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BEAD NECKLACE 1598 IN THE SARAWAK MUSEUM COLLECTION: AN ITEMISED CHECKLIST OF 15 COMMON SARAWAK BEADS, BASED ON A NECKLACE IN THE SARAWAK MUSEUM'S BIDAYUH SECTION.

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Necklace 1598

"Necklace worn by men on festive occasions" is how it is labelled in the display case, while the old catalogue entry reads as follows:

"String of teeth (rhinoceros, bear) and of antique beads, formerly in the possession of a Land Dayak, The beads appear to be valuable. Presented by H.H. the Rajah, Jan. 07" The necklace consists of 1 bronze bell, 4 teeth/claws, and 41 beads.

The late T.G.O. from Kpg. Benuk confirmed that the necklace is indeed of the kind used by the Bidayuh people, but it is a "semban", worn by women or girls. The kind worn by men, "taia bubut", is usually made of several strands, strung on or wound with thin rotan canes to make it as much of a collar as a necklace, heavier, with more animal teeth and claws in its composition.

The distinction is important. A woman could not wear a taia bubut, nor a man a semban. They are needed for important festivals, when a person wears such beads as are owned by the family. They do not count as personal property but as "pesaka", heirloom property; they are not buried with the dead. Beads pass on to sons and daughters after the owner's death.

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IN THE SARAWAK MUSEUM COLLECTION:

**An itemised checklist of 15 common Sarawak beads,
based on a necklace in the Sarawak Museum's Bidayuh section.**

by

Adelheid Munan-Oettli
(*Kuching, Sarawak*)

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A string of beads once made must not be undone or re-strung lightly - certainly not to be divided among rival heirs. T.G.Oto was firm on this point. In the case of an inheritance dispute, the party which misses out on beads can be compensated with extra ceramics or bassware, but the strings of beads remain intact.

If for some good reason, i.e. a worn-out thread, beads have to be re-strung, this work must be done reverently and by a person of sufficient age and experience. Before starting, the spirits of the beads must be informed of the plan, and the following offering must be put in a flat leaf-lined basket for them:

turmeric, uncooked rice, coconut flesh, a small brass bell.

Whatever re-stringing is to be done, beads from different sets should not be mixed, in no case beads from a "masculine" and a "feminine" set.

At least one bronze bell is included in each string of beads. This bell, called "setegah", acts as a "sekedadud" in that it keeps the spirits of the beads from disagreeing among each other. If there are several bells they must harmonise with each other in sound also. T.G.Oto tried out several combinations of bells before he could pick a satisfactorily tuned pair to present to a visitor.

Bone pieces, teeth and claws are carefully chosen for their strengthening and healing properties. The rhinoceros tooth in 1598 met with T.G.Oto's approval - the best way of dislodging a fishbone from a hasty eater's throat is to make him drink water in which a rhino tooth has been dipped, and it has many other uses as well. Other Sarawakians confirm this, and add that rhino faeces is a powerful medicine also, as is rhino urine - though directions on how to collect the latter are scarce.

T.G.Oto does not specify what will happen to anyone who touches beads without proper authority: a man a semban, a woman a taia bubut, a small child any beads at all. While the owner is present a person may handle (to admire) beads which he could not normally wear. Girls will occasionally wear beads at ceremonies after they have been initiated at the age of 12 or so, but they wouldn't wear them frequently. The idea of a small boy secretly wearing "grown-up" beads seemed new and ridiculous to the Tuai Gawai, but when pressed he would only say that punishment by the spirits would surely follow.

About the origin of beads, T.G.Oto is vague. The "real" ones are made of stone, these have been manufactured by ancestral spirits long ago. New beads (mostly glass) are man-made, colourful, pretty, but they are not quite so useful, and they come from far away. None have ever been made in Sarawak, though they might be from Brunei or China.

It might be mentioned here that Everett (J.R.A.S., St. B., 1909) was satisfied that Santubong, about 80 miles from Benuk, must have been a centre of bead manufacture (stone and glass) at the time it flourished as a sea-port and iron industry centre, from about the 7th to the 12th century A.D. While he does not hazard any very close date, Everett makes the interesting remark: "..... natives of Sarawak now have no knowledge of the art, *and the Chinese do not affect beads of these types*" (my italics)

I have sorted necklace 1598 into 15 major bead types, not counting the bell, claws and tooth. As 1598 is most likely of Bidayuh or Selakau origin, I have mostly confined myself to the bead lore of these two people where relevant.

Below is an itemised list, with such information as I could obtain about each type of bead. Each bead is visually described.

Comments by "G.S.M." with the description are from the Geological Survey of Malaysia officers in Kuching who examined the beads. The measurements given (y x n) are (diameter x length).

The accompanying sketch and black-and-white photo are as an aid to identify each type of bead; the colour photo illustrates the whole necklace 1598 more adequately, and gives an approximate impression of the colours.

1. **Black, very shiny, globular**, faint traces around bead; the mass appears slightly spongy, small holes are visible from inside the perforation though the outside surfaces is very smooth.

19 mm x 12 mm