

## MELANAU SICKNESS IMAGES: SPIRITS GIVEN PHYSICAL FORM

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My aim in this paper is to consider the relationship between art and the act of healing with respect to one society in north eastern Borneo. This group, the Melanau, lives on the coastal areas of what is now the state of Sarawak, in East Malaysia. They were studied in 1949 and 1950 by Dr. H.S. Morris who died before he completed his planned publications. However, Beatrice Clayre edited his proposed study of Melanau ritual and belief for the Sarawak Museum Journal, and this volume provides the main source for this account. There were some 44,000 Melanau in Sarawak in 1960 - Jones 1962 - three years before the formation of Malaysia - and, of these, some 10,000 followed traditional religious practices at that time, the rest were Moslem and Christian. Since this time, the number practicing traditional beliefs has declined further and greater numbers have become incorporated into Islam, and the population has intermingled more with coastal Malays.

It is widely accepted that the Melanau were originally a part of the Kayan, Kajang, Kajaman population group, who were thought to have originated in the Usan Apau uplands of north central Borneo but later moved down river toward a number of coastal locations (Figure 1 on CD) where they began to cultivate the sago palm, in the swamp forests, frequently flooded by a combination of monsoon tides and the high rainfall in the region (in excess of 150 inches per year). Wildlife was abundant in the forests (bears, deer, wild pigs were hunted) whilst in the rivers were found many fish - and crocodiles which were a danger to humans. Disease was prevalent, with malaria until recently, responsible for fevers. There were traditionally many human enemies and expanding populations, of Kayan and Iban, a danger, requiring the Melanau to build tall, defensive houses. (Figure 2 on CD). These houses usually had no permanent access to the outside but rather had ladders - normally kept within the house - which could be lowered to permit entry and exit. Melanau who lived on rivers, some distance from the sea were particularly at risk from the expanding Iban population.

All of these potential dangers led to a Melanau world view in which there was no safety anywhere; only in the villages were humans thought to have some possibility of occasional dominance over the spirits which were omnipresent. The proper place for humans was in a village on a river bank, (Figure 3 on CD) but to gain food and a livelihood people were forced to leave the villages to visit and work on farms, sago gardens, the forest, and to fish in the rivers and sea. Fear of danger from fevers, crocodiles and disturbance to the beings in the world around the houses led to a situation in which

art took on a role not found amongst the neighbours of the Melanau. Art became a means of healing sickness through the creation of images embodying the spirits which troubled humans and allowing those spirits to return to their proper place - in the forests or waters surrounding the villages or the rivers above them or the earth below.

The Melanau conception of the universe was one of layers and one in which the territories of all should be respected and a balance (*adet*) maintained. A being should not leave its proper place without consent, but many do, and the means of return of spirits, to their place of origin is the subject of the following discussion.

### Causes of Sickness

Whilst accidents and illness were endemic in the swampy forests in which the Melanau lived, not all were said to have been caused by spirits. Colds, aches and pains and wounds on arms and legs were thought to derive from natural causes - most frequently the wind or by a crocodile stealing the soul - and could be treated by a variety of household remedies.

Most illnesses, were caused by a symbolic attack by an animal, a spirit or another human. Such illnesses could be diagnosed by a *dukun*, a man or woman skilled in Malay medicine who might be able to effect a cure with charms and potions, or, if not, might diagnose the illness as having been caused by a *tew*, spirit, and the cure would be accomplished through the making of a *bilum*, a sickness image. A shaman could also diagnose the spirit cause of sickness and possibly undertake a cure by ceremonial means.

The means of cure by a *dukun* would aim to restore the balance of the body; if too hot, herbs would be given to cool it - and to heat it if thought to be too cold. The *dukun* would have a sense that the illness was caused by a spirit attack from the patient's account of the illness. The patient might also have an indication of spirit attack and, if so, would consult a carver of *bilum*. Such a carver would have a repertoire of perhaps up to a hundred "*tew*," spirits causing illness - about 140 of these have been recorded (Morris 1997; Chong 1987). In some cases the patient would request the carving of a particular image, and in others the carver would make the suggestion.

The carver, who was said to act on behalf of the community as a whole rather than for individual gain, would receive little in reward. Typically a small iron knife, often called a Kayan knife might be given (Figure 4 on CD). This might be supplemented by food or perhaps cloth, but it has been suggested (Chong 1987) that no carver of *bilum* ever gained a living from his craft.

