

Article 4:  
**The Bidayuh People of Sarawak Borneo:  
RITUAL AND CEREMONIES**

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## **1. Abstract**

This research seeks to understand the role of ritual and ceremonies of the Bidayuh tribes in Sarawak Borneo as the way of life of the Bidayuh people. The purpose of this study is therefore to analyse the cultural history of the Bidayuh people as well as its function and its influence to the entire community that becomes its pride and identity.

Qualitative approach is applied, and data collection methodology is through premier sources such as *bajo asal* (traditional songs), *girite Bidayuh damba* (stories and legendary) and exploration and preview of the authenticity of its role in the manifestation of the Bidayuh culture and tradition in numerous villages, though undergoing dynamic modernization. The result of this study will demonstrate its function and preservation as their way of life which influence the entire generations of the Bidayuh people.

Keywords: ritual and ceremonial process, customs and traditions, Bidayuh culture.

## **2. Introduction**

The Bidayuh traditional villages situated mostly in the remote areas. There has always been peace and harmony among the people. Even though residents do not have family ties, the spirit of brotherhood between members of the society has always been closely intertwined. Rituals and ceremonies have played very important role in bringing spirit of togetherness and creating harmonious atmosphere in the Bidayuh community in every village.

Process of rituals and ceremonies among the Bidayuh people are often described as a reflection of its backwardness by western researchers and very much disliked by the Bidayuh community

because it describes the Bidayuh community as a primitive society. Social change among Bidayuh is fast and dynamic. The younger generation of Bidayuh does not show interest and commitment to preserve the cultural heritage and treasures of the Bidayuh tradition contained in the process of rituals and ceremonies. This phenomenon is very worrying because its glory is leading to a dimmer pathway, due to the current dynamic phases of development. Conservation efforts are still receiving cold responses among the Bidayuh community itself.

### **3. Objective and Methodology**

Research on Bidayuh cultural and customary heritage is still lacking and this has prompted researcher to conduct this study in the hope to bring better understanding among international community of the Bidayuh culture that manifested in the process of ritual and ceremonies. This study aims to review and examine the rituals of preservation of customs and traditions contained in traditional ceremonies and celebrations centered in the community of the Bidayuh village in the Bau, Padawan and Serian Division of Sarawak in the hope of fulfilling the following objectives:

- To describe the history of traditional Bidayuh culture;
- To evaluate the influence of the ritual and ceremonial process in moulding the life of the Bidayuh people; and
- To summarize the function of the process of rituals and ceremonies for conservation.

This study is an ethnographic study. Qualitative methods are applied in this study with the main focus that is, primary and secondary research. Through primary research, the collection of data and information is through fieldwork. Interviews were conducted among informants in various villagers like Kampung Opar and Kampung Gumbang in Bau, Kampung Piching and Kampung Bantang in Serian and Kampung Anah Rais in Padawan. However, in addition to fieldwork, researchers using library research methods and interviews were also conducted to obtain additional information.

Qualitative methods according to Stephen D. (2012) examine social settings from an internal perspective and produce descriptions and analyses, rather than using numbers, to obtain meaning. Qualitative research has two dimensions: an interpretive perspective, which focuses on expressing participants' views, and a critical perspective, which is based on interpretive perspectives but also examines the ways in which strength is embedded in the social environment.

#### 4. Rituals and Worship

Nais (1989) described the ritual process and ceremonies among the Bidayuh people as closely linked to worship of spirits and Tamba in the traditional Bidayuh community. According to him, "worship in traditional Bidayuh is surrender to the more powerful to help, avoid any disruption and disaster that may occur. For traditional Bidayuh it is a manifestation of willingness to do anything to please a more powerful force. " In his writings, Howard (2003: 174) attributed the end goal of sacrifice is intended that the request be granted the benefit of the inhabitants of the village as way of life in the traditional era.

