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MELANAU SECONDARY TREATMENT OF THE DEAD: RE-MEMBERING CONNECTIONS¹

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BACKGROUND

The *nulang* arc (from the Berawan cognate *tulang* - for bone or bones) is a term coined by Metcalf (1975) to describe the present day distribution of peoples in Sarawak who traditionally practised secondary treatment of the dead. These include the small subgroups who make up the Kajang peoples, the Punan Bah, Berawan, Lundayeh, Lun Bawang, and Kelabit, as well as the Melanau nearer the coast.² These groups are also linguistically related and some of them share genealogies and mythical ancestors in common (See Metcalf, 1975; Aseng, 1998; Morris, 1991; Clayre, 1971).

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Two (not entirely unrelated) hypotheses have been put forward regarding the historical origins and relationship of these groups. Metcalf argues that the various groups of the *nulang* arc “represent an ancient cultural substratum” who, prior to “the arrival of the Kayan and Kenyah...were distributed more evenly across northern Sarawak” and that “the present distribution is the result of migration down the major rivers that flow north, south, and west out of the Usan Apau” (1975: 58). Though the reason for this migration remains unknown, nevertheless the practice of secondary burial remains a common identifying element.

Sellato (1994) suggests that the societies of the *Nulang Arc* are part of a bigger complex and posits a link with the societies of the Barito Complex in the southern part of Kalimantan, which are characterised by a common practice of “elaborate funerary rituals, including secondary treatment of the bodies of the dead” (1994: 11).

These practices may reflect “a relationship to an ancient centre of Hinduised culture in the south of Borneo” (*ibid.*). Sellato proposes that both groups were part of a “major set of cultures of unstratified horticulturalists, which once extended over much of Borneo prior to the arrival or development of rice farming cultures” and notes that all these groups were characterised by “an elaborate technology and system of religion” (1994: 190).³

The origins and relationship of these societies remain largely a matter of speculation, though that is not to suggest they may not be correct. However, the available evidence consistently speaks of former contact and connections with other civilisations within the wider Southeast Asian region and beyond.

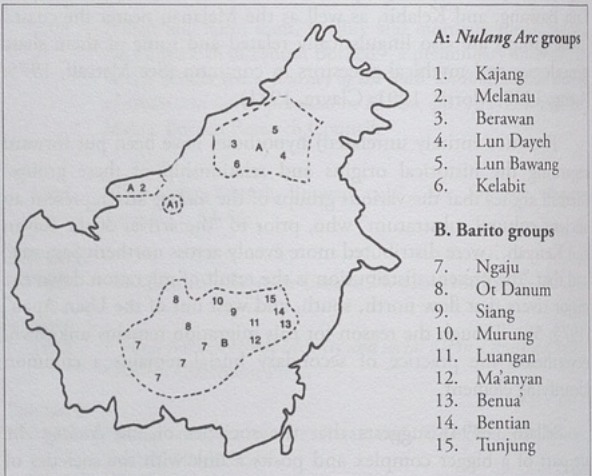


Fig. 1: Map and key adapted from Sellato (1994) showing Societies of the *Nulang Arc* in Sarawak (A) and societies of the Barito Complex in Kalimantan (B).

The above map, adapted from Sellato (1994) shows the location of the societies that make up the *Nulang Arc* and the Barito Complex.

Melanau burial practices

Along with other societies that make up the *nulang arc*, the Melanau previously practised secondary treatment of the dead. The remainder of this article explores the published literature on these practices and associated beliefs amongst the Melanau of Sarawak and also introduces some new material gathered during field trips to Melanau communities on the Mukah and Oya Rivers. It should be noted that the traditional Melanau village was a politically independent community and historically each Melanau community – living in relative isolation from the others, was characterised by distinct linguistic, cultural and political differences (Morris, 1991: 2). What might at first appear as conflicting information in the published literature is simply a reflection of this fact; *i.e.*, different traditions were associated with different Melanau communities.

Evidence suggests that the practice of secondary burial among the Melanau survived until the end of the 19th century and that its abandonment was associated with “conversion to Islam and also through an implicit ruling under the Brookes” (Aseng, 1998: 3), though accounts also indicate that isolated cases continued to occur into the mid twentieth century; *e.g.* see Morris (1997: 129). The erection of *jerunei* and *kelideng* and the practices associated with them ceased much earlier, possibly by the end of the eighteenth century and probably due to the cost and manpower involved in obtaining and erecting the pole, as well as increasing religious conversion (Morris, 1991; Aseng, 1998).

Melanau treatment of the dead differed depending on rank and status of the deceased. Primary ground burial appears to have always been the norm for those of lower rank. However, in former times aristocrats and those of middle rank might be buried above ground