

Berawan of Loagan Bunut: Death and Its Sacred Forbiddance

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i2/20585>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i2/20585

Published Date: 07 February 2024

Abstract

There are sacred forbiddance or taboos in every culture, and funeral rites are no exception. Various societies possess customary practises and formal observances to cope with the concept of mortality. Familiarity with sacred forbiddance is crucial as it serves as guidelines and regulations in the administration of funeral rites. This study delves into the sacred forbiddances that are observed during the funeral proceedings, specifically those that occur prior to and subsequent to the burial for Berawan ethnic in Loagan Bunut, Sarawak, Malaysia. The discussions will be framed by the Bridging Reference Approach. This approach proves to be beneficial in maintaining the coherence and comprehensibility of a text or conversation by establishing connections between ideas and facilitating the understanding of the relationships between different pieces of information. The Berawan ethnic group follows a number of forbiddances. The prohibition varies depending on who dies and how they die. However, many of the practices have changed as a result of the passage of time and the influence of religions such as Islam and Christianity. It was also discovered that the current generation has no idea why such a prohibition was imposed; they simply adhere to certain rules and restrictions.

Keywords: Berawan, Ritual, Death, Taboo, Sacred Forbiddance

Introduction

The Berawan ethnic group is an indigenous community residing in the Sarawak region, belonging to the Orang Ulu ethnic minority and classified as a sub-ethnic group. They mostly reside in the Miri Division, northern part of Sarawak and can be identified in four distinct communities based on settlement areas: Batu Belah, Long Terawan, Long Jegan, and Long Teru.

The Batu Belah community's well-known settlements is in Long Ukuk, Long Baloh, and Long Patan. While Long Terawan community has taken up residence in Mulu and Long Terawan. The Long Jegan community is mostly located in the Tinjar area: Long Takong, Long Jegan, Long Teran Batu, Long Tabing, Long Ayak, Long Batin, and Apau Gun. Villages for Long Teru community can be found along the Teru River, Loagan Bunut, Sungai Tatan, and Sungai Pelajau.

The Berawan people speaks a distinct language, also called Berawan. The language belongs to the North Bornean branch of the Austronesian language family and comprises various sub-languages with dialectical variations. However, according to Burkhardt & Burkhardt (2019), the Berawan languages is disappearing due to decreased of usage, assimilation and amalgamation.

Traditionally, the predominant source of economic income for Berawan people were agriculture, fishing, and hunting. They used to practice shifting cultivation, known as swidden or slash-and-burn farming, where lands are cleared by burning the vegetation. Rice, tapioca, and sago were among their main produces as well as their main staple diet (Burkhardt & Burkhardt, 2017).

In terms of social organisation, similar to many other ethnic in Sarawak, the Berawan society was organised into longhouses. Residence of the longhouse usually home of a particular clan or family lineage to several generations. The longhouse not just served as communal living spaces for multiple families, but also as served as the centre of social, economic, and cultural activities within the community.

The traditional Berawan ethnic has a rich cultural legacy with various authentic rituals and ceremonies. Similar to many ethnics in the Borneo region, Berawan people observe agricultural like harvesting rituals, healing ceremonies, and rites of passage, such as birth, marriage, and death. Music and singing are integral parts of Berawan's cultural expressions, with traditional musical instruments like gongs, tawak, and bamboo instruments used during ritual practices.

Nowadays, the way of life of Berawan people has changed due to modernisation and external influences. Many have transitioned to fish farming, settled agriculture and engaged in other economic activities, such as wage labour and involvement in the tourism industry. Despite the evolving societal landscape, the Berawan ethnic group continues to uphold their ancestral customs and beliefs, which are deeply rooted in their cultural heritage.

The study of burial rituals provides profound insights into the complex web of beliefs, traditions, and emotions that shape our perception of death and our place in the universe. Analysis of these rituals allows understanding of human behaviour and interactions that expands our understanding of humanity from various angles.

This study also may serve as a way to preserve cultural heritage of ancient civilizations, helps understanding how burial rituals evolve over time, and highlights the dynamics of cultural change and continuity. Consequently, the analysis may provide valuable insights how societies adapt and transform in response to internal and external pressures when it come to something that perceived as both taboo and sacred.

Area of Study

The research was conducted in two longhouses situated within the Loagan Bunut National Park, Sarawak, Malaysia – longhouse Rh Dennis at Kampung Logan Bunut, and longhouse Rh Jau Bato at Teru River. The Loagan Bunut National Park spans across an area of 10,736 hectares and is notable for being the location of Sarawak's largest naturally occurring lake,

the Loagan Bunut Lake. The lake is 650 ha in size, and its primary ecosystem is a peat swamp. In instances where the Tinjar River in close proximity experiences reduced water levels, the shallow lake typically undergoes complete drainage, resulting in its absence during these arid intervals.

