

SARAWAK HERITAGE SERIES

Mukah:

Memories of River, Sago and Community

*A Personal Journey
Through the Heritage of Mukah*



*FRESH from the RIVER
Daily Catch*

PAULYN YAM

MUKAH:

Memories of River, Sago and Community

Introduction

Author: Paulyn Yam

Author's Note:

This work is based on four years of field visits, interviews, participant observation, photography, and community engagement in Mukah and its surrounding areas. While every effort has been made to present information accurately, it should be understood as a community-based heritage documentation project that combines historical research with personal experience.

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the support, encouragement, and generosity of many people.

I am deeply grateful to my family and relatives for their unwavering guidance and support throughout this four-year journey of documenting Mukah's heritage.

My heartfelt thanks go to my husband for his patience, understanding, and companionship as we travelled across Mukah in pursuit of stories, memories, and traditions. His constant encouragement sustained me through the challenges of fieldwork and the long process of research and writing.

I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to my mother, **Mina Wee**, whose generous financial support made this project possible. Special thanks are extended to my auntie, whose knowledge, memories, and valuable insights into Mukah greatly enriched this work and deepened my understanding of the community.

I am equally grateful to the many aunties, uncles, friends, and community members who generously shared their stories, experiences, and knowledge of life in Mukah. Special appreciation goes to **Uncle Datuk Aidan Wing, Uncle Manuchihr, Auntie Wyanie, Syke, Evan, and Justin**, as well as the many individuals I had the privilege of meeting throughout this journey. Their willingness to share their experiences and perspectives forms an important part of this documentation.

Finally, my sincere thanks to **Datin Rosemarie** for her patience and encouragement while awaiting the completion of this manuscript, and to **James, Ming, and Nicole** for their invaluable assistance in proofreading and reviewing the text.

This publication is not solely the result of my own efforts. It is the product of the kindness, generosity, knowledge, and support of many people who contributed in different ways. To all who shared their stories, welcomed me into their homes, and helped me better understand Mukah and its heritage, I offer my deepest gratitude.

Some of my earliest memories of Mukah are not of history, but of taste. The sweetness of fresh fish brought home by relatives, the crunch of tebaloi, and the curious novelty of ulat sago formed my earliest connection to a place I scarcely understood. Only years later did I realise that these flavours carried stories of rivers, sago forests, family histories, and a community whose identity has long been shaped by its relationship with the land and sea.

My grandmother would occasionally share stories—about how the land where the old airport now stands once belonged to my great-grandfather and was used for cattle farming. She also spoke of my granduncle, recognised as one of the first locally born Sarawakian Catholic priests from Mukah—a reminder that our family history, like the town itself, is closely intertwined with moments of transition and change. At the time, these stories felt distant.

Today, they remain fragments of a past I wish I had understood more fully. Perhaps returning to Mukah now is my way of 追遠 (zhuī yuǎn)—honouring those who came before me and seeking a deeper understanding of where I come from. Through four years of field visits, conversations, photography, and participation in community activities, I discovered that Mukah is far more than a town. It is a living cultural landscape shaped by rivers, sago, fishing traditions, and the enduring heritage of the Melanau people. I never imagined that I would one day return not merely as a visitor, but as someone seeking to understand and document its history, culture, and heritage.

Before exploring the stories, food, heritage, and communities of Mukah, it is useful to understand where Mukah is located within Sarawak. Situated on the central coast of the state, Mukah has long served as an important centre of Melanau culture, shaped by its rivers, coastal environment, and extensive sago-growing landscapes.



Mukah Division is one of the twelve administrative divisions in Sarawak, Malaysia. It was established on 1 March 2002 and covers a total area of 6,997.61 square kilometres. (Source: "Rakan Sarawak July 2007" (PDF). State Secretary's Office, Chief Minister's Department, Sarawak, pg 7.)



A century-old palm tree outside my great-grandfather's house, 2024. Photo by Khuwarizmi Jmalluddin.



An early glimpse of cultural display by Mr William Chua Tamby. Photo by the author.



1950 年英殖民县长元旦联欢会与民同乐。

1950 Colonial District Officer (D.O.) invited local people to meet on New Year's Day.

(前排坐者) 左起: Ambrose Soontai、John Chua、Richard Boyer、Hamdan (P+T)、
Abang Ali Abg. Mos、Liu Mee (PWD)、Jame Sim

(二排坐者) 左起: 池容潮校长、刘均 (店屋承包商)、印裔商人 Abdul Kadir、
蔡世扎 (黄庆昌经理)、陈青云、沈清越师、侨长陈起龙、
Rev Fr. Boon、县长、Rev Fr. Royan、SNO Abang Mustapha、吴宗荣、
SAO Vincent Suyong

(三排左起) Jack Brodie (地方当局)、George Jamuh (医务局)、黄文荣 (6)、
Paul Toyad (7)、政府游艇 Royalist 艇长、William Chua Tamby (11)、
T.K Hj. Zahwi Bin Hj. Musa、Cikgu Kipli

New Year's Day celebration in 1950.

(Source: Mukah: An Estuary Town in Old Photographs, 2022, pg 126)

Chapter 1:

Mukah: A Place Shaped by River, Sago, and Community

To many visitors, Mukah is known for Kaul, sago, and the rich traditions of the Melanau people. Yet beneath these visible expressions lies a deeper story shaped by rivers, trade, migration, and community life.

Mukah was ceded to Sarawak in 1861 (toward the end of Rajah James Brooke’s reign). By the 19th century, Mukah became part of a wider network under the Brooke administration. It developed into an administrative centre, with infrastructure such as roads and Fort Burdette. At the same time, life remained closely tied to the environment. Disease outbreaks, such as malaria, were not seen only as physical problems, but as signs of imbalance between humans and the unseen world. This is where Kaul—and rituals like Serahang Kakan—become important. They are not just ceremonies, but ways of restoring balance.

Even today, sago and fishing remain central to life in Mukah. Fresh fish arrives daily, often sold out within hours, while sago continues to shape local food and identity.

Mukah today stands between past and present — changing, yet still deeply connected to its roots.

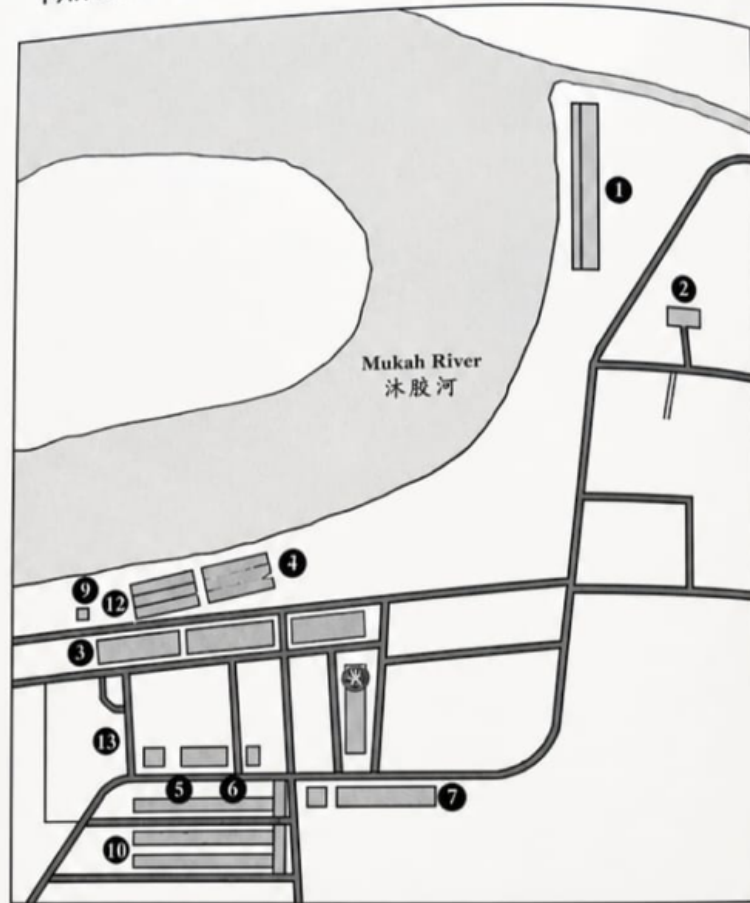
The Timeline Box:

