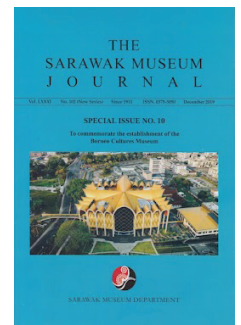




The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LXXXI No. 102

December 2019



ISSN: 0375-3050
E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Oliver Venz (2019). From Enemy Skulls to Welfare, and the Missing Nexus - A Review on Bidayuh Headhunting. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LXXXI (102) : 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:

© Sarawak Museum Department 2019

All rights reserved. No part of this journal may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Director, Sarawak Museum Department



JABATAN MUSEUM SARAWAK

FROM ENEMY SKULLS TO WELFARE, AND THE MISSING *NEXUS* – A REVIEW ON BIDAYUH HEADHUNTING

Oliver Venz

INTRODUCTION¹

‘**H**eadhunting’ 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.

In what follows, I shall embark on a literature survey and, where possible, analysis of Bidayan religious key terms associated with headhunting. The purpose is to gain an insight into the underlying ideas (or conceptual roots) of the phenomena so denominated and to gain a better understanding of the magico-religious link, which, according to Bidayan ideology, is believed to exist between human heads or skulls and the notions of fertility, plentiful harvests and welfare.

The Land Dayak subgroup

The Bidayuh are the fourth largest ethnic group in Sarawak (Malaysia) and live mainly in the Lundu, Bau, Kuching and Serian districts of the Kuching and Samarahan divisions of south-west Sarawak. The term ‘Bidayuh’ is said to be originally a Bukar-Sadong endonym meaning ‘people of the land/hills’ (*bi- + dayuh*) (see Geddes 1954: 6; Grijpstra 1976: 52; Chua 2007: 265), which became an official ethnic label only after the formation of Malaysia. It replaced the former term ‘Land Dayak’, which, however, is still used by historical linguists for the purpose of higher-order subgrouping. Sarawak’s Bidayuh are usually grouped into three linguistic divisions (i.e. dialectal groups or languages): (1) Western group: Bau Bidayuh alias Bau-Jagoi (or Singai-Gumbang-Jagoi), (2) Central group: Biatah Bidayuh (alias Biatah-Penrissen-Padawan) and (3) Eastern group: Serian Bidayuh alias Bukar-Sadung. Some scholars consider Tringgis and Mbaan as a fourth group, sometimes called the Sembaan group (see e.g. Topping 1996; Kroeger 1998, 2009; and Rensch 2012). Due to political and cultural reasons, the Lara’ (or Rara’) and the Salako communities (in Lundu district) are often included within Bidayuh ethnicity. However, linguistically, Lara’ is a dialect of Bakati’ (Bryant 1990), while Selako is a dialect of Kanayatn, and, therefore, part of the Malayic subgroup (Hudson 1970; Adelaar 1992, 2005).

There are also Bidayuh in northern West Kalimantan (Indonesia). However, research on these communities and their languages is still in its early stages (see e.g. Tadmor 2009, 2015 on Onya Darat; Connell 2013 on Matéq or Smith 2017 on Hliboi). Smith (2017: 139–168) provides the most recent analysis of Land Dayak subgrouping relationships, which supplants all earlier proposals (Hudson 1978; Rensch *et al.* 2012, incl. Simons *et al.*

2018). He shows that Sarawak's Bidayuh languages form a subgroup with the Southern Land Dayak languages of West Kalimantan (e.g. Jangkang, Ribun, Golik, Sanggau and Simpang) and that this subgroup, together with Benyadu-Bekati (e.g. Benyadu, Bekati, Rara and Sara), form two primary subgroups of Proto-Land Dayak (PLD). The Land Dayak languages in turn are one of five subgroups of Greater North Borneo, which together with the Basap-Greater Barito and Sumatran subgroups, as well as Javanese, Madurese, Balinese, Sasak, and Sumbawa, form the Western Indonesian (WIN) subgroup which is one of several primary branches of Malayo-Polynesian [see Blust 2010; Smith 2017a, b].

Skulls and 'fertility'

According to many Bornean worldviews, bringing back a head to one's village benefited both the headtaker's own and his community's fertility and wellbeing, while failure to gather heads would see a reversal of these benefits. Consequently, a long scholarly debate has been concerned with the relationship between 'heads/skulls' and 'fertility', more specifically with the identification of the 'mediating agent'. The question to be answered was: What is in the head that causes fertility? Kruijt (1906) developed the idea of a 'life-fluid' (*levensfluïde*), which he later called 'soul-substance' (*zielestof*), and then 'magical power' (*magische kracht*); Hutton (1938) introduced the notion of 'life-fertiliser'; Izikowitz (1985 [1941]) found 'life-energy'; and Bloch (1982: 229) also explained headhunting in terms of some alienable stock of 'life'.³

A different answer came from Freeman's (1979) influential contribution on the 'seed symbolism' of heads among the Iban. According to him, trophy heads "have a phallic significance as symbols of the regenerative power of nature" (ibid. 237), in that both human head and phallus are considered containers of 'seed'. In support of his view, Freeman presented an Iban myth, which recounts how the Iban war "god", Lang Sengalang Burong, splits open a human trophy head, which contains not 'soul-substance' or 'life-force', but 'seed' that subsequently yielded a rice crop (ibid. 234). The close link between the rice cult and trophy heads was furthermore seen in the fact that the term for the human 'soul', located in the head, and that of the rice is the same, namely *semangat*.

Yet another scholar considering the head as a site of fertility was La Barre (1984) with his theory on *muelos* (Greek, 'marrow'). The 'cult of the bones',