



The Changes of Marital Customs and Traditions in the Melanau Community in Mukah, Sarawak

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Article History	Abstract
<p>Received: 04 September 2023 Revised: 12 November 2023 Accepted: 21 November 2023</p>	<p><i>The Melanau community in Sarawak is one of the ethnicity which are uniquely rich in culture. The Melanau community also has a system of social status which are based on its practiced customs and beliefs. Within customs and beliefs of the Melanau community, 'bangsa pikul' indicates the rank system of a family's position which can be seen through marriage. The issue of this research is how changes occur in the community's marital custom of the Melanau community. The research's objective is to identify changes in the traditional marital customs of the Melanau community. This research adopts an ethnographic approach to obtain necessary data. The research was conducted in Mukah, Sarawak over a period of 14 days. The ethnographic approach that were conducted consists of field and literature studies. Field research method such as observation, participation and interviews were conducted to obtain data. The method of observation and participation is used to ensure that the data collected are suitable for this research. The interview method uses a semi-structured interview technique by interviewing some traditional practitioners and authoritative elders within the Melanau community. In order to further support this research, a library research such as journals, books and printed reports are produced as secondary materials. The finding of this research discovered that the changes in the marital customs and traditions of the Melanau community is through the inclusion of Islam and Christianity as well as the assimilation of culture. The Melanau community still practices their traditional customs based on new beliefs and their respective 'bangsa pikul'. The results of this research clearly showed that the Melanau community still maintains and practices traditional marriage customs even though there has been adaptation and assimilation from external influences. Therefore, the contribution of this research expects to give knowledge to the younger generation regarding the customary system of marriage of the Melanau community, and to uplift the customs, identity of the Melanau community.</i></p>
<p>CC License CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0</p>	<p>Keywords: Assimilation, bangsa pikul, Melanau, marriage, social status.</p>

1. Introduction

The Melanau ethnic group is the fifth largest ethnic group in Sarawak. The unique cultural customs and traditions of Melanau are truly unmatched. The customs and traditions of the Melanau community are clearly visible in aspects of their lives such as birth, marriage and even death. H.M. Sidin, (1964) opined that custom means a habit of an act that is repeated

and has been accepted by the community as a rule of life that must be obeyed by every member of the community. In general, Melanau ethnicity has little 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. This custom or tradition has been passed down for generations and still continues to this day. However, their traditional practices and customs still undergo some changes such as marriage customs.

2. Methodology

This study uses an ethnographic approach in obtaining the required data. This study was carried out in Mukah over a seven-day period. The ethnographic approach that is used consists of field research and literature study. Field research conducted 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 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 ten people from the Melanau community, namely 6 men and 4 women aged between 28 and 72 years. The interview questions presented to the informants are divided into two parts, namely Part A (5 questions) and Part B (5 questions). The inquiry questions includes background and knowledge about the Pikul race of the Melanau community. Bibliography research such as journals, books and printed reports is to support this study by contributing secondary materials. Primary and secondary data need to undergo a screening process using thematic analysis techniques and close reading to obtain the correct data in accordance with the study.

Melanau Community

In Sarawak, there are almost 50 ethnicities and sub-ethnicities that live in society or have various ethnic groups since time immemorial. The existence of ethnic groups in Sarawak has its own way of life. This includes their entire way of thinking and living in differences in religion, culture, belief, language and customs. The Melanau community or a '*likow*' is one of the native tribes in Sarawak. The majority of Melanau community lives in the mouth and coast of the Sarawak River. They work as fishermen and agriculturalists according to their own culture and traditions. The majority are Muslim but some of them still practice their heritage (paganism) beliefs. The Melanau community according to the 2010 statistics taken from the 2010 Malaysian Population and Housing Census issued by the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the Melanau is the fifth largest ethnic group in Sarawak with a percentage of 5% which is 123,410 people out of a total of 2,471,140 people. Most of them embraced Islam in addition to Christianity. Now according to the 2014 census, the number of Melanau people in Sarawak is 134,300 people. Once upon a time, the classification of the Melanau community based on rank and position existed in the daily life of the Melanau people. A person's position in the longhouse determines his rank. For example, the upper class will live in the middle of the long house while the lower class will live in the part towards the end of the house. The subordinate community would live at the end of the longhouse and act as guards.

