



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XL No. 61

December 1989



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Mashman, V. (1989). Ethnic Arts and Society - An Orang Ulu Study. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XL (61): 215-230

ETHNIC ARTS AND SOCIETY - AN ORANG ULU STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

In traditional Orang Ulu communities the arts were rooted in the community. Design, mural painting and wood sculpture were integrally part of the religion, social structure and value system. For example, impressive funeral monuments such as the kelirieng and the salong (burial huts) were part of elaborate funerary ceremonies to commemorate great leaders, and vivid wall paintings illustrated myths which explained the social order or depicted motifs which were associated with the aristocracy. Elaborate carvings of spirits were used for the healing of sickness, a further indication of the relationship between religion and the arts. The first part of this paper will illustrate how the visual arts developed out of certain social and historical context; which will be referred to, for the purposes of discussion as 'traditional society'. This is a rather limited and fixed notion that does not account for the dynamic process of change. The second part of this paper will discuss current trends and examine the potential role of the artist in contemporary society.

This study is an introduction to the subject, and is in no way exhaustive. Further indepth study with fieldwork is urgently needed to get an accurate overview of the situation as it is now in remote up river areas. There is a certain regional emphasis in this paper on the Belaga area, and any oversights are unintentional.

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PART 1

THE ARTS IN TRADITIONAL SOCIETY: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Undoubtedly, the art of the Orang Ulu peoples in the interior of Sarawak reflects cultural contact with other civilizations. The influence of China, India, and the Javanese, Majapahit empire is present in the material culture of the island of Borneo. Two dominant Hindu-Javanese motifs, the lotus scroll and the aquatic monster, common throughout Southeast Asia

are familiar to Orang Ulu artists, and are depicted as hook-like tendril patterns (*kelawit kawit*)¹ and as the Berawan water spirit (*bali Sungei*) or as the more common ambiguous dog/dragon (*aso*) motif. However, the different Orang Ulu groups will attach different meanings and functions to the motifs used despite the recognition of a common repertoire of symbols, and these meanings will be transformed through time.

It is possible to account for the sharing of artistic motifs by the different Orang Ulu groups by their relatively close origins, and current geographical locations on the Apo Kayan, Mahakam, Baram and Rejang river systems. Interestingly, it has been hypothesized that some of the earliest inhabitants of the interior areas of Sarawak, the Berawan, the Kajang, the Melanau, and other smaller groups, and even perhaps the Kelabit and Lun Bawang formed part of an 'ancient cultural substratum' across northern Sarawak (Metcalf 1975: 58). These groups share common linguistic and cultural features, the most significant being the funerary practice of secondary burial, which was marked by the building of huge funerary poles (*lijeng, jerunai kelirieng*), burial huts (*salong*) and stone monuments.

The Apo Kayan area of Kalimantan is the original homeland of both the Kayan and the Kenyah. The Kenyah are thought to have come to Sarawak earlier than the Kayans, who are said to have come here in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Tradition has it that their first home was at the Usun Apau (Southwell 1959: 40). The Kelabits traded widely with the Kayan and the Kenyah and there have been suggestions that they lived close to them at one time at the Kerayan and Mentarang rivers in Kalimantan (Yahya Talla 1979: 16). However, there is also a theory that the Kelabits have always lived in the Bareo highlands (Robert Saging 1967: 57).

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Generally speaking, the Orang Ulu groups² shared a similar system of social organization: The Kelabit³ (Robert Saging 1967: 117) and the Kayan, Kenyah and Kajang groups divided their communities into four different hierarchical classes: the ruling class, the lower aristocrats, the commoners, and the slave class.

Aristocratic power was sanctioned by supernatural ordinance, and a person's place in society was circumscribed by ritual prohibitions (*parib, parit, tulah*). Although little is known about the practical functioning of the rank systems of individual ethnic groups, and the potential for social mobility, it is fair to say that an aristocrat was identified by his genealogies, his manners, his skill oratory, his prowess in war, and his knowledge of the *adat*. Only an aristocrat would be allowed to use certain tattoo designs, certain motifs on his costume, or on the murals on the outside of his portion

¹ Following Whittier (1973) the Leppo Tau Kenyah dialect will be used for Kenyah design motif terminology.

² The Berawan are thought to have a similar ranking system but Metcalf (1975a: 34) only managed to identify aristocrat Berawan.

³ Yahya Talla's account of Kelabit stratification is different (1979: 88) and this suggests that the reality is much more complex than this paper indicates.