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SARAWAK'S MATERIAL CULTURE WITH EMPHASIS ON PRESERVATION

Lucas Chin

Although there are no majestic or magnificent monuments like the Pyramids or the Great Wall in Sarawak, the cultural achievements of the indigenous people are by no means lacking. The massive megaliths (*batu-sanupad*) or stone structures erected by the up land Kelabit in memory of their dead chiefs, the huge burial poles: the Klirieng and salong carved by the Melanau and the Orang Ulu: the Punan, the Berawan, the Kajang and the Kayan to keep the remains of their dead aristocrats, the intricately woven blankets (*pua kumbu*) and the stylised hornbill images or effigies (*kenyalang papan*) carved by the lowland Iban in connection with their major Bird Festival (*Gawai Burong*), the wide variety of miniature sickness images (*blum*) carved by the coastal Melanau in connection with their elaborate healing ceremony and the colourful sarong, the kain songket, woven by the Malay, just to mention a few examples here, are indeed most impressive and perhaps somewhat unique in this part of the world.

Even in prehistoric times, our early ancestors were no less creative or artistic. The discovery of ornaments like beads and pendants made of shell and bone and sharpened bone tools such as needles and pointers, the large quantity of pottery, both plain and decorative, and the different types of stone tools at the Niah sites attest to this fact.

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by

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Being a tropical country with three quite distinct geographical zones, that is coastal, lowland and upland, Sarawak offers a rich abundance of raw materials such as reeds, palm leaves and rattan for making mats, baskets, hats and other construction material like *kajang* and *atap*; tree bark and wild cotton for making garments and other textiles; clay for making cooking utensils and other storage containers; wood and bamboo for carving as well as constructing houses, bridges and boats. Iron ores often found in river beds in the interior, were smelted to make tools and weapons before imported iron became available.

These are the basic raw materials which our craftsmen and women have been using over the centuries to produce the many articles needed for their everyday use as well as for their various ceremonies and rituals.