This lake plays a very important part of the Long Teru's Berawan community. The primary source of income in the area depends from fishing, with the resulting catch typically being sold in the nearby town of Lapok. The people used a unique floating house complete with net called "selambau" for fishing.

Nowadays, eco-tourism has emerged as a significant source of revenue for local communities. In this regard, villagers have started renting out their boats for conducting tours of the lakes and rivers surrounding the Loagan Bunut National Park.



Figure 1: Sarawak Map and Loagan Bunut National Park Map

Method of Study

This study utilised "Bridging Reference Approach" for data collection. It is a linguistic strategy that bridge and connect information between stories, sentences, or sections of a text by making cross-references, either explicitly or implicitly, to information that has come before or will come after it, in order to establish coherence and cohesion within the discourse.

This approach involves speakers or informants give information in a variety of ways, such as by using pronouns, demonstratives, and other referencing expressions to refer back to something mentioned earlier (an antecedent), or forward to something that will be introduced later. These technique help listener to understand the progression of ideas, helps listeners understand how information flows and see how different ideas are linked. As such, it facilitates an extensive examination of cultural dynamics. This method able to reveal how external factors contribute to the resilience, adaptation, or transformation of an ethnic customs to get a comprehensive understanding of their cultural heritage.

Death, the Ceremonious Goodbye

Death is one of the inevitable phases of life that has been comprehended in various ways by different cultures throughout history. While in some cultures death is regarded as a natural and inevitable part of life, it is feared and avoided in others. Many cultures believe in the existence of an afterlife, in which the soul or spirit of the deceased lives on in some form.

During ancient Egyptian civilisation, they believe the souls would traverse the underworld and undergo a process of judgement by the deity Osiris. This belief was evident in petroglyphs, which depict ideas about the afterlife, including resurrection (Wilkinson et al., 2004). On the other hand, Hinduism views death as a transitional process, a belief that is deeply rooted in the concepts of karma and reincarnation. The karma refers to the principle of cause and effect, in which it is believed that one's actions in this life will determine one's future rebirths. The concept of death is closely associated with cultural customs and beliefs, as various communities have developed distinct rituals and ceremonies associated with this event. Customs and rituals are pervasive practices that are deeply ingrained in various societies worldwide. While both terms may seem similar, there are some key differences between the two.

Custom is a refers to actions or conduct that are regularly performed in daily life and are passed down from one generation to the next. Inherited customs encompassed of procedures that need to be done and actions that cannot be done. These customs include elements like traditional attire, music, dance, cuisine, as well as beliefs and values upheld by members of the community. Rituals, on the other hand, are a distinct category of tradition that are commonly associated to religious or spiritual practices. These may involves practices like prayer, meditation, or specific ceremonies that are performed to commemorate significant events or milestones within a particular faith or belief system.

Customs and rituals are important components in shaping and preserving cultural identity in diverse communities across the globe. They play a significant role in the collective human experience that promotes a sense of togetherness among individuals who shares similar beliefs, values, and traditions.

Some perspectives, such as those discussed in the book "Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief," see death rituals as part of coping with loss (Klass et al., 1996). Kagawa (1998); Karen et al(2018) have also lent support to this theory. Kagawa stated ritual practice offers a sense of peace and solidarity to family members while also providing them with emotional, social, and physical support during the end-of-life process. This practice enables individuals to navigate this phase of life with dignity and tranquilly. As per Karen's perspective, the fundamental aim of the ritual is to offer assistance and comfort to individuals who remain after the departure of a loved one. There are several common elements that are shared among various cultures, including but not limited to symbols, social events, and ceremonies. Meanwhile, Walter (1999) examined how cultural and societal factors influence the experience of grief and discussed the importance of rituals in the grieving process. On the other hand, William (2013) argues that ritual plays a crucial role in the human pursuit of comprehending the perplexing aspects of death.

There exist diverse modes or manners of funeral that vary significantly depending on the temporal, geographical, and ideological context of a given community. Nonetheless, all members of the community as well as guests, are expected to abide by the unwritten rules that have been established. Understanding and respecting these beliefs can help us better appreciate the diversity of human experience and how we cope with loss and grief. Sukma (2020) highlighted the importance of social ties for individuals' psychological well-being,

especially during funeral or grieving moments. Those who lack social connections may encounter challenges with their mental well-being, including feelings of poor self-worth and difficulty regulating their behaviour.

