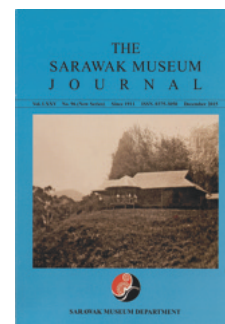




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OLD AND VALUABLE BEADS AMONG THE KELABIT OF SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

Poline Bala

ABSTRACT

Building on Kelabit significant interest in beads, this article first of all examines why since time immemorial the Kelabit have searched and treasured ancient beads. Secondly, it lists down valuable beads among the Kelabit. These beads are priceless and rich in beauty and tradition. They also speak stories of trade, family histories and kinship relations that extend from one generation to the other. Because of their significance, the Kelabit has initiated a bead documentation project to differentiate the old beads from the new. The article highlights what are the issues and challenges that have emerged out of the exercise.

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INTRODUCTION

"I am going to sing you a ballad of *ba'o let kiret*,
And I am going to sing a ballad of *ba'o let bayung*...
Everybody has heard about
How many clothes you have
Covering the floor
You fall into piles of them
Garment sewn with fine beads..." (A Kelabit ballad)

In the anthropology of art and material culture of Borneo, the Kelabit, who traditionally lives in longhouses or villages dispersed across remote densely forested hilly plateau of Central Borneo, is known mainly for their love of beads. This is made obvious from the above Kelabit ballad which points to the importance of beads within Kelabit material culture and history. Since time immemorial the Kelabit have searched and treasured ancient beads. Like the dragon jars and antique gongs, beads are object of desire: they function as currency, they indicate wealth, they possess power and they form coded messages of beauty. These items are considered priceless and rich in beauty and tradition. As family heirlooms these beads speak of story of trade with foreigners, family histories and kinship relations that extend from one generation to the other. Yet historically and traditionally the Kelabit do not make beads; as a result they do not possess any knowledge of the different techniques of bead making and much less who made these beads. Neither

do they have knowledge of the chemical composition of the various beads they treasure. In many cases for the Kelabit the origin of these beads is a mystery. This raises questions how and why beads might have been adopted by Bornean societies such as the Kelabit? How and why do the Kelabit value beads and how are they made to become Kelabit beads? What beads are valuable among the Kelabit, and, why?

This article aims to address these questions. The first part is to explore factors that encouraged bead adoption and use among the Kelabit. It concludes that old beads in particular play significant roles in the Kelabit life and their historical, social, economic and political world. The next section will discuss how in recent years (over the last 50 years) this situation is changing. This is because of changing social and political contexts in which the Kelabit now live, and in particular of the arrivals of 'new' and replica beads in the market. This new social conditions do not only affect the position of old beads in the community, but also making it difficult to identify the old antique beads from the new and replica beads. The final part of the paper highlights an initiative among the Kelabit to differentiate the old beads (the real?) from the new beads (fake) through a documentation project by presenting a certificate of authentication to the owners of old beads. It explores what are the issues and challenges that potentially emerge out of the exercise.

Anthropological and historical perspectives on the origin of beads in the Kelabit Highlands

Since Horace C. Beck's pioneer studies in 1920s and 1930s on beads, especially his observations on Gardner's collection from Johor, there have been many debates among scholars as to the origin of beads on the island of Borneo. This includes efforts to analyse the compound component of the beads in order to determine their places of origin. Beck, for instance, suggested that the ornated beads found on the necklace of the late Raneë Margaret of Sarawak (the wife of the second White Rajah of Sarawak) originated from Greece. He also proposed a close connection between glass beads found in different places in Southeast Asia: Sumatra, Java, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Philippines and Sarawak. In relation to this, he suggested a close connection between certain beads found among the Kelabit and Land Dayak of Sarawak with beads made in India.

Beck's initial suggestions had been verified by archaeological findings at the river mouth of Sarawak River where artefacts such as bead items, Chinese ceramics, glass objects from Europe, India and the Middle East reveal a history of trade activities between Sarawak and the outside world. This has been going on for generations. This resonates with suggestions that since AD 500 traders have

brought beads to Borneo from West Asia, Egypt, Damascus and other part of the Middle East, Mediterranean (Venice), other parts of Europe and also India and China before the Christian era.

In 1947, Sir Roland Bradell suggested that Sabeian traders brought beads into the region. This was facilitated by the trading relation that existed between outside traders and the interior people of Borneo. In relation to this, as a coastal entrepôt trading centre, Brunei was suggested to be the entry point of exchange between these outside and local/interior traders.

All the above, point to the historic importance of trade routes and activities to transfer material culture from one place to another, and in this case making it possible for beads to reach Borneo. This is made clear by Heidi (2005: 29, 33), "Beads, then, reached Borneo by means of trade... in the vessels of 'country traders'. From the coast, they were carried up the big rivers, under sail as far as the tides reached, then under paddle power. Some Chinese and Malay traders made their way upriver."

Question was raised on how far did the interior for instance the Kelabit Highlands were involved in beads trade? This is especially significant since the Highlands have been highly isolated for years. Due to its isolation it is difficult to determine whether the Kelabit have had direct trade relations with archaeologically important places like Santubong or even Brunei. Nonetheless the presence of old beads and ceramics in numerous longhouses in the Kelabit Highlands suggest that there have been ongoing trade relations and exchanges by the Kelabit with peoples and places way beyond the confine of the Highlands.