Year	Event
1861	Mukah was ceded to the Brooke Government in 1861 following negotiations between local leaders and Rajah James Brooke.
1883	Establishment of the Catholic Mission Station
1911	Formal establishment of the Mukah administrative system
1941-1945	Japanese Occupation Period
1962	Establishment of Three Rivers School
1980s	Expansion and modernization of the sago industry
2002	Formation of Mukah Division
Present	Ongoing heritage conservation and cultural tourism development

(Source: Sarawak Gazette & Online Sejarah Pentadbiran Daerah Mukah, Sarawak)

十九世纪初期的商店分布图
(手绘: 江寿海; 电脑绘制: 江柳薇)

19th Century early town planning distribution of shoplot.



- | | |
|-----------------------|--|
| ① 最早期的市镇商店地点 | The earliest town shop location |
| ② 当时的政府官邸 | The government official residence at that time |
| ③ 田振安所建的 21 间高脚店屋 | 21 stilt shop houses built by Tien Chen Ann |
| ④ 货仓及晒晒载粉场地 | Warehouses and loading and drying area for saltpeter |
| ⑤ ⑥ 20 间高脚小茅屋之小工业区及住家 | A small industrial area and residences |
| ⑦ 回教堂路的 12 间高脚店屋 | 12 stilt shop houses along Mosques Road |
| ⑧ 现中街之 10 间高脚店屋 | 10 stilt shop houses at present-day Main Street |
| ⑨ 沿河之小矮屋被拆除, 迁入政府配给土地 | Small riverside huts demolished and relocated to government-allocated land |
| ⑩ 为首个华人村 | The first Chinese village |
| ⑪ 建于平地之 10 间店屋 | 10 shop lots built on flat land |
| ⑫ 泰山亭福德祠大伯公庙 | Tai Shan Ting Fu De Ci Temple (Grand Uncle Temple) |
| ⑬ 崇文小学 | Chong Wen Primary School |

(Source: Mukah: An Estuary Town in Old Photographs, 2022, pg 6)

沐胶泰山亭福德祠大伯公庙，据庙内匾额说明，泰山亭应建于光绪己卯年，即公元 1879 年。

Mukah Chinese Temple built in 1879.



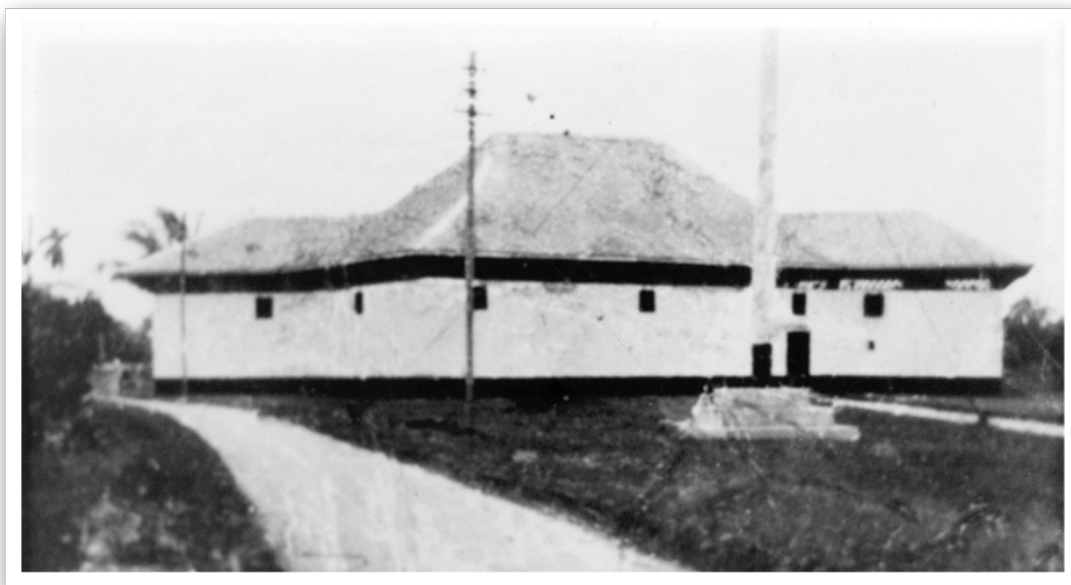
(Source: Mukah: An Estuary Town in Old Photographs, 2022, pg 11)



Mukah Big Chimney and temple, 2022 — silent, weathered, still watching. Photo by the author.



A silent black-and-white cinema, 1950. The first and only cinema in Mukah.
(Source: Mukah: An Estuary Town in Old Photographs, 2022, pg 11)



Mukah District administration began in 1911 under District Officer Henry Herbert Kortright. At that time, it was part of the Third Division. The British colonial administration was based at Fort Burdett II, built around 1910-1911. Historical accounts indicate that Fort Burdett II was destroyed by fire during the Second World War. (Source: Online Sejarah Pentadbiran Daerah Mukah, Sarawak)



沐胶沿海大拖鱼网

Mukah Anchau traditional fishing

(Source: Mukah: An Estuary Town in Old Photographs, 2022, pg 17)



1950 達春影室招牌。

Taat Choon Signboard

The one and only Chinese drug store combined with the town's only photo studio in Mukah town by Mr Kang. (Source: Mukah: An Estuary Town in Old Photographs, 2022, pg 65)



60 年代沐胶圣彼得与保罗旧教堂活动合影。

Group photo of church activities in front of St. Peter & Paul Catholic Church in 1960s



1967 年 Bibi Brodie 在圣心小学（今圣伯特利小学）执教时与高年级同学合影。
Bibi Brodie with senior classmates in 1967 when teaching at Sacred Heart Primary
School (now St. Patrick Primary School).

(Source: Mukah: An Estuary Town in Old Photographs, 2022, pg 81)

三河中学
Three Rivers School



1965 年三河中学师生所雕刻制作的图腾柱。
Totem Pole created by teacher and students of Three Rivers
Secondary School.

The totem pole, inspired by Indigenous art traditions of the Pacific Northwest Coast of North America, was completed in 1964 by Mr. Kang, art teacher of Three Rivers School, together with his students including Ukin, Rumpang, Rimong, and Han. It was erected in the Rock Garden.

In the early 1960s, in response to requests from the people of Mukah district, a secondary school was established. Under the leadership of Mukah District Council Chairman Wee Nam Hai MBE, representatives from Mukah, Dalat, Oya and Balingian held a representative meeting convened by District Officer Macleran. Three Rivers School was built after the approval from the British Colonial Ministry of Education. It was decided that the school would serve students from the three river systems of Mukah District and be named "Three Rivers School".

(Source: Mukah: An Estuary Town in Old Photographs, 2022, pg 103)



Mukah Fish Market today. Photo by the author.



