

THE DEATH RITUAL AND CUSTOMS OF THE MELANAU COMMUNITY IN SARAWAK

Mohammad Husri Morni

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

husri@jkkn.gov.my

Mohd Yuszaidy Mohd Yusoff

yuszaidy@ukm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The Melanau community are similar in terms of culture and customs to the Malay community in Sarawak. The close relations of culture, social, economy and politics between these two ethnic groups has created a strong unity and bond among them. However, the Melanau people have their own customs particularly regarding the death ritual and customs. This study was conducted by examining the death customs of the Melanau community in Mukah. In this study, the uniqueness of death customs within the culture of the Mukah's Melanau community will be explored. According to the view of anthropologists, a culture is a system of ideas, actions and outcomes which were learned by humans in their life's framework. This study is also observed the Melanau community whom are still practices the rituals and customs in matters of death or funeral. Thus, this study is to identify the traditional death ceremony that is still practiced by the Melanau community in Mukah. For this study, the death customs will be analysed from two aspects, namely the practice of death customs in the past and the practice of death customs in recent times. There are several rituals and customs that needed to be observed throughout the conduct of the ceremony. The research of this study uses ethnographical research methods which is based on field research and library research. This research instrument adopts focused interview and observation techniques. The selection of informants for focused interviews is based on individuals who have influence and authority in their community. This study uses an approach of analytical descriptive narrative content. Likewise, this study is also supported by data obtained from library studies in the form of secondary data. The results of findings in relation to heritage beliefs, the death rituals and customs cannot be separated in the Melanau community. The results of the study show that the traditional Melanau community's relationship with death rituals and customs is very difficult to eradicate and separate from the Melanau community itself, eventhough they have embraced Islam. Research contributions can add to the vocabulary of knowledge in the socio-cultural field and most importantly can strengthen the unity and bond among the Melanau community.

Keywords: Customs, Death, Melanau Community, Ritual, Sarawak

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Melanau community is one of the ethnic groups found in the state of Sarawak. In terms of history and origins, the Melanau people are linked to the Kajang people (Clayre in Morris

1978). Jackson mentioned that the Melanau people are the intermediary between the Malays and the people in remote areas (Jeniri Amir, 1988) and MacDonald stated that the Melanau people formed a link between the primitive people in the upper reaches of the river and the more modern people on the coast of Sarawak (MacDonald, 1958). Reports by Morris stated that the name Melanau was given by the Malays of Brunei in the past and that the name was recorded in the map of Sarawak in 1959. In terms of geography, the Melanau people were clearly a group of people who inhabit the coastal area from the Sungai Rajang Delta to Bintulu in the North (Morris, 1978).

The system of belief is a pillar that determines the outlook on life and the conduct of the community. This belief system affects the way they think, react to nature, events and the environment. Animism is a form of belief found among the Melanau community before the arrival of Islam in the archipelago. They believe in the existence of supernatural powers. This belief has become a characteristic of the Melanau community. Among the Melanau community consist of Muslims, Christians and Pagans. Generally, the Melanau community has similarities with the Malay community in terms of culture and customs. However, the Melanau community still has its own culture and customs. In daily life, they have certain beliefs regarding their actions and behavior towards nature, the origins of human, medical methods and also gathering events. These beliefs includes remedies, taboos, customs, rules and community customs.

Customs and culture symbolize the identity of a nation, ethnicity and tribe. Although people have beliefs and religions, social heritage is still passed down through generations of ancestors.. This teachings and social educations covers every member of society, at every stage of life, from birth to death. Among the famous customs are related to death. This custom is practiced by a community through their belief by their respective cultural practitioners according to beliefs, religion, customs and functions. These customs and ceremonies include the management of the corpse, the funeral process, and the ceremonies held after the funeral. Through this study that focuses on the aspects of the death customs of the Mukah's Melanau community, the following summarizes some of the values supported by the ethnic community itself which also symbolizes their cultural identity. Among them are personal and social and economic values, values of mystical beliefs and supernatural powers. The death ceremony is a social phenomenon that is considered complex due to being involved in various aspects.