In many cultures, death ceremonies are deeply rooted in customs and traditions. The rituals performed during death ceremonies often have religious or spiritual significance and are believed to ensure the well-being of the deceased in the afterlife (Mufidah, 2022; McGrath, 2010). For example, in Christian societies, there are specific rituals such as preparing the body for burial and holding a ceremony before the burial (Erbiçer et al., 2022). Similarly, in Balinese Hinduism, death rituals are guided by religious values and involve various ceremonies and offerings to honor the deceased and seek blessings from the divine (Maulana et al., 2022).

The Berawan ethnic group formerly adhered to animistic belief systems prior to adopting the religions of Christianity and Islam. It is believed by the community that the spirits of the deceased return to their place of origin, known as "bilih puong." According to their beliefs, these spirits embark on a journey that takes them across the sea until they reach a majestic Ficus tree. This tree is perceived as a staircase leading to heaven by the spirits.

In his 1982 publication titled "A Borneo Journey into Death," Peter Metcalf elucidates the death-related customs and symbols of the Berawan community. The author described the existence of transitional procedures for the deceased's spiritual essence, wherein purification is required prior to progression into subsequent stages. The funeral ritual holds significant cultural and social significance, often spanning an extended duration and incurring substantial financial expenses. Consequently, all community members must cooperate in the ceremony to ensure the safe return of the spirit to the afterlife without causing any disruption to the living populace.

The complexity of death rituals similar to those observed by Melanau Likow in Sarawak has been documented by (Dzulfawati, 1993). The customary practises typically entail significant costs and serve as a visible indicator of an individual's standing within the society. On the other hand, according to Miles' (1965) findings, the ritual practises of the Dayak-Ngadju ethnic group are contingent upon the economic standing of the respective families.

However, the interview with the respondent revealed their limited understanding of life after death, which can be attributed to the predominant influence of religions in Berawan community. As a result, the current generation has disregarded or lost knowledge of various spiritual beliefs and faiths that their ancestors worshipped. Although they continue to engage in certain rituals, their understanding of the underlying purposes is fundamentally flawed.

Many researches done about funeral ritual in Borneo also show that the religion has changed the way an ethnic or community understanding and knowledge about their ancestral ritual and customs. For example, Halina (2016) show there are changes in death customs and rituals among the Bajau community due to the influence of belief system and Islam. The Suluk ethnic death ritual has undergone notable modifications subsequent to their adoption of Islam, despite their continued observance of ancestral rites (Habibah et al., 2022). The Iban community in Sarawak exhibits a similar trend, whereby the prevalence of Christianity and technology has influenced the comprehension and outlook towards customary practises (Kiyai @ Keai, 2019). However, Nasir et al (2019) show that there are still numerous animism elements in funeral rituals embedded in Orang Sungai (River People) of Sabah despite embracing a religion.

The cultural landscape of a society is not immutable; rather, it is dynamic and undergoes a process of evolution in response to the exigencies of the era. Customs and rituals can evolve

in response to social, political, and cultural shifts (Jaffe, 2014; Mutawali, 2021). Religion has been identified as a significant factor in the initiation of the disregard for tradition. For example, the Donggo customs and traditions in Bima, Indonesia, have changed due to their dialectics with Islamic law (Mutawali, 2021). However, the advancement of technology, the growing inclination towards secularism as well as the rejection of religion have contributed to the abandonment of rituals.

Understanding the complex interplay of these factors in shaping cultural practices is critical. While navigating these changes, it is critical to approach them with respect and an open mind, acknowledging rich history and diversity of one's tradition.

The Sacred Forbiddance

Sacred forbiddance, commonly referred to as taboo, is prevalent in nearly every community. It serves as a guideline for individuals in that particular group to define their own identities and as a tool to admonish and counsel adherence to established customs without resorting to authoritarian words. It is believed that implementation of a specific prohibition or forbiddance will be able to reduce the likelihood of illness or injury among individuals in the community. This matter indirectly contributes to the establishment of a harmonious and prosperous society.

Sacred forbiddance is regarded as a mechanism of social control to regulate the behaviour and mobility of a given society. It refers to certain practices, behaviors, or subjects that are considered forbidden, prohibited, or culturally unacceptable (Colding & Folke, 2001). The establishment of the forbiddance can be considered an educational strategy aimed at shaping a morally upright community (Ani, 2014). The implementation of forbiddance within a community has the potential to cultivate a society that upholds positive values in their daily routines. Transgression of established prohibitions is perceived as a form of noncompliance with the directives of the elderly, which is considered as a manifestation of disrespect towards them.

