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Cultural heritage of Vaie community: Engulfed cultural heritage of minor ethnic groups by other larger ethnic groups

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Abstract

This ethnographic study focus to explore the uniqueness of Vaie community cultural heritage and differences between Vaie and Melanau communities. The main approach used ethnographic, descriptive, and comparative analysis. Observation and semi-structured individual and group interview on history of Vaie community was done by involving ten (10) respective respondents. Findings of this study suggest that Vaie ethnicity are native people of Bintulu and are completely different from Melanau or any other ethnicity in Sarawak as a whole. It is recommended that the Department of Statistics, Malaysia should provide options for the minority ethnic groups especially that of Vaie in Bintulu in other to follow its population growth.

Keywords: Historical heritage, Malaysia, Melanau, Religious similarity, Small minority

Patrimonio cultural de la comunidad Vaie: Patrimonio cultural englobado de grupos étnicos menores por otros grupos étnicos más grandes

Resumen

Este estudio etnográfico se enfoca en explorar la singularidad del patrimonio cultural de la comunidad Vaie y las diferencias entre las comunidades Vaie y Melanau. El enfoque principal utilizó análisis etnográfico, descriptivo y comparativo. La observación y la entrevista semiestructurada individual y grupal sobre la historia de la comunidad Vaie se realizó mediante la participación de diez (10) encuestados respectivos. Los resultados de este estudio sugieren que la etnia Vaie son nativos de Bintulu y son completamente diferentes de Melanau o de cualquier otra etnia en Sarawak en su conjunto. Se recomienda que el Departamento de Estadística de Malasia brinde opciones para los grupos étnicos minoritarios, especialmente el de Vaie en Bintulu, en otros, para seguir su crecimiento demográfico.

Palabras clave: Patrimonio histórico, Malasia, Melanau, Similitud religiosa, Pequeña minoría

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage is refers to the “things, places and practices that define who we are as individuals, as communities, as nations or civilizations. It is the cultural legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of the group or society that are inherited from past generations, preserved in the present and bestowed for the benefit of

future generations. The cultural heritage of a nation is the custom and the way of life and has been practiced for the generations. These custom and cultures were often taught by parents to their children for an early age to familiarize them with the culture of their nation. The cultural heritage of the nation must be preserved and practiced and must be passed down from one generation to the next. So that the treasure will not be consumed in time. The custom of a nation must be carried out in such a way that the younger generation of the age can know their respective cultures as festivals. As such, the culture heritage of the nation must be safe to contribute to the national economy.

Small minority ethnic groups are suffering neglect and their cultural heritage is disappearing in the world (Kushner, 2012; Edwards, 2014). In Malaysia, among minority ethnic groups that are at the point of losing the cultural heritage is the Vaie community in Bintulu, Sarawak (Asmah 1983; Hidayati *et al.* 2018). Report of 2010 census by Department of Statistics, Malaysia on the total population of Bintulu indicated that, out of 183,892 residents, the Ibans constitute 42%, Chinese 21%, Melanau 12%, Malays 10%, and Bidayuh, Indian, Non-Malaysians and other indigenous groups making up the rest 14% (Hidayati *et al.*, 2018). This census report does not include any of the minority groups (the Vaie) thereby making it difficult to monitor population growth of the Vaie community. A study conducted by Hidayati *et al.* (2018) showed that the population of Vaie people in Bintulu, Sarawak number around 18,000 thereby qualifying them as a small community defines by Goudy (1990). The neglect of this

community might be due to it has been mistaken to be a Melanau community because of some similarities they share.

The Melanau communities are traditionally fishermen just like the Vaie community and they all live along the rivers (Pu'un et al., 2014). The religious similarity among these two communities further made them be considered as one. Most Melanau and Vaie have a 'Bin' (son of) and 'Binti' (daughter of) in their names similar to the Malays (Hidayati et al., 2018), thereby making it more difficult to automatically distinguish the differences in this two ethnic groups. Continuous inter-marriage between the Melanau and Vaie further cast shadows on the cultural heritage of the Vaie community (Hidayati et al., 2018). Despite the much similarities between the Melanau and Vaie communities, the Vaie community is believed to have unique cultural heritage that needs to be preserved.