The gift of the knife has perhaps more to do with “strengthening the soul” of the carver rather than its utilitarian value, as the accumulation of almost identical knives by a carver would, after a short time, diminish their worth. Other Sarawak peoples, notably the Iban, believe in the power of iron to “strengthen the soul,” and for this reason Iban shamens bite on iron at critical stages of ceremonies.

### **Carving the Bilum**

The *bilum* is carved from sago pith brought to the carver (*tubok bilum*) by the person commissioning the carving (which can include the patient). The carving commences at the lower end and ending at the head and face. As the sago pith is soft, it is easily carved and may take no more than half an hour to complete.<sup>1</sup> Some accounts including that of Morris 1997 suggest that the ear is the last organ to be carved; others, like the late Edmund Kurui of the Sarawak Museum, (pers. comm., 2005), suggest the eye is last (Figure 5 on CD). In both cases the reasoning is the same: the image, through hearing or sight of the carver, could take his soul before the words asking the spirit to leave the sick person are uttered.

### **Transfer of the Spirit to the Bilum**

The words which effect this transfer are typically uttered by the person who cares for the sick one. Alternatively, the *bilum* maker might utter these words, as might the head of the household of the sick person - or sometimes a household member who had the reputation of being lucky. The words were uttered as a mixture of saliva dyed red by chewing *sireh*, betel leaf lime and *pinang* nut (*areca catechu*) was spat at the image. These words, spoken in the Melanau language, indicate that the spirit represented by the image has made the sickness and should suck it out, and are accompanied by a threat from the carer to crush the spirit if it does not obey and inhabit the image.

At this point, the image, thought to have life, is potentially dangerous for three days. Once it has become enlivened (*tabih*), it is taken to the patient and held close to the part of the afflicted person’s body believed to be sick; water is poured over the image and then onto the patient. Further words command the image to make the person well and order the spirit to leave the patient. The image, which is kept close to the patient for three days, should not be jolted or knocked, in case the spirit leaves the image and either return to the patient or harm someone else.

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<sup>1</sup> Many *bilum* which have been carved from museums, however, are far more elaborate and highly decorated.

After this three-day period, the *bilum* is taken to a suitable place to begin the journey of the spirit to its homeland. Here the location of deposition depends upon the diagnosis. Spirits, as will be discussed below, may be classified according to three broad categories: air, water, and forest or earth spirits, and must be deposited in an appropriate location. A river or sea spirit will be either floated on a raft or small carved boat, or left in the mud of a river bank; a sky spirit hung on a tree or the outside of the house; and a *bilum* of a forest or earth spirit left at the base of a tree or on the ground outside the village. It is particularly important that *bilum* not be disturbed for three days as its spirit makes the journey back to its original dwelling place. It is perhaps significant that the soft pith of the sago, which decays with ease in the tropical conditions of Borneo, is used to symbolise the transfer of spirit back from the sick person to the homeland of the spirit.

### **The Importance of Correct Diagnosis**

The diagnosis of a *bilum* maker, like that of the *dukun*, depends upon the nature of the symptoms described by the patient and visible in him or her. Broadly speaking the categories are: mental states, including fatigue, delirium and confusion; pains in various parts of the body accompanied by itching, swellings and wounds; problems with the stomach and bowels; fevers, colds and breathlessness; and finally children's illnesses which usually manifest themselves in a refusal to eat and drink, and in constant crying. These symptoms are combined by the *bilum* maker with a further set of questions concerning the patient's recent activities: places visited, especially forests, perhaps, for the purpose of felling a large tree for boat - building. Here dwelt many spirits who could cause problems for humans. Morris (1997) describes how one such spirit *Bu'aw guun* (Figure 6 on CD) found in deep forests could cause stomach aches. If correctly diagnosed and replicated, the spirit in the human would be obligated to enter the figure and remain there for three days prior to deposition in the forest. However other spirits also caused stomach pains, and some of these could be found in forests. Failure of the patient to recover would most likely be described as failure to attribute the sickness to the correct spirit, and a second *bilum* would probably be carved in such a case. Continued failure to cure with *bilum* or any of the *dukun*'s remedies would culminate in a consultation with a shaman who would summon familiar spirits to seek a diagnosis. The shaman would offer various forms of treatment, all of which were designed to encourage the spirit causing the illness to leave the patient's body. The ultimate treatment was the *ayum* ceremony which culminated in a *rabong* model boat being released into the waters around the village with its crew of spirit images.

