THE ENDURING LEGACY OF THE MELANAU TRADITIONAL HEALER

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Introduction: the ethnographic context

The Melanau are traditionally a fishing and sago-growing people, living in the northwest coastal region of Sarawak from the Rajang delta to Bintulu and Miri. In 2005 the population was estimated at 127,500 (2005 Yearbook of Statistics Sarawak), equivalent to about 6% of the total population of Sarawak. Though increasing numbers have migrated to the larger towns and cities over the last fifty years, the majority of the total Melanau population still lives in kampong communities along the main waterways of the region.

Major social changes have taken place in the Melanau environment over the past fifty years. In the 21st century this process has accelerated, and Mukah town – the administrative and economic centre of Mukah Division, now has the facilities, institutions and infrastructure of any other large town or city in a modern state. As might be expected the old traditions have not been exempt from the effects of the modernization process or indeed the social processes that have taken place in Malaysian society as a whole. Very few Melanau (mostly the very old), still follow the old animistic belief system.¹ The great majority are now Muslims and a smaller percentage Christians, mainly Roman Catholic.

However, ritual and traditional beliefs continue to play an important part in the lives of the villagers - particularly at times of birth, marriage and death, and within the villages, kinship support networks remain strong. Relatives tend to live in close proximity to one

¹ Locally, members of this group are often referred to as the “free thinkers”.

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another, replicating the residency pattern of the former Melanau tallhouses. And despite widespread conversion, awareness of a collective Melanau identity is a strong continuing source of social cohesion; this is recognized within Sarawak as unique to this community.

The Melanau healer and the traditional healing system

The healing rituals and practices of the Melanau a-bayoh (shaman) have been well documented in previous case studies; e.g. Barnes 1966; Wong To Hoo 1982; Morris 1981, 1993, & 1997. Morris (1997) in particular provides a detailed record of the ritual repertoire of the Melanau a-bayohs who practiced in the upriver villages on the Oya River in the 1950s, as well as an overview of the Melanau system of healing and its connections to the traditional worldview.

An image of the person as interconnected with his or her environment, and the interdependence and influence of each on the other was an overarching theme in the theory and therapeutic practice of the Melanau healers. The body was thought of as a microcosm of a world bound together in a web of reciprocal relationships. Causation of illness was not viewed as arising or residing in the individual-in-isolation; illness was seen as resulting from disturbed relationships, within an environment in which the elements and forces were personalized. Illness, like the social, natural, and spiritual world, had a distinctly human shape. The origins of these ideas can be traced to the historical conditions of existence, whereby:

...the technical description here is a little control over the world.

By personifying, persons can comprehend the meaning of social relations; in the same kind of way you are comprehended because you are the sense of security.

In terms of this world view, the sickness of disorder and imbalance in the relationships between and within the elements of the environment, illness may be better understood as “the bearer” (Hahn 1995:1).

I have therefore used the collective descriptor in the text. One is out for that reason, which is spiritual and whether it is

The healing role: chaos and certainty

While the majority of the coastal Melanau are Christian and follow the teachings prescribed by their religious beliefs and continue to be important and significant, and “a sense of unity with the environment.

In consequence, many traditional healer are now...