Vaie people use the term “Vaie” to refer to both their community and language (Hidayati et al., 2018). The name Vaie also refer to the town its people live (Bintulu). Bintulu in terms of demographics is in the coordinates of 3°10 '24' N 113°2 '36' E and the third largest part of Sarawak. The city is one of the most important historical legacies since Brooke's family administration. Hence the need for this case study which focuses on the historical heritage of the Vaie community in Bintulu, Sarawak. This historical heritage of the Vaie community if persevered will contribute to the rich and diverse historical legacy of Bintulu. In this case study, the following questions were address:

i. What are the reasons for considering Vaie community as Melanau?

ii. What are the unique differences between the Vaie and Melanau communities?

iii. What should be done to preserve the historical heritage of the Vaie communities

Bintulu in historical perspective

Bintulu (3°10 '24' N 113°2 '36' E) is third largest cities in Sarawak with an area of approximately 12,166 square kilometers and a population is 107, 675 in 1991 (Figure 1) (Muhammad and Wan, 2018). Despite the fast developments in Bintulu due to its natural resources and job opportunities, the city also has rich historical heritages that need to be protected especially that of the Vaie or better known as Bintulu. Vaie community recognizes themselves and their language as “Vaie” which is also known as Ba’ie or Bintulu (Asmah 1983). This indicates that the name Bintulu itself is a name of people and their community (The Vaie people). In the 18th century, the majority of residents in Bintulu were the Vale or Ba’ie or Bintulu Ethnic group. Historically, the name ‘Bintulu’ derived from the descendants of Antonio Pigafetta or Italian crew who sailed alongside Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan. He changed the name of a place called Tutoq Ulow River, a place where people heads are cut in the olden days to Bintulu meaning face in the Italian language. This was because Antonio Pigafetta finds it difficult to pronouns the name Tutoq Ulow's.

However, the name Tutoq Ulow's came about because two siblings Berengek and Jalabs were at war with each other in the late 17th century because each of them wanted to be a leader of their clan. Berengek who resides at the edge of the Kuala Sungai Sebiew with his followers went into war with Jaleb's who resided at the uppermost part of Kuala Sungai Kakab of Batang Kemena. Their war led to the death of many tribe members and many cases of the headhunt. One day, after a heavy battle, Jalab decided to rest and by doing so, he laid his head on a wood comfortably. After that, the place was named as Taqag Ulow's which means a safe place for head. Hence, the name Bintulu was also referred to as a place of Vaie people and at the same time the representing the ethnic group Vaie. The Vaie people are also known as Baie, a name that came from an Arabic word means trade area. This was because the Baie came from an Arabic word which means trade area. This again was because of the strategic location of Bintulu and the people mainly engage in these trades were the Vaie people. This engagement has led to all the Vaie people to embraced Islam abandoning their old practices of Animism.

Vaie community

Vaie community recognizes themselves and their language as "Vaie" which is also known as Ba'ie or Bintulu (Hidayati *et al.*, 2018). Traditionally, Vaie people leave along the river and mainly practice a fishing system called panau. Lure made from nipah leaves (*Nypa fruticans* Wurmb) were mainly used as fishing traps in catching fishes such as *Atule mate*, *Carangoides armatus*, *Carangoides coeruleopinnatus*, *Carangoides praeustus*, and *Parastromateus niger*.

