

Changes in the Use of Sago Masks in the Kaul Serahang Kakan Ritual in Mukah, Sarawak

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Abstract: The Kaul Festival is a festival rich in traditions, arts, and cultures of the Melanau community in Mukah, Sarawak. The main aspect of the Kaul Festival is the Serahang Kakan Kaul Ritual event, which is the event of offerings to Ipok, which is a cleansing ritual carried out to receive blessings and safety for the community. The usage of ‘*Topeng Sagu*’ (sago mask) is one of the symbols of the event for ceremonial purposes and possesses high aesthetic value in the culture of the Melanau community. However, with the changes of time and significant increased of modern influence, the function and role of the Melanau sago mask has undergone changes. The objective of this study is to identify the use and changes of the sago masks usage in the Kaul Serahang Kakan Ritual. This research uses an ethnographic approach to obtain necessary data. This research was conducted in Mukah over a period of seven days. The ethnographical approach that are used consists of field studies and literature studies. The field study conducted are to obtain data such as observations, participations and interviews. Observational and participatory methods were used to ensure that the data collected were appropriate for the study. The interview method uses a semi-structured interview technique by interviewing some traditional practitioners and seniors whom are the authoritative figure in the Melanau community. Bibliographic research such as journals, books and printed reports are used to support this research as a secondary material. Primary and secondary data need to undergo a screening process which uses thematic analysis techniques to obtain the correct data accordingly. The results of the study discovered that the Melanau community still celebrates the Kaul Serahang Kakan Ritual ceremony and the use of the Sago Mask are still practiced but there occurred changes regarding its use. Currently this ritual not only unites the Melanau community, but also unites various other communities who wishes to share the enjoyment. Kaul Serahang Kakan Ritual has also become a platform to generate their economy and elevate Mukah as a heritage tourism destination. Therefore, this research are expected to be a contribution of knowledge to the young generation of Melanau regarding their customs and identity of the Melanau community. The efforts of preserving and documenting the culture of the Melanau community should be continued as national heritage.

Keywords: Ipok, Melanau, Kaul Serahang Kakan, sago mask

Introduction

The traditional role of masks in the culture of the archipelago is as a visual link that facilitates communication between humans and the supernatural. Usually, these ritual activities are led by a shaman who has the ability to communicate with beings in the mystical realm. The request to the shaman is often associated with reconciling the two parties through conversations and various types of performances after the shaman puts on the mask. Apart from preventing fear

towards children, the performance of the ritual during midnights were part of the ritual that cannot be done without going through the proper process. This emphasizes the importance of ritualistic and religious aspects to maintain the purity and effectiveness of masked performances in traditional culture. The culture of wearing a mask is not only limited in the Rantau Nusantara (archipelagic region), but also extends throughout the world. In many areas, the presence of masks has become part of the culture, not only as a ritual but also as a connection with the supernatural as practiced by the Dayak people in Borneo. Masks are also used in community events that functions more as entertainment and in parades. The use of masks is not only related to covering of the face, but is also used in various ways. For example, in the indigenous communities of Africa, New Zealand and Japan, masks are carved and placed in the home as a symbol of protection and as a marker of the main leadership position in the area.

Most of the masks are made of wood, which are carved into suitable designs. Masks can be applied to the face or made in larger sizes to cover the entire body as practiced by some traditional cultures around the world. The masked performance culture is still practiced by the theater community in Borneo especially in ritual activities. The use of masks has become an important aspect in community theater performances, not only as symbols or unique decorative motifs, but also as an important element in the performance itself.. Terdapat pelbagai cara dan fungsi yang boleh diwujudkan oleh masyarakat dalam menjalankan aktiviti bertopeng, di mana pemakai topeng sering menjadi watak penting dalam persembahan. For example, in Dayak society a ghost dance is one of the masked ritual performed by shamans. The use of masks in the dance is believed to help shamans to communicate with certain spirits, especially in haunting situations. Such performances are often performed in the middle of the night after the children are asleep in order to avoid disturbance in the village.

The use of masks in the Melanau community is known as ‘Topeng Sagu’ (sago mask), made using reeds or sago trees. The use of this unique material makes Melanau masks different from other cultures. The reed trees play an important role in Melanau life from exploration of land, to food and medicine. The origins of the masked culture in the Melanau community are still unclear but it is believed that it is a culture that shares influence with the Archipelago and Polynesian communities.

