



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LXXV No. 96

December 2015



ISSN: 0375-3050
E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Michael Heppell. (2015). Iban Heirloom Beads in an Evolutionary Framework. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LXXV (96) : 1-44

IBAN HEIRLOOM BEADS IN AN EVOLUTIONARY FRAMEWORK

Michael Heppell

INTRODUCTION

This paper tests a hypothesis that as early as the first millennium CE before the Iban¹ had their cotton to include and developed technologies gins and spinning wheels, they began using beads and cord to construct accessories which led to increasingly sophisticated garments. If the hypothesis has any merit, it will provide suggestive evidence why the Iban eventually treated beaded and cotton garments as two parallel costly signals in the arena of sexual selection. Beaded garments signaled the wealth of a household and the good genes that were necessary to acquire it. Textiles enabled women to promote their desirability as long term sexual partners by signaling their intelligence. Both also signaled a capacity for hard work, a particularly desirable trait in sexual selection.

With the Iban, beadwork survived until the end of the 2nd millennium. Examples of a range of beadwork survive to this day. To set the historical context, this paper briefly describes Ibanic migrations (the Ibanic includes a number of groups like the Kantu' Desa, Mualang, Bugau, Iban and others who speak what linguists call an Ibanic language) from the southwest of Borneo in the Ketapang area to the upper Kapuas and then into Sarawak.² [Fig. 1] The migrations are interesting to this paper because one Iban group which has good oral histories left the 'original homeland' many centuries after the main body and caught up with it in the 17th century but does not appear to have made the same investment in beadwork as other Iban groups.

IBAN HEIRLOOM BEADS IN AN EVOLUTIONARY FRAMEWORK

Michael Heppell

This paper tests a hypothesis that as early as the first millennium CE before the Iban¹ had developed their cotton technologies to include gins and spinning wheels, they began using beads and cord to construct accessories which led to increasingly sophisticated garments. If the hypothesis has any merit, it will provide suggestive evidence why the Iban eventually treated beaded and cotton garments as two parallel costly signals in the arena of sexual selection. Beaded garments signaled the wealth of a household and the good genes that were necessary to acquire it. Textiles enabled women to promote their desirability as long term sexual partners by signaling their intelligence. Both also signaled a capacity for hard work, a particularly desirable trait in sexual selection.

With the Iban, beadwork survived until the end of the 2nd millennium. Examples of a range of beadwork survive to this day. To set the historical context, this paper briefly describes Ibanic migrations (the Ibanic includes a number of groups like the Kantu' Desa, Mualang, Bugau, Iban and others who speak what linguists call an Ibanic language) from the southwest of Borneo in the Ketapang area to the upper Kapuas and then into Sarawak.² [Fig. 1] The migrations are interesting to this paper because one Iban group which has good oral histories left the 'original homeland' many centuries after the main body and caught up with it in the 17th century but does not appear to have made the same investment in beadwork as other Iban groups.

The paper next discusses three markers of age: shell and glass beads, silver, and Chinese crotal bells. While shell beads were found naturally in Borneo, the other objects were imported and the earliest dates of import can be reasonably estimated. Next the paper discusses some photographs taken by Derek Freeman in the Baleh region of Sarawak during his 1948-51 fieldwork for the circumstantial evidence which they present about the antiquity of beaded garments. The conclusion then presents an argument why woven textiles came to supersede beaded garments for display because of the superior information they provided for sexual selection purposes.

Of all the peoples living in the Indonesian archipelago, the Ibanic have the most diverse set of weaving techniques. They have a realistic claim to possessing the broadest range of techniques in the world. Slit tapestry, plain weave, *songket*, discontinuous warp, *pilih*, *ikat*, *songket* and needle embroidery have all graced their

