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## CONTINUING TRANSFORMATIONS: THE *MANARAPOH* ATTIRE OF THE LOTUD KADAZANDUSUN\*

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### INTRODUCTION

Manarapoh is a category of ceremonial attire used by the Lotud Kada2andusun of Sabah, North Borneo. It is a primary symbol of material wealth and spiritual power, worn exclusively by female ritual specialists in ceremonies that are central to the well being of the community.

In this paper we situate *manarapoh* as a primary site of Lotud aesthetics - the focus and manifestation of culturally specific ideals of health, wealth and beauty. It is important to note that the term *manarapoh* refers not only to a discrete category of ceremonial attire, but also to the ritual act of dressing oneself in this attire. It will be argued that the ritual donning of *manarapoh* constitutes a transformative act - altering both the corporeal bodies of those attired and the space they inhabit. Through this process female ritual specialists instantiate a metaphysical link between themselves and their supreme deities. In this act of adornment their bodies become the site and the centre of sacred power- embodying and encompassing ancestors and descendants, deities and followers, the natural and the supernatural in a single continuum.

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A *manarapoh* costume is comprised of important heirloom items originally imported as prestige trade goods from other ethnic groups inside and outside Borneo. Yet despite the historical origins of its components, *manarapoh* is not seen by the Lotud as a collection of other people's material culture. Rather, it has become ideologically reinstated as a timeless

category of ritual apparel representing Lotud identity and cultural ideals. How then, does this particular transformation take place?

After briefly looking at the cultural background of the Lotud people, we hope to show how the individual objects forming *manarapob* are associated with three main stages of use, each with their own distinct layers of cultural value – as prestige trade goods, as heirloom items and, most importantly, as sacred ritual tools. By examining the process of accumulation, value acquisition, and ritual use of *manarapob* attire, we hope to explore the ability of the Lotud to reconfigure these objects into their own world view and to demonstrate the extent to which these items have become integral to Lotud religion and identity.

## THE LOTUD

The Lotud are an indigenous ethnic group of about five to six thousand people, living in and around the Tuaran district of the Malaysian state of Sabah, formerly known as North Borneo (Blood, 1990: 63). They are culturally affiliated with a number of other ethnic groups in Sabah, grouped collectively by past authors under the name Dusun, although nowadays the term Kadazandusun is preferred to indicate membership in this cultural complex. Similarities in social organisation, cosmology and linguistic taxonomy point to a common origin among Kadazandusun peoples. However, groups such as the Lotud have historically stressed their cultural autonomy, evidenced by possession of a distinct language and differing customs of dress, religion and social practice.

Like most of the societies of Borneo, descent is 'cognatic' or 'bilateral'. Kinship is traced equally to ties on both the maternal and paternal sides. There are no corporate descent groups, rather the main social, ritual, and economic group for the Lotud is the household (cf. King, 1978: 5-13). A household usually