A study by Asmah (1983) showed that Vaie as a language is variant to that of Melanau language although studies conducted on Vaie and Melanau languages bear very little similarities. Ethnologue publications also suggest that Vaie language is distinct one under the name “Bintulu” (Simons and Fennig 2017). Although native speakers of Vaie language are small compared with Melanau, the Vaie language is spoken in villages such as Kampung Masjid, Kampung Sinong, Kampung Datuk, Kampung Sibiew, Kampung Baru, Kampung Jepak, Kampung Sebulan, Kampung Batu Sepuluh, and Kidurung. These are also villages where one can find other ethnic groups such as the Melanau. Although the Vaie language is spoken in many villages in Bintulu and out of 183,892 residents in Bintulu by Department of Statistics, Malaysia in 2010, they constitute unknown fraction. The Ibans constitute 42%, Chinese 21%, Melanau 12%, Malays 10%, and Bidayuh, Indian, Non-Malaysians and other indigenous groups making up the rest 14%. The Vaie is under the classification of others although study by Hidayati *et al.* (2018) indicated that the population of Vaie people is estimated to about 8,000 qualifying them as a “small community” (Krauss, 1991). Hence there is the need to preserve this important culture heritage of the Vaie community in Bintulu by distinguishing its differences with the Melanau community.

Melanau community

The Melanau were among the early settlers in Sarawak and are traditionally fishermen, paddy growers, and sago planters (Charras, 2016). Due to their fishing traditions, they settle along the river and used to live in tall stilt and longhouses however, in recent decades,

they live in Malaysian kampung-style houses in small family houses (Thiessen, 2012; Pringle, 2015). The social and cultural of the Melanau are similar to those Malays in Malaysia (Matusky and Beng, 2017). Example of these similarities is the Melanau language and names are indistinguishable from those of the local Sarawak Malays (Ting and Ling, 2013). Despite this similarity between the Melanau and Malay language, Melanau is not considered as Malay as they consider the Vaie as the Melanau although there were language differences between Vaie and Melanau. Language and names similarity of Melanau and Malay made it possible for most of the Muslim Melanau who migrated to bigger towns in Sarawak to claim they are Malays during the National Census Operation. This might explain the rapid increase of the Sarawak Malay population whereas that of the Melanau remain constant over some years now. It is believed that the Vaie population is rather been used to fill the spot of the Melanau changing to Malays during a census.

Although the 2010 census suggest the Melanau communities are the fifth largest in Sarawak, the study showed that the actual Melanau population is significantly higher than those estimated in the 2010 Malaysian Population Census (123,410) (Swee-Hock, 2015). The continuous inter-marriage between the Melanau and other races in Malaysia and outside Malaysia could also contribute to the constant Melanau population in Sarawak just as that of the Vaie communities. The Melanau are also losing some of their cultural heritage as some of the new generations either intentionally or unintentionally have registered themselves as other races, mostly as Malays. Some Melanau

parents have also abandoned their language and speak only Malay or English to their children just as some Vaie parents adopting Melanau. The question then is if bigger ethnic groups like Melanau are suffering from the loss of cultural heritage, one can imagine what will be happening to those smaller minority ethnic groups like the Vaie people. Therefore, it is significantly important to identify, document, and preserve the cultural heritage of smaller ethnic group like that of the Vaie community.

Design

This paper draws upon ethnographic research involved Vaie community of Sarawak, to explore their cultural heritage differences with the bigger ethnic groups of Melanau. We interviewed ten respective Vaie community consisting of four village leaders, a BAWARIS chairman, 5 members of the Jepak committee and the Bintulu District Council. Data collection involved observation as well as semi-structured individual and group interview on history of Vaie community. The analysis of this case study drawn from interview data from two phases of the project.

Place of investigation

Bintulu in terms of demographics is in the coordinates of 3°10'24' N 113°2'36' E and the third largest part of Sarawak (Figure 1) (Muhammad and Wan, 2018). Bintulu is the ninth part of Sarawak with an area of approximately 12,166 square kilometers and a population is 107, 675 in 1991 (Figure 1) (Muhammad and Wan, 2018). Bintulu is one of the fastest developing towns due to its rich natural resources and has great employment opportunities leading to its

rapid development and increasing population (Ho, 2008). Additionally, Bintulu is located strategically at the heart of Sarawak thus 650 kilometers from Kuching City and about 215 kilometers from Sibiu and Miri (Figure 1). In terms of population, we observed that most Malays, Melanau, and China stay and build their homes in Batang Kemena. For the Iban community, most of them live in the Sebauh and Pandan Rivers. For Ulu communities such as the Kayan, Kenyah and Penan communities, many of them live in the areas of Tubau and Sungai Jelalong. Whereas the Vaie communities' lives in Bintulu and its villages such as Kampung Masjid, Kampung Sinong, Kampung Datuk, Kampung Sibiew, Kampung Baru, Kampung Jepak, Kampung Sebauh, Kampung Batu Sepuluh, and Kidurung (Figure 2). Among the communities, Kampung Jepak was chosen for this study because it has the largest Vaie village with a higher population of Vaie people (Figure 3).



