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MELANAU ETHNO-ARTS AND HANDICRAFT

Edmund Kurui and Tuton Kaboy

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Arts and crafts among the Melanau are numerous, however, only a handful has been noticed and taken care of. Those which are brought to our attention are the *terindak*, the Kanowit basket, the *pela* paddles and what about others! In this short paper we include few items like baskets, carriers, fish traps, *dakan* or *bilum*; though very brief, we presume that this will be used as guidance to further research works on the Melanau arts and handicrafts.

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by

Edmund Kurui and Tuton Kaboy

INTRODUCTION

The Melanau have created craftwork of very high quality for many centuries. They have been using very simple materials and yet decorate these crafts with intricate and delightful designs and patterns. The abundance raw materials like bamboo and wood for carving, rattan and other reeds or palm and leaves for basketry, has enabled the craftsmen and women to produce beautiful attractive products for daily use as well as for religious and traditional objectives.

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CARVINGS

Traditional carvings were quickly, though skillfully made in soft wood, sago pith, sago branch, often disposed of at some stage during a particular ceremony. These carvings are called *blum* or *dakan*. The sickness images or effigies and *Rabong* to dead ship. Not only were these soft materials quicker to work, but they were also easier to carve into the correct proportions, the spiralling appendages, and the intricate details common to many traditional figures. Due to the increase number of Melanau are now converted to either Islam or Christianity, the demand of these carvings among them as curing medium or objects are less. And in order to suit the tourist market, the trend is now towards using harder materials, like *jita'* wood or even belian wood. Unfortunately, a decline in detail and artistic value has sometimes accompanied this change of materials used. There are now only a few skilled craftsmen or carvers in each village carved or among the Melanau communities.

Traditionally too, the Melanau had their carving in hard woods. The wood used are *tapang* wood and *mengeris* wood, they did not use the belian.

Tapang and *mengeris* wood are used for making paddles, lidded and unlidded trays (*bulang*). Nowadays, carved paddles *pela* of *tapang* or *mengeris* wood are now produced in Kampung Tanam of Dalat, and other kampung in the Mukah district, however, these are not made in the traditional or original size. They are small souvenir paddles but quite popular among the tourist arts shops in various towns in the State. There is no carvers producing the intricate or beautiful wooden tray now, perhaps because of availability the modern material commonly acquired in the super markets and hardwares shop in the country to replace them.

BLUM/DAKAN (SICKNESS IMAGES)

The Melanau traditionally believed that most sickness are caused by supernatural elements and they can identify more than 40 main such spirits.

In its early stage, or if it is slight, the sickness is usually dealt with by the *bayuh* (medium), an expert in herbal cures and magic charms or *puchau/yap* who would also prescribe medicine. If the sickness persists, then an expert would be invited to carve image of the responsible spirit in sago pitch, called *Bilum*. After the appropriate spell is said over it and a mixture of chewed betelnut, sirih leaves, and lime spat at it, the bad spirit is said to have left the patient and entered the image. After water has been poured over both the image and patient, recovery would take place, if the diagnosis has been correct. The spirit would remain in the image for three days, after which it would be taken to the proper habitation of the spirit, the jungle or the river, and abandoned there. If the above ritual is not successful, then more complicated healing ceremonies like *berbayoh*, *baguda* and *barayun* will be carried out.

RABONG

Apart from the great variety of sickness images, the Melanau also traditionally produced other carvings like boats (*Rabong*) and dragons (*naga* or *yang*, spirit dwelled under the water) for use in their elaborated healing ceremonies (*payun*).

Such boats are to transport the sickness images to their place in the spirit world after the *Payun* ceremony while carved dragon is suspended or a rotan swing (*wai ayun*) served as seat for the spirit medium (*Bayuh*) during the *payun* ceremony.

BASKETS

In general, we can classify the baskets among the Melanau as containers or carriers of certain shapes and styles which are designed for special uses. The baskets are usually made of rattans, split bamboo and reeds or palms. The Melanau are mostly fishermen and producers of 100% of Sarawak sago exports. Most activities connected with fishing and sago processing require the usage of baskets as carriers, storage and appliances for processing the sago itself. These baskets are usually plain without much decorative patterns.

TEPUKU (OYA and MUKAH)

The *tepuku* is basically a cylinder, round topped basket with square base. It is plaited diagonally and is usually made from about quarter inch wide strip of natural brown sago bark. The rim at the round top is