

## Bangsa Pikul Psychology and the Social Status of the Melanau Community in Sarawak

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### Abstract

This paper is about the race in the social status of the Melanau community in Sarawak. The social status system of the Melanau community is based on the customs and beliefs practiced by the community. In the customs and beliefs of the Melanau community, the pikul race means the rank system of the position of a family that is described through marriage, feasting and death. The problem of the study, how the race still exists in the Melanau community. The objective of the study on explaining the race is still being continued in the Melanau community. The study uses an ethnographic approach in obtaining the necessary data. The study was conducted in Melanau within seven days. The ethnographic approach used consists of field studies and library studies. Field studies conducted to obtain data such as observations, participating and interviews. Observation and opt-in methods are used to ensure that the data collected and collected are suitable for the study. The interview method uses a semi-structural interview technique by interviewing several customary practitioners and elderly people of authority in Melanau society. Library studies such as journals, books and printed reports are to support this study by contributing secondary materials. Primary and secondary data need to undergo screening using thematic analysis techniques and thorough reading to obtain true data in accordance with the study. The findings found that the pikul race consists of a nation of nine pikul, a nation of seven pikul, a nation of bertirih and dipen. This result illustrates that the Melanau community still practices the social status of the people in their society. The results clearly state that the Malay community still maintains and practices the social status of the pikul race despite the adaptation and assimilation with external influences. Therefore, this contribution is expected to provide knowledge to the younger generation especially the younger generation of Melanau community on the system of social status as well as to be able to coronate the customs and identity of the Melanau community.

**Keywords:** bumiputera, Melanau, social organization, regulation, social system

### Introduction

The Melanau ethnic group in Sarawak can be classified as a unique ethnic group. The Melanau ethnic group is one of the fifth largest ethnic group in Sarawak. Their custom are clearly visible in aspects of their lives. This custom or practice has been passed down from time to time and continues to this day. For most of the people of Sarawak, Melanau are the same race as the Iban, Malay, Chinese and others. In the daily life of the Melanau community, they have certain beliefs about actions and behavior towards nature, the origins of human, medications and also public events. These beliefs include the culture, beliefs, rules and culture of the community. However, their life practices are based on their social status, which is known as 'bangsa pikul'. Therefore this paper will examine the existence of the 'bangsa pikul' in the Melanau community located in Mukah which has not been studied in depth. In the customs and beliefs of the Melanau community, 'bangsa pikul' means the rank system of a family's position which is depicted through marriage until death.

The social stratification of the Melanau community has a lot of influence on the socio-culture of their lives, especially in the transition of status for certain ceremonies such as marriage and death ceremonies. They are concerned with rank, which is related to the origin of status or custom of the 'bangsa' which can be proven through the arrangement of social life in Melanau longhouses of the past. A low-ranking person cannot claim a high rank because it can cause a person to be afflicted with calamity or plague. This rank can be seen through the father's side and every Melanau man or woman has his or her inherited rank which determines a certain ceremonial pattern.

### Methodology

This study uses an ethnographic approach in obtaining the necessary data. This study was conducted in Mukah over a period of seven days. The ethnographic approach used consists of field studies and literature. Field research conducted to obtain data such as observation, participation and interviews. The method of observation and participation is used to ensure that the collected data are suitable for the study. The interview method uses a

semi-structured interview technique by interviewing some traditional practitioners and authoritative elders in the Melanau community and they are selected as informants because they have knowledge and experience in Melanau cultural arts, either as activists or members of associations. The informants consist of ten people from the Melanau community, namely 6 men and 4 women aged between 28 and 72 years. The interview questions presented to the informant are divided into two parts, namely Part A (5 questions) and Part B (5 questions). The questions asked includes background, knowledge about the 'bangsa pikul' of the Melanau community. Bibliographic studies such as journals, books and printed reports are to support this study by contributing secondary materials. Primary and secondary data need to undergo a screening process using thematic analysis techniques and close reading to obtain correct data in accordance with the study.