The Yellow Bridge, the gateway to Mukah Town. Photo by the author.

Chapter 2:

Kaul and Cultural Traditions

For many visitors, Mukah is synonymous with Kaul, the annual Melanau festival that celebrates community, gratitude, and harmony with the natural and spiritual worlds. Yet Kaul is more than a cultural performance—it is a living tradition rooted in generations of inherited knowledge and belief.

Serahang Kakan: A Ritual of Balance

Kaul is more than a festival—it demonstrates how the Melanau community understands balance between the human world and the unseen.

At its centre is Serahang Kakan, an offering ritual to honour the *Ipok*, spiritual beings believed to influence life, nature, and wellbeing.

In the past, events like illness or hardship were seen as signs of imbalance. The *serahang* became a way to restore harmony through offerings and respect.

The preparation follows strict customs. Food offerings must not include meat, eggs, or bananas. After prayers, the community gathers at the Tapak Kaul to share food, while the remaining offerings are left behind as part of the ritual. Following the prayers, villagers gather to eat together at the *Tapak Kaul*, understood as a communal meeting place. Any remaining food is then placed at the *serahang* and is not taken home, in accordance with traditional beliefs that doing so may bring misfortune. Such practices reflect a well—established body of traditional knowledge aimed at maintaining harmony and preventing further disturbance.

Kaul moves from one village to another, with Serahang Kakan marking the beginning of each stage — connecting communities through shared tradition.



Serahang Kakan 2023 at Tapak Kaul. Photo by the author.



Blood-based food is not included, as it is believed this could disturb rather than appease the spirits. Photo by the author.



A decorated ceremonial boat used by villagers and Bapa Kaul to travel between kampungs. Photo by the author, Manuchihr Smith & Ismail Bin Roslan.



Sharing food is an important tradition of the Kaul Festival. Photo by the author.



Following the prayers, villagers gather to eat together at the *Tapak Kaul*. Photo by the author.

Tapak Kaul: A Living Space

Some places are important not because of buildings, but because of what happens there. Tapak Kaul is one of these places. It is where rituals are performed, prayers are held, and people gather. Without these activities, it is just an open space. Its meaning comes from use, not structure.

This reminds us that heritage is not always something physical. Some traditions can only survive if people continue to practise them. As Mukah develops, keeping spaces like these alive becomes increasingly important.



Prayer at Tapak Kaul 2026. Photo by Ismail Bin Roslan.

Chapter 3:

Before the Ritual

Long before the ritual begins, members of the community spend days preparing the materials, decorations, and ceremonial objects required for Serahang Kakan. These preparations are themselves important acts of cultural transmission and community participation.

Tibow: The Start of Kaul

The *tibow* is one of the first structures to be built. Made from tall wooden poles and rattan, it marks the beginning of the festival. It is not just for play—it symbolises community, celebration, and hope, including wishes for prosperity and even finding a life partner.



Tibow at Tapak Kaul. Photo by the author.

Serahang & Tetilip: Meaning in Structure

The *serahang* is the main offering, placed on a tall bamboo pole. It contains seven types of food, each prepared in groups of seven, following strict rules.

Its structure illustrates the universe:

- Four sides represent directions
- One represents the sky
- One represents the earth
- The centre represents the “navel of the earth”

Tetilip, woven decorations shaped like birds, add meaning to the structure. Together, these elements turn the *serahang* into both an offering and a symbolic representation of balance.

Once completed, it is transported—often by river—to the *Bapa Kaul* before the ceremony.



Serahang. Photo by the author.



Uncle Manuchihr and Evan harvesting young nipah palm (*Nypa fruticans*) shoots for the preparation of tetilip decorations used in the Serahang Kakan ritual. Photo by the author.



Mdm Wyanie weaving tetilip, an important decorative element of the serahang. Photo by Manuchihr Smith.



Syke demonstrating the traditional craft of weaving tetilip, a decorative element used in the Serahang Kakan ritual. Photo by the author.



Preparing tetilip is often a family-centred activity that strengthens social bonds and encourages the transmission of traditional knowledge across generations. Photo by the author.

Sago Mask Art: Performance and Identity

Kaul is not only about offerings, but also performance. One key element is the use of sago masks, or *topeng upak*. These masks are carved from the Sago palm (*Metroxylon sagu*) and carry both artistic and ritual meaning. During the ceremony, performers wearing these masks accompany the *Ulo Kaul*, adding movement and expression to the ritual.

There are two main types—male and female—distinguished by shape. While designs may vary, this distinction remains important. Traditionally, masks were inspired by dreams. Today, makers rely more on creativity, but the connection to tradition remains. Each year, the masks and costumes may change, reflecting how the ritual continues to evolve.



Ipok 2026. Photo by Ismail Bin Roslan.



Ipok 2023. Photo by the author.

Continuity and Meaning

Together, the *tibow*, *serahang*, *tetilip*, and sago masks form a complete system of tradition, belief, and expression. They show how the Melanau community understands balance—between people, nature, and the unseen. They also reflect the deep connection to the sago palm.

While Kaul continues today, its future is not guaranteed. Fewer people now know how to make these traditional elements, and some skills are slowly being lost.

As one community member shared: **“If we don’t record it and teach the young, it will disappear.”** This reminds us that heritage is not just something to remember. It must be learned, practised, and passed on.



Serahang workshop during Pesta Kaul 2026. Photo by the author.



Terendak Workshop during Pesta Kaul 2026. Photo by the author.

Chapter 4:

River, Sea and Everyday Life

The rivers and coastal waters of Mukah have sustained generations of Melanau families. Fishing, food preparation, and trade remain deeply connected to everyday life, shaping both livelihoods and cultural identity. For the Melanau people, food is more than sustenance. It reveals a way of life shaped by rivers, sago forests, the sea, and close community relationships. Traditional Melanau food embodies adaptation to the local environment, where ingredients from the river, sea, and sago palm (*Metroxylon sagu*) become essential to survival and identity.

Fishing Activities

Fishing has long been an important part of daily life for the Melanau community in Mukah. Situated along the coast and river systems, many families traditionally depended on the sea and surrounding waters for food and livelihood. Fishing activities were often carried out in small boats, with fishermen leaving early in the morning or following the rhythm of the tides and seasons.

The catch from the sea not only provided sustenance for households but also contributed to local trade and food practices. Prawns, fish, crabs, and other seafood remain the central ingredients in many Melanau dishes. During certain seasons, large catches would be shared among family members and sold at local markets, which developed from generations of dependence on coastal waters.



Fresh seafood landed by local fishermen forms an important part of daily life and food culture in Mukah. Photo by the author.

For the Melanau people, the sea is more than a source of income. It is closely connected to spiritual beliefs and cultural traditions. During the Kaul festival, the Bapa Kaul performs prayers and rituals to honour the Ipok, spiritual entities believed to safeguard the balance between humans, nature, and the unseen world. Through these offerings and prayers, the villagers seek peace, harmony, protection, and express gratitude for the sustenance provided by the sea and the land.



During Kaul, the Bapa Kaul performs prayers to honour the Ipok, seeking peace, harmony, protection, and giving thanks for the “rezeki” provided by the sea and nature. Photo by Ismail Bin Roslan.

The ritual represents the inherited Melanau understanding that human wellbeing depends on maintaining respect and balance with nature. Even today, despite changes in lifestyle and technology, fishing activities and the Kaul tradition continue to remain important symbols of Melanau identity and cultural continuity.