### **The Spirit World and Examples of Bilum**

The threefold classification of spirit dwellings comprises the air or skies (*langit*), which is home to *yang* spirits; the waters (*anum*), home to *buau* spirits; and forest (*guun*) and earth, in which live *kulum* and *durig* spirits. In general these spirits remain in their correct places, but it is believed that they seek human company if possible, particularly to feed off human blood; also during times of hardship they will be particularly anxious to prey on humans. People are safest in villages, but even here there is danger from the spirits which might be close to houses or on river banks. The forests and seas are especially dangerous. The following examples describe specific illnesses and treatments.

#### ***Dalong Langit – an Air Spirit***

This image (Figure 7 on CD) was carved for Morris (1997, 209) in 1971, stored in the British Museum, measures 26 cm in height. A single anthropomorphic figure holding a spear in its right hand also has wings on which feathers are carved, indicating a sky spirit, is thought to cause stomach ache and powerful defecation. At the end of the curing ceremony the figure is deposited on a tree to facilitate return to its proper environment.

#### ***Bilum Saluy – a Water Spirit***

This example, (Figure 8 on CD) also carved for Morris in 1972 and deposited in the British Museum (Morris 1997, 247), is one of three or four identical anthropomorphic figures carved in sago pith and forming a canoe crew. The figures are carved as if seated in a boat with the knees drawn up to the chest. The spirit in humans causes a severe and painful chill along with vomiting, diarrhoea and painful urination. The figures are set afloat on a river upon completion of the healing process.

#### ***Jimalang tana - an Earth Spirit***

Carved for Morris in 1971 (Morris 1997, 238) (Figure 9 on CD) and now in the British Museum, this buffalo-like figure causes severe itching, which, when scratched by the patient, produces open sores; this condition was said not to be responsive to western medicine. The figure, which is 23cm long and 12.5 high, represents a spirit which lives in the forest close to human houses; it will infect humans if their houses are built across its path between the forest and the river. At the conclusion of the healing ceremony, it will be deposited on the ground behind the house.

### Melanau Carvers in Present Day Sarawak

It is immediately notable to any visitor to East Malaysia that traditional art is thriving. Hotels are decorated throughout with carvings, paintings and traditional artefacts. The waterfront in Kuching has sources of shops selling such art to tourists. I found (Beavitt, 1995) that much of this art is made elsewhere in Borneo and cleverly faked to look “authentic,” i.e., use in a traditional context in longhouses.

However Melanau themes and the art forms are absent from this arena. One notable piece of Melanau-inspired art is the *Kediring* burial post designed by Edmund Kurui formally of the Sarawak Museum, who was an archaeologist by training but highly skilled as a wood carver. However he did not carve in Sarawak (only on visits overseas) (Figure 10 on CD) - and his *Kediring* design was executed by Kenyah carvers. Many Melanau carvings are to be found in the Sarawak Museum, such as the *naga sebalum* (Figure 11 on CD), a pair of intertwined dragons, traditionally made on the order of a shaman for curing a person with a sore and swollen stomach and feverish head. It would normally be left at a river bank or floated on a river; this example was finished and varnished to high standard and included with other *bilum* in the Sarawak Museum collection. Apart from pieces in the museum, though, Melanau art is almost absent from Kuching. I would suggest that the reason for this is the association of the art with sickness and the dangers of the sickness-causing spirits affecting the carvers. As discussed above, the eye and ear are carved last in order to preserve the health of the carver. Such beliefs persist even amongst Christian carvers; there is a reluctance to challenge the spirit world even though the traditional belief system is not the basis of personal religious practices. The spread of Christianity and Islam amongst modern Melanau, coupled with the development of health services, is reducing the demand for traditional healing practices. Also, the breakdown of community responsibility in favour of a greater individualisation decreases both the demands for traditional *bilum* makers and the motivation on the part of the carvers to set apart time and maintain the necessary knowledge in the absence of any significant reward.

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