

**Bidayuh lens:**

# **Living as a Bidayuh in Today's World**



**Edited by  
Su-Hie Ting  
Florence Gilliam Kayad**



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Published in Malaysia by  
UNIMAS Publisher,  
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak,  
94300 Kota Samarahan,  
Sarawak, Malaysia.

Printed in Malaysia by  
PPKS Production Sdn. Bhd.,  
Jalan Canna, Off Jalan Wan Alwi,  
93350 Tabuan Jaya, Kuching,  
Sarawak, Malaysia.

Book Cover Illustration and drawings in Chapter 2 by Leticia Tatih Henry

Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Bidayuh Lens : Living as a Bidayuh in Today's World / Edited by Su-Hie Ting,

Florence Gilliam Kayad.

ISBN 978-967-0054-15-5

1. Bidayuh (Bornean people)--Malaysia--Sarawak.
2. Bidayuh (Bornean people)--Social life and customs--Malaysia--Sarawak.
3. Bidayuh (Bornean people)--Rites and ceremonies--Malaysia--Sarawak.
4. Government publications--Malaysia.

I. Ting, Su-Hie. II. Florence Gilliam Kayad.

305.89923059522

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# 1

## *The Lost Gawai Traditions of the Bidayuh: A Case Study at Two Villages in the Bau Jagoi area*

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### **Introduction**

Gawai is a ritual that is commonly celebrated among the Dayak communities, namely, the Iban and Bidayuh ethnics in Sarawak, Malaysia. Gawai in its broader sense is a celebration and festivity marking the end of the harvest season which correlates with the beginning of the new year for Dayaks. Nowadays, Gawai is officially celebrated on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> of June as it is declared a public holiday by the Government of Malaysia. However, traditionally Gawai is celebrated after everyone in the village finish the harvesting activities. Then the *ketua kampung*, *ketua gawai* and a few elders in the village would sit down and discuss when to celebrate *Gawai Sowa*.

There are many types of Gawai among the Bidayuh of Sarawak. The more commonly known Gawai celebrations are Gawai which are related to the paddy planting activities as well as Gawai related to healing the sick. In the Bau district, there are many sub-groups of Bidayuh (Singai, Jagoi, Tringgus Sembaan and Gumbang). Although they live within the same district, there are differences in terms of language and they have

different names for the different types of Gawai. The rituals of Gawai may differ, depending on which sub-group they are from.

This chapter describes the less-known Gawai observed by the Jagoi Bidayuh in the Bau district. The description of *Gawai Sowa* is based on observations conducted during the last traditional *Gawai Sowa* in 2019 in two villages in the Bau district and interviews with the remaining Priestess or *Dayung Borih* who performed the rituals in both villages and some elders in the villages. Some of the rituals which were deemed important by the traditional Bidayuh such as *porih* (a period of abstinence) are also included in this chapter.

The Bidayuh Gawai, is a ritual which is associated with the planting of rice and is usually celebrated at the end of the harvesting season. In today's society, Gawai is celebrated with merry-making and open houses, where people visit each other's houses in the spirit of community and thanksgiving. However, in its traditional sense, Gawai is more than just eating, drinking, and celebrating. According to Campbell and Mikeng (2019), in the olden days, Gawai can be regarded as a form of communication ritual with the spirits. During their interviews, some of the elders from a village in Bau, Kupuo Duyoh, expressed concern that communicating with spirits gets less attention than the merry-making during Gawai.

For matters related to paddy planting, the main spirits that Bidayuhs communicate with are *Iyeng Podi* (rice spirit) and *Iyeng Sumuk Babai* (spirit of the ancestors). *Gawai Sowa*, or the year-end Gawai, is based on the Bidayuh paddy planting cycle, and its main purpose is to give thanks for the harvest of the year and to seek blessing and permission from the rice spirit or *Iyeng Podi* to plant new rice for the coming year (Nuek, 2002).

With many Bidayuhs embracing Christianity and Islam, the communication with spirits during Gawai has become less relevant. For example, during Gawai, Christian Bidayuhs pray to the Christian God and not to the traditional spirits. Interviews with several elders from two Bidayuh villages in the Bau district, namely Kupuo Duyoh and Kupuo Sarasot, revealed that the younger generation does not understand the true meaning of the Bidayuh traditions, or *adat Gawai* as well as the values and significance of such *adat*. At present, there are

still elders to practise and propagate these beliefs, but the indigenous knowledge related to the traditional Gawai celebration may die with them in time to come.

This chapter describes some of the lost traditional Gawai rituals and the people behind them. The chapter begins with an introduction of the Bidayuh people of Sarawak, and moving on to the study, people behind the Gawai ritual, the traditional Gawai of the Bidayuh, rituals of Gawai, Gawai related to *podì*, other Gawai related to paddy planting, healing Gawai or *Gawai Onam*, values embedded in Gawai, and ending with the concept of Gawai in today's world.