Fish Market and Daily Food Culture in Mukah

The fish market in Mukah begins to come alive early in the morning as fishermen return with fresh catches from the sea and nearby rivers. Rows of fish, prawns, and seafood are carefully displayed over ice while buyers move from stall to stall selecting ingredients for the day's meals. The market is more than a place of trade—it is part of the rhythm of daily life, where conversations, exchanges, and community interactions take place alongside the buying and selling of seafood.



Early morning at the fish market. Photo by the author.



The fish market in Mukah remains an important centre for local trade, daily interaction, and the distribution of fresh seafood from nearby coastal waters. Photo by the author.



All sorts of fresh seafood. Photo by the author.



Morning trade begins as fishermen return from nearby coastal waters. Photo by the author.

Fresh fish remains central to Melanau cuisine, particularly in the preparation of dishes such as umai. Prepared using slices of fresh raw fish mixed with lime juice, onions, chilli, and salt, Umai demonstrates the importance of fresh seafood within Melanau food traditions. The freshness of the fish is essential, making the fish market an important part of the culinary tradition itself.



Fresh fish prepared at the market for making umai, a Melanau dish made using raw fish, lime juice, onions, chilli, and salt. Photo by the author.



Umai expresses a deep sense of place, where the freshness of the daily catch remains central to food practices. Photo by the author.



Ulat sago (sago worms) sold at the market continue to be regarded as a delicacy closely associated with Melanau food heritage. Photo by the author.

Beyond seafood, the market area also offers traditional snacks, local coffee, and sago-based foods that continue to form part of everyday Melanau food culture. Coffee shops near the market serve as gathering places where fishermen, traders, and local residents meet after the morning activities. Traditional pastries, fried snacks, and simple breakfasts remain common, reflecting both continuity and adaptation within local food traditions.



Gerai Kopi at Market Dana serves as a gathering place for fishermen, traders, and local residents after the morning market activities. Photo by the author.



Coffee culture remains part of daily social life in Mukah, where local coffee shops function as spaces for conversation and community interaction. Photo by the author.

At the market stalls in Mukah, traditional pastries are often displayed openly on shared plates or trays for customers to choose freely. Rather than strict monitoring, the system relies largely on trust, where customers take what they wish to eat and inform the seller before making payment.





Traditional Melanau pastries prepared using ingredients such as glutinous rice, coconut milk, and palm sugar continue to remain part of daily breakfast culture in Mukah. Photo by the author.



Kuih displayed at a local coffee shop in Mukah. Photo by the author.

Sago products are also widely sold at the market, including sago pearls, tebaloi, and other traditional snacks derived from the sago palm—an important resource closely associated with Melanau identity and heritage. Together, these foods and market activities reflect a living cultural landscape shaped by fishing, trade, family traditions, and social relationships.



Sago-based products sold at the market reflect the enduring importance of the sago palm in Melanau daily life and traditional food culture. Photo by the author.

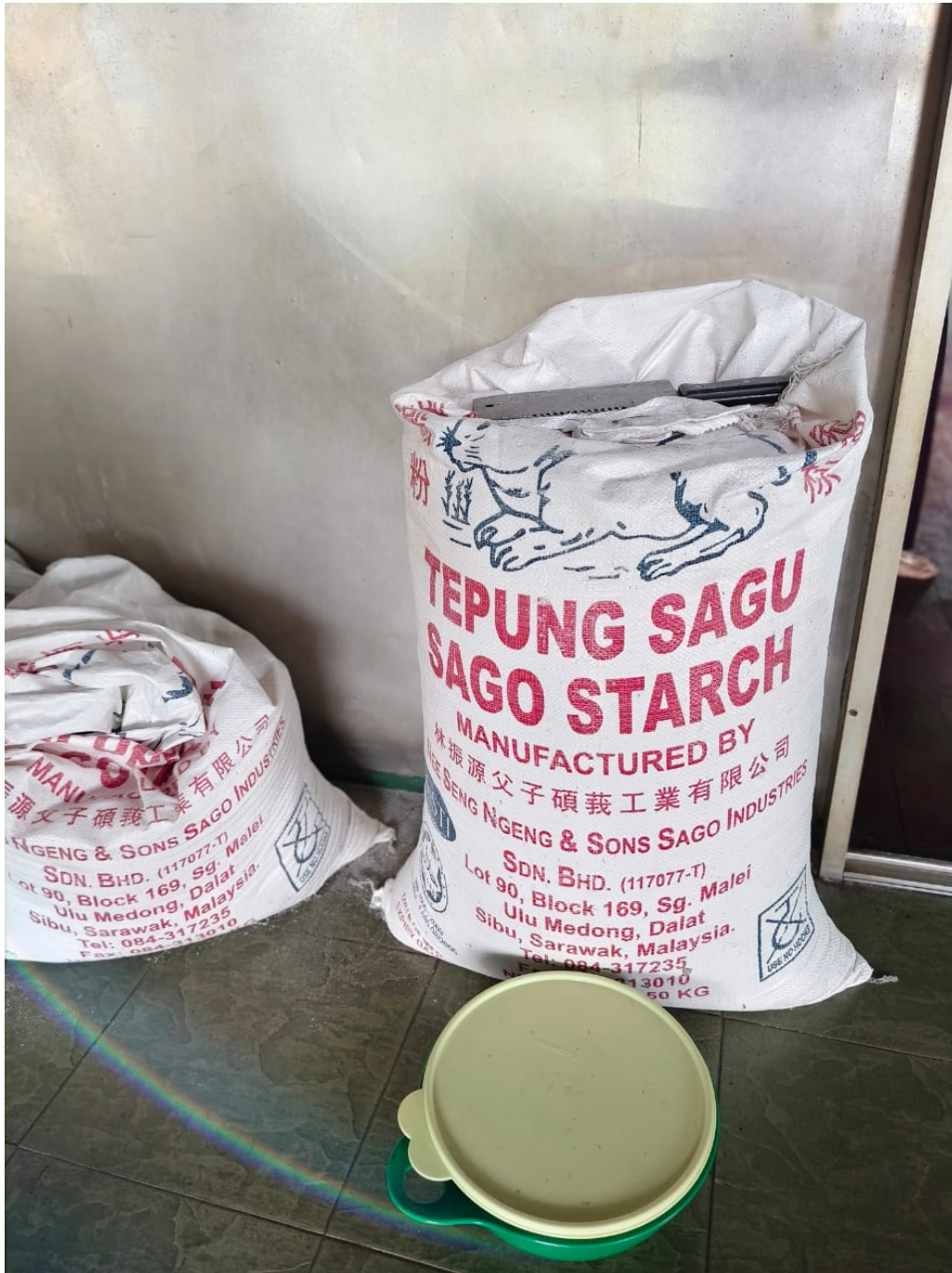
Chapter 5:

Sago: The Queen of Flour

Food provides one of the most accessible windows into understanding a community. In Mukah, traditional dishes tell stories of adaptation, resourcefulness, family relationships, and the enduring importance of sago and seafood in daily life.

Sago The Queen of All Flour

For generations, sago has formed an important part of Melanau life, serving not only as a staple food source but also as a symbol of identity, livelihood, and cultural continuity. The processing of sago flour traditionally involved knowledge passed down through families and communities, closely tied to riverine life and the surrounding environment.