Traditional Bidayuh community believed in the existence of spirits that could harm them. Therefore, they have no choice but to comply with all the rules to avoid angering the spirits and its actions against them. These rules were later developed into customs observed strictly by the community. Rituals and ceremonies were practiced in every Bidayuh village, belief and practices of ancestors inherited from generations to generation and must be complied with to avoid disaster. Religious ceremony and ritual held at each stage of life from birth to death. Ceremonies were adopted and performed according to procedures and rites, prescribed by *babeh pirinteng*.

**Photograph 1:**

The human skulls, symbol of bravery, heroism and masculinity of the past, kept and reserved by residents of Kampung Opar Bau.



**Photograph 2:**

Offerings to the spirits of human skulls found in *baruk* at Kampung Opar Bau.

## **Passage for spirit of rice**

*Nirit dawu ampis tugat dawu sara diu*

*Nirit tangan ku dingu nyakit*

*Nyakit sampai sirungu kutu*

*O diu kanchu pagai da Ngapui badu linu*

*Tabanku nanju muat sulang*

*Tabanku nanju muat maoi*

*Tabanku nanju pinukap*

*Tabanku nanju pinabung*

*Tabanku nanju pimungo*

*Tabanku nanju pinyantang*

*Tabanku nanju Muat badu*

*Tabanku nanju muat sungkut*

*Tabanku nanju ati ngite*

*Tabanku nanju ati ngisok*

*Tabanku nanju muat bangas*

*Tabanku nanju muat bangas padi*

*Tabanku nanju bangasjagung*

*Tabanku nanju bangas simangku*

*Tabanku nanju bangas timun*

*Tabanku nanju bangas guttu*

*Tabanku nanju sumpah kireng*

*Tabanku nanju sumpah tami*

*Tabanku nanju sumpah babah*

*Tabanku nanju sumpah dayum*

*Tabanku nanju sumpah saringina*

*Nanyu nuh beda mandih*

*Beda nuh rampas narik awang*

*Source: Rawin Anak Rumbud. Kampung Bantang 12 March 2020. Rites and Passage to  
appease spirit of rice*

## Translation

Take an *ampis* leaf

To cure my disease

Curing all kinds of diseases

Oh, hold the first ends

Turn glowing

To illuminate

Ghost the destroyer

Ghost the disease carrier

Take me to the shine of the hatred ghost

Take me to shine the phantom obstacle

Take me to shine the ghost blockers

Take me to shine a ghost bug

Take me to shine ghost of insects

Take me to shine ghost of termites

Take me to shine ghosts of caterpillars

Take me to light the devil disease

Take me to shine rice disease

Take me to shine corn disease

Take me to shine watermelon disease

Take me to shine cucumber disease

Take me to shine spinach disease

Take me to shine the liars

Take me to shine a traitor oath

Take me to shine the pretenders

Take me to shine the oath

Let them perish

Let them run away from our rice

Before the ceremony was held, some preparations were done, including preparing offerings to the rice fields. An elderly woman who knew the spell like Rawin Anak Rubed would be called to the *baruk* in traditional Bidayuh costume. She then would place a bowl filled with some food offered to the spirit of paddy, accompanied by sound of gongs until the ritual ended.

<p>Seven slices of cooked chicken livers  Seven slices of cooked pork liver  Seven sticks of bamboo cylinder containing cooked glutinous rice  One bowl of fish pickle  Seven slices of turmeric leaves  Seven slices of betel nuts  Seven stems of paddy shoot  One small knife blade  One black feather live chicken  Half yard of plain cloth in black colour.</p>
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**Table 1:** List of items prepared for ritual proses and ceremonies to be presented to the spirit of rice.

*Source: Research interview with Ketua Gawai Nyawan Atok, 78 years old of Kampung Gumbang Bau, 13 Jun 2018*

Foods needed in offerings wrapped in leaves with a full order by the women. Foods that have been wrapped and put in the basket in black cloth. They started moving to the *baruk* where the ceremony took place, then to the paddy fields nearby. In the paddy fields, the food would be left inside the *sanggar*. A black chicken would be slaughtered to end the ritual. Chicken blood would be sprinkled all along the path to the village. Symbolically, the chosen paddy field represented the whole region of paddy fields cultivated by the villagers.