### **The Bidayuh people of Sarawak**

The Bidayuh is one of the 27 identified ethnic groups in Sarawak, Malaysia. They are the third largest group, but they make up only a total of 8% of the total population of Sarawak. The Bidayuh are mostly found in what is known as the “Bidayuh Belt” (Rensch, Rensch, Noeb, & Ridu, 2012), which spans the Kuching and Serian districts. The Bidayuh can be considered a diverse group since they are divided into six main dialectal groups which are the Biatah, Bau-Jagoi, Bukar-Sadong, Tringgus/Sembaan, Salako and Rara (Bongarra, Kayad, & Campbell, 2017). The Biatah variation is spoken in the Padawan and Kuching districts, while the Bau-Jagoi variation is mainly spoken in Bau and Bukar-Sadong in Serian. The Tringgus/Sembaan variation is spoken between the borders of the Biatah and Bau districts, while the Salako and Rara variations are mainly found in the Lundu district.

The dialects in the Serian, Kuching and Bau districts are all considered to be in the “Bidayuhic” family of languages. In general, they are mutually intelligible within the districts but not between districts. The dialects found in the Lundu district are more distantly related; in fact, Salako actually belongs to a different family of languages, Malayic. (Rensch, Rensch, Noeb, & Ridu, 2012, p. 2)

Despite the lack of mutual intelligibility among the Bidayuh dialects, the groups speaking these dialects share similarities in terms of cultural beliefs and customs since they are believed to have come from the same roots. Believed to have originated from the coastal areas of Kalimantan, Indonesia, the Bidayuh share many similar cultural traits with the Dayak tribe of Indonesia. The Bidayuh moved to Sungkung, West Kalimantan, Indonesia and eventually moved towards Rabak Mikabuh in the areas of Penrissen (Chang, 2002, 2004). The Bidayuh also believed that their ancestors had lived in areas that are now part of West Kalimantan (Rensch, Rensch, Noeb, & Ridu, 2012). From there, the Bidayuh started to build their villages on the mountain tops of some of the major mountains including Singai, Bratak, and Jagoi, which are now considered as the ancestral homes of the Bidayuh Bau group in Sarawak.

A Bidayuh village typically consists of a long house or *botang romin* and an octagonal social and ritual house built for both social and religious purposes known as a *baruk* (in Bau) or *pangguh* (in Bukar-Sadong and Biatah). The *baruk* is considered to be a sacred place where some of the religious rituals are conducted, but it is also a place where meetings among the men folks are held (Ungang, 2006)

Traditionally, Bidayuhs believe in the existence of spirits around them and *Topa*, the Supreme Being, is the highest of them all. The traditional Bidayuh, those who have not converted into Christianity or Islam, believe in the existence of spiritual beings around them who are responsible for their lives and well-being. They believe that the world is surrounded by both good and evil spirits.

Some of the common spirits that the Bidayuh believe in are *Iyeng Sumuk Babai* and *Iyeng Podi*. They also believe in the spirits of the birds, trees and forest. These spirits are called by different names such as *iyeng* (spirits), *gambut* (ghost/spirits), *munuo* (ghost), and *muot* (evil spirit/ghost).

The Bidayuh believe that the land, *tana*, on which we live in does not actually belong to us but is something that we borrow or rent from the spirits. Therefore, the Bidayuh customs and rituals revolve around the world of the spiritual realm.

Many aspects of the Bidayuh customs and rituals are related to the spirit world. One such custom is the observing of good and bad omens. The Bidayuh believe that omens, both good and bad are often shown by the spirits, as a warning to the people before they do something. Noeb and Noeb (2012) stated that the spirits play fools of humans. However, another way to see it is that the spirits usually give some form of warning or sign before something bad happens. For instance, before starting a new farm or building a house, some bad omens to observe are finding dead snake, *bokah buku* (a type of creeper plant with knots), *sigaror* (a type of creeper plant) and *manuk popog* (a type of bird) on the path (Nuek, 2002, p. 192).

Besides that, another strong indication is that based on the sound of the omen birds such as *kutieng* (the common tailorbird), *griya'* (the red-headed tailorbird), *suwob* (the frogmouth bird) and *bubut* (a type of bird). It is said that should one hear the sounds of any of these birds, they must stop what they are doing and wait until the "evilness" has passed before continuing their task.

The traditional Bidayuh, or some might call them "pagans", believe that human beings co-exist with spiritual beings and therefore, a balance should be accomplished to ensure that both humans and spirits live in harmony in this world. This belief is deeply rooted in the *adat* or traditional laws of the Bidayuh and reflected in most of their customs and rituals. It influences every aspect of their daily lives as well.

The majority of Bidayuh are now Christians, mostly converting to Christianity during the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Mill Hill Missionaries came to Sarawak to carry out their mission. According to Nuek (2002), in 1885, a group of young Christians lead by Father Felix Westerwoudt came to Mt Singai in Bau which was one of the earliest settlements of the Bidayuh. From that point onwards, several missions came to various Bidayuh villages in the effort of convert the Bidayuh into Christianity as well as to bring education to the people (Nuek, 2002, p. 105). In the beginning, there was a lot of resistance from the Bidayuh community as there were some attempts to destroy the traditional rituals and artefacts (Nuek, 2002, p. 106). Eventually the Bidayuh slowly embraced the new religion but at the expense of their traditional beliefs and



customs. This chapter describes some of the traditional Gawai rituals which have ceased to exist as well as the people behind them who are slowly decreasing due to change of beliefs.

