

# Changes in Cultural Practices of the Melanau Community in the Kaul Festival in Mukah, Sarawak

Mohammad Husri Morni<sup>1\*</sup>, Mohd Yuszaidy Mohd Yusoff<sup>2</sup>, Muammar Ghaddafi Hanafiah<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1\*,2,3</sup>Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Corresponding Email: <sup>1\*</sup>husri@jkkn.gov.my

**Abstract:** This paper work is about the Kaul Festival, which is a festival that combines elements of religion, belief and customs of the Melanau community in Mukah, Sarawak. In the past, this Kaul was a type of religious festival celebrated by the Melanau 'pagan' community. It is a worship ceremony for them to ask for the blessing from the guardians of the sea, land and forest in order to have peace and security when carrying their daily activities for sustenance in those places. Changes in religion and beliefs among the Melanau community also changed the application and belief of Kaul. The presence of Islam and Christianity brings a new scenario to Kaul which is more suitable to be seen as a socio-cultural party. However, there is still hidden a uniqueness of the Melanau community's heritage that still maintains in the traditional ceremonies and adapts them with the passage of time. The problem of the research is how the Kaul Festival are still celebrated as a religious festival in the Melanau community. The objective of this research is to identify changes in the cultural customs of the Melanau community regarding the Kaul Festival. This study uses an ethnographic approach in order to obtain the required data. This study was carried out in Mukah over a seven-day period. The ethnographic approach that were used consists of field studies and literature studies. Field research conducted were to obtain data such as observation, participation and interviews. The method of observation and participation is used to ensure that the data collected and collected are suitable for the study. The interview method uses a semi-structured interview technique by interviewing some traditional practitioners and authoritative elders in the Melanau community. Bibliography research such as journals, books and printed reports are to support this research by contributing a a secondary materials. Primary and secondary data need to undergone a screening process by using thematic analysis techniques and proofreading in order to obtain the correct data in accordance with the research. The findings discovered were that the Melanau community still maintains and celebrates the Kaul Festival even though there has been an adaptation and assimilation in the Melanau community. Currently the Kaul Festival has become one of the festivals that not only specifically bring together the Melanau community, but has also brought together other various community who want to share in the joy of the Kaul Festival. The organization of this festival not only reminds the customs and heritage traditions of the Melanau community, but becomes a platform to generate the economy and elevate Mukah as a heritage tourism destination. Therefore, this research are expected to give contribution of knowledge to the younger generation in general, especially the new generation of the Melanau community regarding the customs and identity of the Melanau community.

**Keywords:** customs, Melanau, pagan, Kaul Festival, Tibow

## **1. Introduction**

The origin of the Melanau community settlement is explained by Yasir Abd Rahman (1987), whereby the main settlement of the Melanau community is mostly located at the river mouth and also in coastal areas from Rajang district to Bintulu district. The patterns of settlements for all communities has a "lineal" pattern. Their houses are located on the river banks and streams in the respected area. This settlement patterns is related to the economic activities of this tribe but it is more influenced by natural factors such as vast forests and swamps. The settlement patterns does not necessarily determine the social status in the Melanau community but influences the customs and culture of this community. The Melanau community has a few in common with the Malay community in terms of beliefs, culture and customs. However, the Melanau people still have their own distinct culture and customs. These customs have been passed down from time to time and still continues to this day. However, their traditional practices and customs still undergone some changes such as the public ceremony or festival which is the Kaul Festival.

In the past, Kaul was a kind of religious festival celebrated by the 'pagan' Melanau community. It is a ceremony of worship for them to ask for the blessings from the guardians of the sea, land and forest in order to have peace and security when carrying their daily activities to find sustenance in those places. This festival is usually held according to the Melanau pagan calendar that marks the end of the monsoon season which has had an impact on their lives as farmers and fishermen. Rivers, seas and forests are the main source of their income. The Kaul Festival is one of the traditions for the Melanau people that is still preserved to the present generation.

## **2. Methodology**

This research adopted an ethnographic approach in order to obtain necessary data. This research was conducted in Mukah, Sarawak over a period of seven days. The ethnographic approach used consists of field studies and literature studies. The field research were conducted to obtain data such as observation, participation and interviews. The method of observation and participation are used to ensure that the data collected are suitable for the study. The interview method uses a semi-structured interview technique by interviewing some traditional practitioners and authoritative elders in the Melanau community and they are selected as informants because they have knowledge and experience in Melanau cultural arts, either as activists or members of associations. The informants of the study consisted of fifteen people from the Melanau community, namely seven (7) men and eight (8) women aged between 28 and 72 years old. The interview inquiries includes background and knowledge about the Kaul Festival celebrated by the Melanau community. Bibliographic studies such as journals, books and printed reports are to support this research as a contributing secondary materials. The primary and secondary data needed to undergone a screening process using thematic analysis techniques and proofreading in order to obtain the correct data in accordance with the research.