Each cultural practise entails certain prohibitions that are deemed obligatory to observe. It is a recognised proscription, regulation, and decree that all members of the society must follow in a traditional manner. Hence, sacred forbiddance can be defined as a social restriction and prohibition regarding certain conduct, items, or behaviour that create a sense of boundary for people within a society, while transgression on these restrictions often results in negative consequences or social dishonour.

One of the customs and ritual that are often filled with sacred forbiddance or taboos is funeral rites. Death and funeral rituals are viewed as a time of grief and mourning that requires respect and reverence. Many cultures have strict guidelines and forbiddance that must be observed during funerals, including behaviours, clothing, and speech.

For example, traditional African societies follow specific funeral customs such the avoidance of bright colours during the ceremony. Additionally, certain actions or behaviours such as touching the deceased's body or exhibiting excessive mourning, are deemed taboo. Discussing death or speaking negatively about the deceased is also forbidden in certain communities.

Violating a funeral's sacred forbiddance can result in negative consequences. In some cultures, breaking a funeral taboo is seen as a sign of disrespect towards the deceased and their family. The violater can be shunned by the community, or believed will be cursed by the deceased's spirit. Since the forbiddance are often deeply rooted in cultural and religious

beliefs, it is essential to respect these taboos, even if they may seem strange or unfamiliar to outsiders.

Forbiddance 1: How they die

The Berawan people of Long Teru customarily arrange the remains in accordance with the manner in which they died. In the event that someone passed away in the longhouse as a result of an illness, the body would be washed and dressed nicely. The stretcher and escorts will then transport the body to the kitchen area, where they will inform the body that he/she has died. They believe this practice will ensure the deceased's spirit does not disturb and enter the house again. Following that, the body is placed on a platform known as a "teloren". Mulu's Berawan ethnic groups, on the other hand, place their dead in large urns.

In the event of a hospital fatality, or natural death outside the longhouse, the deceased's remains will be brought back to the longhouse. The body, however, is not permitted to enter the longhouse until the family performs the act of slaughtering a pig. Crying is also forbidden until the body arrives at the house. These practices are aimed at warding off or containing negative energy or misfortune, intending to protect others from experiencing similar unfavourable circumstances.

However, the body of a person who died outside the longhouse due to bad luck or an accident such as drowning or being eaten by wild animals was not permitted to enter the longhouse. The community will build a makeshift platform named "terugi" outside the main building, directly across from the deceased's room. If the body is brought up to the longhouse, the community believes that bad luck will follow the rest of the residents.

The body will be kept on the platform for three to seven days while residents prepare coffins and other materials for funeral rituals.

Nevertheless, if the mother dies while giving birth, the body will be buried as soon as possible. Children under the age of one year are subjected to the same procedure. The bodies are not allowed to be kept in the longhouse because they are considered sacred nature, necessitating their prompt repatriation.

Forbiddance 2: Who dies

The Berawan ethnic social system is straightforward, with a ruling class or nobles known as "ketaoh," relatives of "ketaoh," and ordinary people. Nonetheless, because of differences in social status, this social division has an impact on funeral customs and rituals.

If the deceased is a community leader or a former leader, the restrictions surrounding their burial may vary from those applied to non-leadership members of the community. The notification to the villagers will be disseminated via a tawak punch. The gong shall be struck nightly until the night of the funeral. There will be differential treatment for individuals belonging to the non-elite strata. While the community will still be alerted via tawak punch, the nightly gong will not be rung.

Nonetheless, there are several forbiddances that must be followed by both the leader's and commoner's families. If the deceased is a husband or wife, the spouse will be isolated and will not be permitted to see the body. No one is allowed to see the widow or widower, and as long as the body has not been buried, he or she must sit in a roll of mats near the body. The walls near the mats will be pierced to provide food to the spouse, and the floor will be cut in case they need to use the loo. However, none of the informants able to explain the consequences of not observing this prohibitions.

The widow or widower is traditionally expected to refrain from dressing ostentatiously, adorning themselves with jewellery, engaging in leisure activities, or leaving their residence for a period of 40 days. This is so because the period of mourning is one of deep emotional remembrance. The Berawan people believe it is a must to honour the departed soul.

It is forbidden for the children of the deceased to leave the body of their parent. This practise is known as "ngeliang" in the local language. The child is expected to take care of the body, and keep flies and animals away from it. This is due to the absence of embalming procedures, resulting in the decomposition of the body and subsequently attracting various forms of organisms.

In the event that the deceased individual is a child, it is not customary for the parents to engage in the aforementioned practise.