2.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research of this study uses ethnographic research methods based on field research and library research. The instrument of this research applied focused interview and observation techniques. The selection of informants for focused interviews were based on individuals who have influence and authority in the Melanau community in Sarawak such as the elderly, village heads, leaders and members of the Melanau Association. This study uses an approach of descriptive narrative analysis content. Likewise, this study is supported by data obtained from library studies in the form of secondary data. The researcher has conducted several interview

sessions throughout February 2020 to April 2020 with 8 informants. Various questions were asked to the informants in order to obtain information about customs and ceremonies, especially regarding death customs practiced among the Melanau community..

3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

For this study, the death customs will be analysed from two aspects, namely the practice of death customs in the past and the practice of death customs in recent times. There are several rituals and customs that needed to be observed throughout the conduct of the ceremony.

3.1 Death Custom In The Past

This study continues by examining the death customs of the Melanau community, Sarawak in more detail. According to Yasir Abdul Rahman (1987), death and burial ceremonies according to the death customs of the Mukah's Melanau community are usually costly. According to the Melanau community, especially in Mukah, the spirit of the dead must be assisted on its journey to the afterlife (*likow matai*) by holding a mourning ceremony and so on. According to Yasir Abdul Rahman (1987), *likow matai* means about the Meaning of the dead. Not only that, the ceremony should be held on a large scale as a sign of love and respect for the deceased family and relatives.

In the past, the time during and after the funeral ceremony are very important time in order to showcase each other's wealth and power within the Melanau community. By observing the time of the old kingdom, the bodies of the kings and nobles of Melanau would be placed in jerrunei, which are funeral pillars. According to Persatuan Melanau Kuching, 2010 (internet), this funeral ceremony was performed hundreds of years ago during the animism era, which is known that the jerrunei was used by groups of aristocrats.

3.1.1 Jerrunei

According to Persatuan Melanau Kuching (2010), the Jerrunei is made from a large and mature tree known as Belian. The installed jerrunei must have simple or normal carvings and there are also intricately patterned carvings. All the intricate carvings took a long period of seven years to complete. Usually, the carvings outside the Jerrunei pillars are beautifully carved with animal motifs such as dragons, tigers, snakes, rats and so on, subject to the owner's status. In addition, the Jerrunei's height symbolizes the position and rank of its owner. Not only that, there are also Jerrunei that are carved with motifs of flora and fruits such as pineapples and much more. Usually the height of Jerrunei are ranges from 12 meters to 15 meters.

Jerrunei functions as a storage place for the body of a king or nobleman through a large pit that will be dug. According to legends, a female slave and a male slave will be sacrificed with the corpse and left to starve to death. The purpose is that the female slave will be used to serve the king as he experienced during life, while the spirit of the male slave is assigned as a guard, servant and rower for the spirit of the king or noble on their journey to *likow matai*. Jerrunei are their pride which is the manifestation of sovereignty, high rank, influence and wealth during their lifetime. The commoners of the Melanau community took pride because

it was the image and personality of the race that symbolized their civilization at that time. When an aristocrats die, various and vigorous preparations will be organized by the residents of the village. For the Mukah's Melanau community, family and social practices are highly emphasized. Furthermore, their loyalty towards their King and the leader cannot be denied. It is one of the highlights of the Melanau people during that time. Before the jerrunei build process in accordance to the customs, traditional songs were also sung for the guests to hear. Then it is followed with a hole being dug for the jerrunei that measures 10 meters high and 4 meters wide in circumference.

3.1.2 Jerrunei Customs Event

The traditional leader will start the event to uphold the jerrunei. Before that process, a slave would be thrown alive into the hole where the pole was staked. Beliefs and strong customs prevail over everything. In this instance, the Melanau community at the time believed that the spirit of the deceased reached the other world and would not disturb those who were still alive. The body of a Melanau aristocrats who had been dead for three days were also placed in the special pit along with equipment and valuables as a supply in the next world. Other than that, any aristocratic who died early before the completion of the jerrunei, the body will be kept until only the skeleton remains and then stored in a large urn or container. After that, the urn containing the skeletons and bones were inserted into the hole.

