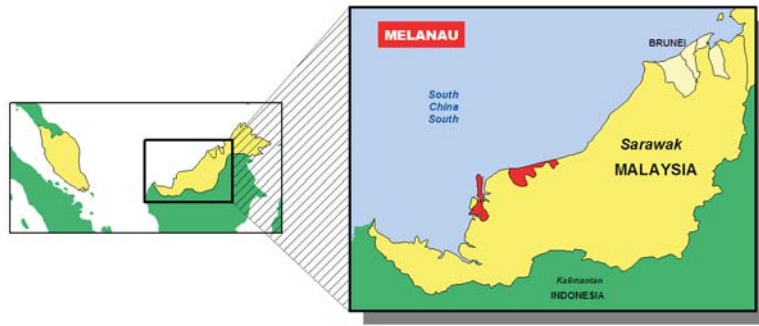


MELANAU



Population	Major Religion	Language
113,000	Islam/Christianity	Melanau

Who are the Melanau?

The Melanau are considered among the earliest settlers in Sarawak. The name Melanau was not used by the Melanau to refer to themselves until recently. They call themselves *a-likou* meaning 'people of the river'. Legend has it that the name Melanau was given by one of the Sultans of Brunei to the inhabitants of the coastal swamp flats and riverbanks of central Sarawak.

The Melanau live in a low-lying swampy plain covered by dense tropical forest in the coastal region of Sarawak. They are mostly located in and near the towns of Mukah, Matu, Daro, Dalat, Bintulu, Kanowit, and Sibu.

Because of their group affiliation, Melanau derive their identities through people such as parents, friends, relatives, and teachers. The self is a part of the community, the family, the clan, the village, and the bureaucracy. A person's family is the primary unit that defines Melanau roles, responsibilities, and status in the community.

The Melanau language consists of various dialects. However, most of Melanau people use the dialect from the Mukah area to communicate with those from other dialects.

What are their lives like?

The Melanau are mostly farmers, fishermen, sago producers, and traders. Cultivation of sago palm, wet rice, coconut, and rubber supplements their economy. They are also regarded as being fine boat-builders and fishermen. They consider education a priority, and some Melanau have thrived in politics, business, and public life.

The Melanau are described as open, friendly, outgoing, and non-aggressive people. They value

their relationships with friends and family members. *Gotong-royong* 'mutual assistance' is still practiced, especially during weddings, funerals, and farming.

Whenever someone dies, the dead person's personal belongings are buried together with the body. The *peligin* 'mourning period' usually lasts almost a month. Inter-marriage among those of different religious beliefs is common and accepted.

What do they believe?

Modern Melanau are the most religiously diverse and tolerant community in Sarawak. It is normal for the Christians, Muslims, and Animists to live peacefully in one place or community. They respect one another's beliefs and even celebrate one another's feasts and festivities.

Traditional beliefs and practices continue to flourish among the people. A shaman can be either a man or woman who is thought to be "a master of spirits." The Melanau still seek help from a shaman if they are sick or bothered by spirits. One Melanau celebration is the *Kaul* festival, which includes a ceremony to appease the spirits of the sea, land, forest, and farm.

What are their needs?

Many of the Melanau need better fishing techniques in order to sustain an adequate income in the fishing industry. Pray for people skilled in modern techniques in fishing to help the Melanau people improve their livelihood. They have great potential for tourism considering their rich culture and natural environment. Many Melanau still lack access to the good news. Pray that believers will commit to helping them have the good news in the language that is most appropriate for them.