## 5. Ritual and offerings to the spirit of the human skulls

Offerings to human skull ceremony referred to the Bidayuh as *gawai baak*, held in honour of the skull that has been obtained by warriors in the battle between villages in head hunting expeditions. The spirits of the skull would be invited to appease the spirits in their new home, which is the *baruk*. Some researchers like Bock associated it with a tendency to human being need and stated that;

The barbarous practice of head-hunting, as carried on by all the Dayaks tribes, not only in the independent territories, but also in some parts of the tributary states, is part and parcel of their religious rites. Births and naming, marriages and burials, not to mention less important events, cannot be properly celebrated unless the heads of a few enemies, more or less, have been secured to grace the festivities or solemnities.

(Bock, 1985:2:15)

However, according to Walker (2002), during the reign of James Brooke, the practice of cutting head was no longer in existence, but the residents were allowed to celebrate skulls as trophies inherited from their ancestors. In later years, Bidayuh gradually began to lose interest in the ceremony. Nais (1988) stated that preparation of rituals and ceremonies must be prepared at least a year in advance. In relation to that, only man and women over the age of thirty years of age were permitted to organise this festival unless they were heroes or had taken part in the expedition where head hunting was carried out.



**Photograph 3:**

Preparations of foods for skulls ceremonies in Kampung Mentu Tapu, Serian in 1954.

*Source: Department of Sarawak Museum*

**Photograph 4:**

*Lemang (pangkang)* prepared for the skull ceremonies in Kampung Mentu Tapu, Serian on August 30, 1954

*Source: Department of Sarawak Museum*





**Photograph 5:**

An Elder preparing ceremonial offering to the spirit of the skulls in Kampung Mentu Tapu, 30 August 1954.

*Source: Department of Sarawak Museum*

The skull offering ceremony is to be held in stages. This happened for two reasons. Firstly, it is to enable the public to abstain in sufficient time, usually within two or three months. Secondly, to determine whether the skull spirit feels "happy" to stay in a new "place", the *baruk*, only known by the *tua gawai* through his interpretation. The types of food provided is as follows:

1. *Baram sinampur daya siyok da buru nan kirubung baak nyuhup*
2. *Baru kunyit nabur da sasah kirubung tanda bidingan*
3. *Sungkoi tungkus angkang kodog da sasah kirubung nan nuh maan*
4. *Sungkoi dog binisa minan omon bahai lalu. binungkus minan dawu nan kirubung maan Ialu supaya sien jani guna kampung*
5. *Kunyit odog numpuh Ialu barut da dawu nan entamu kirunung lalu jaji bala kita da binua*
6. *Makko, rimu diput, dawu baid, bua bahai dangan gambit kodog da sasah nan kirubung maan.*
7. *Barak ambun dam oh masak kodog da sasah kirubung*
8. *Sungkoi da buru diput ato panggang*
9. *Umbos ikan siluang da moh masak*
10. *Rukok dawu apung kodog da raang kirubung.*

*Source: Research interview with Pemancha Kane in Tebedu District Office 18 March 2019*



## Translation

1. Rice wine mixed with chicken blood in a bamboo, as a thirst quencher for the skull.
2. Rice sprinkled on the side of the skull as a sign of blessing and friendship.
3. The rice is wrapped in betel leaves and placed near the skull
4. *Aracanut* juice is shared and placed near the skull as a sign the he was one of the villagers.
5. Pounded turmeric powder to preserve the skulls.
6. Tabaco, lime, slices of betel leaf, betel nuts and Gambier were placed and arranged in order as part of foods for the skulls
7. Ripe bananas were placed by the sides as part of the supplementary food for the skulls.
8. Rice stuffed inside small bamboo or *pangkang*.
9. Packages containing cooked fish meat wrapped with leaves
10. Dried mangrove shoots infused in the jaws of the skull as a cigarette.