### **Melanau Community**

The Melanau community is an ethnic community found in Sarawak. The Melanau community has similarities with the Malay community in terms of beliefs, celebrations, and customs. However, the Melanau community still has its own culture and customs. These customs have been passed down from time to time and continue to this day. The majority of Melanau community lived in the river mouth and coast of the Sarawak River. Their occupation are fishermen and farmers according to their own culture and tradition. The majority of the community are Muslim but some of them still practice their heritage belief (pagan).

Nowadays, there is a cultural absorption within the diverse ethnic in Sarawak. This can be seen through an assimilation whereby the minority accepts the dominant or majority culture in Sarawak. According to Zaini Ozea (1989) among the races in Sarawak, the Melanau have experienced the most clashes and socio-cultural assimilation and this makes them not only the most interesting but also the an immediate group to study. Assimilation refers to a process when a group or ethnic minority adopts the culture and identity of the majority to reduce its ethnic boundaries. This assimilation occurs through ethnic mixing within the dominant surrounding community group and also through intermarriage. According to Saiee Driss (1996) whom stated that Melanau is the only race in Sarawak that can accept religious diversity in family members without facing any problems.

Kaul Melanau is one of the popular festivals celebrated by the Melanau community. It aims to appreciate different types of spirit such as the spirit of the land, the forest, the sea, and their farms. Regardless wherever you are as a Melanau, but you are required to celebrate this festival to show you are a Melanau. This proves that the Melanau community can be identified with this festival. This festival is celebrated based on a unique calendar which is a calendar system based on the position of the moon. The first month is known as *pengejin* and the Kaul festival is held in that month. Other known months in the calendar are *pengelawak umik* month, *pengelawak ayang* month, *pelepak* month, *paka umik* month , *pakar ayang* month, *pegalan* month, *suah* month, *pidai* month, *penangih* month, *pamelai* month dan *pengasiseang* month.

### **Kaul Festival**

Kaul is a festival that has been celebrated by the Melanau community since time immemorial. This traditional festival which celebrated annually, brings together various interesting and unusual ceremonies and customs from other races. This festival is always held in the third week of April in Mukah. In the past, Kaul was seen as a religious festival by the Melanau Pagan community to ask for blessings from the guardians of the sea, land, fields and forests so that the guardians would not disturb them when they were looking for sustenance. Because the Melanau people are synonymous with fishing activities, Kaul is held to mark the end of the monsoon season.

### **Customs and Rituals in the Kaul Festival**

When the Kaul Festival ceremony is held, a man will be appointed as the position of leader known as Bapak Kaul. This position is very important in the event of Kaul Festival. Bapak Kaul plays the role of middleman whom communicates between *ipok* and humans. In order that the Kaul ceremony runs accordingly to the rules and traditions of generations, Bapak Kaul is responsible for ensuring that the ceremony is carried out correctly. In addition, Bapak Kaul is the main pillar of the Kaul Festival ceremony. He is responsible for persuading, appealing to ethereal beings or *ipok* and warding off all evil and calamity that may befall on anyone and is also responsible for ensuring that taboos are followed and those who disobey will be punished.



Picture 1: Serahang Traditional Boat Parade

Bapak Kaul comes from the lineage of ‘Sepok’ in Dalat, Mukah. According to sources, other people cannot become Bapak Kaul because several people from this generation have become Bapak Kaul and this practice has not yet been violated because the people fear that bad omen will happen to them if they disobey. Preparation must be done before the Kaul Festival is conducted. The materials required to be presented to the *ipok kala* are *bertih*, *penyaram* cake, yellow rice, duck, *pais*, nipah leaf cigarettes and areca betel leaves. The materials will be placed in seven containers made of nipah leaves and these containers will be placed in a tray called *serahang*. Most of the *serahang* is made by women because women are said to be more thorough and in line with the gentle nature of women. This is made based on a specific motive. The motifs on the *serahang* also symbolize the image of sea, land and air. Based on observations, *serahang* not only requires high precision but also patience and amount of creativity by taking into account certain elements in Pesta Kaul and the community's belief system.



Picture 2 : Serahang Incantition Ceremony By Bapak Kaul



In addition, sources also state that *serahang* comes from the word '*serahan*' which is an offering to *ipok*. *Serahang* has a height of about seven feet that has its own shape and elements. The components found in the *serahang* must be perfect without any defects because an incomplete and imperfect *serahang* will invite the anger of the *ipok* and eventually the plague will fall on whoever made it. Penghulu or his representative will hit the gong or *canang* seven days before the Kaul Festival ceremony is held. This is to inform the villagers to complete their work in the forest or in the sea. Furthermore, the *canang* or gong will also be struck again three days before the Kaul to remind the villagers to finish their work immediately and give each family the opportunity to prepare food for the Kaul party feast and also to decorate the *bahuong*.