## Results and Discussion

Before the arrival of Brunei's influence which brought Islam teachings to Mukah, the traditional Melanau social structure was divided into three levels, namely the upper class, the middle class and the slave class (Tommy Black 2016). Little change occurred in the traditional Melanau social structure when Brunei became patron of the area. The position of 'Sembilan pikul' is seen to be threatened by the pangiran group originally from Brunei (Dzulfawati Hassan 2006). Previously however, 'Sembilan pikul' are the special group in the Melanau community.

### Definition of Bangsa Pikul Structure

The Melanau people have a social hierarchy consisting of five levels, namely Bangsa Sembilan Pikul, Bangsa Tujuh Pikul, Bangsa Tujuh Bertih and Dipen. The social stratification starts from Noble (A-Mentri) from top to bottom explained below.

9 Pikul- "A-Metahei" is a noble of pure Melanau blood. They are the founders of the village and the safeguards of "Adet". Leadership among the A-Metahei is based on *Primus inter Pares* (first among equals). This means that leadership is given to certain A-Metahei who are qualified to do the job but are still technically equal among their peers. Likewise there are two grades of freemen (free people):

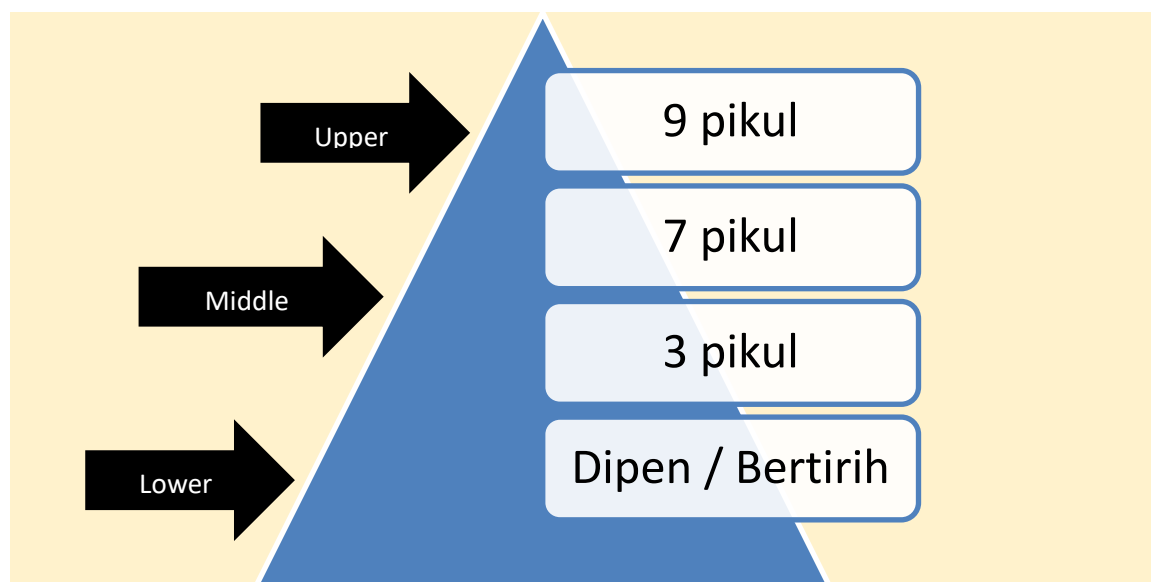
7 Pikul - "A-Bumi Ateng" or a true freeman could be commanded as service for the nobility that no one who could do. They have the right to receive payment or wages for their work.

5 Pikul (7 Betirih)- "A-Bumi Giga" or "bound" freemen may be called upon by the former owner to perform service. These "bound" free people were freed slaves.