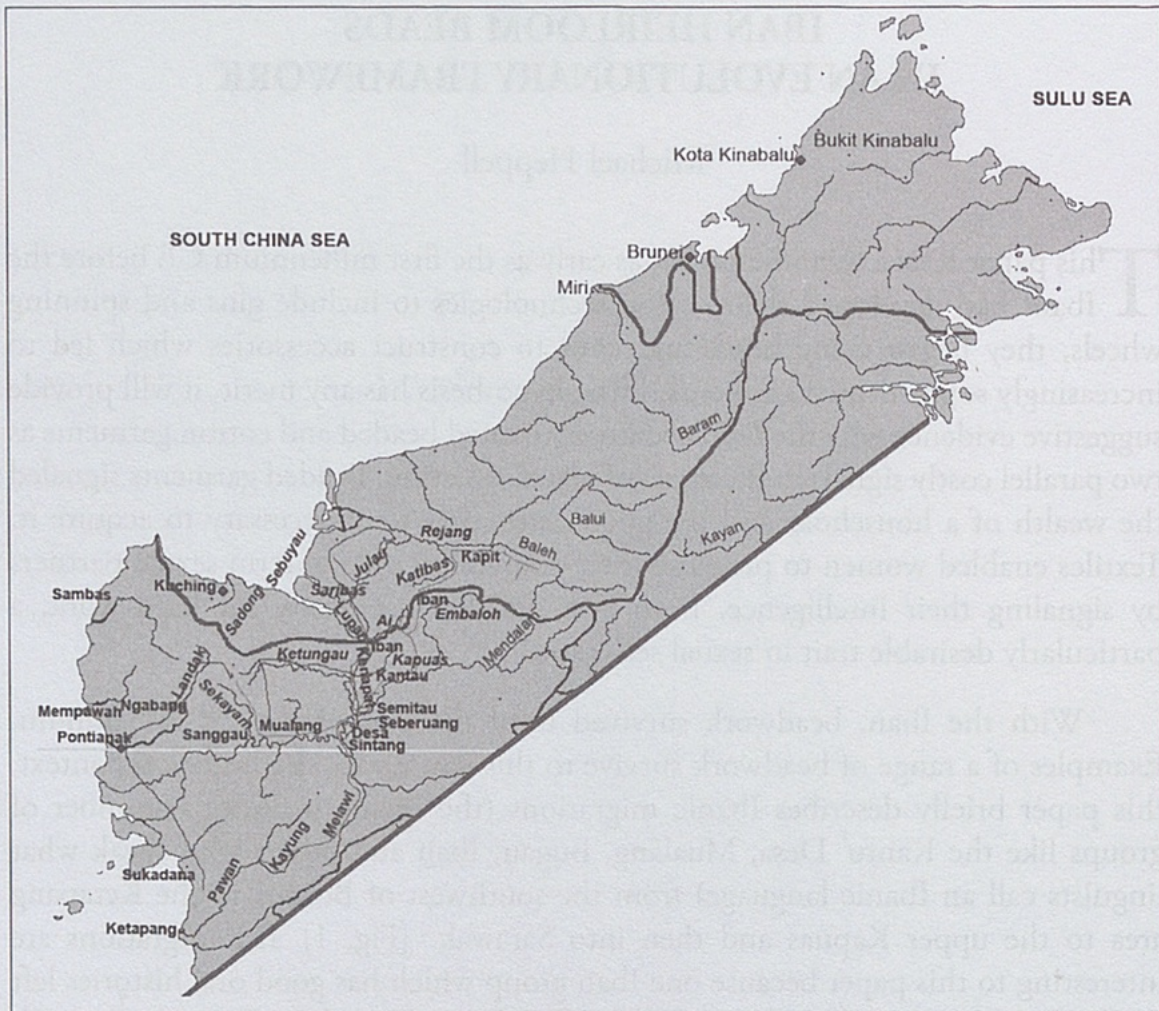


Fig. 1: Map showing Iban migrations through western Kalimantan and into Sarawak.

large blanket sized cloths, their tube skirts and their jackets. They also decorated textiles with *nassa* shells, ceramic buttons and, very occasionally, with glass beads.

In Borneo, the groups known for their beadwork are the Kayanic, the Murutic (Lun Bawang and Kelabit) and the Maloh. The Ibanic are not. This paper will disabuse a view that the Iban at least had little interest in beadwork and argue that in the distant past, before they discovered the use of the cotton gin and the spinning wheel, beaded garments played a central role in Iban ceremonial life.³ The argument can be exemplified from beaded garments and ornaments which have survived and, at least until very recently, have had a role in Iban ceremonial life.