Picture 3 : Traditional Food Within The Serahang

Other than that, all the families involved from the village will come down to bring a feast to the place of the Kaul ceremony. Every family member must be present except for the elderly. All the *serahang* that have been made will be set up around the beach or river mouth where the festival is held. This ceremony will begin with a mantra spell by the head of the Kaul aimed at *ipok kala*. Seven candles will be lit and the purpose of this candle is lit because it is said to represent each layer of the earth and illuminate those who have passed away. Yellow rice will be sown by Bapak Kaul around the *serahang* area and to the line of villagers who are facing the food. The head of the Kaul will give instructions for the meal to be enjoyed and the residents present can also enjoy the meal brought by other families because this act is pleased by the *ipok kala* and it is believed to increase the sustenance or fortune of those who do it.



Picture 4: Melanau's Community Feast

At the end of the feast, the head of the Kaul and his assistant will take the *serahang* to a place believed to be inhabited by ethereal beings. This act is very important for the Likau community because it is to prevent the *ipok* who lives in the area from getting angry and causing catastrophe. There are some rules that applied when the Kaul Festival is held which is to forbid fishing in the morning on the day of the festival because Kaul Festival marks the beginning of the new year and in other words the end of the rainy season, and fishermen may fish because the weather is expected to be good. After that, the entertainment event will be held. Among the entertainment events that will be held are boat racing, *pencak silat*, playing *tibow*, playing *gasing* (top), *mengalai* and traditional dances of the Melanau community such as bamboo dance, *mengarang* dance, and *serahang* dance.

*Tibow* is a traditional Melanau game that is very popular in Sarawak. *Tibow* is built from several bamboo sticks or piles of wood or hardwood. It is in the form of a shelf or field that is tiered and pyramid-shaped. Usually, the height of this *tibow* is between 8-10 meter and it also built in an inclined state on flat ground. *Tibow* is built in two parts, the first part has *para tau pemedang* that resembles a ladder and the second part consists of the two pyramid-shaped poles. In this part there is a hanging rope made of rattan and this rattan will be swung like a swing. Both of these parts must be built solidly for the safety of the players.

According to observations, this *tibow* is usually played in an open area. Normally, the ground for this game should be soft and do not have stones that could harm the player. The purpose of this game is to test the spirit and courage of the participants. Although this game looks simple, it requires a lot of energy. For young people, this is their chance for meeting and courting between the sexes. According to the stories, this game of *tibow* started when Pentian village was attacked by a disease that could led to death. This village is said to be deserted, as if it was dead. Gloomy atmosphere surrounds the villagers. Then there was an old man dreaming in the village. In his dream there was an eagle bringing a kind of toy called '*tibow*' to revive the atmosphere in Pentian village which was shrouded in depression. The news about the dream was then spread to the whole village. Because they believe in the truth of the dream, the villagers work together to build the toy which is considered strange. Since then, *tibow* is

accepted as part of the ceremony in any gathering held by the local Melanau community according to Shahnail Asmar Saa'id and Mohamed Roselan Malek (1995).

*Mengalai* dance is one of the dances held during the Kaul Festival. This *mengalai* dance is the second most popular dance among the Melanau community. This dance has many interesting and amazing actions. This dance is performed by both men and women. The dancers will wear a black traditional clothing of the Melanau community. *Mengalai* dance is a dance that uses the movement of *kenyalang* bird as a basis and most of the dancers will dance alternately between men and women.

### **The Changes in Kaul Festival in Melanau Society**

The the majority Melanau people whom lived at the mouth and coast of the Sarawak River, are known as a community that still practices its own culture and traditions. Changes in religion and beliefs among the Melanau community also changed the application and belief of Kaul. The presence of Islam and Christianity brought new scenario to Kaul which is more suitable to be seen as a socio-cultural party. However there are still the uniqueness of the heritage hidden in the Melanau natives in the state of Sarawak, which is a society that maintains traditional ceremonies that are adapted according to the times.

This significant change happened a long time ago when there was socio-cultural assimilation either through marriage or because of one's own will in changing religion from animism (pagan) to Islam or Christianity respectively. This is the challenge faced in the customs and traditions of the Melanau community when assimilation occurs which can change the socio-cultural form and landscape of their lives. The changes in terms of traditional practices, culture and customs gradually undergo changes according to community acceptance after the assimilation and acceptance of other religions, customs and cultures that are more dominant.