## **The Study**

This study was conducted between the years 2016 and 2019 in two Bidayuh villages in the districts of Bau, namely Kupuo Sarasot and Kupuo Duyoh. These villages were selected because they still conduct the traditional Gawai at the time. Moreover, some of the informants were knowledgeable with the *adat* and practised the traditional Gawai. Kupuo Sarasot was able to celebrate the year end *Gawai Sowa* because they engaged the help of the *Dayung Borih* (Priestess), who live in Kupuo Duyoh. She is the last remaining Priestess.

The informants in the study were the Priestess, the Priest and some elders in the villages. Besides in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations were also carried out during the traditional *Gawai*. The observations were conducted during the last traditional *Gawai Sowa* celebrated in 2019 in two villages in the Bau District. Based on the observations and interviews, it was discovered that only the most essential steps of the *Gawai* ritual were performed. The Priestess and Priests may have forgotten some of the less important steps due to their advanced age.

## **People behind the Gawai ritual**

Our interviews revealed that the people who are responsible for carrying out the Gawai rituals are considered as “special” and “the selected ones”. They are highly respected in the Bidayuh community. Based on the personal stories of these Priestesses and Priests, they were “selected” when they met with different spirits in their dreams. Others claimed that they became gravely sick and the cure only came in the form of “surrendering” themselves to the spirits. Once they have been “selected”, they would acquire special power or abilities to communicate with the spirits to conduct the various Gawai.

Basically, for the year end Gawai or *Gawai Sowa*, three people are involved, namely, *Dayung Borih* (The priestess), *Pak Nyigar* and *Pak Ngaduop*. As long as these three crucial persons are alive and actively playing their “selected” roles, the *Gawai Sowa* can be celebrated. The problem is that the existing ones are old. While there may be other *Dayung Borih* (The Priestess), *Pak Nyigar* and *Pak Ngaduop* (*Tukang Gawe*), some have converted to Christianity and are no longer performing the traditional rituals. Others are too old to remember the chants and rituals.

At the time of writing, there were only two *Dayung Borih* and *Pak Ngaduop* left in Kupuo Duyoh. One of them is too old and sick, and could no longer perform the Gawai. One of the *Dayung Borih*, Madam Mimah, expressed the dire lack of *Dayung Borih* as follows:

There are two *borih* left in Duyoh village. Both are invalid...  
So, only these two invalids, how can I call my fellow Gawai friends? Only three of us are left. All are in difficult condition.  
Others have passed away.

### ***Dayung Borih***

*Dayung Borih* are special women who are believed to have been selected by the spirits to perform Gawai. *Dayung Borih* can be regarded as a conduit of the spiritual world (Campbell & Mikeng, 2019). These women became *Dayung Borih* from as young as two years old.

According to a story, a spiritual being known as *Gambut Sikubun* fell in love with a Bidayuh girl causing her to fall sick. The young girl fell into a coma. As she had been in an unconscious state for a long time, the villagers decided that the girl had died and was going to cremate her in the tradition of the traditional Bidayuh. *Gambut Sikubun*, seeing this, took the young Bidayuh girl to the sky and healed her. When she awoke, she had these special abilities which enabled her to communicate with the spiritual world. That is why the people believed that a *Dayung Borih* has a spiritual husband who resides in the Mount of Santubong and

that every *Gawai Sowa*, the souls of the *Dayung Borih* would go and visit their husbands and families on top of Mount Santubong.

Our informant is Madam Mimah Anak Nyoib, a *Dayung Borih* (Priestess) from Kupuo Duyoh (Photograph in Figure 1.1). She has given her permission for her name to be mentioned in the book, and considered this an honour. As one of the last remaining *Dayung Borihs*, she narrated to us the story of how she herself became gravely ill when she was just two years old. The village shaman told her parents that their child had been selected to be a *Dayung Borih*. Although the position of a *Dayung Borih* is highly respected, it is considered a hard and expensive one.



Figure 1.1. Madam Mimah anak Nyoib, one of the last remaining *Dayung Borih* in front of the *bawar*

The training took years where the *Dayung Borih* had to memorise the different *Borih* songs, chants and rituals. The family may at times need to prepare the traditional attire which also consists of silverware and silver belts. This cost a fortune in the olden days. However, without the *Dayung Borih*, there would be no *adat Gawai*. In order to maintain the *adat*, it was a sacrifice worth making for the girl and the family.

When Madam Mimah Anak Nyoib became a *Dayung Borih*, there were only six of them from the village but now she was the only one left. Most of the *Dayung Borih* have passed away and those who are still alive have converted to Catholicism. Even those from other villages too have left their *Dayung Borih* role, mostly joining their family members in the new faith.

### ***Tukang Gawe***

Two of the most important men during Gawai are the *Pak Nyigar* and *Pak Ngaduop*. The word *nyigar* in Bidayuh refers to “a ritual dance” (Nuek, 2002, p. 277). The ritual dance here refers to the swinging of the body from side to side as those involved walk around the offering place or *bawar*. It may also include the swinging of a live chicken as a form of blessing. Therefore, *Pak Nyigar*, or also referred to as *Pinyigar*, are men who play the role of participating in the ritual dance of blessing.