Melanau has many similarities with Polynesia in terms of language, carvings, and rituals, which indicates significant influence from outside cultures. The good relationship between the Melanau community and the Orang Ulu ethnic group such as the Kayan also shows the possible origin between these two groups. Similarities in language and culture are an additional evidence for the close relationship between them.

Methodology

This research was conducted using a qualitative methodology that focused on answering questions related to the role, aesthetics, and relationship of Melanau sago masks in the daily life and ritual activities of the community. This research uses an ethnographical approach to obtain necessary data. This research was conducted in Mukah over a period of seven days. The ethnographical approach used was consists of field studies and literature studies. The field research conducted is to obtain data such as observation, participation and interviews. Observational and participatory methods were used to ensure that the data collected were appropriate for the research. The interview method uses a semi-structured interview technique by interviewing some traditional practitioners and seniors who are an authoritative figure in

the Melanau community. Bibliographic research such as journals, books and printed reports are to support this research by contributing as a secondary material. Primary and secondary data need to go through a screening process using thematic analysis and proofreading techniques to obtain the right data according to the research. From the review of previous studies, it was discovered that most studies related to Melanau masks are not in-depth. Most studies only highlights the atmosphere and presence of masked culture in Kaul Serahang Kakan Ritual. In addition are some customs and prohibitions related to the performance of Kaul Serahang Kakan rituals in Mukah. The information from the previous survey and the three field studies were then collected, analysed, and compared to obtain more focused and in-depth research information.

The Origin of the Use of Sago Mask

Melanau people have a close attachment with the reed tree, which is used in many aspects of their lives and culture. In the manufacture of Melanau sago masks, chopped branches of thatch are the main ingredients. The production of this mask requires freshly cut branches, not too wet nor too dry to ensure quality carving. Melanau sago masks are unique due to the use of reed material, in contrast to most cultures that tend to use wood. The Melanau sago mask played an important role in the culture of the Melanau community. It is not only as an art or decorative object, but also has a symbolic and ritual function. This mask is used as a cleansing symbol in the Kakan Serahang's performance during the Kaul that aims to cleanse and reawaken the angry spirit of Ipok. In addition, the Melanau sago mask is also used to control the performance of the Serahang Kakan ceremony so that it is not disturbed by children and to accompany the ceremony. In terms of aesthetic value, Melanau sago masks have unique characteristics including a large size that covers the wearer's face, a shape that follows the original shape of reed branches, and carvings done to create different faces and expressions. Each mask has different design features but all have cultural values and traditions passed down from generation to generation.

Although the function and production of Melanau sago masks have undergone some changes in the modern world, their traditional and symbolic values are still preserved. The use of these masks in ritual and cultural performances remains an important aspect of Melanau society, although visitors may see them as mere entertainment or art objects. Through field research, it can be seen that the Melanau sago mask plays an important role in inheriting and spreading the cultural values and traditions of the Melanau community from present to future generations. This study emphasizes the importance of the sustainability of the culture and beliefs of the Mukah people, who continue to practice their ancestral customs.

The reed sago mask became an important symbol in Melanau culture because it was used in various contexts such as food, housekeeping, medicine, and land exploration. In a medical context, *bilum* or *dakan* (shell) is also carved using reeds. The sago mask is believed to symbolize the spirit of the Melanau community which is a symbol of attraction to Serahang Kakan, an important ceremony. The presence of mask wearers is very important in this ceremony, making them a main person to wait until they are ready to start the procession. This shows that the mask is a key element in Serahang Kakan and Kaul.

Other than that, the masks also follows a pairing patterns with the main pair of masks representing a balanced life. However the council allowed the use of other masks to enliven the event, without a limit on the amount. Therefore, this study illustrates how important sago masks are in maintaining the identity and culture of the Melanau community in the Tellian area, as well as their role in traditional ceremonies such as Serahang Kakan ritual. The view of

balance in everyday life and the mystical world reflected in the symbol of a couple, which was an important concept in Melanau culture in the past. The main pair of masks in the main boat together with other elements such as Bapak Kaul, the leading member of the Melanau community and musicians, played their part in the ritual performance. Sago masks as an elements of the mystical world are placed together with other offerings, signify their value and role in the festival. Sago masks inspired by the face of a *dakan*, are often designed asymmetrically in keeping with the belief that the *dakan* is a healing object in Melanau culture. As explained by Heidi Munan, disease can be put into a *dakan* which then cannot be touched by anyone when washed.

