

## Iban beaded costume



Figure 1. Portrait of a group of Dayaks in front of a house in Borneo. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Coll.nr. TM-10005549.

### Introduction

Some time between 1870 and 1910, a Dutchman with camera visited a longhouse somewhere between Semitau and Putusibau in West Kalimantan and took a photograph. It was titled "Portrait of a group of Dayaks in front of a house in Borneo" (Figure 1). The longhouse was Iban and the "group" was a household living in an apartment under an ironwood shingle roof. It was at a time when these Iban's kin across the border in the Batang Ai', Sarawak under the leadership of Ngumbang and Bantin were in open revolt against an unwanted regime (the Brookes) which was intent on introducing taxes for no obvious benefit. The longhouse in the photograph would very likely have given succour to their cousins across the border either with men joining in the guerilla warfare or by providing a safe haven when their cousins came over the border to escape the 'pacification' expeditions organised by the Brookes. This was a time when, had it been in Northern Ireland, it might have been called "The Troubles". The household chosen to pose was clearly the wealthiest household in the longhouse as the thatch on either side of the shingles testifies.

What the photographer said to the household can only be speculated, but the lone old man, his wife and three daughters or daughters-in-law assembled a set of belongings which they considered most important (and revealed something about themselves). For the old man, what was important was the household's

accomplishments in warfare. Hence war shields, all covered in human hair and a war coat covered in hornbill feathers, signaled success as warriors and heads taken using the spears, swords, quiver, war hats and other fighting paraphernalia in the photograph. Hunting and farming got a nod with fishing spears, a fish trap and a burden basket to carry kills, and a whetstone and baskets to carry rice from the swiddens. The women concentrated on their weaving skills, dressing in *ikat* skirts (*kain kebat*), sitting on *pua' kumbu'* (the left one of which being an original and powerful design) and having tying frame and dyeing trough in the background. A closer look shows the woman on the old man's left with a beaded bodkin (*sulat*) beside her and the next sitting woman holding one. They could do *sungkit* to be used for receiving newly taken severed heads. In turn the bodkins, especially the beaded one, demonstrated the artistic skills of the men of the household, examples of which are given in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Iban bone bodkins (*sulat*) including one beaded one.

Pride of place was reserved for the standing unmarried daughter with body enveloped in layers of beads fringed with crotal bells. This would be her wedding gown. Unlike the other women, underneath the beads and rattan girdles, she wore a simple, plain, black skirt. A hundred years earlier such an outfit would have served as a bank account, beads being tokens of wealth. Originally the beads on these outfits would have been polished stone agates and carnelians. Beads were cool. They were apotropaic. They were the first piece of 'clothing' an infant wore either strung as a bracelet or anklet to protect them from malevolence and the spirits of sickness. The apotropaic nature of beads is exemplified by the guests at a festival (*gawai lumbong*) which finally separated a recently deceased from the living. The guests played the role of the spirits of the dead and came scruffily dressed in old clothes. Many wore beads and white bone bangles (Freeman fieldnotes) to protect them from the spirits of the dead who were called to attend the festival. The spirits of the dead were malignant and potentially lethal. Beads being apotropaic need to be kept in mind by the reader of this paper.

In Borneo, the groups known for their beadwork, particularly by museums and collectors, are the Kayanic, the Murutic (Lun Bawang and Kelabit) and the Maloh. The Iban are not. But for a long time beaded garments occupied a central role in Iban ceremonial life. A question then is: from the standpoint of this Dutch photograph, how did beadwork evolve, because the costume photographed by the Dutch photographer did not suddenly appear like some new creation on a fashion catwalk?

## Iban Migrations

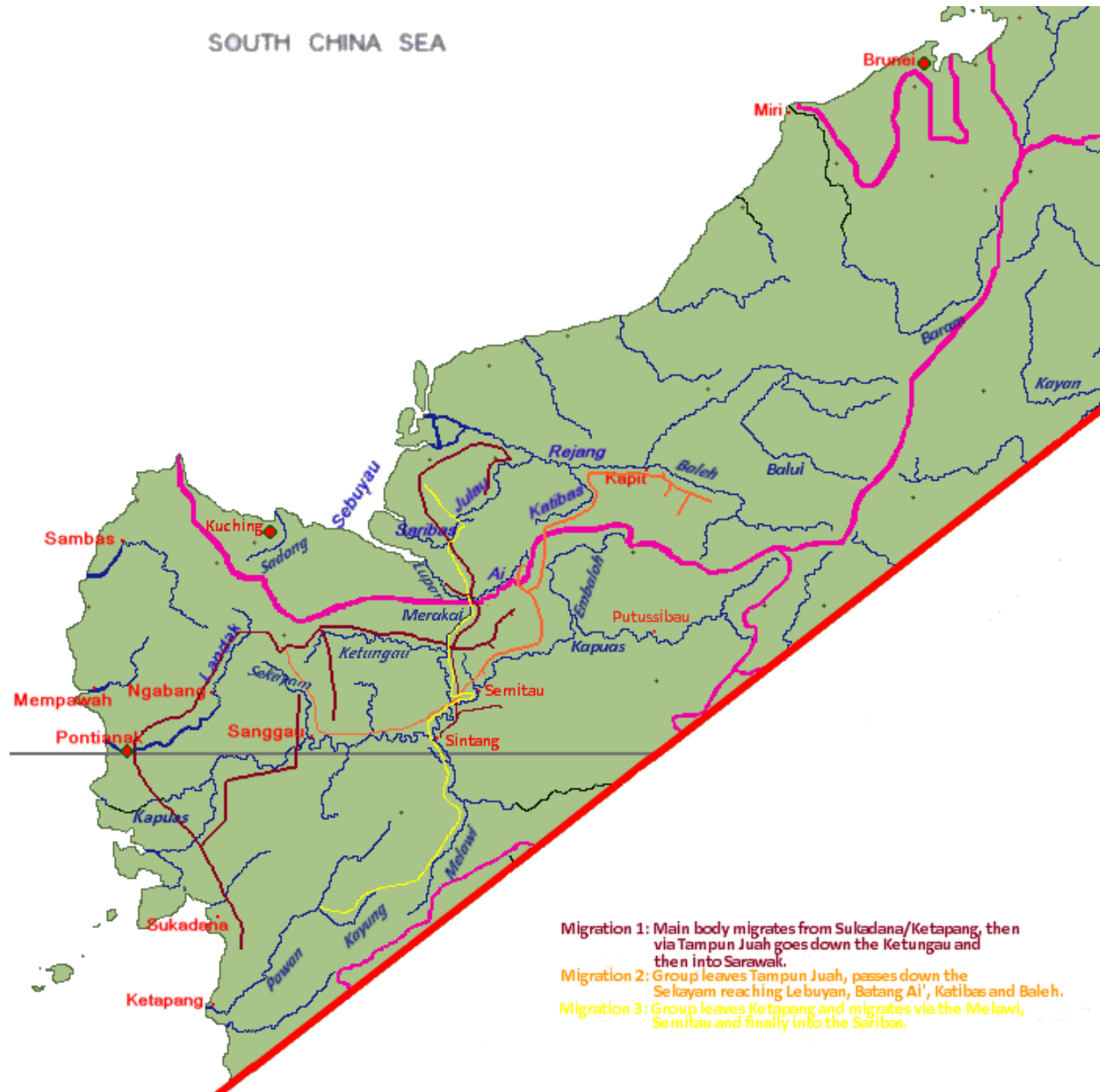


Figure 3. Map showing Iban migrations through western Kalimantan and into Sarawak.

When did the Iban start their interest in beads? Their migrations from south-western Borneo in a generally north-easterly direction might help to provide an answer. Some of their beads were harvested from the sea. Others were purchased. Those that were purchased were likely to have come from different manufacturing sources at different times. They came from India, China, Europe and southeast Asia and were imported at different periods of Borneo history.

Beaded garments cannot be treated in isolation from woven ones. The Iban and related groups wove patterned textiles. Those with satisfactorily documented textile inventories are the Mualang, 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 persuasive evidence that all these sub-groups had perfected each of these techniques by the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century which was when they probably began separating, with the Mualang the first of the weaving groups to part from the main group (Heppell 2014:16-32). The argument is based on the idea that if they all shared something it was probably acquired while they lived together. The opposite argument, that these developments occurred after they split, would require each subgroup to have borrowed techniques and structures from each other or created them independently until eventually every group arrived at a common set of structures, is less plausible. What the groups shared were: all *ikat* blanket-size cloths were framed with the same combination of vertical and horizontal borders; the vast majority of skirts had a widish black selvedge by their outside border; all wove a black-based *pilih* jacket badge with a lozenge motif and a pinkish dyed *pilih* jacket and rear end of a loincloth with rows of similar pink motifs on a white background; and a loincloth front with a design framework reminiscent of Chinese altar cloths.

This argument for dating, however, does not apply to Iban beaded costumes. The Iban were perhaps the only Ibanic group which developed extravagant beaded costumes. There are no substantial beaded objects in any collections which are reliably attributed to another Ibanic group. Nor indeed is there any evidence that the Saribas Iban ever indulged in them. The Saribas indicate that a fashion can operate in isolation in one related group but not in others. Nevertheless, the likelihood that other Ibanic did not share the beaded tradition rests uneasily with the argument that costumes of polished stones and glass beads were ancient.

Ibanic histories record that individual groups migrated from an area in the vicinity of Ketapang and Sukadana probably towards the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE. If we believe these histories, they had already found deposits of iron in the Ketapang/Sukadana area and made steel weapons. Nisi, the son of their leader in Ketapang Beji, had the praise name name *Nisi, bunga besi, enda' besemaia makai tulang* (Nisi, forged by steel, slicing bones at will). In separate groups the Ibanic made their way along the coast during which time it is likely that one Iban group at least began the development of their bead working and weaving. When they reached the Kapuas and Landak rivers, they made their way inland. Iron was probably in very short supply. Some probably settled for a period at a place called Labai Lawai or Laut Lawai, an island in the Kapuas estuary where iron could be bought (there were no iron deposits there). The sagas have the iron for the sword of Singalang Burung (the Iban God of War) being acquired there in circumstances when a superior kind could not be acquired from a spirit called Rendah who lived across the sea and might be associated with the iron earlier found or traded in Sukadana. Eventually, some Ibanic entered the Sekayam River<sup>1</sup> from the Kapuas and moved up to its headwaters and others crossed over the watershed from the Landak into the Ketungau. For a number of generations they occupied the relatively flat area between the headwaters of the Sekayam and Ketungau rivers in two districts called Sungkung and Tampun Juah.

