

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

Yakup Mohd. Rafee, Awangko Hamdan Awang Arshad, Hishamuddin Siri,  
Abdul Riezal Dim and Mohd. Jefri Samaroon  
Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak,  
94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

---

**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

---

### **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

practices through his research. As mentioned by Jabu, all elements that make up a heritage are not found in books or libraries. There are to be found in our own backyard waiting to be discovered and recorded they exist in the minds of elders in oral history, folklore and so on. But each time one of these elders dies, it is comparable to a library destroyed by fire. It is at this point that heritage faces extinction. Therefore, it is part of this studies objective to research, compile and record these data for future references.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study focuses primarily on the study of bilum and its current development in the Melanau community from observer researcher-observer's point of view, following a several site visits to Dalat and Mukah in 2013 covering Kampung Telian Tengah, Kampung Klid, Kampung Medong and Kampung Plajau where rituals of bilum are still practiced.

Biographical approach also is used in studying the biography of bilum. Michell (2011) argued as real objects, artefacts carry with them social and historical narratives that have seldom been investigated in posing and studying research questions related to health, education and social development. At the same time, artefacts have the potential to evoke and carry with them autobiographical narratives. In a biography of an object, one are bound to ask as quoted:

“What sociologically are the biographical possibilities inherent in its “status” and in period and culture and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized “ages” or periods in the thing’s “life” and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing’s use change with its age and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness” (Kopytoff, 1986).

The data for this study was collected using the professional visual document method which include:

- Data collection, sketches and interview
- Participant observation (observe while they are doing the activities)
- Video documentation
- Photography
- Publication, artworks, papers and articles
- Editorial, audio visual and text

The main task in studying the bilum was to look for surviving the bilum’s carver in the area and find out the processes involved in its production as well as its current status within the Pagan Melanau community. In order to explain the background of bilum, most of the data were collected based on interviews and observation. However, visual images were used to support the explanation and provide a better picture of what is bilum is all about.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Bilum:** Bilum (Fig. 1) is also known as ‘dakan’ in Melanau society. According to Chong and Seng (1987), the name bilum can incite fears among Melanau people and it has dual meanings. Bilum in the Melanau community commonly refers to the carving of images of sickness or idols made from either sago pith or soft wood. This intricately carved objects found in various forms made by the woodcarvers are used as a kind of medium to cure the sick.

Chong added that the term bilum also sometimes used to describe evil spirits. According to Melanau mythology, a spirit called ‘antu’ consists of two beings, namely, ‘Tou’ and ‘Bilum’. ‘Tou’ are either reincarnated humans or creation of supreme God, ‘Allaatalah’. All the “levels” of the world inhabited by spirits ‘Tou’ which reside together with humans, animals and plants, occupy the middle level of this world. As explained by Morris in Pagan Melanau belief, the world, the sun, the moon and the stars were created by ‘Allaatalah’. They also believe that ‘Allaatalah’ is remote and has often described to have very little interest in human affairs. Morris added that Pagan Melanau believe that every mortal has their own appropriate dwelling place in the world which is ruled by adat. Trespassing boundaries invites trouble and most human illnesses are caused by intruding on the dwelling places of the spirits which include earth, air, water, forest and so on. Here, the word ‘bilum’ closely refers to inferior beings with unpleasant origins. In brief, bilum are the slaves of ‘Tou’ and the source of human illnesses. Occasionally, they are stated as ‘Ipok’ who are less malevolent than ‘Tou’ and may indeed be invited to reside in and protect dwellings. Generally, these spirits stay in their own domain but it is believed that they pursue human companion, mostly to feed on human blood and also during moment of hardship, they will be particularly thirst to prey on humans.

Until now this belief remains strong among the Melanau and is still practiced by some of them despite having embraced Islam or Christianity. While the ritual practice is still carried out by the Pagan Melanau, Melanau Muslims and Christians equally enlivened the ceremony with the limits allowed by their respective religions.



Fig. 1: Series of bilum

**Bilum's carver:** The Pagan Melanau believes that most sicknesses were triggered by an attack of a spirit, animal or other human being. Such sicknesses could be identified by a 'bomoh' (shaman) whom were skilled in medicine and proficient to affect a healing charms and potions. However, sometimes, the 'bomoh' identify the disease as has been done by a a spirit namely 'Tou' and the cure would be undertaken via a bilum making, a sick images on a carved object. A 'bomoh' could also identify the spirits that caused the sickness and undertook the cure by performing ritual ceremony. The 'bomoh' would have recognize that the sickness was inflicted by the spirit from the patient's own wrong doing. The victim may also have an indication of soul or spirit assault and then would refer a bilum's carver whom provide the spirit its physical shape in the form of a wood carving.

It is believed that the bilum's carver was gifted and acquired their skills through dream as mentioned by Pak Ya bin Galau (Fig. 2), one of the remaining bilum's carvers from Mukah.

