



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LVI No. 77

December 2001



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Rashidah A. Salam. (2001). Promoting Sarawak's Crafts Through Art Education. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LVI (77): 1-18

PROMOTING SARAWAK'S CRAFTS THROUGH ART EDUCATION

Rashidah A. Salam

"Art is the ability in producing something, including purposes and reasons"

- Aristotle

INTRODUCTION

The population of Sarawak comprises various ethnic groups, namely, *Malay, Melanau, Iban, Bidayuh, Kenyah, Kayan, Lun Bawang, Kelabit, Kedayan, Bisaya, Kajang*, and other minority groups. This paper intends to identify the traditional art forms (crafts) produced by these ethnic groups, and the need to preserve and promote them through art education programmes. This is in line with the objectives that have been drawn up by the Ministry of Education of Malaysia; *To study and adapt the traditional forms of crafts and to nurture our young (Malaysian) generations towards cultural and historical appreciation* (Teacher Guidelines Book; 1990).

Comparing Sarawak traditional crafts with those of the Australian aborigines, their arts and crafts are well recognized in part due to having been successfully introduced to the world at large by the Australian government. Aboriginal artworks are in great demand by art collectors and museums and have been studied by numerous international researchers.

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On the other hand, Sarawak's crafts are still less known by its locals but yet have become popular through exploration by foreign researchers. We are very fortunate and indeed grateful to the Sarawak Museum Department for their tireless and

tremendous effort in collecting, preserving and documenting these native arts collections and making them available for reference to the public, scholars and art enthusiasts.

Besides the important roles played by the various Government agencies, and the economic and tourism sectors in preserving and promoting our rich cultural heritage, specific art education programmes also need to be restructured. With a number of research projects undertaken by art academicians and scholars together with students' participation it is hoped that our aim could be achieved.

The Uniqueness of Sarawak's Art Tradition – Ethnic and Multi-cultural Backgrounds

As Chin (1989) remarked "Although there are no majestic or magnificent monuments like the Pyramids or the Great Wall in Sarawak, the cultural achievements by the indigenous people are by no means lacking." Stone structures (*sanupad*) were erected by the upland Kelabit in memory of their chiefs, the Melanau carved *jerunai* and Orang Ulu, *kliring* and *salong*. The Berawan, Kajang and the Kayan kept the remains of their dead aristocrats in huge burial poles. *Pua kumbu* is the exquisitely woven blanket made by the Iban. The Iban also carved stylized hornbill images in connection with their major Bird Festival (*Gawai Burong*). Wide varieties of miniature sickness images (*blum*) were carved by coastal Melanau in connection with their healing ceremonies. The Malay wove the colourful *kain songket*. These are but a few examples of Sarawak's traditional heritage.

There are about 27 ethnic groups living harmoniously in Sarawak, each with their own distinctive cultural backgrounds. In order to get a clear conception and understanding of the usage of the mediums chosen by them for their craft making, it is important to identify them according to the place they inhabit. Rivers play a vital role in their livelihood – as a means of

transport, fishing, and linking them together². For convenience, they are grouped into three main geographical regions: coastal mainland and swampy, the lowlands, and the uplands/highlands. Please see *Appendix 1*.

Foreign cultures also has an impact on our multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society³. The earliest influences were from the Indian traders who came to Sarawak to trade spices (Sarawak Report – 1963-1983). This could be seen through women eating betel nuts and leaves. The Indian art had influenced on tombstone construction in earlier days. Later came the Arab traders who introduced Islam and converted the Malays into Muslims. The Malays have also adapted the Arab's customs into their lives as seen through their wedding ceremony and particularly in their everyday life. Then, came the Chinese traders who introduced ceramics and porcelain vases to the locals. It is found that the Iban and Kelabit keep the ceramic vases as their symbols of status.

According to Kedit (1989), citing writings by Sandin (1980), there are a few ethnic groups who share similar oral heritage and legends. For example, the Melanau, Kayan and the Iban shared the legendary hero, *Tugau*. Before the spread of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism, the people practised paganism – beliefs in the Ultimate: *Bunsu Petara* (Iban), *Alatalah* (Melanau), *Tupa* (Bidayuh) and *Tenangan* (Kenyah and Kayan).

Crafts and its History in Sarawak

According to Sulaiman (1989), crafts can be categorized into five activities, summarized here as: 1) hobby, 2) heritage, 3) functional objects with purposes, 4) aesthetical objects, and 5) commercial objects.