According to the histories, in the latter part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century the process started which led to the Ibanic splitting up and forming a number of named subgroups. It occurred not long after at least three attacks on them by the scions of the expanding Majapahit empire, which enables a broad date of the 14<sup>th</sup> century to be posited for these events. (The Bidayuh with whom I worked in the headwaters of the Landak also had stories of warfare with the Majapahit whom they called Pahit). After an epidemic probably of either cholera or typhoid the main body of Ibanic migrated from the area. The Mualang left last and instead of following the main group down the Ketungau, headed south crossing a number of watersheds until they arrived in the Belitang area, a bit to the north of Sanggau. As it headed down the Ketungau, the main

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<sup>1</sup> River names are found on the map in italicized blue. Henceforth rivers are only called by their name just as Europeans speak of the Danube, the Rhine, the Loire etc.

group shed a number of small groups which preferred remaining where they were on the Ketungau and are generally known by their location. The main group included the Kantu' who moved up the Kapuas, the Desa who settled in the vicinity of Sintang and the Iban who entered the Merakai, a tributary of the Ketungau, and thence into Sarawak.

The argument about the basic range of weaving being established prior to the separation 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 probably occurred with one group. Probably about 600 to 700 years after the main body of Ibanic left the Ketapang/Sukadana region, a second group fled that area to put distance between themselves and Islamic proselytizers. It is possible to date this flight reasonably accurately as Islam probably did not start making headway into southwest Borneo until the late 15<sup>th</sup> or early 16<sup>th</sup> century. This group fled up the Kayung River and thence along the Melawi eventually reaching Sintang where, according to their 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. At some time in their journeys after leaving Sintang, this group learned the whole range of Ibanic weaving techniques from either the Kantu' around Semitau or later from other Iban with whom they mixed on their subsequent migrations or from both. Much of this group migrated into the Saribas river system. There are no records of the Saribas Iban using beaded costumes of the kind photographed by our Dutch photographer. The fact that they only wore barkcloth clothing when they arrived in Sintang suggests their belongings would have been sparse and their luxuries absent.

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 lakes and into the Leboyan and Embaloh Rivers. They passed by the mouth of the Ketungau long before any part of the main Ibanic group migrating from Tampun Juah had reached it. In time, they migrated into the upper Batang Ai', the Leboyan and Embaloh rivers. From there they migrated into the Katibas River and thence into the Baleh River and its tributaries.

## **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 was ubiquitous for millennia, and that included Borneo. Excavations in the Niah caves have found shells with one perforation indicating that they were strung onto something. These shells probably preceded the arrival of the first Austronesians into Borneo four thousand years ago. Beads are strung.

Later and probably after the arrival of Austronesians, the opercula of giant freshwater and land snails were ground down to form discs and the shells of the snail *nassarius* were ground down to a pair of 'lips'. Francis (1991:237) considered that shell was a very important bead material for a very long time in Indonesia, so long in fact that he thought it would be interesting to determine how shell bead industries in Indonesia might have linked up with those in mainland Southeast Asia, and indeed, throughout the southern Pacific region. *Nassa* shells in particular were used by the Iban as ornamentation, particularly on textiles. They were particularly popular on women's skirts and are found on waistcoat jackets, ponchos and the padded jackets of warriors. Leboyan shamans also wore a distinctive bark headband decorated with *nassa* shells and beads.

On their migration along the coast, the Ibanic would have been able to harvest *nassa* shells from tidal mud and sand flats and grind them to the appropriate shape. In this way, *nassa* shell beads would have been available to anyone prepared to do the necessary work to produce them. The only constraint on the

use of *nassa* shells on garments would have been whether or not the women in a household had the time to harvest and prepare the shells.

### ***Stone and Glass Beads***

While *nassa* shell beads were probably plentiful around the coast, beads were not. Stone and glass beads were not manufactured in West Borneo. It is not known when stone beads first entered into Borneo, probably in the form of agates and carnelians. They were traded in mainland Southeast Asia in the first century BCE (Bellina 2003:286) where they became status markers. Glass beads probably entered Borneo about the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, initially from India and then from inferior quality manufacturers located in Southeast Asia. They were followed by Chinese beads and much later, European beads.

Indian sourced beads, in the literature called 'Indo-Pacific beads' were the main imported beads and one of the few imported items found in Borneo for almost a thousand years. The earliest Indian beads were agates varying between the size of peppercorns and smallish cherries and carnelians in cylindrical shapes. They were followed by glass beads which were fabricated by drawing tubes from viscous molten coloured glass, cutting to size and then smoothed by rolling the beads through hot ash. They were traded into Borneo in exchange for local non-timber forest products (Francis 1990:16). In the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE, Borneo coastal elites developed, in part, an exotic trade regime, purchasing non-timber forest products from inland peoples in exchange for beads of inferior manufacture acquired from Southeast Asian manufacturers and then selling the forest products to foreign merchants for high quality beads of Indian manufacture which became status markers (Munan 2005:294). The elites, some of whom probably would have started local ruling dynasties then wore as jewelry well crafted beads of Indian manufacture while the sources of their trade, the inland Dayaks made do with inferior beads (Francis 1990:16). An examination of the popular old carnelian spindles on Iban beaded garments and accessories reveals that the oldest carnelian spindles were often of a kind a good quality control system would have rejected.

Most of the beads manufactured in southeast Asia were probably made in east Java. The earliest were probably made before the 7<sup>th</sup> century and were certainly exported to Borneo because, after Java, they are most commonly found there and in Sumatra (Francis 1991:227). Other earlier import possibilities might have been Sating Pra, an important link in Srivijaya trading systems and Kuala Selinsing in Peninsular Malaya where production started in the late 6<sup>th</sup> or early 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, dates closely linked to when the Ibanic probably started their migrations from Ketapang and Sukadana.

Perhaps noteworthy is that around the middle of the second millennium CE, by which time the Ibanic had long since migrated from there, Sukadana was acknowledged as a flourishing trading post where beads featured prominently. There is every reason though to believe that Sukadana had operated as such for many centuries before and probably back to Srivijaya times when the Ibanic were early in their migration along the coast. In about 1600 an Englishman called John Saris resident in Bantem, not far from present-day Jakarta, wrote (Danvers 1896:221):

I have many times certified your worships of the trade the Flemings [Dutch] follow to Soocadanna which place yieldeth great store of diamonds, and of their manner of dealing for them for gold principally which comes from Beniermassen [Banjarmasin] and blue glass beads which the Chinese make and sell 300 for a [piece] of eight, and they are there worth a mas [sic] a 100 which is [3 shillings] and sometimes less according as gold doth rise and fall.

[Commodities vendible and in request at Sucidana include] all sorts of small Bugles [tubular glass beads], which are made in Bantam of colour blue, and in fashion like a Tunne [a barrel], but of the bignesse of a Beane, and cost at Bantam four hundred a Riall of eight, with at Soocodanna, a Masse the hundred, the Masse beeing three quarters of a Riall of eight ....

Indo-Pacific carnelian beads were particularly popular with the Iban. Old ones are not uncommon. According to Richards (1981:260), they were used to make fire by being struck against a shard of pottery to generate sparks. If this were so, there would have been a deep historic symbolic relevance linking beads to the cooking hearth.<sup>2</sup>

Around 1200 CE Chinese manufactured beads which were made by twisting viscous glass round a wire, replaced Indian beads at least in Sarawak (Bellina 2003:289; Francis 1990:6-7). It seems likely that their arrival in Borneo was earlier as Chinese beads dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> century have been found in the Niah caves, not far from present-day Miri (Francis 1991:225).

Borneo too has enjoyed some bead manufacture. There is circumstantial evidence that beads might have been made in Santubong, not far from Kuching in Sarawak, in the late part of the 1st millennium. Much more recently a specialized market developed for an opaque yellow bead in the Apo Kayan. To meet the demand, an enterprising Malay trader in Tanjung Selur at the mouth of the Kayan River in East Kalimantan imported yellow beads from the Netherlands, ground them down into something close to a powder and then heated the resulting cullet to produce the opaque bead in demand. Recently these beads rediscovered their local popularity and at the end of 2019 were selling for A\$3 each in Kuching. Elsewhere, it seems likely that local manufacturers produced beads in demand by local groups, though, as yet, there is no evidence of the location of these workshops (Munan 1991:179).

Much later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the import of carnelian spindles was refreshed. The German bead industry imported a similar stone from Brazil and produced carnelian spindle look-a-likes. Later towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Bohemian glass industry produced a glass imitation which became particularly popular with the Baleh Iban (Munan 2005:134).

Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when they became more commonplace, glass beads were regarded as valuable in Southeast Asia in much the same way as people in the West now regard precious stones. In Borneo, old beads were treasured as markers of a person's or a household's wealth and became heirloom property (*pesaka* in Iban). This was particularly so with groups like the Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit and Lun Bawang who sought out specialised polychromatic beads. They had a large vocabulary of names to identify



Figure 4. Baleh Iban sunhat showing Kayanic influence and not suprisingly called a *tanggoi Kenyah*.

<sup>2</sup> The Iban I have mentioned this to remember a local red stone which they used which was very scarce. They did not think that carnelian stones were used in this way.

different kinds of bead and some became extremely valuable. In contrast, the Iban interest was on beads of one colour, particularly opaque blue-blacks, whites and reds. While beads became markers of wealth they probably did not become a medium of exchange with the Iban. For example, fines (common under Iban law) were denominated in brass by weight, ceramic plates and ceramic jars. As wealth, an advantage beads had for frequently migrating groups like the Iban was that, unlike ceramic jars and heavy brassware like cannons, they were readily portable.

Given the extent of Ibanic textiles, beads might have been considered supernumerary as a decorative medium except at the outset of textile development. The important unseen audience for beads and textiles were the deities. Without beaded garments the deities would still have been dazzled by the beauty of the *ikats*, *sungkits* and *pilihs*. These textiles were unique in the sense no other Borneo non-Malay group wove them and stunningly beautiful to complement the beauty of the human wearers. But bead garments did not disappear into desuetude.

Towards the end of the first millennium, beads and textiles were conjoined in probably the first decorative textile when *nassa* shells were sewn onto the base of the earliest woven garment, the plain weave black skirt. These skirts were given fertility symbols and worn on ritual occasions associated with rice farming (Heppell 2014:50) and rice festivals. At rice festivals, they were worn when women pounded glutinous rice on the verandah to produce rice wine in order to capture the attention of the deities and inform them that there was a festival being prepared and they were to be the principal guests.

