

# An Epidemic of Flying Heads in a Melanau Community in Sarawak, Malaysia

*Those images that yet  
Fresh images beget  
-Yeats, Byzantium*

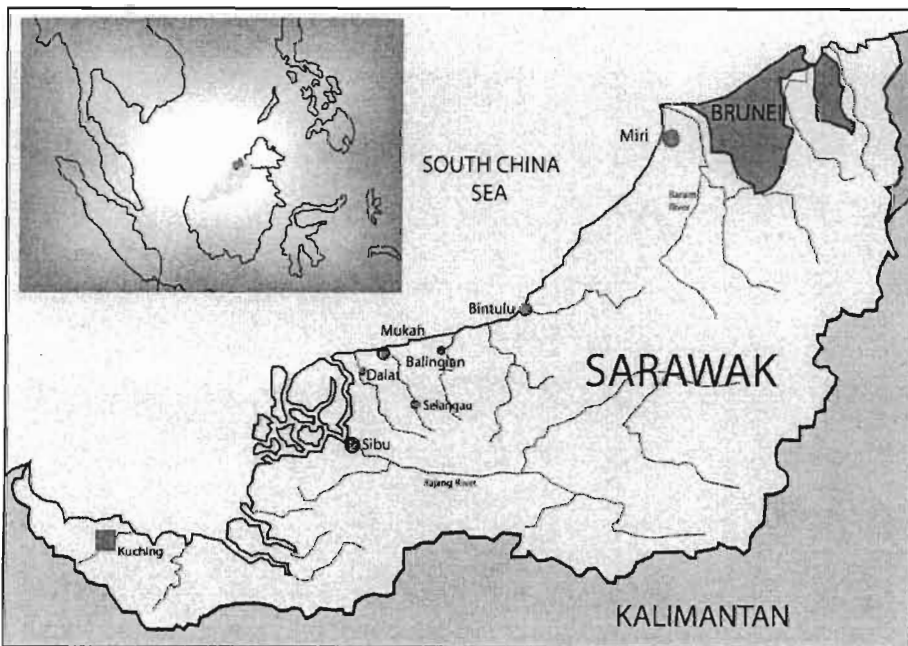
Ann Appleton  
Institute of East Asian Studies  
University Malaysia Sarawak

The research for this paper has been registered with RIMC, UNIMAS.

## Introduction

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 (see map below). 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, about eighty percent of the Melanau population still live in kampong communities along the main waterways of the region, where fishing and sago-related activities continue to provide a subsistence income for many households.

Within the Melanau villages, kinship support networks remain strong. Relatives tend to live in close proximity to one another, replicating the residency pattern of the former longhouses that were abandoned early last century. Very few Melanau - mostly the very old, still follow the old animistic belief system. The great majority are now Muslims and a smaller percentage Christians, mainly Roman Catholic. Despite widespread conversion, ritual and traditional beliefs continue to play an important part in the lives of the villagers and awareness of a collective Melanau identity is a strong continuing source of social cohesion.



Map 1 SARAWAK

## An epidemic of flying heads

In May 2001 a spate of reported sightings of *ulou pesilieng*, or flying heads, occurred in the Melanau villages around Mukah, accompanied by reports of sick children and generalized anxiety amongst the inhabitants. Historically, this phenomenon was associated with the Melanau *a-bayoh* (shaman of the old animistic religion). Under the influence of their familiars, some of these persons (the flying head *a-bayohs*) were believed to detach from their bodies at night and roam the villages, seeking to satisfy an appetite for human blood.