Figure 1: The map of Sarawak with Bintulu in the central location in the state.

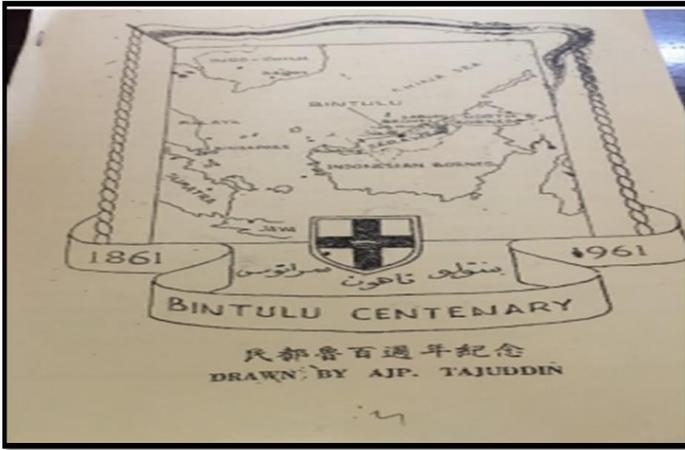


Figure 2: Evidence of the Vaie community in Bintulu, Sarawak before 1861



Figure 3: Kampung Jepak, a Vaie community in Bintulu located along the river

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this work relied on a qualitative approach through observation, semi-structured individual and group interview. There were 10 respondents involved in the Vaie community. Since the interviews could give a deeper insight into the industry, interviewees were carefully chosen from among those who had the knowledge and experience of the industry. However, the data collected needed to be interpreted and coded in a valid and reliable manner for analysis. The method sought to classify the findings of discussions into an effective number of categories by coding that represented similar meaning. Coding is a way to link the data with information, topics, concepts and factors. It is necessary that different people code the same text in the same way as the reliability of the analysis depends on this consistency. The interview was through face to face discussions with conversation lasting for about 1 hour where the interview was repeated for four (4) rounds in order to ensure the data saturation is being reached.

3. RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Customs and culture of the Vaie community in Bintulu Sarawak
Vaie custom is the traditional beliefs and way of life by all the Vaie for generations (Dubin and Lezberg, 1986). These customs are seen mostly during ceremonies such as the young bowing to the older

people as a sign of politeness and respectful, taking off shoes when entering a house, sitting on the mats laid on the floor especially during eating and so on. These customs are ancestors' practices that are passed on and seen as rules for guiding the unique identity of the people. This then turns into a habit or tradition of the people and studying the customs of a particular group of people enable you to understand their way of life. Customs guide other people to learn and co-exist peacefully with each other. The Vaie community have varieties of customs such as taboo, festival, dance, art, wedding custom, medical technique, birth ritual, death rituals, and so on. Although taboos of the Vaie community are not documented, they are passed on to generations after generation.

According to Mr. Bujang, a former Vaie leader and head of Kampung Sebiew, Bintulu narrated that, presence of the bird Cit chirping in a community indicates danger in the area thereby making the place not safe. Additionally, custom in terms of language, the Vaie use different words when on sea whilst on land, a different word is used to mean the same thing. For example, the Vaie use the word "Babai siqau" on the sea to mean eating and these words are used with the believed that the spirit of the sea or other creature understand their conversation. Furthermore, it is a taboo for a pregnant woman to nail anything as this will cause the baby to be stuck in the uterine wall of the mother (Liamputtong, 2009). This taboo is similar to those of the Malays and Chinese who believe a pregnant mother nailing will cause a miscarriage of her pregnancy. At birth, the Vaie community practices a unique custom for newly born baby girls by flattening they are heard