In general, the classification of societies that once existed is based on the following;

- a) bangsa Pengeran : the highest rank and is a Brunei nobleman who represent the sultan of Brunei and collect taxes.
- b) bangsa Sembilan Pikul (A-Metahei) : the highest rank of Melanau

- c) bangsa Tuju' pikul : middle class people
- d) bangsa Tuju' Betirih: prisoners and slaves
- e) Dipen: servant / slave class.

However, this rank-based classification system is almost non-existent now. Moreover, they now live in separate houses instead of long houses. The time has changed. The Melanau community is now experiencing a change in shaping the culture of life. According to Zaini Ozea (1998), the Melanau community is described as a society that is so fluid and easily absorbed into the community. However, they still maintain their Melanau identity despite certain symptoms of loss in terms of cultural practices. Time and the modernity of the way of life have changed the customs of the Melanau Community. This means, they no longer practice the old customs as a whole. They have practiced it selectively. This change is related to the development of Islam and Christianity as their religion today. In the past, they were influenced by the teachings and practices of (pagan) animism. Due to cultural assimilation, the Melanau community has now learned and deepened the intricacies of the religion they follow. Traditions and customs that are against religious values have been set aside.

Nowadays, there is a way of absorbing culture in ethnic diversity in Sarawak. We can see this through assimilation where the minority accepts the dominant or majority culture in Sarawak. According to Zaini Ozea (1989) among the races in Sarawak, the Melanaus have experienced the most clashes and socio-cultural assimilation and this makes them a group that is not only the most interesting but also the most immediate 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) who stated that Melanau is the only race in Sarawak that can accept religious diversity in family members without facing any problems. It is not a strange thing that in one family there are pious people but they consist of various religions, or some are still pagan (without religion) but they can live in peace. This happens a lot in Sarawak such as marriages between Melanaus and Malays or Melanaus and Ibans and so on. The current generation no longer takes into account all the customs and rituals that have been practiced since the beginning. Modern life demands all these changes. Millennials are considered a progressive generation. Their lives are for survival. Because of that, they don't have much time to think and take things that are trivial. In fact, there are customs that are contrary to religious teachings. Therefore, many things that have elements of animism (pagan) and superstition have been set aside. The marriage customs of the Melanau community have also undergone changes. The old wedding customs have been abandoned and are no longer practiced. Many wedding customs such as gift items and wedding dress have been modified in line with the current demands. The influence of current life has caused society to set aside some traditional elements that are considered no longer suitable for the demands of the times.

Marriage Process in Melanau Society

Marriage in the Melanau community contains several ceremonies that are taken very seriously because of the social implications found in them. The aspect of rank or social status (*bangsa*) is emphasized in the institution of marriage compared to the other institutions namely *Sembilan Pikul*, *Tujuh Pikul* and *Tujuh Betirih*. The types of items and gifts that need to be brought for "*Tanda tuang*" and items that accompany the dowry such as "*Adat Menuga*", "*Adet Mebin*" and "*Pakan*" are also calculated based on this social status. However,

the process of wedding customs is the same as the community Malay that is proposal, engagement and wedding ceremonies.

Marriage Customs of The Melanau Community

Merisik custom (proposal): Among the Melanau community, marriage between couples of the same social status is known as sama gara. Marriages between couples of different social status are known as sida adat. The male representative visits the girl's family home to find out more and ascertain the social status of the girl's family and to determine whether the girl is already married or not. If the girl is not yet married, it is asked whether the girl can be betrothed or not as well as her dowry. Merisik is an aspect of social status that is very important since this will symbolize the rank of the couple in the social institution. This social status can be explained in determining the type of goods and gifts that should be provided during the engagement and the gifts that are sent along with the dowry. This social status is called Sembilan pikul, tujuh pikul, tujuh bertirih and lima bertirih. Customs will also include customs such as adat menuga, adat mebin and pakan which are closely related to the social status. Merisik begins when the young man is felt attached to the young woman and it is necessary for the young man to convey his heart's desire to both his parents. When the representative of the groom visits the maiden's family home, this custom is called merisik custom. In this custom of spying, it is necessary for both families to clarify their respective social status. If their social status is the same then it is known as sama gara and if their social status is not the same then it is known as sida adat. The determination of this social status will determine the form of dowry that should be given when a consensus has been reached in this merisik custom and then it will continue with the engagement custom.

Engagement Custom

The day of engagement are agreed upon by both sides of the male and female families, then a sign of engagement custom is held, the representative of the male family, i.e. several men and women who have reached the age of majority, will hand over the engagement items, which are a gold ring, a weapon, a bushel rice, a coconut and a bag of copper items. With the delivery of the items by the male family representative and accepted by the female family representative, the engagement is official. Both parties must comply with all conditions that have been mutually agreed upon. If the agreement is violated, the engagement can be terminated. If the female party decides it, the items marked tuning must be returned to the male party but if the male party decides it, the items marked tuning belongs to the female side.

