

# The kaul festival essay



This article, as far as possible, aims to explain the ethnicity of the Sarawakian Melanau, particularly, the ones living in Mukah, Sarawak. The process towards understanding a particular society has to interpret customs, behaviour, tradition as well as the cultural heritage of the respective race or society according to its own weltanschauung. A successful researcher and interpreter thus, has to be neutral (without any biasness) in interpreting the society that he wishes to study. The Kaul Festival seems to trigger our interest to understand insignia as well as symbols that are highlighted both directly and indirectly, literally and laterally, in order to understand the way of thinking that bring diversify the ethnic identity of Melanau. The Melanau Ethnic Group The Population Statistics 2000 (Department of Statistics, July 2001) shows that the Melanau ethnic group totalled 112, 984 in Sarawak.

The Mukah area, consisting of Mukah, Matu, Daro and Dalat, states as many as 52, 439 Melanau ethnics. Now, the Melanau ethnic is divided into 3 major groups – the Muslims, Christians and Pagans (Likos). The focus of the study details on the Mukah's Melanau ethnic group based on the celebration of the Kaul Festival as how it was stated in the Sarawakian Tourism Calendar focusing the Kala Dana beach, Mukah. As polled in 1980, the focused area of the Melanau ethnic was still the districts Igan, Oya, Mukah, Dalat, Sibul, Sarekei, Mato/Daro and Bintulu. Ever since the beginning of the Melanau population in the 16th century along the beach, the domination still goes on till now. The resident area which is surrounded by the sea and river that flow in the midst of Melanau society population, as well as the fresh air from the forest, has defined the economic and socio-cultural activities of the Melanau society. Their economic activities include the traditional fishing activity, as

well as the sago/ " rumbia" / " mulong" plant cutting. This is clearly proven when Sarawak became the world's most important export of Sago in the 19th century (Ooi Keat Gin, 1997).

From the aspects of physical and appearance, we shall look at the comments made by Western reknowns who had once lived in Borneo, In personal appearence, the men of Melanau have much resemblance to the other races inhabiting the island, from whom they cannot, by their features, be distinguished. The women, however, enjoy the reputation of being far more beautiful than those of any of the other tribes.....

... They were dressed in the manner of Malayan females and perhaps their long clothing may have better concealed their personal defects: their hair was kept in better order, and their faces were much fairer than is general amongst the other tribes. (Hugh Low dalam D.. J. M Tate 1988: 114)The woman consider better looking than most on the coast, having agreeable countenances, with the dark rolling, open eye of the Italian, and nearly as fair as most of the race; but I could naver admire the colour, as they exhibited an almost unwholesome sallowness, and a want of vivacity in their puddingly faces.

The men are cleanly, and generally well dressed, but not so nice looking as many other tribes (James Brooke, ibid: 114)In personal appearance the Milanows strongly resemble the other tribes inhabiting the Sarawak territory and can only be distinguished from them by the squareness of their features; the women, however, have unaccountably won a reputation for beauty.... but as a tribe they are far behind the Malays ibn figure and regularity of

features; they are very white (that is, an unhealthymilky white), but having to work all their lives treading or expressing the sago from the pith of the palm, their feet become large and their figures squat and stumpy ....

. The men are about the middle height; they are not tattooed, no do they use any ornaments or personal decoration (W. M Crocker, *ibid*: 114)Social Stratification of the Traditional MelanauThe social stratification is a process that differentiate individuals in the society that results in the hierarchy which features different levels of strata (Tang Chew Peh, 1985: 98). This phenomenon is the result of the social interaction that occurs. Referring to the traditional Melanau society in particular, the factor concerning titles which are held in years, family ties as well as the positioning of residential area established the strata within the society. A Melanau family is divided into five status in the society (Jeniri Amir & Awang Azman 2001: 20) namely :-1) Pangeran2) Sembilan Pikul3) Tujuh Pikul4) Tujuh Beritih5) Dipen/UlunThis society strata is obviously practiced back in the Melanau's long house society. The positions of the rooms in the house were determined by the status. The status of a family is inherited through the father.

Every child, boy or girl will inherit his or her status in the society. This hierarchy functions in the social relationship especially in engagement and wedding ceremonies, and funerals. The PangeransThey happen to be the conquerers from the Brunei sultanate. Since they hold the highest position in the society within the Melanau social stratification, they are the administrators and order givers in the society and they are respected by other races. The Pangerans are entitled to get the services from the Dipens or the slaves. The Pangeran ancestry chain is sustained through marriage

among those with the same status. The wedding dowry is 15 “ pikul” of yellow copper items and a sword (ibid: 22). Sembilan Pikul Their symbol of power and position are emphasised by the owning of cannons and their own flag (ibid).

They are among the aristocrats. They have a better economic status compared to the commoners. In a wedding ceremony that takes place among themselves, they have the privilege to ask for nine “ pikul” of yellow copper items and a sword as the engagement or wedding dowry. Tujuh Pikul They are the freed middle class group. They are free to do their economic activities in order to achieve a higher status of living. They are also free to be active in any economic activity, although they are bound to the rules that pertain to customs and leadership determined by those from the upper class. Tujuh Bertirih Similar to the people of Tujuh Pikul, this group of people is also free to choose their own economic activity, although they ask for help from the upper class for their social and economic activities (ibid). Dipens They are also known as “ kulad benukan” and are divided into Dipen Dagen Lebok, which means, living in their own houses.