*Pak Ngaduop* is usually the apprentice of the *Pak Nyigar*. *Ngaduop* means “to entertain an important person or persons” (Nuek, 2002, p. 276). Usually, after sufficient training as a *Pak Ngaduop*, which is about four years, they would then be “promoted” to be a *Pak Nyigar*. During a Gawai ceremony, the *Pak Ngaduop* is not involved in the dancing rituals but only assist the *Pak Nyigar*. They help with the preparation of the offerings and other things needed for the Gawai ritual.

Another important person within the Gawai committee is known as *Tukang Totak*. The Bidayuh believed that the *Tukang Totak* is the most knowledgeable man in the community. They believed that a good spirit, by the name of Kingak appoints someone as a *Tukang Totak* by sending messages in their dreams and from there, the *Tukang Totak* also has supernatural knowledge and knows how to solve supernatural problems.



It is also believed that the *Tukang Totak* gains his knowledge and ability from these supernatural beings by listening to their instructions. In other words, the *Tukang Totak* can communicate with the spirits. The other informant in this study was Madam Noyek Anak Sijon and Madam Kassir. Both women are believers of the traditional Gawai and *Dayung Borih* but no longer participate in the traditional Gawai ritual.

### **The Traditional Gawai of the Bidayuh**

The traditional Gawai refers to Gawai which are celebrated in accordance to the traditional or old beliefs, *adat oma*. Nowadays, Gawai is still celebrated but with the influence of Christianity. For instance, during Gawai, villagers would gather in church for Mass. In contrast to the traditional Gawai, where the celebration took place in the Bidayuh Gawai house or *Bori Gawai* with rituals connected to the traditional Bidayuh beliefs and religion.

There is only one Gawai for those who have embraced Christianity which is *Gawai Sowa* or the yearly Gawai. However, traditionally, there are many different types of Gawai. As mentioned before, the word Gawai itself means “festival”, therefore, for the traditional Bidayuh believers, Gawai refers to different types of festivals or to be more precise, rituals.

Gawai can be seen as a form of communication with the spirits; therefore, if anything was to be asked from the spirits, it was through a Gawai. There are basically two types of Gawai, which is Gawai related to rice cultivation and the healing Gawai. Gawai basically consists of rituals that are connected to the spiritual realms. These rituals are rather similar in that there are offerings or *sadis* presented to the spirits, chants by both *Dayung Borih* and *Pak Nyigar* and the restriction period after the Gawai itself.

Gawai related to rice cultivation comes in different types. The main purpose is to ask permission and blessings from the Rice Spirit or *Iyeng Podi* before carrying out the different steps in rice planting. According to Riget (2002), there are seven Gawai related to the different steps in rice planting and cultivation.

The purpose of the healing Gawai is to heal the sick. There are many types of healing Gawai, based on the types and severity of the sickness.

Typically, Gawai is conducted for two days and one night, followed by a period of abstinence (*porih*) for about two days. However, there are some exceptions, particularly in the year-end Gawai or *Gawai Sowa* which is usually conducted for three days and four nights. Usually, the *Dayung Borih* would know the duration of *porih* to ensure that evil spirits would go away as well as to show respect to the other spirits.

### **Rituals of Gawai**

A Gawai would not be complete without an offering to the spirits. It is believed that since they are asking something from the spirits and calling them to communicate with them, offerings have to be presented. This is also seen as an act of creating harmony between human and spiritual beings.

In conducting the Gawai, regardless of the rice Gawai or healing Gawai, the offerings must be exactly as required. These are the things that only those involved in the Gawai would know. The number of offerings should be as precise as possible, down to the details like the length of the bamboo in which the *pogang* or glutinous rice is cooked and the amount of rice which is to be offered.

It is believed that the spirits are watching from the sky. If the offering is wrongly calculated, the patient will not be healed. The offerings must be exactly as requested, they cannot perform the Gawai ritual as recklessly as they want.

There are also taboos which one must observe before and during the Gawai ritual. For example, if one suddenly hears the sound of one of the omen birds especially the *kutieng* or the common tailorbird when the slaughtering of the chicken is carried out, the process has to be redone and a new chicken would have to be slaughtered. It is believed that if the slaughtered chicken is used, there is no meaning to the Gawai because it has been disapproved by the spirits.

After the Gawai has been conducted, there is usually a period of abstinence known as *porih*. According to Nissom (2013), *porih* refers to the prohibition or restriction imposed by a cultural and tribal role (p. 173). The *porih* period can be anything between two days and ten days, depending on the purpose of the Gawai. During this time, most outside activities such as going to the farm or to the jungle, as well as pounding of paddy are forbidden. There are also instances, especially after a healing Gawai, when the doors of a house must be closed, and the family must stay inside. Usually, the *Dayung Borih* would know how long the period of *porih* should last. It is believed that a *porih* period is necessary to ensure that evil spirits would go away as well as to show respect to other spirits.

The *porih* periods for *Gawai Bori* and *Gawai Mongi Dari* are about the same, with two days of abstaining in one's own house. Making loud sounds and receiving guests are prohibited throughout the period of *porih*.

### **Gawai related to *Podi***

As mentioned previously, the Bidayuh has Gawai for each step of the paddy planting process. There are seven Gawai in relation to the seven steps involved in *podu* (paddy) planting. Table 1.1 describes seven Gawai related to *podu*.