The villagers would get together inside the *baruk* with various dishes they had prepared, arranged and placed accordingly, ready for the *nyarra* session to begin. It is a tradition indicating the spirit of togetherness in the Bidayuh community as practiced since the traditional era. The skull worshipping ceremony commenced with several trays containing offerings. Trays been prepared with offerings would be paraded around the skulls in the centre point of the *baruk*, accompanied by the graceful dancers in full traditional costumes to the beat of the gongs. Trays would be arranged in the following manner;

- |                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <b>first trays</b> | contained seven cooked eggs to be presented to the spirit of the hills and mountains, through spirits skull. |
| <b>second tray</b> | contained seven kinds of offerings served for Daya Guna spirit   |
| <b>third tray</b>  | contained seven kinds of offerings served to the spirit of the human skulls found in <i>baruk</i>            |
| <b>fourth tray</b> | contained seven kinds of offerings the spirit of the tree  |
| <b>fifth tray</b>  | contained seven different kinds of offerings to spirits of wild animals in the forest.                       |

- six trays** contained seven different types of offerings to spirits of rivers to keep the fish in the river to multiply.
- Seventh tray** contained seven different kinds of offerings to worship the spirit of the ancestors who have died.
- eighth tray** contained four types of offerings designated presentation for the spirit of evil creatures. The spirits of the skull "asked" to inform the evil creatures to stay away from the villagers.
- Ninth tray** contained seven different kinds of offerings for the spirit of the honeybee. The spirits of skulls expected to make more beehives on the branches around the villages.
- Tenth tray** contains eight kinds of offerings to the gods namely *muat kamang*, *muat jorong* and *muat pidadeg* for continuous protection of the village.

*Source: Research interview with Robert Sulis Ridu, Senior Researcher, Council for Customs & Traditions Sarawak, Chief Minister Department, June 18, 2007*

Description above is a manifestation that human skulls kept by the Bidayuh tribes in the *baruk* were treated with honour and respect. The spirit of skulls was served reverently with dignity and accorded the highest level of conduct of worship in the Bidayuh community. Each dish was prepared with similar purpose, namely to persuade the passion of the spirit for the protection and security in everyday life.

The Traditional Bidayuh believed that life was characterised by the practice of faith healing. In animism, the sickness is usually attributed to spirits, demons, ghouls and ghosts. The usual method used by shaman to cure patients is to real out spells to banish evil spirits that plague the patient's body. In many cases, rituals and ceremonies must be conducted as rites and passages towards healing process. Healing rituals involves incantations and spells that could negatively affect the spirits to get out of the patient's body or stay away from it until the patient recovers.

Ginos Lumpoi, 78 years old, a famous shaman in Kampung Bantang Serian revealed that in the early days; to treat a male patient he would go to the *baruk* to meet the patient to identify the sickness. Typically, it would be held at night on full moon because procedures applied involved occult believed to be more effective. Ginos said that when magic spell was read

accordingly, the evil spirits that inhabited inside the patient would be driven away. For example, a spell to cure the possessed by a ghost is as follows;

### **Incantations to cure people possessed by ghosts.**

*Uhhhhhhhhhhh ... hah uhhhhhhhhhhh.hah*  
*Kurrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrahhhhhhhhhh ...aba aba amu*  
*Mandug amu amu ngirusak aku*  
*Mandeg amu la/u buhu ngajah bautjaran*  
*Mandeg amu dangan umo bateh dangan balik karii mudip*  
*Mandeg amu maber libintat mahap*  
*Aku mogjinaga babeh*  
*Babeh nyugon pimagah, pimasi, pingirindu*  
*Nan nangkis, nan ngilawan*  
*Kandam aku*  
*Muhun masu sigatung beh*  
*Ngiran aku*

### **Translation**

Oh haaaaa.....  
Kurrrrrrrrrrrahhh  
Not me  
Not you  
You are the destroyer  
Hopeless creature on earth  
You came in tears and returned breathless  
But my protector is great  
You are weaked  
My protector will shield me  
He gives me strength to fight you.....and your evils ways to make me sick  
He flies from the skies to wipe you  
Incantation to cast out evil spirits from interfering with a person's wellbeing.

*Burrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr*

*oh huh...*

*oh ... huh aku nganchak akam pisuhon nanchak dog babeh pirinteng akam pingilamat aku akam jinju aku akam bandir aku bipakat pinyayung akam ngilamat aku' bada pimagah akam babeh pirinteng.*

### **Translation**

Burrrrrrrrrrr

Ohhh...hahhh

Ohhh...hhaaa

I appeal to you to command

My protector the great

He is my protector

He is my saviour

He is my source of strength

He created fortress to defend my spirit

He commands his soldiers to fall from the skies

He commands his soldiers emerge from the ocean

He dominates the mountains, the valley, the moon

He commands strong winds and storms to cripple my enemies

He is great.... ..my creature is great

Burrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr, ohhhhhhhhhhhhhahhhhhhhhh

*Source: Ginos Lumpoi 75 years. Research interview on 12 September 2007 in Kampong Bantang, Serian*

Ginos added healing through a shaman was to be conducted by no ordinary person. The skills were passed by *babeh sibayan* who created this beautiful universe to carry out responsibility entrusted by the *tampa* to ensure the welfare and wellbeing of the villagers. To possess this knowledge, patience, dexterity and skills he must abide and comply by the taboos imposed. To ensure it remains effective, a ceremony of *pisumpa* has to be conducted. Failure to comply within the stipulated time, usually before the full moon, would lead to the shaman himself



Vanish in the ocean  
Let it (the ointment and the tools) be mightily  
Let it absorbed  
Grandpa, make this ointment great.

## **6. Findings**

Human relationships with the supernatural are linked to the concept of nature in their environment. This belief has given them the confidence to move them to realize ideas related to the relationships of nature and supernatural powers engraved in their lives. Douglas, Mary (1984: 229) said this understanding illustrates that human beings really want to make this world a meaningful place to live. Man seeks a principle of unification and survival from various experiences in life including practicing mystical beliefs and the worship of spirits.

This research discovered that the history of early settlements and the cosmology of the Bidayuh community who proved to adopt a culture of nomadic life to find a safe and marginalized environment from any threat. Their survival is closely related to the beliefs of animism, ritual ceremonies in the worship of the supernatural and its influence being found in the jungles and caves have become practices that should not be side-lined. It is something that is born of action to avoid and stay away from any threats and intimidation as well as a solution to problems that are likely to keep themselves in misery and poverty. They depend on the tradition of bird watching as omen of good and bad luck in their daily lives (Nais 1996: 13)

Clifford Geertz (1973: 127) states that "ritual ceremonies in the belief of animism play an important role as a model that provides guidance for human beings to manage life such as ways in relation to the supernatural". This statement reinforces the opinion that the process of rituals and ceremonies are indeed the practices of worship of traditional beliefs as their way of life. This is done through interactions and behaviours centred on Bidayuh customs and traditions manifested in the ritual process and various ceremonies. The practice of this belief is presented through the worship of the spirits of the skull, the calling of the spirits of the dead and the ceremony of casting off-loading Muat Jirong as their god which they worship with mystical practices.

This opinion carries the meaning that the ritual offerings in the ceremonies are a form of worship of spirits for protection from disease attacks and the ability to enhance agricultural yields, easy sustenance while hunting and so on, as found in the worship of skull spirits. This phenomenon brings the interpretation that ritual process and ceremonies was conducted to fulfil the purpose in some aspects of life that are closely related to the survival of Bidayuh.

