

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.