Dipen are slaves providing services to their masters who belong to the upper class. They are also prisoners of war, poors and orphans with the status of slaves and have to spend their lives committed to their masters and they can be passed on from one family to another (ibid). Before slavery was abolished by Brooke’s Government in 1822, Dipens were also sacrificed for the main pillars when houses were built or when their masters had died and they wish to take care of their masters’ needs and wants in the world after death (ibid: 23) We have seen above that human sacrificies use to take at the

burials, peace making of different tribes, and the captive and slaves were killed for the sake of their heads. Human sacrifices were common among the Milanos previous to the cession of the country to Sir James Brooke. At Rejang village a young virgin was buried alive under the main post of house. (written by Ling Roth, 1968, *ibid*)

**The Belief Corpus**

The traditional Melanau society believes the existence of a power that determines the well being of every life in this world. The human life and other life forms are placed under observation, control and are monitored by the supernatural that exists in every corner of the earth. According to Morris (1991: 59-60), the Melanau society believes that this world is shaped as an egg, surrounded by water.

Close to it are the sun, moon and stars. In line with Taylor (1971), the idea of believing in the supernatural is the foundation of religion. The powerful and ever existing supernatural is believed as souls and spirits. According to animist Taylor, the belief corpus is based on two doctrines namely the doctrine of souls, the fundamentals of beliefs in souls and the doctrine of spirits, the beliefs in spirits. For the Melanau, the supernatural that clouds our lives have two contrasting elements; good and bad. There are good and bad supernatural beings. “Ipok”, “duhig”, “tow”, “jin” (djin) and “amow” are some of the supernatural beings that are connected to their lives. The “ipok”, the most powerful of all, are considered to be in control of all the world’s happenings.

They have their own hierarchy and each controls its own colony (Hang Tuah Merawin, 1997: 328). Some of them are :- “Ipok Langit” (Cloud God) – is considered the most powerful- “Ipok tanah” (Earth God )- “Ipok Iyang” (Water God)- “Ipok Daat” (Sea God)- “Ipok Kala” (Estuary God)- “Ipok Ipok

Guun-Ipok Alan" (Jungle God)- " Ipok Uma" (Dry Paddy God)- " Ipok Lebo" (House God)- " Ipok Bekaan" (Equipment God)- " Ipok Nase" (Rice God), and others. The " Tow" have evil characteristics, much similar to the devil and satan. And as for the " Amow", they are the ghosts of restless souls, wandering around because of the imperfection of its funeral, though the " amow" is not an evil spirit (ibid). This belief corpus is responsible in the formation of an institution to control and monitor the society of their custom, taboo and certain ceremonies so that the society can live in harmony. One of the most important institution is the shamanism or " a-bayoh". They are considered special as they can communicate with spirits through dreams and premonitions. They also determine ceremonies to use in treating sickness and in reducing catastrophes, as a result of the spirits' wrath. In addition, they are responsible in controlling the evil spirits and to represent the victim in seeking forgiveness.

Kaul. The following folktales will try to answer the questions regarding the origin of the Melanau's Kaul festival, as studied by Jeniri Amir & Awang Azman, (opcit: 67-75). The tale began about 400 years ago, when few villages in Mukah were infected with measles (" puhau") and diarrhoea (" putak manik"), resulting in many deaths and unmanageable corpses. Due to this, some of the corpses had to be placed in the lanes where " lemantak" (wet sago flavour) was made. Nonetheless, even the people who sent the corpses to the lanes were also infected. In the end, the lanes which were by the river, were neglected and is now known as Bukieng River, which means the river of the dead. The situation worsened until one of the villagers dreamt that, Ipok, who caused the illness, must be consoled and treated to,

so that they will be saved from the illness, which was initially easy to be treated. Another tale happened in Kampung Medong, Dalat. A warrior named Sepok went hunting when he got lost.

Eventually, Sepok found a long house in Sitieng, on the upstream of Mukah river. In the house, Sepok met a beautiful girl named Rirang Rabu Bunga and wished to marry the girl with his son. However, his proposal was rejected by the girl. Sepok was frustrated. The frustrated Sepok then went back to his village and assembled his people with the purpose of attacking Sitieng. But to his dismay, nobody was in the longhouse. Enraged, he then burnt the longhouse. All but one room were not burnt to the ground. As an invincible warrior, Sepok then went to the room and a magical object which had warned the people of the longhouse of the attack.

The object was called " Beliseing", which would emit a noisy sound as warning if anything bad should happen. This " Beliseing" was kept in a wooden container made from the teeth of the devil or " nyipan buou". That night Sepok dreamt that the " Beliseing" was actually Rirang Rabu Bunga, who advised Sepok to take care of her by feeding her as she would be the village curer. He then assembled the villagers and thus began the " kaul" ceremony, the act of feasting " Beliseing" ancestors. Serahang Serahang (gift - to appease spirits) in the kaul ceremony is treated with yellow rice, corn and betel nuts. Prayers are then read to Ipok Rirang Rabu Bunga. It is believed that the Beliseing is now kept in a hut close to the Kampung Medong, Dalat community hall. According to Morris' study in 1948: Belisieng.



... This is a wooden cylinder filled with offering of spear, beads and coins, which is believed to be the dwelling place of three spirit, a male, his wife and their male slave, it is peculiar to Medong and history being captured from a Melanau long house at Siteng.....

The Symbolic Generalisation of Kaul FestAs a holistic entity relating to the Melanau social relationship, the Kaul Festival can be defined only according to the weltanschauung of the Melanau society itself. The processes of planning, studying, building, as well as the application of the Kaul Festival itself seems to define the harmonious social relationship between the people in the society by respecting the ethics and the believed norms of the current Melanau society. This is proven by the reception and the cooperation given by the Melanau society to make this festival successful. The Melanau cultural system which encompasses behaviourism, taboos, tips and others, has in some way put to practice through the events in the Kaul Festival. Tibow, for example, has emphasized the individual bravery as well as defined the meaning of cooperation, perseverance and the interest to do challenging things, which is a good start through exercises like traditional games to develop positive thinking.