The process of erecting the jerrunei is also the same as the process of plunging a servant into the hole where the jerrunei is planted. In addition to one servant being plunged into the pit, another servant will be chosen to accompany the deceased. Usually the chosen servant is the person whom the deceased chosen during his life as a companion when the deceased is in another world, which is the world of the deceased. The process of the servant's death is different, which is the servant is tied up and placed in the upper chamber of the jerrunei and left to die of thirst and hunger. The owner of Jerrunei is not only for male aristocrats, even their wives and children also use Jerrunei as a burial ground. Hence, the spirits of the servants will play a very important role in determining the life of the aristocrats spirits in the afterlife.. Servants will be tied to the Jerrunei pole or there is a special hole at the top of the Jerrunei as a sacrifice. Usually the jerrunei will be placed near the riverside because the sacrificial servant shall feel thirst and beg to those who pass through in the river to splash using their paddler for drops of water to quench their thirst before they meet their death.(information obtain from Dr. Jeniri Amir 2009). Based on this study the use of jerrunei or "keliding" for the Melanau people, "kelirieng" for the Kayan and Kajang people, and "lijeng" for the Berawan people serves the same function which is for the burial of their respective aristocrats. All the tribes practice the Monarchy system and the people have a level of respect and unwavering loyalty to their king and leader. All the people above believe in the existence of eternal life after death and there is no repetition of death. They also believe that the aristocrats will carry them in the equal position when they are in the afterlife. If we observed in terms of their geographical position, the people who still believe in this system mostly inhabit the central parts of Borneo.

3.1.3 The Elimination Of Jerrunei Practice

The practice of jerrunei was eliminated when religious beliefs and teachings began to gain a foothold in Mukah, whether it was Islam or Christianity. The practice of death ritual of carrying out jerrunei customs is no longer practiced and the last time jerrunei was made was in 1880 in Belaga and by the Melanau people in Mukah. The Melanau people at that time practiced a closed door policy to outside community. They began to realise that killing humans even as a sacrifice is a torture and a grave sin. In Mukah there are still traces of the history of jerrunei which continues to stand firm in the area of Kampung Tellian Tengah, Mukah. Some of them are worn out by age due to being exposed to rain and the scorching sun.

According to Yasir Abdul Rahman (1987), the ceremony does not stop in an instant, during a certain period, the middle of the jerrunai will be opened and the bones are put into a special urn placed at the top of the jerrunai. However, this custom is no longer practiced by the Mukah's Melanau community. The custom were never documented in detail. This custom is becoming extinct due to the conquest of King Brooke.

3.2 Current Death Customs

In the present day, if a person died his body would be taken care and cleaned by *a - bei patai* which refers a close family. After the body is cleaned and bathed by the family, the funeral process is done by them.

3.2.1 Burial Process

The funeral process needs to be done regularly in accordance to the concept of customs. According to a book of cultural study of the Melanau of Mukah, the corpse is bathed by the closest family and an old plate as a dipper must be used during the bathing of the whole body of the corpse. A special place is prepared to place the corpse which are made of boards and reed branches. The special place is known as 'pakat'. At the four corners of the pakat, poles are placed from reed branches so that a piece of net can be hung to protect the corpse. The pakat is layered with a load mat (*bembam*) while the top part is a blanket cloth arranged with some sarong cloth and the deceased's shirt that they once wore when alive. Other clothes will be arranged on the corpse and two more pieces of cloth will be placed on the chest of the corpse. A set of teapots, cups, plates, bowls are prepared because it is considered necessary for the deceased during their time in *likow matai*. After the corpse is bathed, the two toes of the corpse will be tied together and the body will be tied with a piece of cloth. Next, the corpse's head will be covered with a piece of white cloth that will pass under the chin. The body will be kept in the house for three days and the burial will be done in the evening between two and four in the evening.

