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THE POWER OF OBJECTS: MATERIAL CULTURE'S STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE TO ORANG ULU ETHNICITY AND THE PROCESSES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Fiona M. Leibrick

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a preliminary outline of the significance and dynamics of traditional and introduced material culture in Orang Ulu societies. It undertakes to sketch out material culture's strategic role in the shaping and transformation of society, drawing on examples from Orang Ulu societies, and to then briefly consider some of the implications of this for contemporary and future Orang Ulu ethnic identity. There is a vital need for more wide-spread recognition of the importance of material culture in shaping and buttressing cultural worlds, in maintaining social continuity, in providing a sense of heritage, and in promoting and reinforcing ethnic identity. There is also a correspondingly urgent need for extensive and detailed programmes of documentation of Orang Ulu material culture, since research specifically focusing on the traditional and contemporary material cultures of the Orang Ulu is negligible, in spite of the excellent and ongoing efforts of the Sarawak Museum. Such programmes would provide an accurate and informed foundation for further promoting awareness and appreciation of Orang Ulu cultural heritage and ethnicity through such avenues as publication, arts and crafts development, travelling exhibitions, regional museums, and school workshops in traditional skills.

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This paper is based principally on information derived from the published literature on Borneo societies, particularly that concerning the ethnic complex of the Balui or Upper Rejang River of the 7th Division. However, personal observations, made in the course of one month's reconnaissance of longhouses in Belaga District in 1986 with staff of the Sarawak Museum, also provide a background to what is discussed.

This is a revised version of a presentation given at the Orang Ulu Cultural Heritage Seminar (Miri, June 1988) which was written around some 50 field slides.

MATERIAL CULTURE: ITS PLACE IN CULTURE AND SOCIETY

In its broadest sense, material culture is culture that has been given substance and form, and there are probably few areas of our lives which are not somehow manifested in it. As the entire culturally-laden physical universe that results from the ongoing interaction of people and their material worlds, material culture has a powerful role in both constituting and transforming societies. It is simultaneously culture's setting and its raw material. On the one hand it is the total material environment that constrains and shapes our lives, affirming and informing our existence. On the other, it is the very stuff that we manipulate cognitively and physically in order to alter that same environment and express our individual and cultural identities. It is also the principal means, apart from language, by which culture is stored and communicated.

Regrettably, material culture is a term all too frequently used in the more limited sense of "artefacts" *ie* those objects specifically manufactured and used by people. This is a usage that elevates the "man-made" to an unwarranted position of priority and distinction, cloaking the fact that material culture is the whole tangible world that we interact with and the product of a general on-going process. Artefacts are no more than a subset of this world and the process of interaction which produces it. Modern society's consummate pre-occupation with objects as consumer goods, items of high technology, or art, subtly obscures this and also leads to a devaluation of that which is not equivalently processed and packaged. By scaling technological systems according to their complexity, we soon lose sight of the important truth that increasing technological sophistication is really a process of involution or ever-escalating embellishment of what already exists, and that the same general principles guiding it, which are discussed below, apply equally appropriately to the material landscapes of the Penan Gang (Brosius 1986) as to those of the residents of Kuching. Seen from this perspective, a stand of secondary forest resulting from swidden farming, or a bird attributed with omen powers, or a curiously formed stone thought to have spiritual energy are each as justifiably material culture as a longhouse structure, a painted shield or a radio-cassette player, and each has its special part to play in constituting and expressing the individuality of the society of which it is a part.

Each society has its own unique array of material culture which embodies, reflects and reinforces that society's particular social and ecological configuration and system of dynamics. Elements of this array may be shared with other societies, but the meanings or uses attached to them may be quite different, as demonstrated by the imported stoneware storage jars that are variously employed as burial containers, heirloom items and rice wine fermenting vats among Orang Ulu and other Borneo peoples (Harrison 1986; Chin 1988). Each society's material array is founded on a complex system of shared meanings and skills, a system that is perpetuated by each generation as it re-creates and adapts the culturally-laden material environment that is to be entrusted to the next. As Kelabit women have observed, when asked why they wear the characteristic Kelabit woman's bead cap:

"Our ancestors wore them so we do . . . Other people's ancestors didn't wear the *pata* that's why they don't" (Munan-Oettli 1983: 90).