

## **Bilum: A Cultural Object of the Pagan Melanau**

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**Abstract:** Bilum is among the endangered cultural objects and is used as a healing tool by the Pagan Melanau community, especially in Mukah and Dalat, Sarawak. Yet despite its central role in the community only relatively recently that researchers started taking serious notice of it with studies dating back to the 1960's and 1970's. Thus, this study provides an overview of the study on bilum in the Melanau community and its current state particularly with regard to its ritual practice and production. The discussion includes the general types of bilum, the bilum's carver, spirit, ritual practices and production methods of the bilum. The findings were obtained through visual ethnographic methods to assess the effectiveness of visual analysis in ethnographic research and study the relationship between behavior and visual observation at the study site. The study concludes with the evolution of bilum over time and its impact on the Melanau community in the modern world.

**Key words:** Bilum, cultural biography, cultural object, Pagan Melanau, visual ethnography, evolution

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### **INTRODUCTION**

According to Gosden and Marshall (1999), a critical area of thought in all the social sciences nowadays is the relationship between people and things or objects. They also argued that material objects were given little attention in especially in anthropology and had always been seen as functional items vital to the social process. Gosden and Marshall added that via analysis on purpose, dating and style of archaeology objects, archaeologists have been trying to understand the world of objects. In order to study further the said objects, the researcher tried to discover the idea behind bilum, a cultural object of the Pagan Melanau community.

The name Melanau has been given to a number of similar peoples in Sarawak on the North-Western domain of Borneo (Morris, 1997). The name has been used to address both the inhabitants of the coastal district from Brunei to the delta of the Rajang River and the people living along the interior rivers and Baluy (also known as Kajang). The name Melanau is also used to refer to the people occupying the coastal areas of Bintulu Southwest to the Rajang delta and up to Kanowit who speak dialects which are more or less mutually comprehensible. Morris added in the 1960's there were 17 Melanau settlements on the Oya River with a population of between 6000-7000 people. In the whole of Sarawak, 44,000 people were registered as Melanau but just over 10,000 of whom were

classified as Pagan. The rest were Muslims with a small number of Roman Catholics. The 2010 Malaysian Population Census shows that there are about 123,410 Melanau living in Sarawak with only 7652 (6.24%) of them are Pagans. However, according to the head of Kampung Medong, Ceylon B. Asat, an estimated 50% of the Melanau living in Dalat and Mukah are Muslim, followed by 20% Christian and 30% Pagan

**Literature review:** Currently, the only references relating to bilum can be obtained from Morris (1991 and 1997) and Chong and Seng (1987). Others such as Taylor (1994) and Rafee *et al.* (2015) produced short study examining this cultural object. Studies that have been done in the past, dating back to the 1960's, 1970's, focused primarily on the activity of bilum. As to the researcher's knowledge, till today there have been no studies primarily to this object. In addition, previous studies on bilum focused more on textual and visual aids which were often underutilized in delivering the actual content related to bilum, particularly its motifs and designs.

Morris (1991) interest towards cultural objects of Pagan Melanau such as bilum has led him to stay with the Melanau and thus wrote in a great length relating to the world of spirit, its domain, identification and its various types, its related healing practice from payun to bebayoh. Chong and Seng (1987) on the other hand, also provides a fairly comprehensive record on these disappearing