

DAYUNG BORIH, THE CONDUITS OF THE BIDAYUH AND THE SPIRITUAL WORLD

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Abstract

Dayung Borih, or Bidayuh priestess and *Gawai* are two important cultural elements within the context of the traditional Bidayuh of Sarawak. This paper examines the role and significance of *Gawai* and *Dayung Borih* within the Bidayuh community. The data for this study was collected through a series of interviews and participant observations conducted in two villages in the Bau district. The interviews revealed that the concept of *Gawai* in the olden days was a form of rituals relating human to spiritual beings with the help of the *Dayung Borih* acting as mediators. The role of *Dayung Borih* was not only limited to mediators but also healers whereby they performed healing *Gawai*. The traditional Bidayuh believed that these *Dayung Borih* were gifted women selected by the spirits themselves. It was a highly respected position within the Bidayuh community but physically, mentally and spiritually demanding for these women. However, the number of *Dayung Borih* is decreasing and together with it their significant in the community as well as the concept of *Gawai*, which has changed due to modernisation within the Bidayuh community.

Keywords: Bidayuh, priestess, ritual, spirits, communication

Introduction

The Bidayuh is one of the many ethnic groups residing in the Malaysian Borneo state of Sarawak. They belong to the Austronesia – Malayo-Polynesian group, which share similarities in terms of culture and language with the indigenous groups of Indonesia, the Philippines and Madagascar. According to Chang (2002, 2004), the Bidayuh in Sarawak originated from West Kalimantan, Indonesia. The