which happened in the village. Visitation to the deceased house and family is more acceptable nowadays, more as a sign of paying their last respect to the deceased and comforting the family members.

The influence of Christianity can be seen not only in the lives of the Christians themselves but to some extent it has been adapted into the traditional rituals and rites of the traditional Bidayuh. Based on our observation of the funeral rites in Kampung Duyoh, Bau, one could see that there are some aspects of Christianity which has been adapted into the rites. One of the reasons maybe that since the majority of the villagers are Christians, it was difficult to find those who could help carry out the traditional rituals and customs, therefore adaptations need to be put in these rites.

The number of those who still practice the traditional religion is fast decreasing. While there are a number of literatures on Bidayuh rites and rituals are available, most focuses on the Singai Bidayuh of Bau. Although they belong to the same area, most of their rituals are different from those in the Jagoi area. Although to some, these rites are no longer relevant, these activities mark the passage of time and seasons as well as important events in a

community. In fact, they form the shared structure, identity and worldview of the community.

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