Basically, the process of rituals in ceremonies serves as the premise of custom and worship as well as traditional celebrations related to the belief in *tampa da ngundah dunya bidayuh* (God who created the Bidayuh world). Apart from that, its main function is also closely related to the ceremony of seeking protection from enemy attacks, wild animals and catastrophes from spirits and the emergence of ghosts. This is a manifestation that the ritual process and ceremonies has succeeded in shaping the life of the Bidayuh tribe through traditional worship rituals, ceremonies and celebrations that are the traditional belief of the Bidayuh community.

## **7. Conclusion**

Based on the findings, several conclusions are presented to discuss the purpose and objectives of the study. The first objective of the study which aims to describe the cultural history of Bidayuh of its ritual process, ceremonies and worship has been achieved by exploring several events rituals and worship ceremonies participated by researchers in Kampung Gumbang, Kampung Opar and Kampung Pichin, all are Bidayuh traditional village which embraced close cultural and traditional practice yet considered fast advance moving villages in developments among the Bidayuh community.

The Bidayuh community voiced that ritual process and traditional ceremonies as a social and festive events that needs to be expanded in its role. This phenomenon is evident in several villages like Kampung Gumbang in Bau, Kampung Tae in Serian and Kampung Anah Rais in Padawan. Through the findings of the study, it is concluded that the Bidayuh people have the same enemy, the same land, the same source of energy, the same customs, the same rules and the same beliefs. This is the factor that forges and strengthens their relationship as a society that gives birth to a similar Bidayuh group and has similarities that allow all the rules and social norms in the Bidayuh community to be easily understood and followed. This shows the importance rituals and ceremonies as a very important social institution in planning logistics in the village defence movement and the defensive fortifications of a Bidayuh village from any

evil attacks and supernatural power interference. The daily life of the Bidayuh community depends on *tampa riyuh*, *tampa pidadeg*, and also the address of the bird. Symbols of *tampa pidadeg* (protective ghosts) have been featured and paraded in several traditional Bidayuh festivals and celebrations to bring a picture of the situation faced by the traditional Bidayuh community, how important it is to preserve these ghosts that help in making paddy fields always cared for and preserved abundant harvests, apart from the 'guardians' to the peace of the village.

Through the discussion and findings of the study it is concluded that ritual process and ceremonies among the Bidayuh people needs to be intensified to meet the social needs in the era of modernization. Its traditional role needs to be revived in order to be adapted to the tastes, techniques and soul of the current generation. This effort will ensure the continuity of its role as a Bidayuh culture and tradition. Therefore, concrete and meaningful immediate steps need to be planned and action taken so that research and studies to be conducted on its greatness can be restored and revived. In conclusion, the findings of this study are done as a platform to provide space to attract the interest of various parties to give attention and opportunity to explore Bidayuh culture in depth, and hopefully will continue through new research as well as open space for new discoveries involving culture to this precious heritage has not been taken over by passing events.



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## **A Glossary of Bidayuh Words and Phrases**

Muat Jirong: Personal god.

Tampa da ngundah dunya bidayuh: God that creates the Bidayuh world

Tampa riyuh: God of the sky

Tampa pidadeg: God of mercy. Having been dedicated to tampa pidadeg, the villagers could expect good harvest and successful hunting trips all year round.

Babeh pirinteng: Shaman

Ampis: Name of a kind of vegetable

Sanggar: Small hut specially erected to display offerings to the spirits during ritual process and ceremonies. The sanggar must be placed at the entrance of site where rituals are conducted.

Gawai baak: Skull's ceremony

Babeh sibayan: Term given to an elder created by a god coming from skies to the village to perform procedures to cure sickness

Tampa: Bidayuh God

Pisumpa: The offering process

Nyarra: A gathering of villagers and family members, celebrating with foods and drinks

Daya Guna: Bloods of chicken scarified to the goddess of the land

Muat kamang: A god of fortune

Baruk: Bidayuh traditional building constructed as centre of culture and social ceremonies. This majestic building is a symbol of pride and identity of every Bidayuh villages.

Kemanyan: Incense powder usually burnt to start with ritual process and ceremonies believed to able to drive away evil spirits.