

# Sarawak Culture

## Demographics

Sarawak has more than 40 sub-ethnic groups, each with its own distinct language, culture and lifestyle.

Cities and larger towns are populated predominantly by Malays, Melanau, Chinese, and a smaller percentage of Ibans and Bidayus who have migrated from their home-villages for employment reasons. Sarawak is rather distinctive from the rest of Malaysia in that there is only a small community of Indians living in the state. Dayak Iban

The Ibans form the largest percentage of Sarawak's population, making up some 30%. Reputed to be the most formidable headhunters on the island of Borneo, the Ibans of today are a generous, hospitable and placid people. Because of their history as pirates and fishermen, they were conventionally referred to as the "Sea Dayaks". The early Iban settlers who migrated from Kalimantan (the Indonesian part of Borneo south of Sarawak) set up home in the river valleys of Batang Ai, the Skrang River, Saribas, and the Rajang River. The Ibans dwell in longhouses, a stilted structure comprising many rooms housing a whole community of families.

The Ibans are renowned for their Pua Kumbu (traditional Iban weavings), silver craftings, wooden carvings and beadwork. Iban tattoos which were originally symbols of bravery for the Iban warriors have become amongst the most distinctive in the world.

The Ibans are also famous for their tuak, a sweet rice wine which is served during big celebrations and festive occasions.

Today, the majority of Ibans practice Christianity. However, like most other ethnic groups in Sarawak, they still hold strong to their many traditional rituals and beliefs. Sarawak celebrates colourful festivals such as the Gawai Dayak (harvest festival), Gawai Kenyalang (hornbill festival) penuaian padi and Gawai Antu (festival of the dead).  
Chinese

The Chinese first came to Sarawak as traders and explorers in the 6th century. Today, they make up 26% of the population of Sarawak and consist of communities built from the economic migrants of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The first Chinese (Hakka) migrants worked as labourers in the gold mines at Bau or on plantations. Through their clan associations, business acumen and work ethic, the Chinese organised themselves economically and rapidly dominated commerce. Today, the Chinese are amongst Sarawak's most prosperous ethnic groups.

The Sarawak Chinese belong to a wide range of dialect groups, the most significant being Hakka, Hokkien, Foochow, Teochew, Cantonese and Henghua. Hokkien, Hakka, Foochow and Mandarin are the most widely spoken dialects. The Chinese maintain their ethnic heritage and culture and celebrate all the major cultural festivals, most notably Chinese New Year and the Hungry Ghost Festival. The Sarawak Chinese are predominantly Buddhists and Christians.  
Malay

The Malays make up 21% of the population in Sarawak. Traditionally fishermen, these seafaring people chose to form settlements on the banks of the many rivers of Sarawak. Today, many Malays have migrated to the cities where they are heavily involved in the public and private sectors and taken up various professions. Malay villages (kampung) - a cluster of wooden houses on stilts, many of which are still located by rivers on the outskirts of major towns and cities, play home to traditional cottage industries. The Malays are famed for their wood carvings, silver and brass craftings as well as traditional Malay textile weaving with silver and gold thread (kain songket).

Malays are Muslim by religion, having brought the faith to Asia some 600 years ago. Their religion is reflected in their culture and art and Islamic symbolism is evident in local architecture - from homes to government buildings.  
Melanau

The Melanau have been thought to be amongst the original settlers of Sarawak. Originally from Mukah (the 10th Administrative Division as launched in March 2002), the Melanau traditionally lived in tall houses. Nowadays, they have adopted a Malay lifestyle, living in kampong-type settlements. Traditionally, Melanau were fishermen and still today, they are reputed as some of the finest boat-builders and craftsmen.

While the Melanau are ethnically different from the Malays, their lifestyles and practices are quite similar especially in the larger towns and cities where most Melanau have adopted the Islamic faith.

The Melanau were believed to originally worship spirits in a practice verging on paganism. Today most of them are Muslim and some are Christians, though they still celebrate traditional animist festivals such as the annual Kaul Festival.  
Dayak Bidayuh

Concentrated mainly on the West end of Borneo, the Bidayus make up 10% of the population in Sarawak are now most numerous in the hill counties of Bau and Serian, within half and hour drive from Kuching.

Historically, as other tribes were migrating into Sarawak and forming settlements (particularly the Malays from the neighbouring archipelagos as they shore up along the coastal areas and riversides) the peace-loving, meek-natured Bidayus retreated further inland, hence earning them the name of "Land Dayaks n land owners". The word Bidayuh in itself literally means "land people" in Biatah dialect. In Bau-Jagoi/Singai dialect, the pronunciation is "Bidoyoh" which also carry the same meaning.