On the day of the funeral, the family especially the women will gather near the pakat to mourn loudly as socially required. The mattress that were usually used by the deceased will be placed inside the coffin and then the body will be lowered. Two more pieces of cloth that are on the chest will be taken. One piece to be kept while the other piece will be placed on top of the coffin. The group carrying the coffin will descend from the house. However, a group of

people carrying a flag of rank is preceded if necessary. Pakat and nets will be thrown on the side of the road. When arrived at the burial ground, the coffin and the ties on the corpse will be opened. Then, the coffin will be closed. The belongings of the deceased will be left on the grave. A candle or a small fire will be lit every evening for three days to light the journey of the spirit of the deceased to *likow matai*. For a period of three days, family members are strictly forbidden to leave their house. During a seven-day period, the family is not allowed to visit other people's homes. Also during that period, many friends and relatives will visit the deceased's family home which is a very important as a social institution. This visit is called *peligin*. Visitors who come to sleep at a family member's house on the first night must sleep in the same place for three consecutive nights. While *peligin* visit, many will come to visit until the end of the night and they hold traditional games such as *tataw* (riddles) to entertain the hearts of sad and bitter family members.

3.2.1 Ceremony After The Funeral

Ceremonies called *puyup* and *platow* will be held to contact and send messages to the spirits of the dead. This ceremony is carried out to determine the happiness of the spirit of the deceased in *likow matai*. The *puyup* ceremony involves a game of cockfighting in order to improve the position of the dead in *likow matai*. Usually this ceremony will be carried out on the morning of the seventh day. It begins with the *pasei* ceremony which is a dish of water mixed with fruit and a feast of traditional sweets such as *jejala*, *buah-ulu*, *bingka* and others. After that, a cockfight will be held indoors and the chicken's blood from the fight will be smeared on the central pillar inside the house. Next, a group will go down to the grave with sweets to be given to the dead and placed by the grave. The group that carries out this ceremony must return home and be required to bathe in the river.

Subsequently, a feast will be served to those who come to attend the *puyup* ceremony. For this feast they will slaughter a cow or a buffalo. This feast will then be followed by a cockfighting event. At three o'clock in the afternoon, the tradition of *menului buliang* will be carried out, that is, a *buliang – buliang* are used to load offerings such as sweets, money and so on to be given to the people who participated earlier ceremony. After the ceremony, the taking off of the lugi cloth that was hung are the mark to show the completion of the custom. The ceremony did not end there, the *platow* ceremony will be conducted on the seventh night. This ceremony aims to ensure that gifts are received by the dead and for other purposes. This ceremony will be conducted by *a-platow*, which is someone who can enter the world of the dead and can find the spirit of the deceased. Items as gifts or offerings are sweets, cigarettes and also lugi cloth. Mats and incense were lit. The *a-platow* will tremble and will lie down on the mat three times before being entered into trance or *likow matai*. The *a-platow* will meet the spirit and talk to the spirit of the deceased. After this ceremony is carried out, the gift or present will be given to the spirit of the deceased. The *a-platow* will start the journey back to the world and will told the family of the deceased to please them. A reward will be given to *a-platow* which is a chicken, a knife, a spear and money. Hence, all the death customs of the Melanau community have been carried out in completion.

Conclusion

Based on the research above, it can be summarized that the Mukah's Melanau Mukah community has its own customs of belief, including belief in nature and also their way of socializing. This community also has certain compelling interest for an in depth study. Through the research conducted, as a researcher I was able to discover the existence and uniqueness of the culture of the Melanau community in Mukah. The culture and customs of the Melanau community in Mukah are very unique and complex to understand and study. If we look at the Melanau community in Mukah in the olden days, status and position are so important that it can be seen in their death customs. Nevertheless, through this research we can see that the current death customs have a very significant mix of elements of customs or other religions such as Islam and Christianity. The Melanau Muslim community has conducted the death ceremony according to Islamic teachings as well as the Melanau Christian community according to their religious teachings. Each has carried out the burial according to their respective religious practices. In general, the custom of death ceremony nowadays are more perfect without the need of sacrifice of servants, and not through ritual practices.

It can be concluded that the Melanau cultural tradition in the death ceremony need to be documented because it is a tradition inherited from their ancestors since immemorial times. A documentation needs to be preserved as it will become the symbol and identity of the Melanau community. The sustainability of custom and culture in the Melanau community is important to generate the ethnic cultural tradition so that it continues to last for future generations.

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