Table 1.1. The seven Gawai related to *podì*

<i>Gawai Ayuh Obuo Sowa</i>	Held after harvesting activity
<i>Gawai Juran Tubi Bauh</i>	Held before the harvesting activity - to bless the new rice. After this Gawai is held, only then the Bidayuh started harvesting.
<i>Gawai Maan Kuduos</i>	Held before eating a new crop of vegetables (in between the planting and harvesting of <i>podì</i> )
<i>Gawai Ngirangan</i>	Held to prevent pest or evil spirit from attacking the <i>podì</i>
<i>Gawai Papau</i>	Held after clearing of the land for farming.
<i>Gawai Poris Oran</i>	Held before the clearing of the land for farming.
<i>Gawai Tugar</i>	Held before burning the cleared plots of land for farming.

(Source: Nuek, 2002, as cited in Campbell & Mikeng, 2019)

### ***Gawai Sowa, Gawai Ayuh Obuo Sowa and Gawai Boras Bauh***

*Gawai Sowa* or *Gawai Boras Bauh* is celebrated as a symbol of respect to the paddy spirit, *Iyeng Podì*, and to ask for better harvest in the following season. This Gawai must be conducted after *Gawai Tadjkong* to cast the evil spirits away.

*Gawai Sowa* is conducted after the harvesting period. It is said to have originated together with the *Borih* tradition of the Bidayuh Priestess or *Dayung Borih*. Therefore, the main conductor of this Gawai is the *Dayung Borih*.

To prepare for the *Gawai Sowa*, the first thing that needs to be prepared is the *subuoi* which is a shallow rattan basket. The *subuoi* is then filled with *sukuoi*, *pogang* and other food such as fermented fish, fermented wildboar and *tuak*, a Bidayuh alcoholic drink. *Sukuoi* is rice wrapped in banana leaves while *pogang* is rice cooked in bamboo. The *subuoi* is then placed inside the offering hut or *bawar*. There would



also be other items in the *subuoi* which are betel leaves and pinang as well as small bowls of the newly harvested rice grains and glutinous rice. These offerings are for the spirits of the ancestors and spirit of the paddy. *Gawai Sowa* is usually celebrated for three days and four nights.

During *Gawai Sowa*, the *Dayung Borih* would sit on a wooden plank hung from the ceiling of the *Gawai* house with large ropes and start to sing their *Borih* songs. This ritual is known as *ngayun*. After *ngayun*, the *Pak Nyigar* together with the *Dayung Borih* would start the *nyigar* ritual, where they would be swaying from side to side and walking around the *bawar*. The *Borih* songs contain language which is difficult to understand. The informant, Madam Mimah, said that she could not recite the chants freely but she would be able to recite them during *Gawai*. It is believed that as the *Dayung Borih* rocks the swing, they are calling upon the spirits. This process of rocking the swing while chanting is named *brarang*; *ngayun* only involves rocking motion without the chant.

Another ritual which is also part of *Gawai Sowa* is known as *ngiraga*. This is when the *Tukang Gawe*, including the *Dayung Borih*, would go to the stream of the village to call the paddy spirit, *Iyeng Podi*.

After the *Gawai*, the offerings in the *bawar* hut would be taken home to be given to the chickens and pigs as their food. It is because the offerings are now rancid and inedible.

Besides *Gawai Sowa*, the interviews revealed that there are two *Gawai* which are no longer being practised nowadays due to the Bidayuh conversion to other religions and they are *Gawai Tadkong* and *Gawai Siyang Ratus*.

### ***Gawai Tadkong***

*Gawai Tadkong* is regarded as the “head” of the Bidayuh *adat* and customs. Therefore, in the olden days, celebrating *Gawai Tadkong* is a must. This *Gawai* was conducted after the harvesting period. During this time, the villagers would move from one house while playing gongs. The name *Gawai Tadkong* comes from sound of the gongs which sounds like “tadkong, tadkong”.

The purpose of *Gawai Tadjkong* is to cleanse the home by removing and chasing away evil spirits, omens and bad luck. The Bidayuh believed that bad spirits are always following human beings in many ways including invading their bodies and living with them in their homes and eating their food supply.

*Gawai Tadjkong* is conducted for one day plus a two-day period of abstinence or *porih*. During this time, it is forbidden to carry out certain activities such as carrying rattan baskets of *juah*, collecting firewood and pounding paddy. The house must be closed for visitors and the doors cannot be left ajar. Besides that, in order to prevent evil spirits from entering the house, a thorny wild plant known as *bikorom* must be hung at the entrance of the door. Figure 1.2 shows the thorny plant, known as *bikorom* which is hung at the entrance of the house. It is believed that evil spirits do not dare to enter a house with *bikorom* at the entrance. After the *porih* period, the villagers may continue their daily activities.



Figure 1.2. The thorny plant, known as *bikorom* which is hung at the entrance of the house

It is believed that if the *Gawai Tadjkong* is not conducted, evil spirits would enter the house and take the food of the household. Signs of evil spirits presence include insufficient food for the household, or their food becomes bad easily. Offerings for the spirits will be prepared by the shamans who will also bring the offering away from the home so that the spirits will stop eating rice grains at the home.