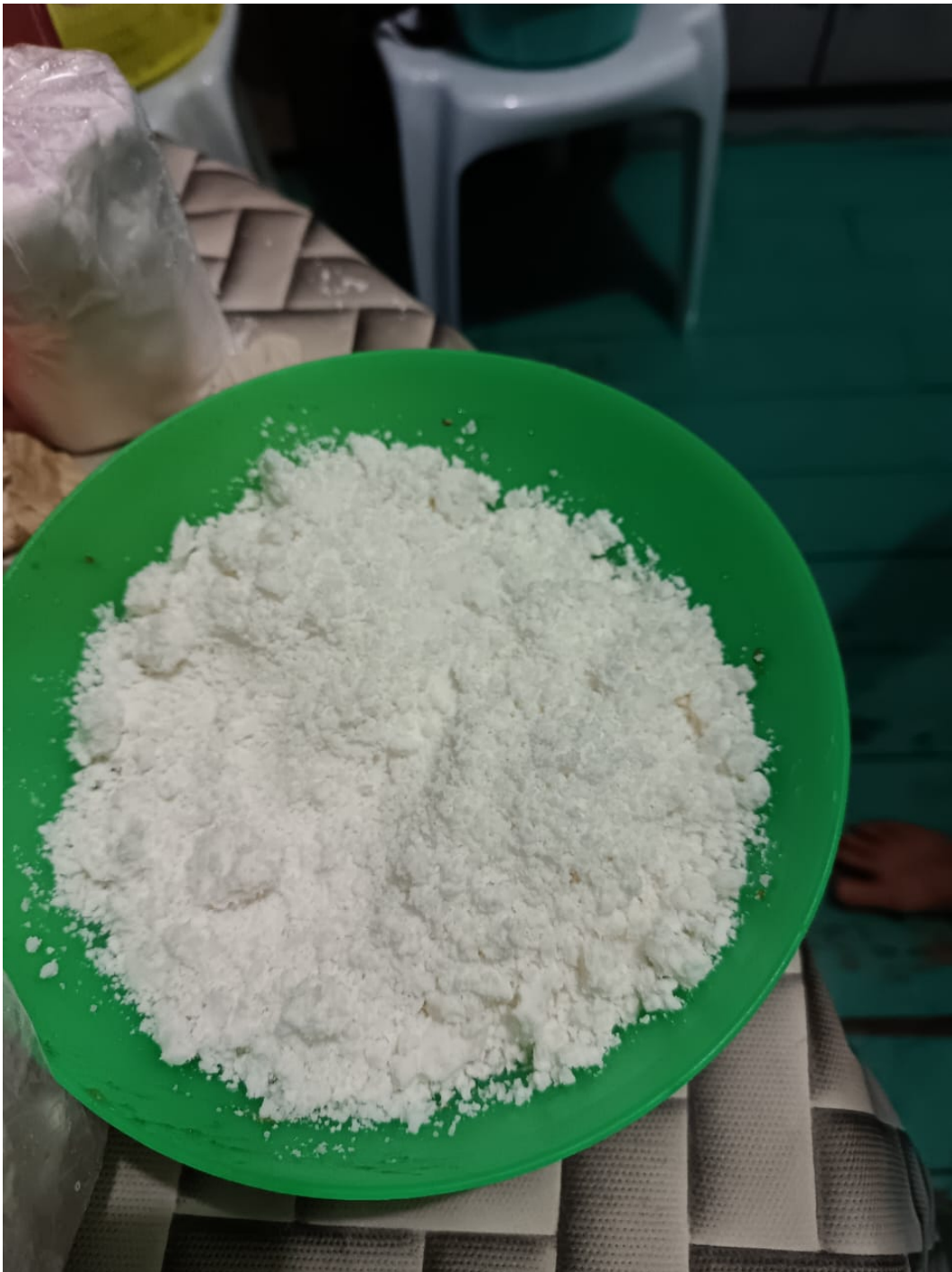
Sago flour remains an important ingredient in Melanau food culture and continues to be widely used in dishes and pastries. Photo by the author.

The process begins with the harvesting of mature sago palms, usually after several years of growth. Once cut down, the trunk is split open to extract the soft pith found inside. Traditionally, this pith is then crushed or grated into fine fibres before being mixed with water. The starch is separated through repeated washing and filtering processes, allowing the heavier starch to settle at the bottom.



Sago logs transported through river systems demonstrate the historical importance of waterways in the processing and movement of sago resources. Photo by the author.

After settling, the starch is collected and dried before being packed and distributed as sago flour. The flour can later be used to prepare various foods such as linut, tebaloi, sago pearls, and many forms of local kuih. Historically, rivers served as important transportation routes for moving harvested sago logs and processed starch between villages and processing areas.



Sago flour mixed with coconut flake for cooking. Photo by Manuchihr Smith.

Traditional Sago Pearl Making in Mukah and Dalat

The sago industry also shaped the social and economic life of many Melanau communities, particularly in areas such as Mukah and Dalat, where sago processing became closely linked to local livelihoods and trade. Although modern machinery has changed parts of the production process today, sago remains deeply embedded within Melanau cultural heritage and food traditions.

During this documentary journey, two different traditional sago pearl production sites were visited — one located in Kampung Tellian Tengah Mukah, Pn Mary Hubert and another operated by Puan Masniah Binti Paris in Kampung Medong, Dalat. Although both produce sago pearls, each site showcases its own working environment, technique, and community experience shaped by generations of knowledge.



Traditional sago pearl processing site operated by Puan Mary Hubert in Kampung Tellian Tengah. Sago pearls are dried and roasted evenly through controlled heat on the large wood-fired clay stove and constant manual stirring. Photo by the author.



Woven baskets and sieves remain important tools in sorting and handling sago pearls. Photo by the author.



Mop made by cloth strips and bamboo to clean the sago stove. Photo by the author.

The production of sago pearls begins with processed sago starch, extracted from mature sago palms. The starch is first refined before being shaped into small granules or pearls through repeated rolling and sieving processes. Traditional woven trays and hand tools are often used to ensure the pearls form evenly.



The making of sago pearls expresses generations of inherited knowledge closely tied to Melanau food culture and livelihood. Photo by the author.

At Puan Masiniah's processing site in Dalat, the sago pearls are cooked and dried using a large traditional wood-fired stove. Heat from beneath the raised clay platform slowly dries and roasts the pearls while workers continuously stir and spread them evenly across the surface. The process requires close attention, experience, and patience to maintain the correct texture and prevent burning.



Belanga (The big flat stove) . Traditional sago pearl processing site operated by Puan Masiniah Binti Paris in Kampung Medong, Dalat. Photo by the author.



The Belangan used for roasting sago pearls features five fire openings beneath the platform to distribute heat evenly during the cooking process. Photo by the author. Photo by the author.



Traditional wooden moulds and clay are used to repair and reinforce the *Belangan* stove when cracks or damage appear from repeated heating during the roasting of sago pearls. Photo by the author.



Awards and recognitions displayed at the processing site reflect the long-standing contribution of local small-scale sago industries. Photo by the author.



Members of Persatuan Sejarah Malaysia Cawangan Sarawak during the “Program Jejak Sejarah ke Bahagian Mukah” held in conjunction with the Sarawak State History Quiz 2024. The visit formed part of a heritage learning journey aimed at deepening understanding of Mukah’s local history, culture, and community traditions under the theme “Tak Kenal Maka Tak Cinta” (“To know is to love”). (Source: Facebook Masinah Sago Medong Ent.)

Wood remains an important fuel source for the roasting process, while woven baskets and handmade sieves continue to play practical roles in sorting and handling the pearls. The working environment reflects a blend of traditional knowledge and small-scale community industry, supported over time through local agricultural initiatives.



Firewood continues to play an essential role in sago pearl production methods. Photo by the author.



Locally sourced coconuts prepared for use in traditional sago pearl making. Photo by the author.