### **Silver**

Silver should be mentioned because it succeeded beads as a marker of wealth. It did not banish beads completely from gala dress as a beaded yoke raised itself Phoenix-like as testimony to a once great tradition. By that time European manufacturers had begun flooding the market with cheap beads. They massively devalued beads as a marker of wealth. That beads continued to be used confirmed their ritual importance.

Dating the use of silver in Borneo is easier than for beads because its import was more recent. There are no known silver deposits in Borneo. It seems likely that it was not imported in any great quantity until midway through the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, perhaps initially from Java during Majapahit times (Frazer-Lu 1989:83). In Brunei, there was a kind of guild of silversmiths who worked in the same location as goldsmiths and their trade probably dated back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Ismail 1985). Fashioned into jewelry, along with the gold mined in Borneo, silver became a sought after symbol of wealth for Malays. The Ibanic probably entered the market somewhat later because, certainly until the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, brass was the metal of choice for much of their jewelry. What is certain is that silver from the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century became the accessory of choice for Iban non-beaded gala costumes. It clearly entered the picture long after weaving had reached its maturity and provides little assistance in comparatively dating the advent of beaded and textile garments.

### **Chinese Crotal Bells**

The final item of note found on Iban beaded costumes are Chinese crotal bells. They have recently been christened “tiger” bells ([www.tigerbells.nl](http://www.tigerbells.nl)) on the basis of a face embossed on the front of the bell above which is the Chinese character for ‘wong’ [王], a ruler. The three horizontal strokes are similar to natural furrows on a tiger’s brow just above the eyes and replicated on many Chinese representations of tigers. In both Asia and Europe, crotal bells were apotropaic. They protected the wearer – in Europe children and in Asia both children and adults. In China a protective role is more appropriate for a lion than a tiger which represents power and, hence, among some knowledgeable Chinese in Sarawak, the bells are said to have



the face of a lion. Perhaps coincidentally, they also seem to be the bells of choice for the base of Maloh jackets and skirts (Figures 6 and 7).



Figure 5. Typical 'tiger' crotal bells used by the Iban.

In Europe, evidence of the existence of bronze and brass crotal bells goes back no further than the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Read 2001:465-467). In the case of the 'tiger' bells, estimates of their age could stretch back to the middle of the first millennium, though this seems unlikely. There is a supposed 'confirmed date' based on examples found in a field in Russia. Coins in the vicinity were dated from the 16<sup>th</sup> century ([www.tigerbells.nl](http://www.tigerbells.nl)). The coins arguably could have been a lot older than the bells. There are clues to the age of most bells with the maker's characters being included on them.

There are usually three characters – one the maker's name; the second what he manufactured and the third the dynasty during which it was made. The ones I have seen all mark the bell as Qing Dynasty which places their earliest date at the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.



Figure 6. A Taman Maloh beaded jacket worn by women. The bells at the base are 'tiger' crotal bells.

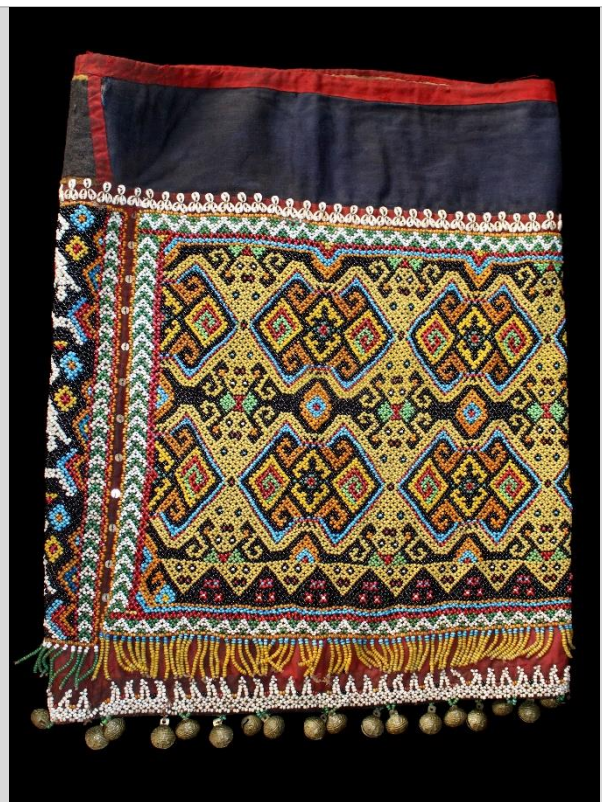


Figure 7. A Taman Maloh beaded skirt which with the jacket make a matched suit. The crotal bells are also 'tiger' ones.

If these crotal bells date from the second half of the second millennium CE, they are of little assistance in validating or invalidating any claims of the antiquity of Iban beaded garments. They are a latecomer. Given the ubiquity of crotal bells on beaded garments and on *nassa* shell skirts, they might simply have become more fashionable as an accessory based on their attractiveness or, more probably, on the apotropaic qualities given them by Chinese.

### Beaded Garments, Textiles and Silver Ornamentation

Beaded garments and cotton textiles were a luxury. Consequently, the question needs to be asked: why did the Ibanic invest energy and time to make them? Textiles required planting cotton, tending it, processing it, spinning it and then weaving it into a textile for no obvious economic return. The Ibanic could simply have continued to wear beaten barkcloth as did most Dayak groups until cheap garments began to appear in local bazaars. The same question applies to beaded garments if not more so because while an argument might credibly be advanced that a simple plain weave black skirt produced a more durable garment than beaten bark, the same argument would not apply to beaded accessories and garments which were only worn for ceremonies and cost money. A person could not sit down wearing a beaded ensemble like that worn by the standing girl in the Dutch photograph. It was completely non-functional.



Figure 8. A Taman Maloh *nassa* shell jacket (*sape parusi*).



Figure 9. A Taman Maloh *nassa* shell skirt (*kain parusi*). quite different from the Iban equivalent.

A further question would be: if the Iban already possessed their panoply of textiles, why would they also develop beaded garments? In such circumstances, applying beads to a cotton garment would have been more logical. In the upper reaches of the Kapuas both the Maloh, with whom the Iban traded cloths for jewelry, and the Mendalam Kayan did just this. The Maloh traditionally probably produced simple geometric patterns on beaded skirts and jackets and flowing designs of tendrils and lowerworld animal life on skirts and jackets decorated with *nassa* shells (Figures 8 and 9). Then after three groups of Kayan crossed into the Mendalam, West Kalimantan from Sarawak in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sellato 2002:39), the Maloh worked out how to produce more complex designs with their beadwork. Often, they applied the beads to worn out skirts and jackets they had acquired from the Iban. A very few of these were sold

back to the Iban while others were appropriated by the Iban after successful raids. The Iban, however, did not go down the same path and produce sophisticated beadwork designs on their own textiles. Obviously, the range of decorative textile work hardly called for another technique, but that argument had not applied in the past as they added more and more techniques to their woven textile wardrobe. They continued to use their beaded garments for selected rituals in their great festivals.

By the Second World War, beaded garments were only worn by Iban living in the Katibas/Baleh and Batang Ai'/Leboyan regions. A century earlier, they were worn by more groups but probably not by all. They were not reported by Edwin Gomes who lived with the Sebuyau between 1853 and 1867 and, as already noted, there is no evidence that they were made by the Saribas. There are two reports of their use in the Skrang. In 1863, Frederick Boyle (1865:245-6) saw beaded costumes there:

But, meantime, the female portion of the assembly had been preparing for their part in the proceedings. At this moment they came from the interior of the house, and the startling magnificence of their appearance showed that time and labour had not been spared in arraying themselves for this great occasion. From the neck to the hips they were covered over with large agate beads; string of them was heaped on string, till many of the women were cuirassed and inch thick in solid stone before and behind. Upon their heads was placed a piece of bead-embroidered cloth, in which were arranged thin skewers of painted wood about five inches long; there were about twenty of these bits of wood disposed about their heads, and each was attached to the other by strings of brilliant glass beads. Five or six of these many-coloured loops hung from each skewer, and they were intertwined into a graceful network. The effect was very pretty, though barbarous; and the solemnity of the ceremonies was much enhanced by the stately uprightness which the women were compelled to preserve in moving, on peril of disarrangement to this delicate structure.



Figure 10. Two young Iban women in beaded gala costume in 1949. Photograph by Monica Freeman. With kind permission of Hilary Freeman.

Sometime in the 1850s, the Rev A. Horsburgh (1858:11) saw beaded garments somewhat longer in length:

On one occasion I saw the daughters of several Sakarran chiefs clothed in loose dresses composed of shells, beads, and polished stones, arranged with great care and considerable taste. The dress, which was very becoming, hung as low as the knee, and as the young ladies walked along, the stones of which it was composed rung upon each other like the chime of distant bells. These dresses are very expensive .... and are therefore not common.

By the 1850s there was an alternative gala costume. It appeared no less expensive. Marriageable girls wore a *sungkit*, *pilih* or *ikat* skirt and covered most if not all of their upper body in silver (Figure 11). As the Rev. W. Crossland wrote in 1865 (Ling Roth 1896, II:51):

In the wealthier Undup tribes the women wear round their petticoats strings of silver coin, the united value of which, in many cases, will amount to above £10 [which today in 2020 would be about £1,225].



Figure 11. Young Baleh women in silver gala costume with beaded yoke in 1949. Photograph by Monica Freeman. With kind permission of Hilary Freeman.

In time silver became more fashionable than beads, especially after inexpensive beads from Europe flooded the market with the result that anyone could afford them. Published photographs of Iban women over the last 100 years rarely show them wearing a beaded costume. In contrast, they show them decked out in decorated woven skirt, copious amounts of silver and a beaded yoke around the neck.

When Boyle and Horsburgh saw their cuirassed females, the core beaded ensemble consisted of: a black cotton skirt decorated with *nassa* shells, a sleeveless 'dress' tied at the back (*tangu'* or *baju marik*) which stretched in tiered ladders of beads from neck to anywhere between the hips and ankles hemmed with small brass pellet bells and tiger crotal bells [Figure 12]; a body length train which passed down the back and ended in a small battery of largish brass bells (*tali ujan*) (Figure 13) and a hat

which was usually made of a plaited base pitted with holes from which wooden skewers, usually wrapped in dyed cotton, extended upwards from which were suspended strings of beads (*dujung marik*) (Figures 14 and 15). Other beaded garments might be added to this core costume, including a beaded skirt (*burai lumit*) (Figure 16), a necklace (*marik empang* or *tangu'*) (Figure 17), a beaded skirt fringe hung from a waist belt (*entelu*) and a loose belt with beaded tassels hanging from it, fringed with 'tiger' crotal bells (*sementing marik*).