The traditional community construction of the Bidayuh is the "baruk", a roundhouse that rises about 1.5 metres off the ground. It serves as the granary and the meeting house for the settlement's community. Longhouses were typical in the olden days, similar to that of the Ibans.

Typical of the Sarawak indigenous groups, the Bidayus are well-known for their hospitality, and are reputed to be the best makers of tuak, or rice wine. they also do arak tonok, some kind of xo.

The Bidayus speak a number of different but related dialects. To some Bidayus they either speak English (thanks to the British colonial era ((James Brook)) or Malay as lingua franca. While some of them still practice traditional religions, the majority of modern-day Bidayus have adopted the Christian faith.

Dayak Orang Ulu

Young Malaysian playing the sape. The phrase Orang Ulu means upriver people and is a term used to collectively describe the numerous tribes that live upriver in Sarawak's vast interior. Such groups include the major Kayan and Kenyah tribes, and the smaller neighbouring groups of the Kajang, Kejaman, Punan, Ukit, and Penan. Nowadays, the definition also includes the down-river tribes of the Lun Bawang, Lun Dayeh (mean upriver/far upstream), Murut, Berawan, Saban as well as the plateau-dwelling Kelabits. The various Orang Ulu groups together make up roughly 5.5% of Sarawak's population. The Orang Ulu are artistic people with longhouses elaborately decorated with murals and woodcarvings. They are also well-known for their intricate beadwork detailed tattoos. The Orang Ulu tribe can also be identified by their unique music - distinctive sounds from their sape, a stringed instrument not unlike the mandolin.

A vast majority of the Orang Ulu tribe are Christians but old traditional religions are still practiced in some areas.

Some of the major tribes making up the Orang Ulu group include :

Dayak Kayan

There are approximately 15,000 Kayans in Sarawak. The Kayan tribe built their longhouses in the northern interiors of Sarawak midway on the Baram River, the upper Rejang River and the lower Tubau River, and were traditionally headhunters. They are well known for their boat making skills, which they carve from a single block of belian, the strongest of the tropical hardwoods.

Although many Kayan have become Christians, some are still practise paganistic beliefs, but these are very rare today [citation needed].

Dayak Kelabit

With a population of approximately 3000, the Kelabit are inhabitants of Bario - a remote plateau in the Sarawak Highlands, slightly over 1,200 meters above sea level. The Kelabits form a tight-knit community and practise a generations-old form of agriculture. Famous for their rice-farming, they also cultivate a variety of other crops which are suited to the cooler climate of the Highlands of Bario.

The Kelabit are predominantly Christian, the Bario Highlands having been visited by Christian missionaries many years ago.

Dayak Kenyah

There are few findings on the exact origin of the Kenyah tribe. Their heartland however, is Long San, along the Baram River. Their culture is very similar to that of the Kayan tribe with whom they live in close association. The typical Kenyah village consists of only one longhouse and the people are mainly farmers, planting rice in burnt jungle clearings. With the rapid economic development, especially in timber industry, many of them work in timber camps.

Dayak Penan

The Penan are the only true nomadic people in Sarawak and are amongst the last of the world's hunter-gatherers.[2] The Penan make their home under the rainforest canopy, deep within the vast expanse of Sarawak's virgin jungle. Even today, the Penan continue to roam the rainforest hunting wild boar and deer with blowpipes. The Penan are skilled weavers and make high-quality rattan baskets and mats. The traditional Penan religion worships a supreme god called Bungan. However, the increasing number who have abandoned the nomadic lifestyle for settlement in longhouses have converted to Christianity.

Sarawakians practice a variety of religions, including Islam, Christianity, Chinese folk religion (a fusion of Buddhism,

Taoism, Confucianism and ancestor worship) and animism. Many converts to Christianity among the Dayak peoples also continue to practice traditional ceremonies, particularly with dual marriage rites and during the important harvest and ancestral festivals such as Gawai Dayak, Gawai Kenyalang and Gawai Antu.  
Sebob/Chebob

One of the least known tribes in Sarawak and be found in upper Tinjar river. Sebob are the first Tinjar settlers along the Tinjar river and it is said that the other tribes came later(migrated) The sebob/chebob tribes occupies up to 6 six longhouse in Tinjar namely; Long Loyang, Long Batan, Long Selapun, Long Pejawai,and Long Subeng.(All these names come from small stream where they lived) Amongst the longhouses, Long Luyang is the longest and most populated Sebob/Chebob settlement.It comprises almost 100 units. Most of these people have migrated and found work in the cities.

Source: Wikipedia.org