For instance, Harrisson (1950) highlighted a physical connection between the red beads found among the Kelabit with similar beads discovered at Kuala Selingsing in Perak. He also made a similar observation in 1958 about one-colour glass beads found at the mouth of Sungai Sarawak at the coast and the monochrome beads treasured by the Kelabit in the mountainous regions of Sarawak. However, a chemical analysis conducted few years later (reported by Harrisson in 1964) of the Kelabit monochrome beads complicate this matter. This is because the chemical component of 5% lead oxide (PbO) of the Kelabit bead appears to be very different from that of similar beads found at Sarawak River, Kuala Selingsing, Pulau Kakao of Thailand and other places of South East Asia. Unlike the Kelabit monochrome, the later ones have no traces of lead which in turn suggest that they are of Middle Eastern origin. This suggests even though the beads are superficially similar, the ones found among the Kelabit are of different origin.

In similar vein, Heidi made a connection between the oldest *ba'o rawir* found in an Early Metal Age site in Sabah and ancient *ba'o rawir* found in the Kelabit beaded caps.¹ This suggests lively beads linkages since 500 A.D. She also draw attention to the presence, although originated in India, of cornelian agate (hexagonal faceted) known as *ba'o burur* among the Kelabit, Lun Bawang, Kayan, Kenyah and the Iban of Sarawak. There is also the blue barrel beads which are highly valued by the Kelabit in the Highlands as well as by the Land Dayak (Selakau) in the coast. Because of this she observes, "Most beads passed through many hands before they reached the high Plateau of Central Borneo ... occasionally a trader from the river mouth carried a consignment of beads all the way to end consumers." (2005: 34)

Heidi's comments resonate with Harrison's (1964: 40) comments on Nieuwenhius' description of a bead trade which existed at the turn of the century that run up through the island into the homeland of the Kenyah peoples of east Central Borneo. He notes, "Beads visually the same with the ones found in AD pre 1200 burial cave at Niah, West Borneo, were also still being traded inland from Brunei Bay to the Kelabit country in the late nineteenth forties." In short, beads were part of the complex trading cycle found on the island of Borneo and some through the process of changing location from one place to another eventually made their way into the Kelabit villages in the Highlands.

Objects of desire and the making of Kelabit beads

Once these beads entered the Kelabit longhouses, the beads' place of origins become permanently obscured. Instead what is often recounted are the ways these beads arrived through social alliances, such as through the cultural practice of travelling far (*me ngerang mado*).

But, why is that so? Historically *me ngerang mado* is a long journey that a man and woman might undertake to venture far from home. These are activities and traditions of exchange that included trade and marriage alliances, headhunting and migrations, all in turn provide avenues for diverse cultural borrowings (Bala, 2002).²

For years this tradition has been used by the Kelabit to bring in objects of desire such as the *belanai ma'un* (old dragon jars), *ba'o* (beads), *tungul* (machetes), *angai* (Chinese jugs) into their 'remote' and ancient world, which has been far removed, in Tom Harrison's words, "from what most people call 'the world'" (1959: 5). In return for these valuables the Kelabit traded tobacco, salt, rice, *gutta percha* and resin with traders from communities like the Kayan, Kenyah, Berian, Potok, Kerayan, Murut, Malays and even with the Chinese close to the sea. It is

how these items such as the *ba'o alai* were tediously acquired through these relations of exchanges that made them so highly valued by the Kelabit.

Elsewhere, I have highlighted how hardships and the high price one had to bear when *me ngerang* (going on a journey) that provides meanings, especially prestige, to these valuables. As such Kelabit traditional songs (in the form of *laku*, *benging* and *sedadai*) and ballads, composed by poets of old, describe some of these journeys made by Kelabit ancestors to forge links with the world beyond; they have traversed many mountains and valleys, crossed untold numbers of rivers and streams.

Two prominent Kelabit bead practitioners, the late Pun Tenganen and Makatu Aren have identified a number of main trade routes through which beads were traded into the Highlands.

- 1) Trade centre at Long Adang, which is located along the Adang River, is an old Kelabit settlement. It was an important trading post between the Kelabit and Lun Bawang of Trusan. Traders from Bario would trek to Batuh Lawih and then to Sungai Adang and Long Adang.
- 2) Long Seridan trade route. This was established after the Kelabit of Long Adang had moved to Long Seridan and thus this new route to the east of Bario. Known as '*dalan Penan*' or the Penan route, this journey took about a week leading to Kubaan and to Pa Tik. Beads traded along this were the blue barrel beads (*ba'o let* and especially the *let tuning*) and the *ba'o rawir*. Items such as *tungul*, buffaloes and *para' kallang* were traded for these beads.
- 3) The northern bound route is via Pa Lungan. It goes over the international border between Sarawak and Kalimantan into Pa' Rupai and from there to Ba' Kelalan. This route which would take about two days was very popular as it involved three different groups: the Kelabit, Lun Berian and the Lun Bawang. The Lun Berian were considered as the middle traders. The three groups value similar beads and the main beads traded along this route were the *ba'o rawir* and *ba'o alai*. Through this route the Kelabit traded beads with the Lun Berian in exchange for gongs, jars and buffaloes. However, since 1980s cash was preferred to send their children to school and also to purchase groceries from retail shops in Bario.
- 4) The route to the west allowed for trade activities between the Kelabit and the Kenyah in Baram. This route required going down river of