The illustrations show that carnelian spindles were prominent in the Iban beaded costume. Cylindrical shells and pierced bones were also used and matched the length of the carnelian spindles. Rounded stone and glass beads completed the costumes and accessories. Their size varied from a large blueberry to a cherry.

From a development perspective, as already suggested, beaded costumes of the size of that in the Dutch photographer's photograph were likely to have gradually evolved. What then were the steps which led to such a costume? First, it should be emphasized that income was more likely to have been obtained from rice surpluses. From the distant past up to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there would have been few Iban households who would have owned the full beaded regalia. Significant rice surpluses were infrequent and more likely to



Figure 12. Example of an old *tangu'* with berry-size beads and carnelian spindles in the centre panel.

would have owned the full beaded regalia. Significant rice surpluses were infrequent and more likely to

have been spent on a major festival than on valuables. Consequently, beads were likely to have been acquired in small parcels rather than large ones.



Figure 13. Old *tali ujan* with berry-size beads, cornelian spindles and bones fringed with crotal bells.

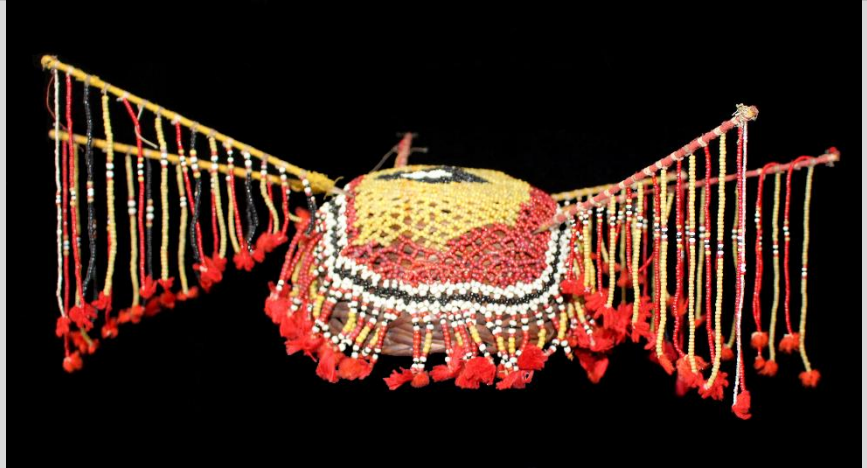


Figure 14. Old *dujung marik* with seed-size beads.



Figure 15. Typical *dujung marik* with seed-size beads. There are modern plastic embellishments to make the piece more striking.

Hence the origins of beaded accessories are likely to have been necklaces, bracelets and other small pieces of jewelry rather than ensembles. As households acquired more beads, aspirations increased and that led to garments evolving. The designs of the beaded objects indicated symmetry was desirable. Given costumes were assembled incrementally, having enough matched beads for a large garment would have presented a challenge.



Figure 16. *Burai lumit* with bilberry-size beads and Chinese ‘tiger’ crotaal bells at the base. This piece was paired with a simple beaded jacket.

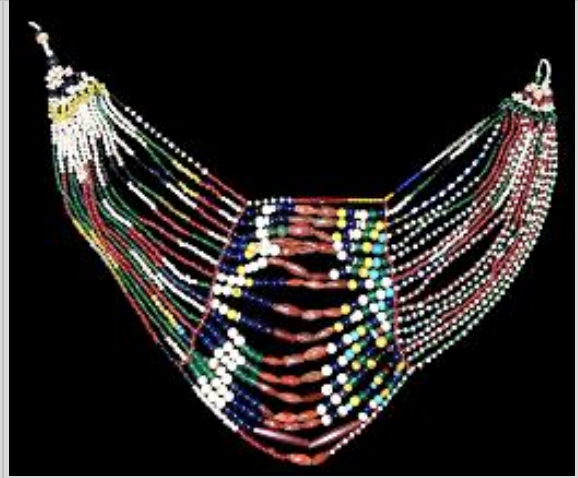


Figure 17. Old *marik empang/tangu'* with cherry-size beads and cornelian spindles in the centre panel.



Figures 18 (left) and 19 (right). Two and three Iban women wearing beaded necklaces (*tangu'*) and tasseled belts (*sementing*) titled “Batang Lupar Dayaks in gala dress and wedding hats” and “Batang Lupar Dayak women in gala dress in the Semitau region, West Borneo, Kalimantan” respectively. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Coll.nrs. RV-A440-LL-121 and TM-10005537 respectively.

The most plausible route the dress took was to evolve from the multi-stringed necklace illustrated in Figure 17. A comparison with Figure 10 shows that carnelian spindles were used in much the same way on the full dress. The spindles form a ladder up a central panel with two sides of round beads stretching from there to a clasp to secure the necklace round the neck. The beads on this necklace are not arranged entirely symmetrically which might be that it was restrung before being sold. Early Dutch photographs of women wearing such necklaces (Figures 18 and 19) and one from the Batang Ai' in 1972 (Figure 20) strongly suggest that the beads were what was important not symmetry, as they seem to show beads clustered by colour but which did not produce symmetry. The beaded tasseled belts however on the Dutch photographs did have symmetrical designs.

## Iban Beaded Garments

### *Entelu* (Beaded Belted Fringe)

A key piece of evidence for the antiquity of beaded garments is the *entelu*. On first acquaintance, the *entelu* appears to be a simple beaded belt (Figure 21). Consult an old Iban dictionary like Howell and Bailey (1900:44) and the *entelu* is described as a “girdle of glass, stone and shell beads attached to the lowest portion of a woman’s brass bodice (*rawai*)”.

Howell and Bailey did not say how an *entelu* was attached to a *rawai*. Fortunately, Derek Freeman came across one and took three photographs of it: one the simple *entelu* and two (Figures 22 and 23) as it would have been attached to a woman’s skirt. A close examination of the Dutch photograph of the Iban household seems to indicate that the standing young woman had an eleven string one hanging in much the same way as Freeman’s photograph. The Iban thus at one time used an independent structure to decorate the base of their plain black skirts rather than sew beads directly onto the skirt. That raises some interesting questions.

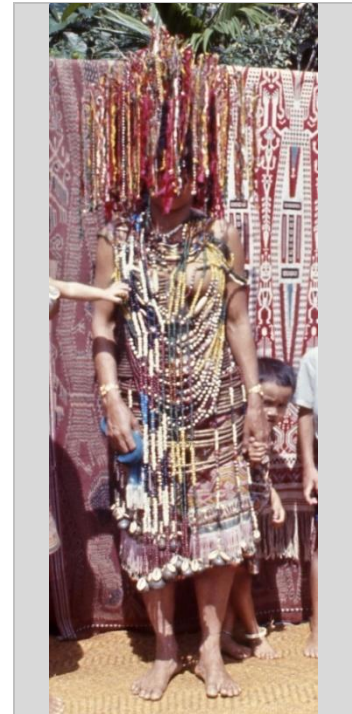


Figure 20. Batang Ai' woman wearing *dujung marik*, *tangu'* and *sementing* in the 1970s. Photograph author.

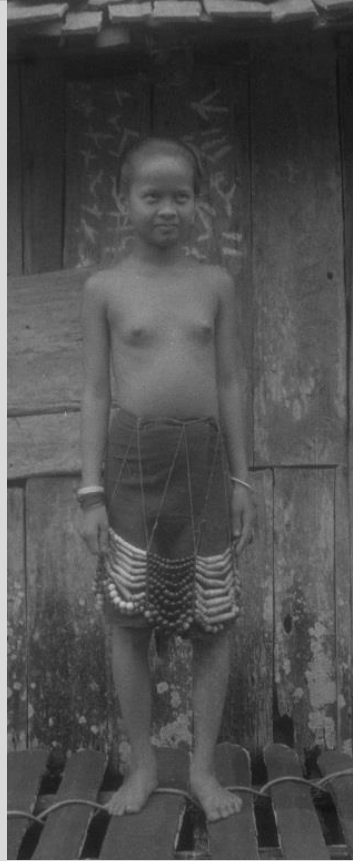


Figure 21. Two *entelu* with cherry-size beads. Some blue beads on the upper one are fractured suggesting that they might be Southeast Asian made. Each *entelu* has nine strings. The upper one has 8 small and crude petal crotal bells at the base of the fourth panel from the left.

One question is why did the Iban not sew the beads directly onto a skirt? The starting point of any answer is the transition from simple beaten bark skirt to the plain black skirt (*kain balui*). The latter was the first garment the Iban wove (they probably already weft wrapped sword belts (Figure 44) and badges for war jackets (Figure 38) but both items fall short of being a full garment). The Iban probably have been weaving plain weave cotton skirts since as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Heppell 2014:83) but more likely from slightly later. They started weaving patterned skirts, probably starting with *sungkit*, some time after that.



Figures 22 and 23. *Entelu* photographed in 1950 in the Baleh. The *entelu* is suspended from the waist on a plain black woven skirt to produce a decorated base. Like the *entelu* in Figure 20, there are nine strings, an auspicious number. Photograph by Derek Freeman. With kind permission of Hilary Freeman.



Prior to the advent of the cotton skirt, they wore beaten barkcloth skirts. Barkcloth had one great disadvantage over cotton. It split easily, especially along the fibre. Consequently, one thing which is noticeable in most barkcloth garments in museum collections is that they have been stitched across the fibre with a palm or other leaf fibre to strengthen them from splitting.

If the large beads were intended for a beaten bark skirt, why were they not sewn directly onto it? A nine string *entelu* of old glass beads weighed about two kilograms. Agates would have been heavier. Sewn to the base of a barkcloth skirt, the risk of a skirt splitting would be great. If a woman's only covering was a barkcloth skirt susceptible to tearing and she wanted to decorate it with heirloom beads, it made sense to attach the beads independently so that the skirt itself

did not bear their weight. Hence, attaching the beads to a waist band of some kind and suspending them the length of the skirt provided a solution to such a dilemma. If this argument is correct, it would take the *entelu* back to a time before the Iban had started spinning cotton on a spinning wheel.