According to Freedman, both men and women may become shaman or bilum's carver. These experts are not likely to be shamans but if there are there will not normally prescribe medicines or carve bilum if there are active shamans. They also learnt the techniques from their master carver, usually from their relatives and family members. Under certain circumstances, the patient would demand a specific image or otherwise, the carver would propose another image to the patient. The carver would have a range more than a hundred spirits or 'Tou' causing sicknesses and about 140 of the 'Tou' have been noted (Chong and Seng, 1987; Morris, 1997). Pak Ya himself knows only about 50-70 different bilums while Gali bin Awek and Latip bin Junah (the other bilum's carvers from Dalat; Fig. 3) only remember around 20-30 different bilums.

This means that most of the designs of bilum have become extinct since the 1970's because of the lack of surviving carvers and the lack of interest in the tradition, particularly among members of the younger generations.



Fig. 2: Pak Ya Bin Galau



Fig. 3: Latip bin Junah (left) and Gali bin Awek (right)

**Types of bilum:** There is a threefold classification of spirit's dwelling places: Langit (the air), the domain to the yang spirits; Anum (the water), the domain to the buau spirits and Guun (forest) as well as Earth, in which the durig and kulum spirits reside. According to Pak Ya, each carver usually knows several types of bilum based on the patient's illness and they will create the bilum based on the classification of the spirit. Chong and Seng (1987) described that each types of carved bilum have their own characteristics as explained Fig. 4.

**Air spirit (Langit):** Usually, the air spirit bilum shares some common characteristics such as wings on its body, a mouth that resembles a bird's beak and it' hand holding a spear. The wings which indicating a carved sky spirit are used to cure upset and angry person. Finally, the figure is dumped on a tree to assist the spirit's return to its appropriate place.

**Water spirit (Anum):** This type of bilum is shown in a sitting position with either brazier horns or a headgear carved round and low. The eyes are flat and sunken like those of a fish. Normally, the hands are on the chest with one hand lower than the other. However, in water Djin, their both hands touch the ears. The inclusion of a tail



Fig. 4: Kulum Langit Pengamou, an air spirit

does not appear to be compulsory for many bilum of this type do not have tails. The secondary features at the base of the bilum are a round mat or a fish/a dragon. Here is one of water spirit from the researcher's documentation (Fig. 5-8).

This bilum is a combination of three different anthropomorphic figures. It was used to cure hands, chest, headache and hard breathing. The bilums are set to float on a river upon accomplishment of the healing procedure.

**Earth (Guan):** The main characteristic of the earth spirit is the bilum depicted in a squatting position. There is no specific design for the headgear and the eyes normally protrude. The hands are shown holding an earthly weapon such as a blowpipe, a quiver of poison-darts, a spear or a sword. Below is one of Earth Spirits from the researcher's documentation.

This type of bilum symbolises a spirit that exists in the wood close to human dwellings. It usually infects humans if their houses are built across its path between the forest and the river. At the end of the healing ceremony, the bilum will be deposited on the ground behind the patient's houses.

**Rabong:** The final healing process is the 'bebayoh' ritual ceremony which culminates in a rabong to float on a river around the village with set of bilums. Rabong (Fig. 7) refers to a set of bilums that have been placed inside a model of another carved boat (Fig. 8) to be abandoned in the jungle or sea after the 'bebayoh' ceremony (Chong and Seng, 1987).

According to Pak Ya, rabong is required only when the sick person is not immediately healed by using the bilum. The main purpose of performing this ritual is because each bilum has its own function and the combination of different bilums will increase the chances of healing the sick person.



Fig. 5: Bu'aw Kenaway, a water spirit



Fig. 6: Bu'aw krukuk, an earth spirit



Fig. 7: Rabong

**The making of bilum:** The bilum is made from sago pith that has been brought to the carver by the person (which can include the patient) that asking the carving. The carving begins from the lower part and ends on the bilum's face and head. The sago pith is soft, so, it is easy to carve and very fast to complete. Some versions including Morris (1997) suggested that the ear is the last part to be carved in bilum while others such as Pak Ya bin Galau and Gali Bin Awek, suggested that the eye is the one should be carved last. In both cases, the reasoning is to preserve the health of the carver which they believe that the bilum, through sight or hearing, could take the carver's soul before the chanting asking the spirit to leave the sick person are uttered.



Fig. 8: Bilums which have been placed inside a rabong

**The ritual practice of bilum:** The ritual practice of bilum is carried out by a shaman who performs the sickness healing ceremony that involves spitting chewed betel nuts and leaves with lime onto the bilum while uttering a short chant known as ‘Yap’ (Chong and Seng, 1987). Without the ‘Yap’, bilum is a merely an object or a piece of carving with no healing power. It is the ‘Yap’ that invokes the spiritual power of the bilum to heal or drive away the spirits that cause illness to a person. Hence, the spirit is thought to have left the patient and entered its own image (bilum). As told by Pak Ya, the ‘bomoh’ or bilum maker diagnoses the spirit that has caused the illness and forces the spirit into its carved image (bilum). Each bilum has its own function and the combination of different bilums will increase the chances of healing. Pak Ya further added that the diagnosis of a bilum maker depends on the symptoms described by the patient. The shaman would propose numerous forms of treatment, all of which are designed to encourage the spirit to leave the patient’s body. The bilum is taken after three days, either to the river, forest or graveyard where it is subsequently abandoned.