Forbiddance 3: Before Burial

It is also forbidden for the deceased person's family members to wear red, bright colours, or anything flashy. This is because vibrant hues are associated with joy, celebration, and vitality. While funeral focus on grief, loss, and paying respects to the deceased. Hence, family members are required to wear a black head wrap, a belt made of black cloth, and a white calico cloth. This cloth will be worn until the end of the mourning period. The other families in the longhouse, on the other hand, will only wear white cloth on the first day of burial.

The deceased family is prohibited from consuming regular meals. They can only food made from soft rice known as "nasi licak" or "kanan tepoh". The conventional method of cooking rice was not employed in this instance. Rather, the rice was partially cooked and pounded until it attained a soft texture. The rice will then be wrapped with a type of leaf called "nyak". Another rule is that the deceased's family is not permitted to eat before delivering the food to the dead body. A plate of food will be positioned anteriorly to the body. This practice must be done before every meal time. However, the food cannot be discarded until the body has been buried. When the body is buried, the food plates and daily cloths of the deceased will be thrown in front of the house.

The residence is not allowed to sweep the floor to prevent sweeping away the deceased's spirit or any potential blessings.

Funerals are significant events for residents of longhouses, but children are excluded from the ceremonies. They are prohibited from viewing the body or participating in the rituals alongside adults, instead being required to remain in their own homes.

On the night prior to the burial, no one in the longhouse is permitted to sleep. The night is called "kem mugeh" (kem = night, mugeh = sleepless), and is dedicated to rituals such as playing tepah and singing "Gek" songs to summon the spirit.

Forbiddance 4: The Burial Ritual

The day of burial is characterised by a plethora of rituals and prohibitions. Individuals not of the "ketaoh" social class are prohibited from being buried in the same burial ground. The Berawan people residing in the Loagan Bunut region have a cultural practice of burying their leaders on a large island in the lake. The individuals from the lower social strata will be interred in a cemetery close to the river.

When the body is ready to be buried, it will be placed in a coffin made of a large carved log. It is forbidden for the corpse to descend the same stairs it used while alive. The Berawan community would construct stairs out of small, spherical logs harvested from the forest

surrounding the longhouse (Figure 2 (a)). However, the locals are unaware of the rationale for this restriction.



Figure 2: (a)The spherical log stair used for funeral ritual (b) The stairs for daily usage

After burial, visiting the longhouse is prohibited, including crossing the river where many longhouses are located. White flags are displayed on both sides of the longhouse to indicate no entry. Violators will face fines, and individuals attempting to cross the river will be pursued by guards stationed there. Typically, the penalties consist of a brass tray, a machete, and poultry.

Conclusions

Across diverse cultures, sacred forbiddances or taboos hold significant importance, permeating various aspects of social life, including funeral rites. Funeral customs are deeply rooted in traditions and are designed to address the concept of mortality. Understanding these sacred forbiddances becomes imperative as they serve as guidelines and regulations in the administration of funeral rites. This study explored funeral rites of traditional Berawan ethnic in Loagan Bunut, Sarawak, Malaysia. The sacred forbiddances observed during funeral proceedings, specifically those that occur prior to and subsequent to the burial was documented.

Funeral rites play a crucial role in the process of bidding farewell to the dead and providing comfort to the bereaved. These ceremonies often involve a set of sacred forbiddances that must be followed to keep the funeral proceedings holy.

The Bridging Reference Approach helps make connections between ideas, stories, conversation and discussion on the sacred forbiddances among the Berawan ethnic easier to understand and follow.

The Berawan ethnic group adheres to a number of sacred forbiddances during funeral rites that vary depending on the deceased's social status and death circumstances. However, many of these practices have evolved due to external factors such as introduction of religion, either Islam or Christian.

As a result, certain sacred forbiddances have been altered and lose their original meaning. It also has been observed that the current generation follows these forbiddances without understanding their origins or purpose, simply adhering to certain rules and restrictions. The erosion of customs and ritual knowledge among the Berawan ethnic group highlights the importance of preserving cultural heritage.

External factors such as globalisation and religions raise directly affect cultural diversity and its preservation. While cultural evolution are natural and unavoidable, it is critical to strike a balance between embracing change and preserving traditional practices. Through awareness, education, and documentation, communities can appreciate their cultural heritage while respecting diverse background of others.

Acknowledgement

The authors are appreciative of the financial assistance provided by Universiti Putra Malaysia through Geran Pehin Adenan Satem (6700202). We would like to express our gratitude to the following people for their assistance with this research: KK Dennis ak Jalin, KK Jau Bato, Jerawit Kumbang, Jalin ak Luta, Itang Kumbang, Leming Gumbang, Doreen Meran @ Thiana Meran, Louis Tingang, Beluluk Ukat, and Roland Ayu.

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