So, if cherry-size beads were too heavy for a skirt and beads were desired, why not simply sew smaller beads onto the skirt? Aesthetically it seems an obvious solution. One can only speculate on an answer. First the beads in question are cherry-size and that size might have had a symbolic value. It should be noted that *entelu* also means bubbles of the kind blown by an infant. If a glottal stop (as I thought I heard) was added, *telu'* means an egg. Both bubbles and eggs are fertility symbols, especially when they are represented as motifs on cloths when they are associated with severed heads.

It could have been that only cherry-size beads were on the market when the *entelu* was devised, though Bellina's (2003:286) photographs of ancient agates and carnelians showed beads of various sizes. It should be remembered that both Boyle and Horsburgh wrote only of polished stones agates in the middle of the



19<sup>th</sup> century, but it is unlikely that they would all have been cherry-size beads. There was only mention of glass beads when the headdress was mentioned and, one imagines, must have always used smaller beads.

As a beaded accessory the *entelu* is not dependent on a cotton textile for its existence. One advantage of an *entelu* was that it could be attached to any number of skirts worn by any number of women. So if we take the beaten bark or plain black cotton skirt, the *entelu* could be transferred from one waist to another of whoever wanted to use it. But once cotton skirts were introduced, why would the Iban continue to do so and not sew the beads directly onto a skirt which did not split easily?<sup>3</sup> When asking Iban why they did something, they often replied “*sigi adat*” (it is the custom). That could be the lasting reason, but when the original decision was made to continue with the *entelu*, there would have been a reasoned justification. That has been lost with the passage of time.

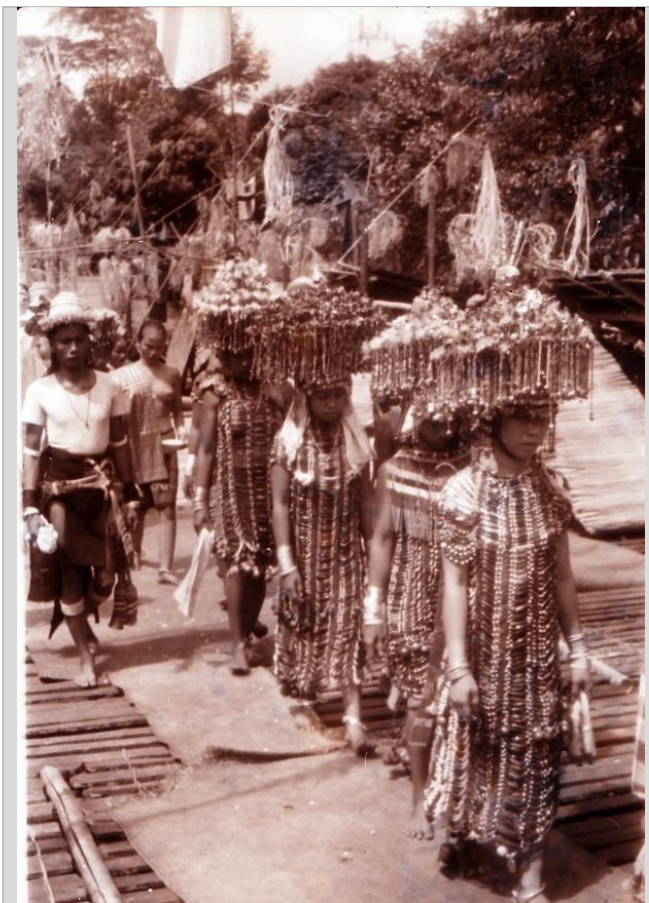


Figure 24. The *niti' daun* parade. A woman casting yellow and puffed rice can be seen behind the beaded girls. Photograph by Monica Freeman. With kind permission of Hilary Freeman.

Fortunately, *entelu* survived for the Freemans to photograph. The household owning it knew how it was used. While it is impossible to estimate how old the beads in the *entelu* photographed by the Freemans were, some of the ones in Figure 21 are likely to have been made in Southeast Asia. That means that it is unlikely that they would have been made after the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Lankton et al 2008:336). While the *entelu* is likely to have been restrung many times over the centuries, the beads are consistent with an artefact of some age.

The question then arises why a woman would want to combine beads and a skirt? Beads signified wealth but as such they could have been exhibited in many more convenient ways than suspending them to the base of a skirt. Beads also signified coolness, protection and fertility. Coolness, protection and fertility lend themselves to ritual and ritual was one of the two occasions in which this outfit was used in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The other was for a formal wedding (before Christianity entered the picture, most Iban unions were not preceded by a ceremony) when the brides of wealthy households would wear beaded gala dress. On such occasions, the outfit publicized wealth.

In ritual, the beaded vestments were worn in a ceremony, *niti daun*, which occurred very early in major festivals (Figure 24). At the beginning of such a festival, a shrine (*ranyai*) was erected. A commensal meal followed, served on banana leaves and eaten by male guests. On completion, everything was cleared away except the leaves. Then, a procession mainly of women circumambulated the longhouse twice, passing by (*niti*) the leaves (*daun*) left after the feast.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the beads did not go right round the tube skirt so that a fold to accommodate a waist could be made.

At the centre of the procession were a number of unmarried girls dressed in full beaded gala dress. Curses were issued while older women in front of and behind the girls cast yellow and puffed rice to each side. In the spiritual world, as the rice fell on the banana leaves left on the gallery floor, the leaves were transformed into snakes, dragons, wasps, hornets and other nasties which, in the next part of the festival, would be set off to attack the Iban's enemies. The beaded garments were apotropaic keeping the longhouse cool while 'hot' curses were issued in much the same way as when a man issued a curse in lesser ceremonies, he would cast yellow and puffed rice on each side with an upturned spear with blade in a trough of cool water resting against his shoulder. Once uttered, curses had a life of their own. If they were unable to locate the intended victim or victims, they would return and do to the issuer what he or she had intended to be exacted on the victim.

***Kain buri' (Nassa Shell Skirt)***

It is important to remember that the *entelu* was attached from the top of the skirt or from a separate girdle and hung at the base. The exposed upper part of the skirt remained a plain undecorated black.



Figure 26. Baleh *nassa* shell skirt of young bamboo shoots (*puchuk rebung*) with pellet bells at base.



Figure 26. Baleh *nassa* shell skirt of sacred rice (*pantak ridun*) with pellet bells at base.



Figure 27. Baleh *nassa* shell skirt with pellet bells at base and red calico to highlight motif.



Figure 28. Baleh skirt with ceramic buttons and *nassa* shell border at top and brass weights at base.

When the Iban came to decorate their black skirts with *nassa* shell beads they did so only at the base (Figures 25-27). They later used ceramic buttons in the same way (Figure 28). This use of *nassa* shells was probably the first decorative work applied directly to a skirt (Heppell, 2014:50). The designs on these skirts were replete with fertility symbols. They were initially called *kain pantak ridun* which literally translated was 'most sacred rice skirt' (Figure 26). A second popular design, young bamboo shoots (*puchuk rebung*) was associated with strong growth (Figure 27). In 1971-74 in the Batang Ai', in addition to informing the deities of an impending festival, such skirts were worn for agricultural rituals like *pemali umai* which banished pests from a swidden.

The designs were simple. There were no borders or any other structural component in the design which mirrored decorated woven skirts. The designs only filled the lower half or less of the skirt leaving a large area of black exposed in contrast to decorated woven skirts which usually had the whole surface completely filled by a design. When they didn't, it was the centre which was left vacant. The structure replicated the *entelu* and, therefore, was probably inherited from the *entelu*.

The motifs on *nassa* shell skirts were about fertility and therefore very much in the female domain. There were also old motifs on *nassa* shell jackets and they were about warfare. Figure 29 shows an anthropomorphic figure with mouthless face, a neck which suggests a neck tattoo, longish arms each with hands of four fingers and hooked thumbs, a thin waist with some ornaments hanging from it and small legs probably on either side of a long sexual member. Tendrils stretch in from the frame. The impression is of lithe movement. Figure 30 has an eight by four group of circles of tightly compressed shells with a further frame below. Iban identified it as a full moon with the lower frame as 'soaring bird of prey' (*selepeh lang ngeremang*), a time in the dry season when warriors went forth in search of heads.



Figures 29 and 30. Two Iban padded war jackets decorated in *nassa* shells.

There is another kind of jacket which is much more complex and sophisticated in design. Though it was not padded, it was likely to have been a war jacket. These jackets have representations of crocodiles on their backs (Figures 31 and 32). According to Batang Ai' Iban, they were probably war jackets, the motif of the crocodile making the wearer invulnerable. They identified the crocodile in Figure 31 as a supportive

crocodile (*baya mentas*) as there was no food provided for it. A photograph of an Iban woman in Hose and McDougall (1966:plate 30) shows an Iban woman wearing *nassa* shell skirt and jacket, but the back of the jacket was not shown. The sleeves of the jacket were fringed with crotal bells in keeping with the women's role of attracting the attention of the deities when wearing *nassa* shell garments. There is little doubt that *nassa* shell jackets were worn by women for agricultural rituals.

None of these war jackets had crotal bells attached which is hardly surprising. War parties did not want to announce their presence in any way. They attacked at break of dawn. Tinkling their way to an enemy's longhouse at this time of day hardly fitted such a scenario.

There was a third kind of *nassa* shell jacket, a poncho, and possibly worn by shamans. There are only two that I have seen, each quite singular. One from the Katibas had a design of crocodiles swimming with humans on the front and small crocodiles on the back (Figure 33). The second (Figure 34) from the Leboyan had alternative rows of upturned triangles and a floriate motif from which strings of beads were suspended. Both pieces had beads and crotal bells the purpose of which was likely to have been apotropaic as well as to catch the attention of the healing deities being supplicated. In the case of shamans in the Leboyan region, a bark headband decorated with *nassa* shells, beads and charms was popular (Figures 35 and 36).



Figures 31 and 32. Two *nassa* shell jackets (*baju buri'*) depicting crocodiles swimming in waters. In 31 it is creating ripples and in 32 they are with other marine creatures, an anthropomorph and bubbles.



Figure 33. Sapei with crocodiles basking amongst bubbles surrounded by anthropomorphs.



Figure 34. *Sapei* with geometric motifs.



Figures 35 and 36. Shaman headbands



Figure 37 (left). Upper Batang Ai' beaded skirt (*kain marik*) with brass weights at base. The design is a cross section of a cucumber (*sapar rampu*) and the design is also at the base of the skirt.

Figure 38 above). Example of weft wrapped badge (*subak*).

