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LOOKING FOR THE *TAMBOK*: SOME ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES ON CONTEMPORARY BIDAYUH BASKETRY

Liana Chua

INTRODUCTION

The average visitor to the souvenir shopslining the Main Bazaar in Kuching, Sarawak is apt to encounter what is frequently described as a 'Bidayuh *tambok*': a small, finely woven rattan basket distinguished from others of its ilk by its vertical twilP. In Sarawak's self-consciously multi-ethnic milieu, this is the emblematic Bidayuh basket: a cultural feature which, like the balai or 'head-house'[2], recognisably differentiates it from other indigenous groups (Chin, 1980: 70-71; Munan, 1989: 44).

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Jabatan Muzium Sarawak

LOOKING FOR THE *TAMBOK*: SOME ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES ON CONTEMPORARY BIDAYUH BASKETRY

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Liana Chua

INTRODUCTION

The average visitor to the souvenir shops lining the Main Bazaar in Kuching, Sarawak, is apt to encounter what is frequently described as a 'Bidayuh *tambok*': a small, finely woven rattan basket distinguished from others of its ilk by its vertical twill[1]. In Sarawak's self-consciously multi-ethnic milieu, this is *the* emblematic Bidayuh basket: a cultural feature which, like the *balai* or 'head-house'[2], recognisably differentiates it from other indigenous groups (Chin, 1980: 70-71; Munan, 1989: 44).

But take one of these baskets to a Bidayuh village in the mountainous hinterlands of the capital city, and a different story may emerge. As I found while showing one such specimen to the people in the Penrissen village where I lived, instant recognition of its culturally emblematic properties was not often forthcoming. 'That's from Bau,' remarked one woman, busily stripping rattan for her own basket; 'we don't weave designs like that over here.' Another was curious as to whether other ethnic groups, like the Iban or Kayan, wove the same sorts of baskets. Someone else murmured that the quality of the rattan wasn't especially good, but that tourists never noticed anyway: they always seemed happy to buy the roughest of such receptacles if they chanced upon them at the longhouse. 'It's very well done,' observed a fourth, veering subtly in the direction of her house; 'But why don't you come and buy one of mine too?'

This article, based on a year-long collecting project carried out as part of a broader stint of anthropological fieldwork between 2004-5, is about Bidayuh basketry; and more specifically, the so-called 'Bidayuh *tambok*'. But as the comments above suggest, it is Bidayuh basketry from a slightly different perspective to that usually found in books of an artistic or technical bent. Rather than adding to the already rich literature on baskets, arts and crafts and other Sarawakian traditions, it offers some ethnographic notes and reflections on basketry as I encountered it among its village-based users and producers. By this I do not mean to replicate wholesale the experiences of Bidayuh basket-weavers, which are too numerous and varied to reduce to a single article at any rate. Neither do I aspire towards a comprehensive survey of Bidayuh basketry, replete with technical information and glossaries. This article may be seen instead as a window onto a certain world at a certain point in time, revealing some preoccupations, trends and methods more commonly found on a humid longhouse (or indeed concrete) veranda than a Main Bazaar shop or the pages of a Sarawakian craft book. My purpose here is to capture a certain element of 'native exegesis' – or how the basket-makers and villagers I encountered conceptualised and classified these objects. In the process, this article addresses a pressing question which marked my entire collecting project, and remains salient in any attempts to study Bidayuh basketry: what exactly *is* a 'Bidayuh *tambok*'?

THE BIDAYUH: AN OVERVIEW

With a population numbering about 210,000 (8.4% of the population), the Bidayuh comprise Sarawak's second-largest indigenous group after the Iban. Linguistically and culturally related to the Dayaks in what is now West Kalimantan, Indonesia, most of them trace their descent to Sungkung across the border, from which their ancestors were said to have migrated a few hundred years ago (Chang, 2002: 18-25). Settling in the mountainous vicinity of Kuching, they were known during the Brooke and colonial eras (1841-1963) as 'Land Dayaks': a generic label applied to several

diverse groups in the region[3]. For many Bidayuhs, however, the idea of belonging to a broad overaching ethnic category was somewhat alien: as Geddes (1954: 20-31) and others (e.g. Babcock, 1974; Jehom, 2003; King, 1989: 238) noted, village and other regional features remained more salient forms of communal identification for a long time after Sarawak's independence in 1963. This tendency has persisted in the present. In my adoptive village, 'Dayak' (which also means 'people') rather than 'Bidayuh' is the preferred local endonym, although everybody acknowledges that they basically mean the same thing. The difference, however, was encapsulated by an elderly woman, who noted that 'now the government doesn't know which village we Dayak are from, so they call us all "Bidayuh"'. This is not to suggest that 'Bidayuh' is seen as fake or invalid, but that the underlying aspiration of pan-ethnic unity (Mamit *et al.*, 2003; Minos, 2000) is not an obvious priority to many villagers.

A second factor which has made such unity difficult to attain has been linguistic diversity (Dundon, 1989; Sarok, 1997). Today's Bidayuh are officially divided into four regional linguistic subgroups: Bau-Jagoi (Bau area), Biatah (Penrissen/Padawan area), Bukar-Sadong (Serian area) and Lara-Selako (Lundu area). Although there exists a degree of lexical similarity between the different dialects and their innumerable offshoots (Topping, 1970; Rensch *et al.*, 2006; http://www.ethnologue.com), such differences have also caused very real problems in communication – and more pertinently to this article, the comparative classification of regional material culture. The solution employed by Bidayuhs from different dialect groups is to either communicate in a mutually understood language – which today includes Malay, English or even Chinese – or carry on what is effectively a bilingual conversation in their respective dialects. This lack of linguistic (and indeed ethnic) chauvinism is a striking characteristic of many Bidayuh communities, which have had a particularly long history of contact with the 'outside world' due to their proximity to Kuching. As we shall see, such contact has also facilitated the widespread incorporation of 'external' objects and materials into Bidayuh society, which has in turn been shaped by them.

THE CROWTHER-BEYNON COLLECTING PROJECT

At the end of 2004, I embarked on a year-long project, supported by the Crowther-Beynon Fund, to create a new Bidayuh collection for the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (CUMAA) in England. This collection focused largely on Bidayuh basketry: a term encompassing a broad variety of woven receptacles ranging from 1.5 metre tall harvesting baskets to shallow winnowing trays. My aim was to amass a range of contemporary baskets and other objects – those being produced, used and sold in Bidayuh villages – which might shed light on developments in basketry and the social, cultural and economic circumstances surrounding its production. As part of my overall anthropological research, I also used this project as a means of eliciting people's opinions on 'Bidayuh-ness' and ethnic identity, although as shown later, this was not always successful.

Due to the exigencies of doctoral fieldwork, a large proportion of the objects and data was derived from my adoptive village in Penrissen. Collecting trips to other Bidayuh regions were usually conducted at weekends, and centred on a number of specific villages. I would usually turn up at the relevant place through a local contact who would introduce me to weavers and other craftspeople there. Throughout this project I was very fortunate to have the help of Mr Jonas Noeb from the Majlis Adat Istiadat Sarawak, who was also carrying out research on Bidayuh *adat* (customary law), traditions and material culture. His linguistic skills and social networks in the Bau, Serian and Lundu areas were instrumental to the success of this collecting project and in eliciting the information contained in this article.

While I sometimes bought used objects on the spot, I often had to 'pre-order' batches of baskets and other items, as they were no longer produced in large quantities. The vast majority of contributors were elderly women, who made them only for personal use and occasionally friends and neighbours. The decline of agricultural and other manual practices had significantly reduced demand for such receptacles; and it was not uncommon to see rows