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Good-Luck Charms (*SUK*) of The Melanau on The Island of Borneo

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines specific aspects of the mythological and cosmological world of the rapidly dwindling pagan Melanau people of Sarawak on the Northern coast of the Island of Borneo. This superstructure formed the basis for the Melanau's unique healing rituals and an advanced material culture, reflected in an immense variety of carved wooden images of spirits held responsible by shamans for causing harm and disease to people. Because the relevant literature of the 19th and 20th centuries focused on the various stages of healing procedures and the use of the wooden images (bilum), extensive information is available on the origin, morphology, and names of the spirit images, as well as the indications and healing potential within the healing rituals. The purpose of this analysis is to find and to compile data and information about the less noted smaller spirit images (suk), carved from antler or bone and commonly known as "fishing charms". Compared to the bilum, there is no written record to help understand their cultural use in more detail. The result presents the few existing written references about the suk which are supplemented by statements from older knowledgeable Melanau consultants. The findings show a vast variety in size and morphology of the suk and a use either as protective or good-luck charms in daily life. In addition, they serve as bringer of good fortune when hunting or fishing.

Keywords: Borneo, Sarawak, Melanau, Melanau mythology, Melanau traditional healing, Melanau fishing charm



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INTRODUCTION

The c.130.000 Melanau form the fifth largest ethnic group in Sarawak (Malaysia) inhabiting the Southeast Asian Island of Borneo, the third largest island in the world. Their homeland is situated along the northern coast of Sarawak. It stretches from the mouth of the mighty Rejang River eastwards towards the administrative and cultural centre of Mukah to then reach the now booming industrial urban centres of Bintulu and Miri.



Figure 1: The Melanau homeland lies in Sarawak, Malaysia between the mouth of Rajang River and the town of Miri. Borneo, Topografischer Dienst (Batavia), 1934.

The early history and the migration routes followed by the Melanau people to Sarawak are largely unknown. Nevertheless, a settlement area named “Malano” is mentioned on 16th century maps. Their language is of Austronesian origin and spoken in several dialects. There is a noticeable close cultural similarity with Bornean inland groups, especially the Punan Bah, Kejaman and Kajang (Aseng, 1989). This resemblance manifests itself for instance in the practise of secondary burials, erecting huge burial posts in honour of leaders and aristocrats, and in the languages.

After centuries of being ruled by the Sultanate of Brunei, areas inhabited by the Melanau were ceded by Brunei in 1861 to then be colonised by James Brooke, the self-proclaimed British Rajah of Sarawak, whom Great Britain supported. His family stayed in power until 1946 when Sarawak officially became a British colony. Since 1963 Sarawak has been part of the newly founded Federation of Malaysia, a merger of former British colonies.

In earlier times the Melanau lived in longhouses raised on stilts but now live in single houses and villages built on riverbanks. Their economic activities have been restricted to the limited possibilities provided by the coastal marshland with its exposure to tides and rough weather. The focus lay on sago production, fishery, rice farming where possible, and on growing vegetables within a smallholder frame.

Sago extracted from wild growing palms is utilised across Borneo. However, the local climate and soil conditions favoured this staple food’s cultivation and production in small estates. These circumstances presented rare cash economy opportunities to the Melanau as early as the middle of the 19th century – a result of the high demands for sago starch for developing industries across Europe. Rivers and the sea being the only means of transport were utilised in order to export sago palm-derived products to Kuching and Singapore via Chinese middlemen.

Brunei in the East and the Malay neighbours in the West effectuated a strong Islamic influence on the animistic Melanau population. Christianity arrived in 1861. Today the majority of the Melanau population has adopted Islam and c.20 per cent the Christian faith. A diminishing minority of c.8.000 people is registered as Pagan and refer to themselves as *a-likou*, meaning “people of the river” (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). No data are available on the number of those who continue to practise traditional animistic beliefs and customs.

Suk, a Rarity Since Around 100 Years Ago

When Dr. Eric Georg Mjöberg, the renowned Swedish ethnologist, travelled to the home of the Melanau community on the northern coast of Borneo almost a century ago, he