There is a further pronounced difference between *kain buri'* and plain black and decorated Iban cotton skirts. Like beaded garments, crotal bells, in this case petal or sleigh ones, were always attached to the base of *kain buri'*. Consequently when women pounded glutinous rice in their *kain buri'* the sound from

the pestle clapper boards and the pestle hitting the grain was accompanied by the tinkle of bells. Bells provide another example of the consistency between *kain buri'* and the beaded gala dress.



Figure 39. Beaded loincloth (*sirat marik*).



Figure 40. Beaded loincloth ends (*kelapong sirat marik*). The design is probably the tail feathers of Lang, the Deity of War.



Figure 41. Seat mat (*tikai burit*) with lozenges above a stylized hawk in flight.



Figure 42. Maloh seat mat. The plaited part is patterned. The beaded design has a central slave (*keletau*) below stylized dragons, symbols of aristocratic rank.



Figure 43. Frog (*sentagai*) for sword.



Figure 44. Left-wrapped frog.



Figure 45. Possibly tunic of a shaman (*manang*). Beaded stick figures are attached from single thread at head so that they would move while the *manang* danced.

Figure 46 (centre). Iban attachment (*kabu*) to sword belt in male gala dress.

Figure 47 (right). Maloh tassel attachment to sword belt in male gala dress which appears to have been copied from the Iban.



The interest of the Iban in using shell beads to decorate skirts did not extend to stone and glass beads. There were no attempts to copy the neighbouring Taman Maloh. Iban cotton skirts decorated with beads are very rare. I have only seen two, each with a lozenge design. Like *nassa* shell skirts, they were beaded at the base (Figure 37). Like *nassa* shell skirts they had accessories attached to their base but in their case brass weights seem to have been preferred, suggesting a ritual function different from *nassa* shell skirts. Unlike *nassa* shell skirts, the designs on jackets had borders much in the style of weft wrapped jacket badges (Figure 38).

Occasionally, other garments had beaded designs. They included the ends of men's dress loincloths (Figures 39 and 40), seat mats (Figure 41) (the Maloh also beaded seat mats – Figure 42), sword belts (Figure 43) which, when gala dress was worn, also had a beaded tassel attached (Figure 46 and was copied by the Maloh – Figure 47) and shaman's tunics (Figure 45). With loincloths, beaded tassel and seat mat, beads were heavy enough to swing and accentuate the movement of the hips as a man paraded. All are also reasonably recent because the seed glass beads used are of a kind which were not traded into Borneo until about the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### ***Tangu'* – An Expanding and Diminishing Necklace**

Figures 18,19 and 20 show three photographs of Iban women (not young girls in these) wearing traditional necklaces (*tangu'* or *marik empang*), girdles (*tina*) and/or corsets (*rawai*) and tasseled beaded belts (*sementing*). The date of the first is uncertain but probably taken before 1937, the second was taken by Hendrik Tillema in 1928 (King 1982:viii) and the third in 1972. The first two were of Iban in West Kalimantan and the third of an Iban in the Batang Ai'.



Figure 48. Krian beaded yoke (*marik empang*).

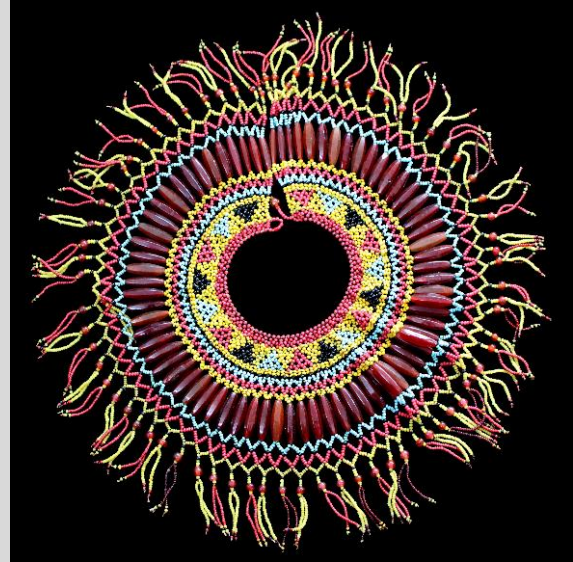


Figure 49. (right). Baleh beaded yoke (*tangu'*).

The necklace was called *marik empang* in the Saribas and *tangu'* in the Batang Ai' and through to the Baleh. *Marik empang* was described by Howell and Bailey (1900:101), whose dictionary was based on the Iban of the Batang Lupar and Saribas, as "beads threaded and worn in rows down to the breasts" (Figures 48 and 49). *Tangu'* did not appear in their dictionary but in Sutlive et al (2018:1636) it was called a "bead collar created with concentric circles of beads that clamp around a woman's neck and fall just above her breasts". Sutlive did his work in the Rejang and Baleh. The two dictionaries, over a century apart, make no obvious distinctions between *marik empang* and *tangu'*.

The *tangu'* in Figure 17 has a central core of cherry-size beads of the kind found on the *entelu* on either side of carnelian spindles. The top and bottom rows of the central core and the two side panels have smaller currant-size beads of the kind found on full beaded dresses. The original carnelian spindles and the agates that Boyle described were from India and very old. It seems reasonable then to suggest that the smaller beads were a later addition and the necklace spread from an older core. As additional rows were added to the necklace with the increasing availability of beads, a point must have been reached when the ornament became too heavy to be comfortably supported by the neck and the support was transferred to the shoulders (compare Figures 17 and 12). For some groups like the Baleh, the change resulted in the piece being called a *baju marik* and that nomenclature stuck there as the garment was extended further down the body. In others, however, such as the Batang Ai', each extension of the ornament was regarded as incremental and both full beaded dress and a long necklace like those worn by the Iban women in the Dutch photographs remained a *tangu'*.

From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Borneo was flooded with cheap seed-size beads from Europe, their value crashed like the South Sea Bubble and the Iban transferred their living displays of wealth to silver ornamentation. With silver corsets, silver belts and silver necklaces replacing the beaded costumes, there was hardly any need for the continuation of any beaded ornament. But the Iban did not think so and the *tangu'/marik empang* shrunk in size and changed its form to become a simple netted yoke of seed-size beads. The simple net was transitional and led to a yoke which was more elegant with designs of geometric and other motifs. In all this silver, the beaded yoke appears completely out of place. Nevertheless, while markedly different from the original *tangu'* necklace, the re-engineered ornament remained a *tangu'* in the Batang Ai' and became a *marik empang* in the Saribas. The tenacity of the nomenclature *tangu'* implied continuity.



## Evolution of the Beaded Costume

The main cast of characters (*entelu*, *kain buri'* and *tangu'*) is now assembled. Their relationship is crucial to any attempt at reconstructing how the full dress beaded costume might have evolved. The *entelu* and *tangu'* all had large cherry-size beads at their core. The *tangu'* often included carnelian spindles. The *kain buri'*, in contrast was decorated in *nassa* shells and was accompanied by petal crotal bells. Much of the full-dress costume had crotal bells as a fringe with an emphasis on 'tiger' crotal bells.

We have already noted how the *kain buri'* had only its lower half decorated leaving the top half plain and how that design structure replicated the effect of an *entelu* hanging at the base of a black skirt. The girl in the beaded ensemble in the Dutch photograph of the household group had a black skirt and what looked like an *entelu* worn underneath the beaded ensemble. During his fieldwork in the late 1940s, Derek Freeman had a close-up photograph taken of one of the two young women in beaded costumes in Figure 10 (Figure 50). One can see that under the beadwork dress of the woman on the left is a black cotton underskirt decorated with *nassa* shells with a design of young bamboo shoots. What the other woman wore under her beaded dress is not apparent in the earlier photo.



Figure 50. Rear view of woman in Figure 10 on the left of the two women. She wears *nassa* shell underskirt of *puchuk rebung*, second beaded underskirt (*burai lumit*) with Chinese 'tiger' crotal bells, beaded dress (*tangu'*) and train (*tali ujan*). Photograph by Monica Freeman. With kind permission of Hilary Freeman.

The same arrangement is illustrated in the Sutlive et al (2001:1,168) *Encyclopaedia of Iban Studies*. This arrangement was probably made with the advice of Sia *anak* Temunggang Jugah, an authority on Iban textile traditions. Consequently, there must have been a conscious decision to link a *nassa* shell beaded skirt, beaded underskirt and beaded dress often supplemented by a *sementing* of the kind worn by the woman on the left in Figure 19. If the Dutch photograph showed the prototype, the *nassa* shell skirt, likely to be far more ubiquitous than the *entelu* with its large cherry-size beads, became an alternative to the *entelu* in the full-dress costume.

Like the *entelu*, the *tangu'* necklace was a prototype. The original necklace was probably a combination of agates and carnelian spindles on a single twined string which hung down to the waist of the wearer. As already discussed, it expanded to a full dress which could stretch from the shoulders to below the knees. As it grew, the name did not change in the Batang Ai'. The persistence of the name from a few beaded strings to a full length dress presents strong evidence that the predecessor was the necklace and not the other way round. The likelihood that the full dress diminished to a necklace of a few strings is unlikely.

Paradoxically, the ornament later did shrink to the beaded yoke. We can be certain that it was

later because the beads used in the yoke did not appear in Borneo until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by which time silver was replacing beads as a marker of wealth. It seems likely that the beaded yoke harked back to the time when the gala costume of women was an ensemble of beadwork garments. Once beads became commonplace, beaded garments began to lose their lustre. Beads, though, had other values apart from that of being a marker of wealth. They were apotropaic and cool. Silver in contrast did not have such qualities. As a result, the rituals for which beaded gala costumes were worn did not change dramatically. The highly charged dangers extant in these rituals remained. Coolness and protection were still as important as they had been in the past. Beads provided both qualities and therefore could not be removed completely from a gala costume by a culture which was risk averse. Something as small and novel as the *tangu'/marik empang* did the trick.

### Antiquity of Beaded Garments

There is a persuasive case that a simple beaded garment of bark skirt and *entelu* preceded woven cotton ones, the first of which was the plain black cotton skirt. At some time in Iban history decorated beaded skirts and patterned cotton ones were developed in parallel with ritual requirements dictating which was to be used when. At weddings, for example, a beaded gala dress was preferred to a home-produced outfit because beads signaled wealth while any Iban female could learn to produce cotton cloth. Asked to dress up in their best, the five women in Figures 18 and 19 chose beads, not *ikat*. That was as late as the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On ritual occasions when coolness was desired because hot curses were ringing out, beaded costumes again were preferred.