Marriage Customs

Weddings are held on a large scale except for extortion type weddings which are weddings due to couples being caught red handed. Preparations for this ceremony took place several days in advance. The groom-to-be is required to hand over dowry gifts such as penyekab and berian and other gifts such as adat menuga, adat mebin and pakan a day before the ceremony is held. This handover is followed by a wedding ceremony. The wedding can also be held the next morning, which is on the day of the wedding ceremony. The wedding feast is held at the homes of both the groom and the bride, attended by relatives, neighbors and friends. The ceremony usually begins at the home of the groom's family. This means the bride and her entourage will go to the groom's. When the bride arrives at the home of the groom's family, it is necessary for the groom's family to present a traditional *pahe* to the bride. Without this *pahe* custom, the bride and her entourage are forbidden to eat any food at the groom's house. If all the customs have been followed then the marriage will be allowed for both the bride and groom to sit on the bridal chair that is built for all the guests and family to watch. After the

ceremony at the groom's side is over, now it's time for the marriage ceremony at the bride's family home. The groom's entourage will visit the bride's family home. At the marriage ceremony next to the bride, there will be a custom of *petudui*, which is the handing over of various items including a gold ring and a silver bracelet by the groom to the bride..

Marriage Customs According to Social Status

In marriage customs, the Melanau community is very concerned about their social status (*bangsa*) which is Sembilan Pikul, Tujuh Pikul and Tujuh Betirih.

Bangsa Sembilan Pikul

When the day of the wedding will take place, the dowry is given. There are two important parts which are *penekab* and *berian*. *Penyekab* consists of nine gold amas, a sword, a piece of *betabor persarakap* (handkerchief with gold wings with a certain pattern) and a *tumo'* (container made of wood in a certain shape). *Berian* consists of yellow copper items as much as Sembilan Pikul (133 pounds x 9) or other property worth the price of the items. Other requirements are the *Menuga* custom of one sack of yellow copper goods or property of the same value as a condition for transporting the bride to the man's house on the day of the wedding. The *Mebin* custom is a bag of copper items as a condition for the bride to go up to the groom's house when the group has arrived at the house. *Pakan* is only in the form of money according to the woman's wishes. All delivery items will be delivered to the girl a day before the wedding date. The next morning the bride will go to the groom's house. At the same time the groom's house will be attractively decorated and then the rank of the men will be displayed. At the same time Nine flags will be flown, five in front of the house and four on the side of the road. As soon as the bride's entourage arrives, a male representative will present a piece of *persarakap betabor* (woven cloth made of *gemas* yarn with a specific pattern). Then the bride will stand on the prepared whetstone while touching the *anseni* (pot). The male representative splashes both his legs to the left. After that, the representative gives a gift to the bride as a condition of *Pahe'* custom. There are three traditional forms of *pahe'* that must be prepared by the groom's representative, namely *pahe' Mukad* which includes a gold amas, a pair of silver bracelets (*batuong*) and nine beads (*kehet*). *Pahe' Atap*, on the other hand, consists of five manic *pasin* seeds. *Pahe' Id* is five thick beads and *Pahe' Keman* is five *pingeh* *yuong* beads. After that the marriage ceremony will be done at the groom's house.

After some time, the bride and groom will go to the bride's house to perform the customs related to the event of the first night until the third day. Among the traditional items of the inhabitants are as follows: One gold amas, Seven manic *kehet* seeds, Five *tilak* beads, A pair of silver bracelets, four spear blades, Twelve *belan*, A piece of *lugi* cloth, Three lumps of *Bagoutulei* resin (resin containers made of copper) *Bulang*, a spear for scraping tarmac and a spear (like a cone shape for scooping water). These prepared items are put into the bride's special room. After that the bride and groom will enter the room. The groom gives a gold ring to the bride. Then the groom gave a silver bracelet tied with beads in black cloth to his bride again. According to Melanau community tradition, newly married couples are not allowed to leave the house for a day. This period is named as the custom of the inhabitants which requires them not to bathe in the river or sleep during the day. Despite this, the couple is free to visit both their parents' homes.