Rank of Dipen (Slave) known as the 2 1/2 Pikul also can be divided into few groups: 5 Betirih- "Dipen gak luer" or rice field slaves which live in their own houses and are entitled to their own land in communal rice fields. As slaves, in the inside they probably owned sago gardens in their own right. But they are of course subject to all the claims made by their owners. The land given to them can also be taken by the owner without any permission.

2 1/2 Betirih- "Dipen gak lebok" or house servants live in the owner's household and help with domestic tasks and accompany nobles as servants and companions wherever they go. Although the rank cannot be changed, any melanau has the right to redeem the rank at the weed or at any other time with the permission of A-Metahei by paying the remaining amount of Pikul remaining to achieve the desired status.

The rank redemption system has been organized in steps (tirih). The full redemption of a slave from the lowest group to "bound" freeman status (A-Bumi Giga or 5 Pikul) takes 3 Pikul or seven steps/ installments (7 Tirih). Therefore, "bound" free people are also known as 7 Betirih. A slave should and usually does take less than seven steps at a time and thus still remain a slave. Those who have paid their fifth installment are called 5 Betirih (Dipen gak luer). Only at a wedding can a free man (A-Bumi) redeem his rank and become a lesser noble (A-Metahei). For a true free person (A-Bumi Ateng) he has to pay an additional 2 Pikul and "bound" (A-Bumi Giga) 3 Pikul to complete 9-Pikul in 15 steps / installments (15 tirih). Only the firstborn born will inherit the redeemed rank while other siblings will inherit their father's former rank.



**Diagram 1:** Social Structure of Melanau Society  
Source : Tommy Black 2022

Based on the diagram above, the upper class is referred to as the ‘bangsa sembilan pikul’, which is the top tier group of the Melanau social structure. Before the conquest of Brunei Sultanate over Mukah, this ‘bangsa sembilan pikul’ had a role as the government system of the Melanau community (Dzulfawati Hassan 2006). Therefore, there are privileges reserved for this group to distinguish their Upper, Middle and Lower ranks. The privilege includes aspects of marriage and death that will be briefly commented on in this writing. The middle class is the group of seven people who are not attached to any party. This position makes them the most stable group because they are free to do daily activities that bring profit and wealth to themselves and their families. In addition, they are also not threatened by political threats as experienced by the ‘bangsa sembilan pikul’ group when the Sultanate of Brunei took over the reins of leadership in Mukah. The absence of pressure and obstacles from any of these parties has caused some of these groups to have more wealth than the ‘bangsa sembilan pikul’ (Dzulfawati Hassan 2006).. Nevertheless, this situation do not change their position in the social structure of Melanau.

The lower rank groups are the ‘tujuh bertirih’ group and the ‘dipen’ group. The tujuh bertirih’ or common slave is different from dipen slave because the common slave is still entitled to get wages based on the results of their work. They also have the right to develop their own land and house because they are slaves who have been freed with the conditions of ransom set (Dzulfawati Hassan 2006). For example, they can enjoy freedom but still be bound by orders from those above them. This means that this group can improve their lives in a better direction but are still subject to the conditions of their masters. ‘Dipen’ slave refer to those who work without being paid. These groups are prisoners of war (Stephen Morris 1953) or those who cannot pay their debts to their masters and also orphans (Stephen Morris 1978)..

## Discussions

### Melanau Marriage Customs

Marriage in Melanau society contains several ceremonies that are taken very seriously because of the social implications found in it. The aspect of rank is emphasized in the institution of marriage compared to other institutions. The Melanau community is also very concerned about their social status which is ‘sembilan pikul’, ‘tujuh pikul’, ‘tujuh betirih’ and ‘lima betirih’. The types of goods and gifts that need to be brought to mark the engagement and the items that accompany the dowry such as ‘menuga’ custom, ‘mebin’ custom and ‘pakan’ are also calculated based on this social status. Nevertheless, the basis of marriage customs is the same as in other societies, namely proposal, betrothal and wedding ceremony.