Ibanic Migrations and Weaving Development

The Ibanic weaving groups with satisfactorily documented textile inventories are the Muafang, Kantu', Desa and Iban. Their textiles share a number of common

design features indicating that these features were developed before the Ibanic split into individual groups. They all wove slit tapestry, plain weave, *sungkit*, *pilih* and *ikat*. There is plausible evidence that all these sub-groups had perfected each of these techniques by the end of the 14th century. The evidence is that for each type of textile each sub-group followed a particular structure which defined the borders. Consequently, all *ikat* blanket sized cloths are framed with the same combination of vertical and horizontal borders. The vast majority of skirts have a widish black selvedge by their outside border. A black-based *pilih* jacket badge with a lozenge motif had a unique border structure. A *pilih* jacket and rear end of a loincloth with rows of pink motifs on a white background had a unique structure.

Ibanic histories record that individual groups migrated from an area in the vicinity of Ketapang and Sukadana probably in the second half of the 1st millennium. They made their way along the coast during which time it is likely that they began the development of their bead working and weaving. When they reached the Kapuas and Landak rivers, they made their way inland. Eventually, some entered the Sekayam River from the Kapuas and moved up to the headwaters and others crossed over the watershed from the upper Landak. For a number of generations they occupied the relatively flat area between the headwaters of the Sekayam and Ketungau rivers round Tampun Juah and Sungkung.

Probably in the latter part of the 14th century a sequence of events started which led to the Ibanic splitting up and forming a number of named subgroups. It occurred not long after a number of wars with the expanding Majapahit empire which enables a broad date of the 14th century to be posited. The Seberuang were the first to go who, if they ever wove, have long since lost the skills. The main body of Ibanic was next to leave. In time, this group split up as it moved down the Ketungau and into the Kapuas shedding a number of small groups which remained along the Ketungau. It included the Kantu' who moved up the Kapuas and the Desa who settled in the vicinity of Sintang. All these groups wove textiles which stylistically are clearly Ibanic. The remainder of the group became Iban. They occupied the Merakai, a tributary of the Ketungau and the Emperan area of the Kapuas. Many migrated into Sarawak. The Mualang were the last to leave and instead of heading down the Ketungau, made their way in a southerly direction towards the Belitang area just above Sanggau where they remained geographically separated from the larger body.

The common structural textile core of all Ibanic weaving groups indicates it must have been developed before they went their separate ways. Ibanic histories record that while they lived in Tampun Juah, they were one reasonably homogeneous group and textiles were likely to have been part of this homogeneity. A less plausible

alternative is that these developments occurred later and even later still, subgroups borrowed or copied techniques and structures from each other until eventually every group arrived at a common set of structures.

This argument does not preclude a non-weaving group acquiring the whole range of weaving techniques once it came into contact with a group that already had them. Iban histories indicate that this must have occurred with one group. Probably about 600 to 700 years after the major body of Ibanic left the Ketapang/Sukadana region, a second group fled that area to put distance between themselves and Islamic proselytizers who were intent on forcing them to adopt Islam and, in so doing, have both men and women circumcised. It is possible to date this flight reasonably accurately as Islam probably did not start making headway into southwest Borneo until the late 15th or early 16th century. This group fled up the Kayung River and thence along the Melawi eventually reaching Sintang where, according to its histories, members saw decorated textiles for the first time. At the time they wore minimal barkcloth clothing – the men a loincloth and the women a short skirt. After Sintang, this group eventually found itself in the Semitau area where it borrowed land from the Kantu' to farm. Later it moved up the Ketungau and then into what is now Sarawak and eventually into the Saribas. At some time in their journeys after leaving Sintang, this group learned the whole range of Ibanic weaving techniques from either the Kantu' around Semitau⁴ or later from Iban with whom they mixed on their later migrations.

The Ibanic living at Sungkung migrated separately from the main Ibanic. They made their way down the Sekayam and migrated up the Kapuas to the Labuyan River. They passed by the mouth of the Ketungau long before any part of the main Ibanic group migrating from Tampun Juah had reached the lower Ketungau. In time, members of this group occupied the upper Batang Ai and moved into the Embaloh. By the early 19th century, the upper Batang Ai and the Labuyan became increasingly overpopulated and groups began to migrate into the Katibas River.⁵ Towards the end of the century this migration expanded into the Baleh River and its tributaries. In this paper, this group is called 'the Labuyan complex'. Like the Saribas, it also practised all the Ibanic weaving techniques.

Beads, Silver and Crotal Bells

Shell Beads

When beads are mentioned, the first image which comes to most minds is one of glass beads. But through much of the world the shell bead has been ubiquitous for millennia. And that use included Borneo. Excavations in the Niah caves have