The Kaul Festival is the largest community picnic ground of the Melanau community. This festival serves a manifestation of the cultural treasures of the Melanau people from aspects of clothing, handicrafts, food, games and dances. Now the celebration is joined by all walks of life from various races, whom wishes to see and participate in various traditional games such as *Tibow*, exhibitions and sales of local exotic foods such as *Tebaloi*, *Si'et*, *Sago* and *Umai*, cultural performances, handicraft exhibitions and what is more interesting is the process of unifying kinship within those found in the various races, religions and speech in the community's ceremony.

Indirectly, the organization of Kaul Festival opens up economic opportunities for the local community to generate income through the sales of stalls provided. Suara Sarawak's survey at the fairgrounds found that many traders did not miss the opportunity to earn a side income. Various types of sales are available including food and drinks, handicrafts, clothes and so on. Thus, the organization of this festival not only reminds them of the customs and heritage traditions of the Melanau community, but also serves as a platform to generate the economy and promote Mukah as a heritage tourism destination.

The young or current generation are still less interested in continuing to learn every process in customs that their descendants have gone through. This is because most of these cultural customs have not been practiced for a long time and the celebration of the Kaul has set aside traditional practices and rituals that is seen to violate the religious laws of the respective practices today. Nevertheless, the Melanau community still believes and proud of the uniqueness of their ethnic customs.



### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Kaul Festival nowadays has received a great response and has been joined by all walks of life from various races especially to see and participate in various traditional games such as *tibow*, exhibitions and sales of local exotic foods such as *Tebaloi*, *Si'et*, *Sagu* and *Umai*, cultural performances, exhibition of Melanau handicraft products. Kaul also became more interesting field for the process of unifying kinship that are found in various races, religions and languages in this large community's ceremony. The changes in religion and beliefs among the Melanau community changed the application and belief of Kaul. The presence of Islam and Christianity brings a new scenario to Kaul which is more suitable to be seen as a socio-cultural ceremony. However there is still hid the uniqueness of the heritage of the Melanau Nation in the State of Sarawak, which is a society that still maintains traditional ceremonies that are adapted according to the times.

### 4. Reference

1. Jeniri Amir & Awang Azman Awang Pawi. 2001. Kaul: Suatu Interpretasi Sosiobudaya. Kuching: Massa Kasturi Management.
2. Jeniri Amir, Rosline Sandal & Rudi Affendi Khalik. 2007. The Sarawakiana Series Culture &
3. Heritage. Dakan : The Diminishing Medium of Melanau Tradisional Healing. Kuching:Pustaka Negeri Sarawak.
4. Jeniri Amir. 1989. Adat Resam Kaum Melanau. The Sarawak Museum Journal.Vol. XL. Special Issue No.4. Part II. Desember 1989.
5. Saiee Driss. 1996. Wawasan Melanau. Wajah Dan Identiti Melanau. Kuching: Lembaga Amanah Kebajikan Kaum Melanau dan Persatuan Melanau Sarawak.
6. Saptuyah Latip . 2011. Adat Perkahwinan Masyarakat Melanau Dan Pandangan Islam Terhadapnya: Satu Kajian di Daerah Mukah, Sarawak: Jabatan Sejarah dan Tamadun Islam, Akademi Pengajian Islam, Universiti Malaya
7. Seng, Chong Chin. 1987. Traditional Melanau Woodcarving (Bilum) in Dalat, Sarawak: Persatuan Kesusasteraan Sarawak
8. Shahnail Asmar Saa'id dan Mohamed Roselan Malek. 1995. Permainan Tradisional. Prisma Sdn.
9. Bhd
10. Yasir Abdul Rahman. 1987. Melanau Mukah: Satu Kajian Budaya. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
11. Zaini Bin Oje @ Ozea. 1997. Bahasa Melanau Dalam Konteks Perubahan Budaya. The SarawakMuseum Journal.Vol. XLVII. Special Issue No.5. Part II. Malay and Melanau Cultural Heritage Seminars II, 1993. Kuching: The Museum.
12. Zaini Ozea. 1989. Bahasa Melanau: Suatu Tanggapan Awal. The Sarawak Museum Journal.Vol. XL. Special Issue No.4. Part II. Desember 1989. Kuching: The Museum

### Appreciation

The author would like to express his gratitude to Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara, Negeri Sarawak, Muzium Budaya Sarawak and Persatuan Sri Ritma, Mukah for their assistance to the planning of this research.

### Interviews

Macollin Bin Ginda, Pembantu Tadbir Muzium Budaya Sarawak ( Mei 2023 ) Kuching, Sarawak



Tommy Black, Sejarahwan bebas masyarakat Melanau kampung Tellian, Mukah (Mac 2023) di Muzium Sapan Puloh, Mukah, Sarawak.  
Yasmin Tahirih Smith, Penggiat dan Pengerusi Persatuan Kebudayaan (Mac 2023) di Mukah, Sarawak.