The role of the mask in the Serahang festival can be understood as a symbol of purification, although in a different context to *dakan*. The masqueraders' clothing also differs from the traditional clothing worn by people on the main boat, signifying their difference in status. The wearer of the mask is considered a symbol of another world, with carvings on the mask influenced by the concept of *dakan*. Previously, the clothes used by the mask wearers were made of jute sackcloth, giving a less neat appearance and different from the traditional Melanau clothing. Taking into account the character of the mask's wear and design, the sago mask can be identified as a different element from the real world perhaps symbolizing purification as performed by the *dakan* or not but on a larger physical scale. Masks in the Kakan Serahang tradition were originally carved with very creepy motifs. The function of this scary mask is to accompany Serahang Kakan activities, especially when the celebration arrives at the beach and is held specifically for Ipok. Mask wearers will play an evil role to scare children who may try to disrupt this event, making Serahang Kakan an event that needs to be respected and taken seriously by the community.

As Serahang Kakan takes place, the increased number of mask wearers helps maintain the safety and order of the event. After the event, it is not clear what the wearer of the mask did, but the mask should not be removed for two or three days because it was believed to still contain the spirit and should not be carelessly discarded before the spirit returned to its original state. In Melanau culture, ritual activities such as Serahang Kakan should not be taken lightly. There are many taboos that must be obeyed and breaking these taboos can lead to dire consequences such as disaster and hardship.

An example of a case where the family of the state museum did not observe taboos when bringing taboos from Mukah to Kuching shows how serious the consequences of breaking taboos in Melanau rituals are. From these examples, it can be concluded that it is important to observe taboos and rituals in Melanau culture, including the presence of mask wearers in Serahang Kakan to maintain the order and progress of the event. This also reflects that the pledge activity itself should not be taken lightly because the purpose is to clean the village. Therefore, the role of the mask is part of the overall pledge and has a deep significance in Melanau cultural practices.



Picture 1: Sago Mask
Source : Sapan Puloh Museum



Picture 2: Original carving of Sago Mask
Source : Sapan Puloh Museum

Changes of Sago Masks Application

The use of sago masks in the context of the modern world is still considered an important symbol in the Kaul Serahang Kakan ceremony. The belief in the necessity of this mask in events remains unchanged. In fact, without the presence of the mask, Kakan Serahang's performance will not be performed. Its primary function as a symbol of Melanau spirit continues in the modern world, making this mask something to be taken seriously. If we look

at the current design of the main sago mask, we will see that the design has become simpler. The fear value in this mask is no longer as obvious as the original more complex design with sharp eyes, sharp teeth, and other frightening features. This change comes after Hatt Ruji, a leading mask maker that has been in the field for more than 10 years, began emphasizing the value of simplicity in its designs. Hatt (2019) also believes that modern mask design should be more open and diverse, as well as encourage the presence of more mask makers.

This design change also led to a change in the role of the mask in Serahang Kakan. Although the mask remains an important symbol in the performance, the role of the main sago mask after climbing into the main canoe until the end of the offering also changes. From the results of the field research, sago mask wearers seem to be more friendly with the general public, starting from the beginning of the canoe journey until arriving at the beach. They can be seen waving to the spectators and having fun with the canoe. This is in contrast to the attitude shown by mask wearers in the past, where children and visitors would avoid them for fear of the mask's horror. Now, most visitors are familiar with the mask. Many also took pictures with mask wearers. This friendlier demeanor led many to consider the mask a symbol to be photographed with, much like Santa Claus in Western culture. Santa Claus is a symbol or icon that is always present in the Christmas celebration and is very loved by children. Although different in historical context and role, Santa Claus is more inclined to give joy by giving gifts to children, while sago mask is more to maintain order and seriousness in Serahang Kakan.

