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THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL CHANGE ON THE FUNCTION OF BALU OF BIDAYUH-BUKAR COMMUNITY IN KAMPUNG TAE, SERIAN

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ABSTRACT

A significant feature of the Bidayuh community is the unique structure known as balu, which reflects the communal nature of their society. The balu serves various purposes. However, modernisation has led to alterations in both its functions and the materials used in its construction. This study aims to provide a thorough understanding of how social changes have influenced the changing functions of the balu, comparing its past significance to its current roles, as well as examining the implications of these changes for Bidayuh culture in the 21st century. The focus area for this research is Kampung Tae in Serian, Sarawak, where two specific balu structures – the Balu Gambang and the Balu Tuda - are located. Utilising a qualitative approach, the research involved semi-structured interviews and passive participant observation. The findings indicate that social or cultural changes in Kampung Tae have significantly affected the functions of the balu over time, and that its significance has decreased as many of its traditional uses have ceased to be practiced. Despite this decline, the study reveals a strong sentiment of cultural identity among the Bidayuh-Bukar community, as they continue to incorporate the balu into their modern lifestyles and traditional ceremonies, such as the Gawai Dayak celebration.

Keywords: Bidayuh, Sarawak, cultural change, modernisation, cultural structure, traditional functions

THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL CHANGE ON THE FUNCTION OF *BALU* OF BIDAYUH-BUKAR COMMUNITY IN KAMPUNG TAE, SERIAN

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ABSTRACT

A significant feature of the Bidayuh community is the unique structure known as *balu*, which reflects the communal nature of their society. The *balu* serves various purposes. However, modernisation has led to alterations in both its functions and the materials used in its construction. This study aims to provide a thorough understanding of how social changes have influenced the changing functions of the *balu*, comparing its past significance to its current roles, as well as examining the implications of these changes for Bidayuh culture in the 21st century. The focus area for this research is Kampung Tae in Serian, Sarawak, where two specific *balu* structures – the *Balu Gambang* and the *Balu Tuda* - are located. Utilising a qualitative approach, the research involved semi-structured interviews and passive participant observation. The findings indicate that social or cultural changes in Kampung Tae have significantly affected the functions of the *balu* over time, and that its significance has decreased as many of its traditional uses have ceased to be practiced. Despite this decline, the study reveals a strong sentiment of cultural identity among the Bidayuh-Bukar community, as they continue to incorporate the *balu* into their modern lifestyles and traditional ceremonies, such as the Gawai Dayak celebration.

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural changes are inevitable in people's lives or one's culture. Many people today are daunted by how rapidly their cultures are changing. Toffler (1970) used the term "future shock" to describe the situation, which refers to the psychological orientation caused by living in a cultural environment that is changing so quickly that people believe they are constantly living in the future. Indeed, global commodity and information change are bringing the world's population closer to the concept of living in a global world. Because of the rapid and dramatic increase in our ability to interact with people from other parts of the world, the possibility of culture diffusing has increased dramatically in recent decades. Culture is experiencing development or dynamic changes in tandem with the development of society. Thus, culture will undergo changes. Changes in culture concern many aspects of life such as art, scientific knowledge, technology, rules of life, organisation and philosophy. Cultural change is in relation to the problem of acceptance, new ways, or changes to the ways of life in fulfilling the needs of societies (Ungang, 2017).

There are some Western scholars who claim that the Bidayuh, as an ethnic group, are conservative and less open towards accepting changes (Lyndon, 2011). However, Pawi & Ungang (2021) stated that social change in the Bidayuh community is fast and dynamic, which contradicts Lyndon's (2011) statement about the conservative nature of the Bidayuh community. Ungang (2017) said that the Bidayuh community is experiencing changes from many different aspects, therefore what Lyndon (2011) mentioned may be considered as inaccurate. Hence, this study is conducted to resolve the contradiction between the statements by Lyndon (2011) and Pawi & Ungang (2021) about the Bidayuh community in general.

There is a cultural structure called '*balu*' in Bidayuh-Bukar Sadung Serian dialect. The Bidayuh-Padawan community refers to this cultural structure as '*pangah*', while the Bidayuh-Bau refers to it as '*baruk*'. While the names may differ from one Bidayuh community to another, they essentially refer to the same cultural structure, which is spherical in shape with a conical roof that serves multiple functions such as a courthouse, a gathering place, a dwelling or sleeping space for male teenagers (Zaini *et al.*, 2018) and a headhouse. All of these are secular reasons built around its religious functions, centred on historic beliefs that entitle it to be regarded as a sacred monument. Every Bidayuh community has at least one *balu*. Yet, the structure of the *balu* is determined by the number of houses in the village or the number of longhouses built at that time. Although the *balu* still exists to this day, the functions of the *balu* have changed with modernisation (Atar *et al.*, 2017). One of the factors that

leads to the cultural changes on the functions of *balu* nowadays is that only a few of the younger generation have awareness of their own culture and tradition (Rahman & Letlora, 2018). Rahman & Letlora's statement is also supported by Atar *et al.* (2017), who stated that the younger generation of the Bidayuh community demonstrates no dedication toward protecting the cultural heritage and treasures of the Bidayuh heritage. This study highlights the changes in the *balu*'s function due to the inevitable cultural change as experienced by the Bidayuh-Bukar community in Kampung Tae, Serian. The *balu* is unique to each Bidayuh village. Nevertheless, the number of *balu* is declining, and the functions also have changed (Atar *et al.*, 2017).

Moreover, *balu* is considered a monumental symbol of tangible cultural heritage and it symbolises the identity of the Bidayuh community (Ridu, 1989).

METHODOLOGY

We used a qualitative approach in carrying out the study. Denzin (1989) stated that one of the advantages of the qualitative research method is that researchers can generate a dense representation of participants' thoughts, views and experiences, as well as interpret the implication of their action. In addition, qualitative research also incorporates a greater range of epistemological views, research methodologies, and interpretative tools in understanding human experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Our main data collecting method was semi-structured interviews. During data collection, we asked questions based on a list of interview questions that had been prepared beforehand. Beside that, we also asked additional relevant questions during the interview session in order to make sure the objectives of the study were achieved. McIntosh & Morse (2015) stated that a semi-structured interview is interactive in nature, and that it provides a comfortable situation for the informants to freely tell what is on their mind about the subject of study. The interview session with the former *Ketua Kampung* (community leader or village head) and informants took place in the *Balu Tuda*. This provided us with an avenue to better understand the information gathered as the informants were able to directly point out during the interview and explain the significant areas in the *balu* for activities or rituals in the past and modern world. Moreover, we were also able to ask questions based on our own direct observations in the *Balu Tuda*. Another research method used in collecting primary data in this study is passive participant observation conducted in and around