Figure 51. Photograph by Hedda Morrison showing three women entering a longhouse in the 1950s, one of whom is wearing a beaded belt and a kind of beaded yoke and a *nassa* shell skirt of *puchuk rebung*. Hedda Morrison Photographs, #4516. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

The Iban seemed consciously to keep beaded costume quite distinct from decorated cotton costume. Never should the twain mix. It is noticeable that in the early Dutch photographs and in Freeman's later ones, beaded ensembles were always accompanied by *nassa* shells or, in the one case, by an *entelu* attached to a plain black skirt. One other photograph (Figure 51) taken by Hedda Morrison (1962:167) in the 1950s lends further support to this observation. It shows three mature women entering a longhouse. Two were wearing *ikat* skirts and silver while the third wore a beaded double sash, a tasseled beaded belt and a *nassa* shell skirt of young bamboo shoots.

The technology and the earliest dates that beads probably entered Borneo indicate that stone and glass beaded accessories could have been produced as early as halfway through the first millennium. Glass beads manufactured in Java could have entered the island as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century as such beads have been found in southeast Kalimantan. Such beads were exported from Java and have been found in late 5<sup>th</sup> to early 6<sup>th</sup> century royal tombs in Korea (Lankton et al 2008:338, 351). That is possibly

as much as three centuries before the earliest date the Ibanic are likely to have 'mechanised' the production of sufficient cotton to weave a simple black skirt (Heppell 2014:83). It should be stressed, however, that there is nothing conclusive about the Iban's possession of beads at these early dates.

Returning to the section on Iban migrations, it posited that the Ibanic migrations from Ketapang and Sukadana probably started sometime towards the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE and might have done so even earlier. When that migration began, beads were being traded to Kalimantan. It might be significant that when the second migration began from the Kayung much later, the group only wore barkcloth garments and probably did not possess any beads of significance as the Saribas, the eventual destination of this migrating group, did not possess any substantial beaded ornamentation. It therefore seems likely that the Iban acquired their earliest agates and cornelians during their migration along the southern coast of Borneo *en route* to the Kapuas and Landak drainages. It was during this migration that they probably also acquired the spinning wheel which their histories relate as facilitating their ability to weave cotton garments and set in motion the parallel development of wardrobes one of which emphasized wealth and the other skill.

The technology required to produce secure beaded garments of some considerable weight was simple. A fibre, *Gnetum* sp (*tengang*), also used to produce cordage garments like war jackets, was able to support the weight without breaking. Knotting was not an issue for the Iban. From time immemorial they were masters of knotting. In the past, just about everything the Iban made was held together by lashing and knotting. That included longhouses, longboats, basketware and tools. That technology was perfected long before the Iban started acquiring stone and glass beads and experimenting with cotton and natural dyes.

### Attributions

"Who killed Cock Robin?" "I", said the sparrow, "with my bow and arrow". With Bornean material culture, sometimes an attribution is relatively simple like the nursery rhyme. It is at its most simple when an object was purchased from or gifted by the person who had made it. After that it becomes progressively more difficult. The more difficult it becomes, the greater the likelihood that justice will not be done to the appropriate ancestors. Fortunately, most groups have some kind of signature when making a certain kind of object. Groups also have individual styles. There is never a debate, for example, about whether or not an *ikat* textile is Ibanic or Benua'. Quite apart from the style, the materials used were quite different. With the Iban, it is not so simple. The distinction between what has been deemed the two styles of large Iban *ikat* cloths (*pua' kumbu'*), Baleh and Saribas, has been made to appear simple. But in locations where the two groups meet, how do you separate the two? And what about very old designs which are shared by both groups and other Ibanic groups like the Desa, Mualang and Kantu'? And then when this distinction was made, no attention was paid to the Balau, Undup, Sebuyau and many similar Iban groups across the border in West Kalimantan many of whose cloths are very similar to the 'Saribas' style. Similarly, the Baleh took their 'style' with them when they migrated from the Katibas and Batang Ai' and then developed it independently of the other two river systems. The contrast between the Baleh and the Batang Ai' after the Second World War could not have been more marked with the former concentrating on *ikat* and the latter on *sungkit* using colourful machine spun threads.

As this paper has been comparing Iban and Maloh beaded textiles, it might be worth drawing attention to the kinds of attribution which cause confusion. Only then will justice be done to the appropriate ancestors who can legitimately claim to be the creators of them. Figure 52, a tunic with rows of beaded catherine wheels, was bought in 1972 by an Englishman in Betong, at the heart of the Saribas, from a general goods merchant called Lim Min Kai. Both assumed it was Iban. The dark blue calico was what the Iban used for their *nassa* shell jackets and the 'lining' was typical Iban hand spun cotton. The Maloh did not weave. The Englishman later bought two other beaded garments (Figures 53 and 54) from Lim Min

Kai and assumed they too were Iban. At the time, Chinese shopkeepers in Betong were unaware of the Maloh. The Englishman assumed that Lim Min Kai traded locally.



Figure 52. Maloh beaded tunic on blue calico attached to an Iban tunic.

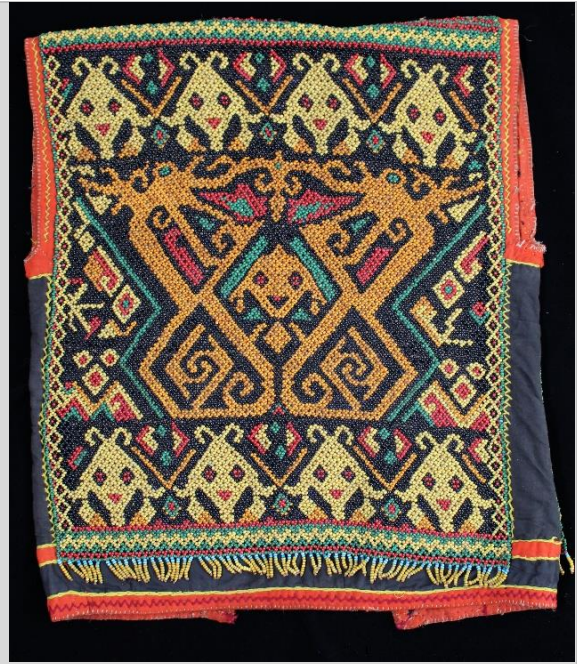


Figure 53. Maloh beaded jackets with central face framed by dragons in turn framed by more faces.



Figure 54 (left). Maloh skirt with dragon motifs



Figure 55. Maloh skirt of beads and *nassa* shells with the beaded panel typical of Maloh border work.

Later I got to know Lim Min Kai as Betong was a convenient place to buy provisions one could not get in Lubok Antu. I also bought the odd textile from him. Hence when I visited his shop, he would show me his new 'arrivals'. After a bit I noticed some Kayan pieces for sale and asked him how he got them. A shopowner in Kapit bought goods from him and settled partly in cash and partly in artefacts was his reply. I also learned he had a van which he used to trade directly with Iban longhouses along the main Kuching to Sibu road as far as Engkilili in the Kuching direction and Sarikei in the opposite direction. He did not trade over the border in West Kalimantan. The beaded garments, therefore, were likely to have been acquired from Iban. In turn, the Iban must have purchased the pieces from the Maloh (less likely taking them in a raid) and in so doing continued to treat beaded garments as wealth. They did not deign to make them themselves and treat them as objects connoting skill.

The collecting habits of museums and galleries have changed in the last century and a half. Round the turn to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the material culture of exotic peoples interested museums. In colonial Borneo, Dutch and British museums built up collections in large part from the gifts of colonial officers. Their interest was generally in the material culture of these exotic peoples rather than in artistic merit. Unfortunately, frequently not much information was provided about provenance and less of function of objects donated. The other great collectors were Americans. There two museums, the Smithsonian and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Penn Museum) were the chosen destinations of considerable collections acquired by wealthy enthusiasts, in the case of the Smithsonian, W.L. Abbott and the Penn Museum, three alumni, William Furness III, Alfred C. Harrison and Hiram Hiller. A couple of decades later the Chicago Field Museum sent William O. Krohn to East Kalimantan where he amassed a large collection, the details of which, like those of Abbott, await the respective museums to digitally photograph their collections and put the information on the web. All three museums received useful but incomplete field data about these collections. All these collections, nevertheless, are extremely important, particularly the American ones because the general location in which the objects were acquired is known. In those locations at that time, there was no market for fakes. Consequently, there should be no suspicion about the indigenous hand that made the object nor that it was made to deceive.

Back in Europe in the 1920s a modest expressionist artist, Serge Brignoni amassed a small but interesting collection of Borneo artefacts which, on his death, he donated to the Swiss city of Lugano where it remains. Acquired from dealers and auctions, it came with little documentation. Much later, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a German Hilde May began collecting artefacts in Samarinda. It was a time when *caveat emptor* needed to be exercised. Hilda was a prolific collector and later on started to visit the areas from which the artefacts were sourced and collect information about the people and their material culture. She donated the collection to the Voelkerkundemuseum, Heidleberg which had miraculously survived the Second World War. This collection was in the mode of the American ones mentioned in the previous paragraph but without the certainty that all objects acquired were quite what they aspired to be.

A second phase of collecting occurred after the Second World War which, in many cases, was a phase which might be depicted as trophy collecting. An occasional wealthy individual developed an interest in Borneo (usually as part of a wider interest in the Indonesian archipelago) and purchased 'outstanding' pieces. 'Outstanding' objects are what galleries insist on for their collections. There is little doubt that that was precisely what they acquired most of the time, but after admiring the pieces one is left wondering if there was a kind of holistic strategy guiding the purchases. For that one needs a context. A consequence of an absence of context is that in the marvellous collection of Borneo objects assembled by Thomas Jaffe for the Yale Art Gallery, there is a solitary *kain buri*'. On its own, it is devoid of the context of the other beaded objects that would have accompanied it. The context of course would be a full gala ensemble

which would present the kind of spectacle that the Iban deities would have admired, not least for the beauty of the young woman wearing it. On its own, the *kain buri* is an interesting curiosity.

Context is important to draw together art and ancestors (ancestors in this heading being shorthand for gods). There is no given that the peoples of Borneo shared the same aesthetics as those of developed western nations. For example, how do you represent malevolent spirits you have never seen? Many Borneo carvings depict such spirits and were intended to be more in the 'shock' mode of some of the mediaeval art like that of Hieronymous Bosch than to be aesthetically beautiful. Amulets, beautifully illustrated in Corbey's *Jurookng* (2019), for example, would be placed in this category. Shorn of their context, such pieces are likely to be placed in the curiosity box. And context is generally what is missing in collections, especially those assembled in the recent past.