Freshly roasted sago pearls mixed with coconut flakes, prepared using traditional methods. Photo by the author.



Freshly roasted sago pearls prepared using traditional techniques still practised in Mukah and Dalat. Photo by the author.

Beyond food production, these sites also represent living heritage. The making of sago pearls carries knowledge related to craftsmanship, labour, river transportation, community cooperation, and the Melanau relationship with the sago palm. As industrialisation and changing lifestyles continue to reshape local economies, such processing knowledge faces increasing pressure and gradual decline.

Tebaloi

Tebaloi is one of the most recognisable traditional sago-based foods of the Melanau community in Sarawak, particularly associated with Mukah. Made primarily from sago flour, coconut, sugar, and eggs, it is known for its thin, crispy texture and long shelf life.



Pusat Memproses Tebaloi. Photo by the author.



Fresh coconuts sourced locally as one of the main ingredients in making tebaloi. *Photo by the author.*

The process of making tebaloi begins with the preparation of ingredients. Fresh coconuts are sourced locally and grated before being mixed with sago flour, sugar, and eggs to form a dough-like mixture. Different flavours and colours may also be added, such as pandan, chocolate or strawberry.



Freshly baked sheets of tebaloi cooling before being cut and baked again. *Photo by the author.*



Moulds used to shape tebaloi evenly before baking. *Photo by the author.*

The mixture is then pressed into moulds to shape the thin sheets evenly. Traditionally, tebaloi was baked over charcoal heat, but many producers today use industrial ovens to improve consistency and increase production capacity while maintaining the traditional recipes.



Modern ovens used in the tebaloi-making process, combining traditional recipes with contemporary production methods. Photo by the author.

After a first bake, the large sheets are removed from the oven and left to cool before being cut into smaller rectangular pieces. The texture becomes crisp as the moisture evaporates after being baked a second time.

Once cooled, the tebaloi is packed carefully into plastic packaging and boxed for sale and distribution. Today, tebaloi production combines traditional knowledge with modern food-processing methods, allowing this Melanau heritage food to reach wider markets while preserving its cultural identity.



Freshly baked tebaloi with its signature crisp texture and light sweetness. Photo by the author.

Keropok

Fish crackers, locally known as *keropok ikan*, are among the food products produced in Mukah and remain closely connected to local fishing and food—processing traditions. The process begins with fresh fish, commonly parang fish, which is cleaned and blended into a smooth paste together with sago flour, salt, and seasoning. The use of sago shows the strong connection between Mukah's food heritage and the sago industry.



Packed Mukah fish crackers ready for sale. Photo by the author.

Once the mixture is prepared, it is shaped into long rolls and steamed until firm. After cooling, the rolls are sliced thinly into small pieces. In Mukah, fish crackers are often recognised by their distinctive red edges, while prawn crackers typically use orange edges, giving each product its own visual identity.



Fish crackers from Mukah prepared and dried before packaging. Photo by the author.

The sliced crackers are then carefully arranged on drying racks and left to dry, traditionally under the sun, until they become hard and suitable for storage. Proper drying is important to ensure a crisp texture and longer shelf life.



Drying racks used to air-dry fish crackers before frying and packaging. *Photo by the author.*

After drying, the crackers are packed for sale or fried before consumption. When fried, the slices expand into light and crispy crackers commonly enjoyed as snacks or side dishes. Today, production combines traditional knowledge with small-scale commercial processing, allowing this local heritage food to continue reaching wider markets while maintaining its culinary traditions.



Freshly packed fish crackers prepared for local distribution and sale. Photo by the author.

Kueh Sepit

Kuih sepit is a traditional festive snack commonly prepared in Sarawak, especially during Hari Raya and other celebrations. Known for its thin, crispy texture and rolled shape, the snack continues to be produced through small-scale home-based businesses and family enterprises.



Gerai Kuih Sepit Asli Kampung Judan, a small-scale local enterprise producing kuih sepit in Judan, Mukah. Photo by the author.

The process begins with preparing a batter made from flour, eggs, sugar, coconut milk, and flavouring. The batter is poured in small amounts onto heated metal moulds or presses. Traditionally, these moulds are heated over charcoal fire, though many producers today use gas stoves for efficiency and consistency.



Kuih sepi being prepared using heated moulds over gas stoves, reflecting the skill and precision required in the process. Photo by the author.

Once the batter is pressed and cooked into thin wafers, it must be removed quickly while still hot and flexible. The wafers are then carefully rolled by hand into cylindrical shapes before they harden. This stage requires speed and skill, as the wafer becomes brittle once cooled.



The rolling process must be done quickly while the kuih sepi is still hot and flexible before it hardens. Photo by the author.

After rolling, the kuih sepi is left to cool completely before being packed into containers or plastic packaging for sale. Variations in colour and flavour may also be introduced to suit market preferences.



Freshly rolled kuih sepit cooling before packing and sale. Photo by the author.

Today, kuih sepit production embodies both continuity and adaptation, where traditional techniques are maintained while modern equipment and commercial packaging help sustain the business and preserve this local food heritage.

Sago and the Sea: Shaping Mukah's Identity and Economy

Sago and sea products have long shaped the economy and daily life of Mukah. The swampy land surrounding Mukah supports the growth of sago palms, making sago one of the region's most important resources. It provides income and forms the basis of traditional foods such as linut, tebaloi, and sago pearls.

At the same time, Mukah's coastal location supports fishing and seafood processing activities. Fish and prawns are turned into traditional products such as keropok ikan, smoked fish, and umai, contributing to local livelihoods and trade.

Together, sago and sea products influence Mukah's food culture, economy, and identity, reflecting the close relationship between the Melanau community and their natural environment.



Pesta Kaul 2026. Photo by the author.

Chapter 6:

Traditional Melanau Dishes

Food provides one of the clearest windows into understanding a community. Through food, we encounter memory, identity, environment, and cultural continuity.

Among the traditional Melanau meals I encountered during my documentary journey, several dishes stood out for their uniqueness and strong connection to local identity. Many of these foods are rarely found outside Mukah and surrounding Melanau communities.

“民以食為天” (mín yǐ shí wéi tiān) — food is the foundation of life for the people. I believe this saying applies universally to every community, including the Melanau people of Mukah. Through food, we not only understand daily life and survival, but also culture, memory, identity, and the relationship between people and their environment.

Among the authentic Melanau dishes encountered during this journey are:

Linut with sambal ikan bilis

Linut is a long-standing Melanau staple food made from sago starch mixed with hot water until it forms a thick, translucent, and sticky texture. Commonly eaten in Mukah and other Melanau areas, linut shows the deep cultural and economic connection between the Melanau community and the sago palm.

Traditionally, linut is eaten using a special twisting technique with chopstick-like utensils known as chandas. It is usually served with strong and flavourful garnishes such as sambal belacan, fermented fish sauces, or sour fish—based dishes. Fresh vegetables such as cucumber, long beans, and cabbage are often served alongside it to balance the meal.

Among the Melanau community, there is also a traditional belief that one should not smile or laugh while preparing linut, otherwise the mixture may not form properly. While often shared humorously, this belief expresses the patience, focus, and care traditionally associated with preparing the dish.



Linut set at Kafe Sri Diana. Photo by the author.

Tetebeh Kosong & Tetebeh with Coconut

Tetebeh with coconut is one of the traditional Melanau foods commonly enjoyed as a light meal or snack. Made primarily from sago, the dish shows the important role of the sago palm in Melanau daily life and food culture.