For *Gawai Tadjkong*, only the male *Tukang Gawe* will come to the houses. The *Tukang Gawe* will take some rice grains from the villagers, and some money (about one ringgit), which is used to pay for the chicken used for the *Tadjkong* ritual. Other than that, a small packet of glutinous rice grains, corn seeds, vegetable seeds and fruit seeds are also given to the *Tukang Gawe*. The belief behind *Gawai Tadjkong* is that after harvesting, it is only right to share their profit with the spirits.

The *Tukang Totak* is the person who would communicate with the spirits. The spirits will tell the *Tukang Totak* how much the household owes them and the *Tukang Totak* will relay the message back to the villagers concerned. Madam Kassir said:

The spirits may say “that mister/madam owes me two cents for the land they used. One cup of paddy”. They tell the *Tukang Totak* other things they request. The shaman then will say to the ghost after he acquires the offering “This is yours”. The spirits come from the forest. If we think about it, we use their land when we farm. It is not our land. We simply use it temporarily.

Her statement shows the close co-existence of the Bidayuh with nature and the spirit world.

### **Gawai Siring Ratus**

Another type of Gawai which has not been celebrated for a long time is *Gawai Siring Ratus*. This Gawai can be compared to the act of paying “rent” to the land spirits in exchange for using certain land plots for farming. This is based on the belief that the land does not belong to them but to the land spirits. Therefore, they have to prepare offerings as the rental fees for using the land for farming. According to Madam Kassir, the informant, this Gawai was usually done in replacement of the *Gawai Sowa*, if the latter is not performed.

During this Gawai, offerings in the form of food are offered to the land spirits. Madam Kassir also said that there are instances when the spirits are stubborn and demand coins in exchange. In some cases, if the spirits are not satisfied with the offerings, new land has to be sought for paddy planting. This is usually done by looking into omens and signs which are believed to be shown by the spirits. For instance, the appearance of a snake, or a dead bird or even eggs indicate that the land cannot be used for the planting of paddy. After this Gawai, a *porih* period of two days follows, where going to the forest is forbidden.

### **Other Gawai related to Paddy Planting**

Besides these two types of Gawai, there are also other Gawai related to paddy planting which will be conducted should there be anything amiss. For instance, *Gawai Todang Touk Ratus* which is also known as *Gawai Oran* or *Gawai Poris Oran* in some parts of Bau, is conducted in the event that the burning of the rice field is done wrongly. A good indication of the spirits being happy with the Gawai is that there is no bird sound during the ritual. This shows that the spirits are happy with the offering and the farmer has permission to plant paddy on the land.

After the burning of the land, another Gawai that needs to be conducted is *Gawai Sauh*, which is also to ask for permission to start the clearing of the burnt land. Then, *Gawai Bangas* is conducted when the paddy is attacked by insects or has rotten roots. These are indications that the spirits are not pleased with something they have done.

Lastly is *Gawai Nuboh* which is done to remove bad spirits from disturbing the paddy crop.



## **Healing Gawai or *Gawai Onam***

Another type of Gawai is the healing Gawai or *Gawai Onam*. These are performed in times of illness by *Tukang Gawe*a or the priestess, *Dayung Borih* who are believed to have special healing power.

There are different types of *Gawai Onam* which the shaman can conduct based on the types and severity of the ailments. In the olden days, there were no doctors or medical resources. Therefore, the Bidayuh believed that sickness and illness were caused by evil spirits.

The Bidayuh regard the soul of a human being as living in a vessel which is the body. There are instances when a spirit, usually an evil one, would interact with the soul. This interaction is usually not something that the human is aware of. So, when a soul unintentionally interacts with a spirit, it could become weak, and this is shown through sickness and ailments. Another way to look at this is that the soul has escaped the body and has either wandered off or stayed in the spiritual realm.

In some cases, Gawai had to be conducted to bring back the soul into the body or to strengthen the weakened souls. One such Gawai is *Gawai Mongi Dari* which is performed to heal minor sickness or injuries such as stomachache, headache, and aching or bruising on the body. This Gawai is conducted for two days and is usually performed by men (*dari*) who are believed to have married spirits. It is believed that these men once fell gravely ill as a result of contact with the spirits of the forest. Since normal treatment did not heal them, they had to marry the forest spirits and only then they became better. Thus, they indirectly obtained the ability to heal people with the assistance from their spirit wives.

In the case where *Gawai Mongi Dari* does not work, then a ritual known as *Ngibagak* has to be performed. In this ritual, a chicken is used, whereby a live chicken is slaughtered at its neck and is hung upside down to collect the blood. It is believed that the blood together with some chants once rubbed on the pained area would heal the person.

Again, just like any Gawai, a period of abstinence or *porih* needs to be carried out for two days where they are not allowed visit someone who is dying or attend funerals. This is because they believed that

during such times, the spirits and ghosts can see the ailing person who is in a weak state and they are vulnerable to the spirits. This could make their condition worse and may even lead to death.