Bangsa Tujuh Pikul

Marriages for the lower ranks of Sembilan Pikul are almost the same. The only difference is in terms of the amount of dowry. *Penyekab* consists of seven gold amas, a dagger, a piece of *persarakab*, a handkerchief with gold thread and a *tumo'*. *Berian* consists of yellow copper

items as much as Tujuh (seven) pikuls or various other items of the same value. Menuga' custom is as much as a bag of yellow copper items or cash. Pakan given in the form of cash according to the amount set by the woman. When the bride goes up to the man's house, she is given a bundle of pranakan bercura' (woven cloth with gold thread with a special pattern). Pahe' makad will also be presented to the bride containing one gold amas, seven manic kehet and a bag is also given with beads and tied in black cloth. In the custom of bed occupants, four spear blades will be prepared. Then three blocks of dammar are prepared along with tools such as bagoutulei, kila, a spear point and a spear. Coconut oil will be put in a small pottery. In addition, the groom will also present his bride with several gifts of one gold amas, five tilak beads, a pair of silver bracelets and bibe' pan.

Bangsa Tujuh Bertirih

For the Tujuh Bertirih, the custom of giving a dowry is like a ring placed in a container, a bushel of rice placed in an uncovered segamut and a coconut placed in a bukor and covered. Penyekab consists of five gold amas, a dagger, a guard, a copper plate with teeth on the side and a piece of seasoning cloth. Berian also consists of yellow copper items amounting to three pikul Sembilan puluh kati or other property worth the copper. The Menuga custom is as much as a bag of yellow copper items or cash of the same value. While the Pakan given in the form of cash depends on the woman. While the bride is boarding the groom's house, the groom's representative will be given a cloth sebuhuong tanjing sarek. Pahe' mukad which contains one gold amas, five tilak beads tied together with bibe' pan and a bag of yellow copper items (menuga). For the custom of Tujuh Bertirih, three pieces of tar will be prepared with a bagoutulei, a kila' (a spear point) and a spear. Other items are used except for the coconut oil which is placed in the pan only. The custom of lima bertirih no longer exists among the lowest ranked. This is because groups like this no longer exist in Melanau community.

Changes in the Marriage Customs of the Melanau Community

This is the challenge in the life customs and traditions of the Melanau community when assimilation occurs which can change the socio-cultural form and landscape of their lives. Changes in terms of traditional practices, culture and customs little by little undergo changes according to the acceptance of society after the assimilation and acceptance of other more dominant customs and The uniqueness of the marriage customs of the Melanau community in Sarawak, is generally still preserved and remains in their group, especially the elderly. The young people or the current generation are still less interested in continuing to know 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 wedding equipment of the past is mostly difficult to obtain nowadays. However, the Melanau community still believes in and is proud of the uniqueness of their ethnic customs. This significant change happened a long time ago when socio-cultural assimilation occurred either through marriage or because of one's own will in changing religion from animism (pagan) to Islam or Christianity respectively until now. Marriage customs have changed a lot because there are many processes in marriage customs that need to go through, mainly according to social status. This caused some customs and processes to be reduced. Among them is the reduction of wedding delivery equipment and equipment for engagement and wedding ceremonies. This is because the materials needed for engagement and wedding gifts are quite difficult to prepare or obtain for the current generation. Nevertheless, there are still many processes in marriage customs practiced by a number of those who have the means.

Nowadays, most of the marriage process for *merisik* customs is also rarely practiced because in the eyes of the Melanau community, the omission of this method can save time and expenses on both sides of the bride and groom after the results of the discussion together. The marriage process continues with the engagement custom before the wedding ceremony. Some of the wedding receptions are also not according to their social status and now resemble the engagement ceremony of the Sarawak Malay community or according to the custom of couples from other ethnic groups in Sarawak. In the wedding event, changes in terms of the use of costumes and wedding decorations have also experienced slight changes according to the current design. Clearly, many young people are starting to break out of the cocoon of their society's way of life. This is for personal development and the family economy. The current culture that is absorbing in Malaysia is also one of their choices to continue their lifestyle which is more comfortable and equal to other ethnic groups in Sarawak.

3. Conclusion

The Melanau people, the majority of whom live at the mouth and coast of the Sarawak River, are known as a society that still practices its own culture and traditions. The majority are Muslim but some of them still practice animism (pagan). In today's Melanau society, the changes that occur in customs and the marriage process are due to the assimilation in the socio-culture of the Melanau community, which is after the embrace of Islam among the Melanau ethnic group. The changes that occurred in marriage customs due to this assimilation process caused the Melanau community to follow the traditional marriage customs of the dominant community in Sarawak.

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