The sago mixture is traditionally wrapped and cooked before being served with freshly grated coconut, giving it a soft texture and mild natural sweetness. Some versions are lightly toasted, creating a fragrant aroma and slightly crispy surface while remaining soft inside.



Tetebeh with coconut. Photo by Manuchihr Smith.

Kueh Buah Pudo

Kueh Buah Pudo is an indigenous Melanau delicacy made from young pudo fruit, a seasonal fruit, mixed with sago, grated coconut, sugar and wrapped in leaves before steaming. The process begins by cutting open the fruit and removing the seeds by hand. The filling is then prepared and wrapped neatly using local leaves secured with small wooden sticks. After steaming, the kueh develops a soft texture and natural aroma from the leaves and local ingredients. Rarely found outside Melanau communities today, Kueh Buah Pudo is an example of traditional ecological knowledge and the Melanau community's close relationship with nature and sago—based food culture.



Seasonal buah pudo collected and prepared for making Melanau kueh. Photo by Manuchihr Smith.



The seeds of the buah pudo removed and cleaned before preparation. Photo by Manuchihr Smith.



Wrapped Kueh Buah Pudo secured with small wooden sticks and steamed before serving. Photo by Manuchihr Smith.

Midin with Black Fungus and Catfish

Midin (*Stenochlaena palustris*) with black fungus, kulat kuah, and ikan keli is a traditional dish that combines locally sourced river and forest ingredients commonly enjoyed in Sarawak. Midin, a wild jungle fern, is valued for its crunchy texture and is often stir-fried with garlic, sambal, or belacan. In this dish, it is paired with black fungus, kulat kuah, and ikan keli (catfish), creating a rich combination of earthy flavours and soft textures.

Traditionally, this dish was often cooked by farmers and villagers working in or near the jungle, as many of the ingredients could be easily gathered from the surrounding environment. Midin and wild mushrooms were foraged from the forest, while ikan keli could be caught from nearby rivers or streams. The dish reveals the Melanau community's close relationship with nature and their traditional knowledge in using available local resources for daily meals.



Ikan keli cut into small pieces. Photo by the author.



Cutting the fungus stems. Photo by the author.



Belacan and chilli pounded in a stone mortar to create the flavour base for the dish. Photo by the author.



Midin, black fungus, kulat kuah, and ikan keli being stir-fried. Photo by the author.

Ulat Sago (Sago Worms)

Ulat sago stir-fried with kicap is a traditional Melanau dish prepared using sago worms harvested from the trunk of fallen or cut sago palms. Considered a delicacy by many Melanau communities, ulat sago is valued for its rich texture and high nutritional content.

In this version, the ulat sago is stir-fried with garlic and a mixture of garlic, kicap pekat (sweet thick soy sauce), kicap cair (light soy sauce), and sos tiram (oyster sauce), creating a savoury and slightly sweet flavour. During cooking, the worms release natural oils, giving the dish a rich taste and soft, creamy texture inside while lightly crisp on the outside.



Fresh ulat sago cleaned and prepared at least 1 hour before cooking. Photo by the author.



Ulat sago being stir-fried with garlic, kicap pekat, kicap cair, and oyster sauce, creating a rich savoury Melanau dish. Photo by the author.

Lamb & Beef Curry

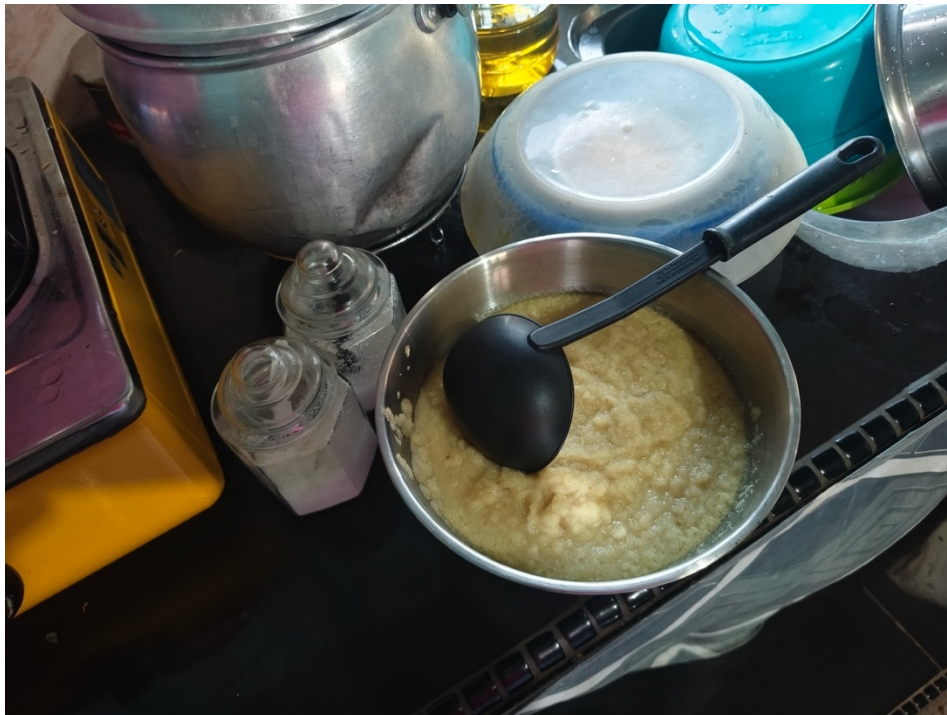
Lamb and beef curry are important communal dishes commonly prepared during Melanau weddings and funerals. Cooked in large quantities, these dishes are served to family members, relatives, neighbours, and guests as part of community gatherings and hospitality.

The meat is usually marinated with spices before being slowly cooked with curry paste, coconut milk, and seasonings to create a rich and flavourful gravy. The preparation often begins early and involves collective cooking, displaying the spirit of gotong-royong within the community. For larger gatherings, a chef or experienced community cook is normally hired to prepare the meals due to the quantity of food required and the importance of maintaining the traditional taste.

Beyond being a meal, these dishes carry social and cultural significance, symbolising togetherness, mutual support, and the role of food in bringing people together during important life events in Melanau society.



Lamb and beef marinated with spices in preparation. Photo by the author.



Ginger, garlic, lemon grass and red onion paste. Photo by the author.



Large pots of lamb and beef curry slowly simmering for guests and family members during a Melanau gathering. Photo by the author.

Umai Ikan with Spicy Sambal

Umai is a traditional Melanau raw fish dish commonly associated with Mukah and coastal Sarawak. It is prepared using fresh fish mixed with lime juice, onions, chilli, salt, and seasonings. The lime juice naturally cures the fish, giving it a firm texture and refreshing flavour.

Traditionally made using freshly caught fish such as popot, pirang, haruan, bawal, or tenggiri. Umai may also be understood as a local raw fish tradition comparable to ceviche or sashimi, demonstrating the long-standing Melanau appreciation for fresh seafood.

Today, umai remains one of the most recognised traditional dishes in Sarawak



Fresh fish prepared for making Melanau umai. Photo by the author.



Cleaning, drying and slicing freshly caught fish before mixing it with lime, onions, and chilli. Photo by the author.



Umai Campur and Umai Jeb. Photo by the author.

Prawn Soup with Serai Hutan

Prawn soup cooked with serai hutan (wild lemongrass) is a simple traditional dish that highlights the natural flavours of fresh river or sea prawns. The wild lemongrass gives the soup a fragrant aroma and slightly citrusy taste, creating a light yet flavourful broth.



Fresh prawns cooked with serai hutan (wild lemongrass), creating a fragrant soup. Photo by the author.

