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**THE ENDURING LEGACY OF THE MELANAU
TRADITIONAL HEALER**

Ann Appleton

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THE ENDURING LEGACY OF THE MELANAU TRADITIONAL HEALER

Ann Appleton

Institute of East Asian Studies
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK

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".

another, replicating the residency pattern of the former Melanau tallhouses.² 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.³

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; eg. 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.⁴

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:

² Most of the Melanau had already moved out of their former tall houses by the early 20th century. The last tall house on the Oya River (at Medong) was abandoned when the Japanese invaded in 1942 (Morris 1991:79).

³ Morris writes: "By 1960 about three-quarters of the coastal Melanau were Muslim converts, but all spoke Melanau as their first language, and did not consider themselves to be Malay, although the Malay-speaking population of Sarawak did on occasion refer to them as such" (1991:6). The situation regarding the Melanau/Malay identification label and the use of the Melanau language remains unchanged almost 50 years later.

⁴ The words *a-bayoh* and *a-bayuh* are interchangeable. I have used the former spelling which is more common in the area around Mukah; *a-bayuh* is more commonly used in the kampongs around Dalat on the Oya river.