*Gawai Bisiyak* is a more serious kind of *Gawai Onam*. This *Gawai* is to lead a lost soul back to the body. It is believed that when a person falls gravely ill and is on the verge of dying, his soul may be separated from his body, thus making his body an empty soulless shell. It is the duty of the shaman to trace the soul and bring it back to the body. Using a small rattan basket, known as *juah*, the shaman, after capturing the soul would put the soul into the *juah* and cover the lid with a piece of cloth. Afterwards, the shaman would grab the soul from the *juah* and blow it into the patient's ear. Whether the ritual succeeds or not depends on what the Bidayuh believed as fate. If patients die after many attempts to heal them are made, then it would be considered that they have been fated to die.

The *Dayung Borih* could perform different types of *Gawai Onam* such as *Kijarat* which is used to treat normal ailments such as fever and bruised body. Another type of *Gawai Onam* which the *Dayung Borih* can perform is *Mongi*. There are two types of *Mongi*, one for infants and the other for adults. The *Mongi* for babies is performed when a baby cries for weeks or months and is believed to be disturbed by spirits. While *Mongi* for adults are performed when the *Kijarat* method does not work. *Mongi* usually involves two *Dayung Borih* and the patient must stay indoors for two days and must not touch fire.

The third type of *Gawai Onam* is *Ngirabou* which is conducted when *Gawai Mongi* has no effect. This is a more intense *Gawai* which is performed from night to morning and a dog is sacrificed whereby its blood is rubbed on the ailing spot to banish evil. The *porih* period for this type of *Gawai* is longer where the patient must stay indoors for three days.

Finally, the last type of *Gawai Onam* is *Pinyak* which is used to treat extreme ailments, usually the dying or terminally ill. They would perform *Pinyak Sayang Rawang* with the purpose of cleansing the patient's family. Rituals are conducted for eight days. During the ritual, *Dayung Borih* would read the chants every day to heal the patient and

after the Gawai, the patient has to stay indoors for eight days. This is considered the most expensive *Gawai Onam* mainly because it is conducted for eight days and is completed with various offerings for the spirits. *Pinyak* is conducted the whole day and night but the *Dayung Borih* does rest in the evening. This Gawai is for women. After the eight days, an abstinence period follows which lasts for two days.

### ***Gawai Bori***

Another type of Gawai which the Bidayuh conducted in the past was *Gawai Bori*. According to Madam Kassir, the informant, she held a *Gawai Bori* when a snake went into her house. It is believed that the snake is a ghost, and therefore a *Tukang Gawea* or *Tukang Totak* is called to conduct the Gawai. The *Tukang Gawai* would then communicate with the ghost and hear what the demands are. The demands could be in the form of two cents coins, glutinous rice grains, newly planted rice grains, or anything that is asked for. They believe that the ghost wants something in the house and therefore it came into the house. Once its demands are met, it would go away. However, these are not limited to snakes. Hummingbirds could also be an indicator of some spirits' message. Usually, the *Dayung Borih* would decipher the hummingbird's message. If the message is not good, then a Gawai would have to be conducted.

### ***Gawai Tuop Tiban***

Madam Kassir related a story in which a family was constantly losing its members. Each family member died after one another, therefore the eldest son suggested that they should perform *Gawai Tuop Tiban*.

One of the *porih* for this Gawai is that the family members must not go out from the main door, only from the back door of the house. The reason for doing so is because they believe that closing the main door would prevent bad ghosts from seeing them and entering their house. The *Tukang Totak* came to their house and tried to find the cause of these deaths.

Once the spirit spoke to him, the *Tukang Totak* informed the *Tukang Gawai* who summoned the ghost. Apparently, the ghost had been trying to find the family for eight years and now that it had found them, he was going to take them one by one. Madam Kassir related this incident:

And after he summoned it, the ghost came. It looked positively scary. It looked inhuman. It carried a spear when it was summoned. It slammed the spear in front of the house. Even the shamans were scared. It appeared and was wearing a scant of loincloth. When it arrived, it was served with some *tuak*. Only then the ghost became a little gentle. It was no longer angry”.

After the *Gawai Tuop Tiban* and the *porih* period were over, everything went back to normal and the family members still lived on until today.

### **Values embedded in Gawai**

The Gawai rituals reflect the close relationship between the Bidayuh and nature. They need to seek permission from the spirits before conducting any activity related to paddy planting. Even the act of paying rent to the spirits in *Gawai Siyang Ratus*, reflects their respect for nature. They believe that the world is not only occupied by humans, but also by other beings, both seen (in the form of animals and plants) and unseen (in the form of spirits).

This is also seen in how they give thanks and offerings for the spirits for their harvest and good life, especially through the *Gawai Sowa* rituals. They believe that they co-exist with other beings in this world. For instance, their belief in the warnings of bad omens by animals reveal how the Bidayuh are sensitive to nature and spirits.

The Bidayuh also respect nature because nature provides them with medicine. One of the healing rituals which does not need a Gawai is known as *nyomul*. For this purpose, ginger is pounded with pepper, betel leaves and pinang until it is mushy and then mixed together to

be wrapped around the painful area of the body. It is believed that the “heat” from the mixture would help heal the pain.

The rituals that the traditional Bidayuh practice, tedious as it is, can be seen as a sign of respect for the spirits and nature. The traditional Bidayuh lived in harmony with nature, and therefore their needs were met, as simple as it was in the olden days; rice stock was abundant and food was sufficient.