Smoked Fish

Smoked fish is a common daily food among the Melanau community, and many households know how to prepare it. The smoking process helps preserve the fish while giving it a rich smoky flavour and firmer texture.

Among the popular varieties is smoked ikan tenggiri, valued for its taste and suitability for smoking. Traditionally prepared over wood fire, smoked fish remains an important part of Melanau food culture and shows the community's close relationship with fishing and seafood preservation practices.



Smoked ikan tenggiri, a common daily dish. Photo by the author.

Tebaloi Ikan Wrapped with Daun Nipah

Tebaloi ikan wrapped with daun nipah is a Melanau dish made using fish and sago-based ingredients wrapped in nipah leaves before being slowly cooked over fire. The daun nipah acts as a natural wrapper, helping to retain moisture while adding a distinct aroma during the cooking process.

Traditionally prepared using wood fire and charcoal, the slow cooking method gives the dish a smoky flavour closely associated with Melanau home cooking. The use of nipah leaves and open-fire cooking is another example of the community's traditional knowledge in using natural materials and local resources in daily food preparation.



Tebaloi ikan wrapped in daun nipah being slowly cooked over traditional wood fire and charcoal.
Photo by Manuchihr Smith.

Ulam-ulam Melanau Style

Ulam-ulam plays an important role in Melanau meals, where fresh vegetables and jungle plants are commonly eaten raw or lightly blanched as side dishes. Often served together with linut, sambal, smoked fish, or umai, ulam-ulam helps balance stronger flavours while exhibiting the community's close connection to nature and locally available plants.

The vegetables in the photo include long beans, winged beans, young jungle leaves, terung pipit (*Solanum torvum*), and shoots collected from surrounding gardens or forest areas.



Fresh ulam-ulam and local vegetables commonly served in Melanau meals, including long beans, winged bean, terung pipit, and jungle leaves. Photo by Manuchihr Smith.

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Family and Community Traditions

Heritage survives when knowledge is shared.

Passing recipes and food knowledge through generations remains an important part of Melanau family life. Throughout Mukah, traditional skills are often passed informally between parents, grandparents, relatives, and neighbours. Whether preparing traditional dishes, weaving tetilip, or organising Kaul activities, these acts of teaching and learning help ensure cultural continuity across generations.

During the documentation process and community visits, I observed strong family bonds, where younger generations were taught by their parents and elders how to cook traditional dishes and make tetilip. This informal transfer of knowledge within the family is a meaningful way of preserving cultural heritage, ensuring that traditional skills, food practices, and community identity continue to survive across generations.

During the Pesta Kaul, various cultural activities such as the Serahang workshop, umai competition, terendak workshop, and Melanau cooking competitions were held. These activities provide an engaging way to introduce Melanau traditions and cultural heritage to both tourists and younger generations. Through hands-on participation and demonstrations, traditional knowledge, food practices, and craftsmanship can continue to be appreciated and passed down to future generations



A father and son preparing traditional dishes together, illustrating the intergenerational transmission of culinary knowledge. Photo by the author.

Modern Changes and The Future of Heritage

Like many traditional communities, the Melanau community is experiencing social and cultural changes brought by modern lifestyles and urbanisation. Many younger generations have moved to cities for education and employment opportunities, resulting in fewer people continuing traditional practices in their daily lives.

Changing diets and modern food preferences have also reduced the regular preparation of certain traditional dishes, while some customs and skills are becoming less commonly practiced. As older generations age, there is concern that valuable cultural knowledge may gradually disappear if not actively preserved.

At the same time, documentation, community workshops, cultural festivals, and revival efforts are becoming increasingly important. Through research, education, and cultural activities such as Pesta Kaul, efforts are being made to preserve and reintroduce traditional Melanau food, crafts, and cultural practices to younger generations and the wider public.





Young entrepreneurs adapting local flavours into contemporary food businesses during Pesta Kaul. Photo by the author. Young entrepreneurs selling modern street food and beverages during Pesta Kaul in Mukah. “Saya paling manis”. Photo by the author.



A younger generation food vendor promoting contemporary snacks and drinks, reflecting the changing food culture in Mukah. Photo by the author.

Closing Thoughts

Mukah is often celebrated as the heartland of Melanau culture, where rivers, sago forests, fishing traditions, and community life have shaped generations of people.

Through photographs, personal memories, field documentation, and conversations with local communities, *Mukah: Memories of River, Sago & Community* explores the living heritage of Mukah—from Kaul rituals and sago traditions to daily meals, local knowledge, and family life. More than a record of places and customs, this book is a journey of rediscovery, reconnecting with the stories, people, and landscapes that continue to define Mukah today.

Richly illustrated and grounded in community experiences, this work seeks to contribute to the documentation and preservation of Melanau heritage for future generations.

This documentation represents only a small part of Mukah's story. Many traditions, memories, and forms of knowledge remain undocumented, waiting to be shared by future generations. Heritage preservation is not merely about recording the past—it is about ensuring that knowledge continues to live, evolve, and remain meaningful in the present.

As one community member reflected:

“If we don't record it and teach the young, it will disappear.”

The future of Mukah's heritage ultimately depends not only on remembering, but also on continuing to practise, share, and value it.

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END

20th May 2026

Glossary

Term	Meaning
1. Kaul.....	Melanau thanksgiving festival
2. Ipok.....	Spiritual entities
3. Serahang.....	Ritual offering structure
4. Tetilip.....	Decorative woven ornament
5. Tibow.....	Giant swing
6. Linut.....	Sago starch staple
7. Ulo Kaul.....	Kaul ceremonial group
8. Bapa Kaul.....	Head of Ritual

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20. Interviews with traditional food practitioners, sago processors, community elders, Kaul practitioners, and local entrepreneurs conducted during field documentation activities.

21. Personal communications with:

- **Manuchihr Smith**
- **Wyanie**
- **Syeki**
- **Evan**
- **Mary Hubert**
- **Masniah Binti Paris**
- Other community members who contributed knowledge, stories, and cultural insights during the documentation process.

Web and Digital Resources

22. Sarawak Government Official Portal

23. Facebook pages and public social media content relating to:

- Masinah Sago Medong Enterprise
- Pesta Kaul Mukah
- Community heritage and cultural activities in Mukah

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- Khuwarizmi Jmalluddin
- Ismail Bin Roslan
- Manuchihr Smith

About the Author



Paulyn P. L. Yam was born in Kuching, Sarawak, and grew up between village surroundings and urban life, an experience that shaped her appreciation for both traditional and contemporary environments. Of Cantonese heritage, her upbringing was enriched by exposure to Hakka, Melanau, and Western cultural influences, forming a strong multicultural foundation.

A significant influence in her early life was her adoption by Sylvia Sundram, a Canadian whose encouragement inspired Paulyn to explore and better understand her own cultural roots. This cross-cultural upbringing instilled in her a deep respect for heritage and identity.

Paulyn holds a degree in Marketing from the University of Southern Queensland and has built a diverse professional career across several industries. Alongside her corporate work, she is actively involved in heritage research and documentation.

Paulyn P. L. Yam is a heritage researcher and community documentarian based in Kuching, Sarawak. Her work focuses on recording living traditions, food heritage, oral histories, and cultural landscapes throughout Sarawak. She is a collaborating researcher in the Kai Joo Lane and Tales of Kuching projects led by James S. L. Yong and has contributed to a range of heritage documentation initiatives involving local communities. Through her research and writing, she seeks to make Sarawak's diverse cultural heritage more accessible to future generations.