The words or chants are normally articulated by the individual who administers the sick person. Alternatively, the bilum maker may articulate these words as may the leader of the family of the sick person. The chants are uttered whilst chewing areca nut with betel leaves and lime before the shaman spits them out onto the bilum. As mentioned by Taylor (1994), the carved piece of sago pith remains ‘raw’ until the shaman spits betel juice on it and incites the malevolent spirit to take up residence there. These chants (in Melanau language), indicate that the spirit represented by the bilum has caused the sickness and should leave the patient and if it refuses and tries to inhabit the bilum, the carver will crush it.

At this point, the bilum, thought to have life is potentially dangerous for 3 days. Further chants command the bilum to heal the person and order the spirit

to leave the body. The bilum which is kept close to the patient, should not be jolted for three days because it is believed that the spirit can leave the bilum and return to the patient or harm another person.

**Bilum and Pagan Melanau society:** According to Mashman (1994) and also supported by Ceylon Bin Asat, the head of Kampung Medong, the traditional life of Pagan Melanau is changing with the old belief system being replaced by the world’s religions. The spread of Islam and Christianity amongst modern Melanau, coupled with the development of health services had reduced the demand for traditional healing practices. Furthermore, the breakdown of community responsibility in favour of a greater individualisation decreases both the demand 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. In parallel with this situation, the cultural objects of Pagan Melanau such as bilum is also very much on the brink of its extinction. In this millennium, these objects no longer play a significant role in the lives of modern day Melanau. It has become a dying art which requires preservation and revivification.

All bilum’s carvers listed in Chong and Seng (1987)’s are either dead or living out the remaining years of their lives. From the survey, the researchers were only able to find three woodcarvers (Pak Ya bin Galau, Gali bin Awek and Latip bin Junah) who only carve if there is a demand to do so, either because of healing purposes or for a ritual event such as the ‘Kaul’ ceremony. Now a days, the carvers have become fewer in number for many reasons:

- The younger generations, most of whom have move out of their villages for socio-economic reasons are not interested to acquire the knowledge of bilum
- The advancement of technology has changed the younger generation’s perception of life and death
- Many modern day Melanau who have embraced Islam or Christianity know that ritual healings contravene their religious beliefs
- The materials used to produce bilum are not durable and easy to rot within a few months. Indirectly, it will become extinct because bilum may never last like most artefacts

As mentioned by Chong, since, this is an unluccrative craft, the carvers prefer to spend their time doing odd jobs for money. Therefore, bilum carving has become a dying art form and the future generations of Melanau may not be able to appreciate it.

## CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that bilum is an endangered art form in the Pagan Melanau community. Although, this paper shows that the beliefs and rituals of bilum remain the same to this day as they were back in 60's and 70's, some information such as the types of bilum have begun to disappear since the ritual is no longer practiced by the younger generations.

Bilums do not only change through their existence but they have the capability of accumulating histories, so that their present significance derives from the people and events to which they are connected.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

With the support shown by the government, action to save the heritage of this country rests on the shoulders of all parties. Among other measures that can be done in preserving Malaysia's cultural heritage include:

- Carrying out conservation activities, world heritage promotion and mobilization of resources and financial support
- Increasing public awareness on the importance of preserving national cultural heritage through social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter
- Respecting local cultures and customs

It is hoped that this study provides an opportunity for all to see the possibilities that could be explored in preserving the dying art form of the Pagan Melanau community.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Research was done under FRGS research grant (FRGS/SSI09(01)/984/2013(25)), supported by the Ministry

of Education Malaysia (MOE) and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). The researchers would like to thank the officers from Majlis Adat Istiadat Sarawak, Mr Hat bin Hoklai and community of Dalat and Mukah area who have greatly assisted the research.

## REFERENCES

- Chong, C.S. and C.C. Seng, 1987. Traditional Melanau Woodcarving (Bilum) in Dalat. Sarawak Literary Society, Sarawak, Malaysian.
- Gosden, C. and Y. Marshall, 1999. The cultural biography of objects. *World Archaeol.*, 31: 169-178.
- Kopytoff, I., 1986. *The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process, The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England.
- Mashman, V., 1994. Woodcarving in Sarawak: Memory, meaning and mementoes. *Sarawak Mus. J.*, 68: 117-126.
- Michell, C., 2011. *Doing Visual Research.* Sage, Newcastle, England.
- Morris, H.S., 1991. *The Oya Melanau: Malaysian Historical Society.* Sarawak Branch Publisher, Sarawak, Malaysian.
- Morris, H.S., 1997. The oya Melanau: Traditional ritual and belief with a catalogue of bilum carvings. *Sarawak Mus. J.*, 52: 388-388.
- Rafee, M.Y., A.A.H. Arshad, A.R. Dim, H. Siri and M.J. Samaroon, 2015. Visual ethnography and its applications in ethnographic painting. *Procedia Soc. Behav. Sci.*, 211: 399-406.
- Taylor, P.M., 1994. *Fragile Traditions: Indonesian Art in Jeopardy.* University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, Hawaii.