using wood until for three to four years. This is to make the face of their daughters longer and beautiful. Vaie community believes that the longer the face of the girls, the better their appearance. The community also shave the baby's hair and conduct naming ceremony to celebrate their new-born's just as other tribes like in Malaysia. The customs of the Vaie community with regards to death is unique as they manage them according to the caste of society. High caste community will put their corpse in a coffin and transport it to the cemetery using boats if the cemetery is far from the community. The corpse inside the coffin is then slid gently onto the ground using Kayu Nibong. The deceased's family will also accommodate and feed the neighbors and friends for seven days and seven nights whilst bearing all food and drink cost.

Celebration of the Vaie communities

The Vaie has a unique celebration which is known as the Pesta Pinum formally known as 'Hari Keramaian because it is mostly held at the river bank after harvesting of rice. The purpose of this celebration was to appease the spirits of the sea, land, and forest. However, this festival has been abandoned and events carried out during this festival are not clearly stated because it has no valid proof about this celebration. The reason for not continuing the celebration of this festival might be because of the acceptance of Islam by all Vaie. Information obtained by BAWARIS on Pesta Pinum was that activities such as traditional games, dances, and music are played throughout this celebration for three days and nights or sometimes or seven days and nights. During Pesta Pinum celebration, men and women usually will get along regardless of game or food. On the last day of the

celebration, the juvenile and the maiden will pair up to pound the rice in the mortar.

Another unique celebration of the Vaie community's is their traditional wedding ceremony (Figure 4). The wedding ceremonies are mostly celebrated with a pantun debate with a unique dance and musical rhythm. Formerly, this event was held for the purpose of attracting girls and was done in every wedding ceremony however, of recent, unique dancing with music is an event for entertainment. During the event, the kompang and kendang are used to play the background music. The pantun used is usually spontaneous and rhythmic has fascinating and interesting words. During the celebration, the men and women attending the occasion are separated by a curtain and the pantun event is performed behind the curtain. The music played during this event make it's very unique from the pantun celebration of the Malay. The Vaie community has a traditional costume that uses three basic colors which are red (mila), white (mitem) and black (mapuk). This traditional costume has no pictures that can be shown as evidence but based on BAWARIS surveys, the traditional costume of this society has a red scarf, black dress, and white robe but this extra accessory or traditional costume design has yet to be clearly described as almost similar to traditional customs Malay.



Figure 4: Traditional wedding event of Vaie dressed in traditional costume of black, white, and red colours

Tradition of the Vaie communities

Vaie community have their ancestral traditions and among them is a traditional medical technique known as ritual Puwet. This unique ritual is said to be used as a medical technique for all illnesses and intensively practiced before the arrival of Islam. This ritual was performed by a traditional medical practitioner or physician who examines their patients before determining the type of ritual Puwet to be used. The medical practitioner read verses in a song-like manner, followed by music from musical instruments such as plates, violin, and kendang. This ritual requires all instruments or equipment's to ensure successful communication with the soul or spirit (Tow) of the patients.

If a medical practitioner fails to communicate with the Tow of the patient, the ritual is stopped and postponed. At the end of the ritual, medical practitioners will confine the disease faced by the patient into Dakan (statue) and in fact, every Dakan engraving varies according to the types of illness. Dakan is processed carefully and have certain taboos to obey in order to ensure that no harm occurs to the patient. After the disease is confined inside the Dakan, it will be thrown into the river or the sea and the patient will recover as usual. This medical technique is no longer practiced today because it is believed to have shirk elements which could damage the Vaie Islamic belief. Recently, BAWARIS studies have found that the Vaie community has a unique musical instrument, lutung which is designed like a guitar.