### **Concept of Gawai in Today's World**

Today, most Bidayuhs have converted to either Christianity or Islam, leaving the beliefs of their ancestors behind. Since most Bidayuhs are Christians, most of their rituals have incorporated Christian rituals such as prayers and hymns.

Gawai nowadays are very different from the traditional Gawai. The number of *Dayung Borih*, *Pak Ngaduop*, *Pak Nyigar* and *Tukang Gawai* are decreasing from year to year. In fact, some of the efforts to “preserve” these traditional Gawai has become too commercialised.

Madam Noyek, another informant, related that most of the traditional Gawai are unheard of nowadays because many of the elders have passed on and there are no more *Tukang Gawai* to conduct the rituals. To a certain extent, they do agree that “... those things actually, when we think about it in the past, is a hindrance. There are too many hassles.” She gave an example:

In order to conduct a Gawai, there are a number of basic things that needs to be prepared such as rice grains and chicken. Isn't it a waste of rice grains, a waste of chicken? It sums up to hundreds. It is just too much of a hassle.

The younger generation of Bidayuh may not be able to appreciate the true meaning of the traditional Gawai. Madam Noyek also stated that the younger generation may have their own way of thinking, for instance, to them it is about science and not about spirits.

In the past, the *Gawai Sowa* was not celebrated every year. It was only celebrated when the harvest was little. They believed that if the harvest was little, it was an indication that the people have strayed from their faith in the spirits and thus, the spirits were unhappy. Therefore, it was necessary to conduct *Gawai Sowa* that year to ensure a bountiful harvest the following year.

However, in today's society, *Gawai Sowa* is celebrated every year regardless of whether the harvest is good or bad. Madam Mimah said, "But Gawai nowadays, is a means to earn instant money. People set up bands of singers, set up shops, and get instant profit." As mentioned before, today's Gawai is more about merry-making and celebration, rather than rituals.

The purpose of Gawai has shifted, from a spiritual one to a more commercialised one. "Sowa now is really festival-like," said Madam Mimah. According to her, some felt that the traditional Gawai was a hassle and troublesome.

But people really hate the Gawai tradition the most. They were fed up. They no longer want it. They were fed up with Gawai tradition, and move on to other religion, but those like me who still believe in Gawai just hold on. I stand alone by myself now. Nowadays, people refuse to do all these hard traditions. They want to have abstain-free tradition. As for me, I have no choice, as I am a Gawai believer.

The Gawai will only be kept alive as long as the people responsible for the Gawai such as *Dayung Borih* and *Pak Nyigar* are alive. Since nobody wants to be the person performing Gawai, there is no one to carry on the tradition. Besides that, most of the beliefs and customs related to Gawai are against the beliefs and teachings of Christianity and Islam, which many Bidayuh have converted to.



## **Conclusion**

In the olden days, it was important for the Bidayuh to maintain and conduct various rituals during Gawai because of their beliefs and their co-existence with nature and the spirit world. The meanings of the various Gawai celebrated by the Bidayuh show their co-existence with nature and the spirit world. The society has changed from agrarian to industrial, resulting in a move away from economic activities based on the use of natural resources. This has caused the loss of local ecological knowledge and indigenous traditions, among which is the full celebration of the traditional Gawai. Furthermore, since most have converted into Christianity, most of these Gawai are no longer celebrated. There is also a lack of *Dayung Borih* and *Tukang Gawai*, the people selected by the spirits to perform the rituals. Living in today's modern world may at times makes us forget the importance of respecting nature as well as giving thanks and appreciation for the good things in life. Even though the traditional Gawai may no longer be relevant, the values embedded within them should be instilled in the younger generation. These values are still relevant in today's world, such as being thankful, respecting nature, being humble and not claiming sole ownership of the land but sharing it with other beings including people, animals, and spirits. These values are essential for maintaining harmonious relationships, not only among human beings but also with the environment.

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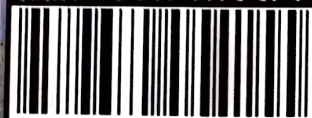
**Bidayuh lens:**

# **Living as a Bidayuh in Today's World**

This book showcases various aspects of the Bidayuh culture beyond the oft-highlighted visible tangible artifacts. The Bidayuh Lens unravels the intangible cultural heritage of a wonderful unique group living in Sarawak and offers a glimpse of the lens through which the modern Bidayuh sees the world. This book discloses the knowledge that is currently available to a select few on the significance of the different types and ways Bidayuh celebrate Gawai. The book explains the intellectuality and relevance of the old and traditional Bidayuh proverbs in the modern world today. This book also deepens appreciation for the meanings of the much-treasured Bidayuh folktales which, surprisingly or not surprisingly (depending on personal views), share features with oral traditions in other parts of the world. Ethnic stereotypes exist in any society and the Bidayuh lens unveils the changing (and the fixed) representation of the Bidayuh people in newspapers and tourism materials. The authors invite you to take the journey to see the Bidayuh with different eyes.



ISBN 978-967-0054-15-5



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Bidayuh Lens: Living as a Bidayuh in Today's World  
UNIMAS PUBLISHER