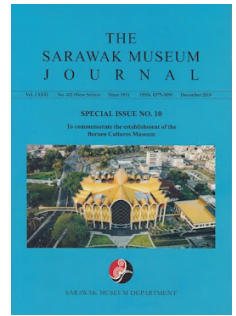




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Citation: *Sarawak Museum Journal*, LXXXI (102) (2019): 153-200**FROM ENEMY SKULLS TO WELFARE, AND THE MISSING NEXUS – A REVIEW ON BIDAYUH HEADHUNTING**

Oliver Venz

INTRODUCTION

Headhunting' was practiced by many societies widely separated in space and time, including Europe (see Chacon and Dye *ibid.* 5–32 for a global survey). However, says Winzeler (2012: 99) in a summary of the matter: "Southeast Asia and especially Borneo, is the locus classicus of head-hunting as far as the more recent ethnographic and historical literature is concerned. Yet scholars disagree about the cultural motives underlying the practice or maintain that it is now difficult to find what the motives were at the time when head-hunting was in full practice. It is the specific religious or ritual motives that are disputed or unclear".

To avoid any misunderstanding, the anthropological literature on headhunting is vast and a host of different interpretive frameworks² are being used by scholars in order to elucidate different 'aspects', 'causes' and 'purposes' as well as 'building blocks', 'dimensions' or 'recurrent themes' of what some authors consider a 'universal grammar of head-taking' (Armit 2012: 66). What has been found most remarkable about headhunting is, as Blust (1980: 231) once put it, "the matrix of 'magico-religious' concepts in which the practice is inextricably enmeshed". However, it is exactly this area, as Winzeler insinuated above, where there is an extensive lack of reliable fundamental data. And, despite its prominent role as locus classicus in recent headhunting debates, this is also true for Borneo. My task as a Fellow of the Sarawak Museum Campus Project (2017–2018) was to focus my attention on Bidayuh (Land Dayak), and especially Bisingai, concepts related to headhunting. This choice turned out to be just as exciting as problematic. Headhunting already stands as a puzzling topic, and the Bidayuh are themselves, as Winzeler (1993: 223) put it, "something of a jigsaw puzzle" when it comes to the often considerable cultural and linguistic differences between individual communities. While the data corpus has grown in recent years, our knowledge of (early) Bidayuh religiosity, however, is still sketchy and detailed grammars and dictionaries are lacking for the majority of individual isolects.

Keywords:

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