In the theater context, the character of the sago mask has undergone a change from a scary character to a character that is friendlier to the public. Although he still plays the main role in the Serahang Kakan ritual, his character has changed. It seems to be played by different actors with different styles of roles. In fact, the costumes used by the masked characters have also changed. If we look at the original tradition, the sago mask costume is made of shabby and bad jute cloth. The worse the condition of the costume, the higher the scare value that the mask has, because initially its main purpose is to scare people. However, nowadays sago mask clothing is more modern and often used in daily activities. For example, the main mask wearer wears an old shirt and jeans, and white gloves for the male mask wearer, while the female mask wearer wears a baju kurung or kebaya. There are also those who use T-shirts with patterns on the front. However, the use of masked clothing that refers to the art of self-defense may also be present, although it was not found by the reviewer during the field research..

The main mask wearer is always with Bapak Kaul and Serahang, showing that this character in organises the performance of Serahang Kakan although his character has now changed to be more friendly with the audience. In addition to the main mask user, there are also other mask users present to enliven the masked atmosphere. In other words, masked culture has become a kind of masked party in the modern world, although the excitement of this event has decreased slightly in the last two years, namely in year of 2018 and 2019. However, the exclusive value of wearing a mask should be maintained and it should not be recognised as a mask wearer when offerings are made, although the public can now approach them. These values are still firmly held as in the past, indicating that there is cultural preservation that still needs to be practiced to maintain a masked cultural identity..



Picture 3: Serahang Parade in conjunction with the Serahang Kakan Ritual at the Mukah River Estuary
Source : Field Observation



Picture 4: Sago Mask Wearers with Bapak Kaul and Serahang
Source : Field Observation



Picture 5: Sago Mask Wearers in parade boat with Bapak Kaul and Serahang
Source : Field Observation



Picture 6: Author with male and female Sago Mask wearer
Source : Field Observation

Conclusion

The Serahang Kakan masked culture originally had the purpose of scaring children in this ritual activity so that they would be more polite and not engage in bad behavior. However, in modern times, the role of the mask has slightly changed to become a cultural symbol that appeals to the audience. Where once children would run in fear at the sight of a masked performance, now masks are an important aspect of culture that appeals to the masses. Differences in mask design factors and the development of the times have caused the role of the mask to undergo a slight change. In the past, masks were used to scare children and to control the condition of Kakan's jaw. However, now the use of masks is more to accompany Ulo Kaul and as a complement to Serahang Kakan. The simpler and less evil design, coupled with the friendlier demeanor of the mask wearer, made him an icon. Many ordinary people in attendance would take photos together with this mask, making the mask wearer unique in Kakan Serahang's performance apart from the main ritual.

Despite this, the traditional value of masks using the medium of sago branches for the manufacturing process is still maintained even though there are now various technologies. It can be noted that sago masks and masks made of wood are the ones present in Serahang Kakan's performance. This makes this culture unique and needs to be preserved as an artistic value. The original purpose of the mask is to control the ritual situation so that it is not disturbed by small children, while also helping to enliven the ritual atmosphere. It is hoped that more in-depth research can be conducted on this culture, because not many cultures in the archipelago use masks made from sago palm. Generally the manufacturing material is wood. From the research that has been done, it is difficult to get references related to the topic of Melanau sago masks. The lack of in-depth research on this culture makes this study unique and needs to be studied more deeply by future scholars of Melanau culture.

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Appreciation

The author would like to express his gratitude to Mr. Eznol Hafiz Azemi, Mrs. Soffina Ahmad, Mr. Ismail Haji Nahar, Mr. Muhammad Asyraf Rezali, Mr. Wan Junaidi Wan Osman and Mrs. Intan Yoshida Sharuddin as Research Assistants, State Department of Culture and Arts, State of Sarawak, Museum Sarawak Culture, owner of Sapan Puloh Museum, Mukah and Sri Ritma Association, Mukah for helping this study.

Interviews

Macollin Bin Ginda, Sarawak Cultural Museum Administrative Assistant (Mei 2023) Kuching, Sarawak

Tommy Black, Independent historian of the Melanau community of Tellian village, Mukah (Mac 2023 & 2024) at Sapan Puloh Museum, Mukah, Sarawak.

Yasmin Tahirih Smith, Activist and Chairman of the Cultural Association (Mac 2023 & 2024) at Mukah, Sarawak.