Marriage in Melanau society contains several ceremonies that are taken very seriously because of the social implications found in it. However, the basic customs of marriage are the same as in other societies, which are proposal, betrothal and wedding ceremony. The types of goods and gifts that need to be brought for the engagement sign, including ‘sembilan pikul’, ‘tujuh pikul’, ‘tujuh betirih’ and ‘lima betirih’. The items that accompany the dowry are ‘menuga’ custom, ‘mebin’ custom and ‘pakan’. Among the Melanau community,

marriage between couples of the same social status is known as 'sama gara'. Marriages between couples of different social status are known as 'sida adat'. If the girl is unmarried, it is inquire whether the girl can be betrothed or not with the dowry. On the day that has been agreed upon by both sides of the family, then it is customary for the engagement to be held, the representative of the male family along with several men and women of age will hand over the engagement gifts. With the delivery of the items by the male family representative and accepted by the female family representative, the engagement is official. The wedding feast is held at the homes of both the groom and the bride, attended by relatives, neighbors and friends. The highlight of the event is the marriage match which is usually held at noon. The first match is held at the groom's house and this is followed by the second match at the bride's house. After the ceremony at the groom's house, a ceremony was held at the bride's house to undergo the 'petudui custom'. After that, a 'begendang' ceremony was held. Attendees are invited to participate but the partner must be of the same race, i.e men in pairs with men and women with women. They danced until late at night. On the seventh day, a liberation ceremony is held to free them from the taboo imposed during the wedding day.

#### Melanau Death Customs

The death ceremony is an important ceremony according to the beliefs of the Melanau community. Death needs to be managed as best as possible by following certain customs and according to the social status of the deceased. The Melanau community also believes that if a person dies, the deceased needs to be helped on his journey to the afterlife which is called 'likow matai'. This assistance is in terms of holding mourning ceremonies, feasts and so on. During death, the corpse will be bathed first. This will be done by 'A-beri patai' or a close family member. Next, the corpse is dressed in beautiful clothes along with decorations such as beads and jewelry for the 'bangsa 9 pikul' compared to the middle class. For female corpses, Sebungong cloth which is the cloth received as a wedding gift will be placed together. The corpse's toes are tied to the body with a cloth while the head is covered with a cloth tied under the chin. The body will be placed on the pakat, which is a place to park the body made of boards and reed branches. This place will be covered with a bemban mat and the upper part will be covered with a blanket fabric. The body will also be covered with several pieces of sarong and his own shirt. Lugi' cloth is then placed on the body. A mosquito net will be installed to protect the body.

The body will be kept indoors for three days before burial. There are also family members who keep the body for a week. The funeral ceremony will be attended by all family members and mourners consisting of women who are required to mourn the death by wailing in a loud voice. This ceremony depends on the respective 'bangsa pikul'. However, for the upper and middle class, this practice is according to the ability of the deceased's family. A mattress, usually used by the deceased during his life, will be placed in the coffin. Two pieces of Lugi' cloth that were placed on the corpse will be taken to be used in the 'platow' ceremony and another piece will be placed on the coffin of the deceased. Flags according to the rank or race of the deceased will be flown while the coffin is carried for burial. After arriving at the cemetery, the coffin is opened and the ties on the corpse are untied. Next, the coffin is closed again and buried. The clothes of the deceased will be placed on the grave and for three consecutive days. Candles will be lit to illuminate the journey of the spirit of the deceased to the afterlife. In the aspect of traditional Melanau funerals, the 'dipen' are considered the most unlucky group because they are the ones who are often sacrificed in the funeral ceremonies of the upper class (Henry Roth 1896). In short, 'dipen' slaves can be said to have no right to their own lives because they are determined by their respective masters.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that the Melanau community still maintains and practices the social status of the 'bangsa pikul' despite the fact that there has been adaptation and assimilation with external influences in the current situation. Therefore, this contribution is expected to give knowledge to the young generation, especially among the Melanau community about the social status system, as well as be able to ennoble the customs, identity and self-identity of the Melanau community..

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