Vaie unique traditional food and its values

Vaie community also have unique traditional foods with special names such as the Ti'ong, Linut, Te'bhes, Leluway, Numai, Naau, and many more. Ti'ong (Figure 5) is the name of food created from coconut, sago flour, medium size prawn, and ti'ong is the main ingredient. This food is wrapped in Nipah leaves before grilled on the live coals. Other unique foods such as Te'bhes is normally served with 'gula apong' to boost its taste and flavour. Both dishes are very popular among Vaie community in Bintulu. Fruits such as Tupik Vaie is mostly served eaten as snacks and it looks like sago but smaller than it. It can either be eaten raw, mixed with raw fish called umai or bananas or with curry.



Figure 5: The traditional Ti'ong been wrap in Nipah leaves for grilling

Another special food of the Vaie community is the linut. It is made up of sago powder or raw sago thereby making it tasteless and sticky. The preparation of linut is simply by adding boiled or hot water into the sago. Some also prepare linut by adjusting the temperature of hot water pouring it slowly to the sago powder. After which the mixture is stirred continuously to achieve a homogeneous linut (Figure 6). Usually, the linut is served with some sideways dishes such as sambal and fried fish (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Linut served with sambal and fried fish in a unique traditional style

Belacan is one of the Sarawak state traditional food served in Sarawak and it is a unique food found mostly in every single household of Vaie (Figure 7). The belacan have a strong smell and give a strong taste compare to others. The main ingredient of the belacan is dried small prawns. The prawns are mixed with sugar, salt, and other seasoning and crunch into a solid cube (Figure 7). The belacan act as seasoning because it always added into dishes like kangkung and majority of it is used in sambal preparations.



Figure 7: Cubic and solid belacan that is used to prepare sambal

The uniqueness of the Vaie language and how different it is from Melanau

The study found out that Vaie language (also known as Vaie Segan) is completely different from that of any language in Sarawak and for that matter, Vaie ethnicity cannot be considered as Melanau ethnicity. Additionally, findings by BAWARIS was that Vaie ethnic comes with their own language but the Vaie community was not officially stated as an ethnic group because there's the national census thus not provide them with the options to state their ethnicity. In the census, only the Iban, Chine, Melanau, Malay, Bidayuh, and Indian are the choices given and all other indigenous groups and Non-Malaysians were classified as others. These options left the Vaie community with no other choice but to ether chose Melanau or Malay as alternative ethnic group to associate themselves with. Statement by Mr. Khairul,

the chairman of BAWARIS states that, there are more than 80% differences between the language of Melanau and Vaie. The Vaie people mostly use words with alphabet such as Q, V, and Z as consonant in their language. Generally, the Vaie ethnicity is completely different from any other ethnic group in Bintulu, Sarawak, Malaysia. The following are few differences between Vaie and Melanau languages as in Table 1.

Table 1: Differences between Vaie language and Melanau language showing distinct differences in words are usage.

Vaie Language	Melanau Language	Meaning
Aqeu	Akou	Me
Ikau	Ka'au	You
Jiang	Jah	One
Melakau	Makau	Walk
Tevau	Madam	Smelly
Qalak	Kena'an	Product
Uzeu	Lulok	Chase
Tavivu	Pebaih	Running
Nenah didem nau inah?	Nou nak ka'au in?	What are you doing?

4. CONCLUSION

Bintulu is one of the developing cities of Sarawak with different ethnics and cultures. Among the ethnic groups in Bintulu, Vaie

community stand out to be unique and different from all others especially Melanau. The study reveals that customs and culture of the Vaie community such as taboo, festival, dance, art, wedding custom, medical technique, birth ritual, and death rituals are different from those of the Melanau ethnicity. Additionally, the Vaie community use to have a unique celebration such as the Pesta Pinum which have been abandoned because of Islam. A wedding ceremony is mostly celebrated with a pantun debate with a unique dance and musical rhythm. The Vaie also have unique ancestral traditions and among them is a traditional medical technique known as ritual Puwet, traditional foods with special names such as the Ti'ong, Linut, Te'bhes, Leluway, Numai, and Naau that make its ethnicity. Furthermore, the Vaie language is completely different from that of any language in Sarawak and for that matter, Vaie ethnicity cannot be considered as Melanau ethnicity.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

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