The reliability of sources is also important. Data provided by museum and galleries are such sources. That does present problems because how is a reliable source secured? For example, Mary Kahlenberg (1986:54-57), a collector, dealer and author, wrote a very persuasive article about the importance of knowing the context for conservation which a collectable object had experienced since its creation. She illustrated her point by describing an imaginary voyage of an Iban cloth from being a cotton seed and dye leaves and roots to its arrival in an American museum. As the example was fictitious, it did not have to be Iban nor that of any other particular group. But for some reason she chose the Iban. Every fact she wrote about the Iban cloth once the cotton and dyes were processed was wrong. *A wedding was arranged to take place in 4 years time*: arranged weddings with the Iban take place very soon after the agreement. *The mother of the bride wove a ceremonial cloth for the wedding*; traditional Iban weddings (which were infrequent) didn't use ceremonial cloths. They split three Areca nuts in half and rolled them like dice to see how they fell. If a bride moved to the groom's apartment, then the groom's family would often make a gift of cloths to the bride's family to compensate for future cloths forfeited. Iban weddings were not like other outer Indonesian island weddings where cloths were transferred. *Care for the cloth is not important because the spirits had already entered it*; like beads, cloths are heirlooms. Like the Queen of Great Britain, the Iban took great care of their heirlooms, in this instance folding their cloths in particular ways depending on the design and carefully storing them in boxes or in ceramic jars and not, as Kahlenberg writes, hanging them in the rafters of the attic. Severed heads were the heirlooms that hung from rafters. Cloths were regularly hung out to dry to prevent them from getting mouldy and the indigos from further oxidizing. Once published, such tales become problematical when another academic (Eastop 2000:20), unaware of the Iban reality then writes: "Kahlenberg's (1986) exemplary history of an Iban ceremonial textile demonstrates her extensive experience and knowledge of Iban culture." The fictitious 'facts' now have a life of their own.

Accurate descriptions of objects and correct identification of the groups making them should be a first step in building up a context for a collection. Attributing an object to the wrong group produces the wrong ancestors and less likelihood that function would be determined. The best three generally known sites for viewing Borneo objects are those of the Yale Art Gallery, the British Museum and the Dutch Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. The latter two had the advantage that a good number of the objects donated to it were described accurately by the donors. The Yale Art Gallery had no such luck and one hopes its hide is thick enough to withstand the barbs that can follow full transparency. Apart from the one *nassa* shell skirt it has no beaded objects of the Iban. But it does have Maloh ones. Type Maloh into the Yale Art Gallery website and a jacket comes up which is attributed to either the Busang (a Kayanic group largely in the upper Mahakam) or Maloh. It is certainly not Maloh. There is little doubt it is Kayanic, but there must be real doubts that it is undoubtedly Busang.

The Gallery does have a Maloh jacket (ILE2006.4.22) which Jaffe acquired from a couple of dealers called Holmgren and Spertus. The jacket is attributed to the Iban, is called a *baju singkuap* (*singkuap* is not an

Iban word I have ever come across) and was 'made' in an Iban longhouse called Entawau in the Sut river. There might be an Entawau in the Sut, the river Freeman did his fieldwork in, but the dealers in Kuching know of the one in the Skrang, which might be a coincidence. The jacket has much the same design of catherine wheels as Figure 52. So we have two similar jackets provenanced to the Iban and the attribution is becoming more convincing. There is a third, beautifully illustrated in Robyn Maxwell's *Life, Death & Magic* (2010:132). It was also acquired from Holmgren and Spertus. This one they attributed to the Kantu', but, no worries, they are Ibanic and closely related to the Iban. So there are three, all Ibanic beaded jackets with catherine wheel motifs. The beaded design must be very old because the Kantu' and Iban separated along the Ketungau River probably early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century or earlier. One would have expected the design to have been current then as two different groups were unlikely to have developed such an unusual design independently. But wait a minute, these beads did not appear in Borneo until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Iban don't make jackets with glass beads (with a very rare exception – they are in the female domain. The most senior male shamans (Figure 45) ritually crossed the gender divide). A closer look at these jackets directed at signatures and style challenges the presumption they are Iban. Each jacket has a border. Figure 52 has a white beaded *tumpal* motif at the bottom done in very much a Maloh style (see Figures 6 and 7, for example). Maxwell's example has a beaded panel at the top in much the same style as the Maloh beaded skirt in Figure 55. The Yale example has a beaded panel along its edge with a design very much in the Maloh style.

The sources for the information about objects need to be tested by galleries, especially when pieces are acquired from dealers who share the same networks as curators. It is curious that there seems to be a convention with galleries of giving the provenance of an object but not the provenance or source of the information they provide about the object as would normally occur in an academic paper. The jacket with the catherine wheel motif is not the only Maloh object in the Jaffe collection. A group of objects were recently added to the website and all are attributed to the Iban (ILE 2019,12,393, 397, 398, 400, 401, 420, 422). The first is called 'a figure of a lute player', though the figure does not seem to be holding a lute. Iban anthropomorphic statues were carved to frighten malevolent spirits (or attract pigs) and most such spirits were probably tone deaf and unlikely to be terrified by mellifluous sounds. The next are four tattoo blocks. Similar ones in the collection are attributed to 'Borneo' and to 'probably Kayanic', attributions which no one would object to. The next is a Maloh seat mat. A quick comparison with the Iban and Maloh ones (Figures 41 and 42) in this paper leave most people in little doubt that the plaiting and the beadwork in the Yale acquisition share a resemblance with the Maloh one and not with the Iban one. The last is a sunhat, the design of which shows similarities with those of the Baram Kenyah but little with the Iban sunhat in Figure 4.

Differentiating Maloh and Iban can be difficult in some circumstances. The Maloh had a justifiable reputation for being very skilled metal workers. Their men were well known for setting up shop in Iban longhouses and carrying out commissions as well as assisting Iban households with their everyday work. They would have learned a lot about the Iban.

In Iban religion, omens were sought. One way was to sacrifice a pig and examine its liver. This was most often done when someone was believed to have a life-threatening illness and at major festivals. The sacrificial pigs were selected, bathed, laid out under a canopy of an *ikat* cloth and, shortly before the sacrifice, ritually fed, oiled and their hair groomed (Figure 58). The Iban often used combs, an example of which is shown in Figure 56. Is this an Iban-made comb used to groom sacrificial animals? It is iron. There were many Iban skilled enough to do this as any examination of Iban sword blades would reveal. There were also Kayan who were well known for turning iron into curlicues. There were also many itinerant Maloh metal workers who could have done so. Figure 57 was purchased in a Maloh longhouse. It is brass; so the manufacturing process and detail was different. The Maloh certainly sacrificed pigs during mortuary

ceremonies, but how the pigs were prepared for the sacrifice was not mentioned by King in his monograph on the Maloh. Did the Maloh copy the use of metal combs in the form of a hornbill from the Iban or vice versa? Did the Maloh use them in sacrificial rituals? Or perhaps, did Maloh women wear such combs as hair pieces? We don't know.

One needs to be very careful with attributions. A wrong attribution sells the forefathers short and can lead to fruitless arguments about the individual styles of particular groups with, in the cases discussed, the Yale Art Gallery being referenced as a reputable authority. The weakest and most misleading part of the outstanding Jaffe Borneo collection is its documentation, which is a great pity.



Figure 56. Iron comb in shape of hornbill for combing the nape hairs of a sacrificial pig.



Figure 57. Maloh brass comb.



Figure 58. Iban woman grooming sacrificial pigs. Photograph by author in 1973.

### Conclusion – Art and Ancestors

The idea that art in certain parts of the world, especially the outer islands of Indonesia is a celebration of the ancestors in the role of gods runs deep. It is a very captivating catch all. But is what has been described



in this paper 'art' and has it anything to do with this kind of ancestor? The answer to the first question is "just possibly" and to the second, "definitely not".

A curious reader of this paper might google 'Iban ancestor worship' and would immediately be referred to a paper in *Man* written by Reed Wadley (1999:598) in which he wrote: "At its core and as seen in ritual, Iban worship their ancestors." If our curious reader pursued their enquiry, they would find 25% of the papers in a compendium, *Ancestors in Borneo Societies* by Pascal Couderc and Kenneth Silander were devoted to the Iban. One of the contributors, Véronique Béguet (2012:243) wrote that: "Iban *petara*, known in the literature mostly as 'gods' are in fact ancestors". The other contributor, Clifford Sather (2012) wrote of 'ancestralship', used Wadley as an authority and certainly implied that ancestors played a big part in Iban religion. All this seems pretty unequivocal. Anthropologists don't get things wrong. Or do they? One unpublished thesis (Uchibori 1978:282), however, summed up Iban religion (1978:282) as being "markedly polytheistic". Uchibori's fieldwork was focused on ancestors about to be (death and Iban eschatology in fact). If he mentioned the word 'ancestor' in his thesis, it was hardly at all. Uchibori's thesis is unpublished. Those in Uchibori's camp (which includes myself) would be adamant that no Iban 'art' objects had anything whatever to do with ancestors other than, if old, they were made by a forefather of currently living Iban. They would also insist ancestors in the context of being worshipped played a microscopically minuscule part in Iban religion.

In Figure 58, There are two pigs on the brink of becoming ancestors (gods) of the Iban if I have understood Sather's arguments for ancestralship correctly. They are being groomed and fed. They will become ancestors a few seconds after their livers have been severed from the rest of their body. When one witnesses such a sacrifice, one might feel that the ancestors-to-be doth protest much as they experience their livers being detached from their other organs. One piece of evidence Sather (2012:119) presented to support his argument that the gods were ancestors was that many Saribas families traced their ancestry back to the gods. Details, however, sometimes present rather unsettling scenarios for such claims. There was an Iban deity, for example, called *Selamuda* who married the daughter of *Raja Babi* (King of the Pigs). They had two sons, *Begeri* and *Uting*. After a number of years living with this wife, *Selamuda* decided to leave the porcine world and return to his own kin. His father-in-law, *Raja Babi* told him that he could take *Begeri* with him, but *Uting*, the runt, would remain. *Raja Babi* continued that from then on, in the material world, a runt would be sacrificed by humans at major ceremonies to provide auguries. *Uting's* older brother *Begeri* led directly to a number of prominent *Paku*, Saribas families. The problem for 'ancestralship' in this scenario is that, assuming dead souls were more than transient phenomena, the Iban would worship Pig as an ancestor deity, sacrifice him for divinations and to expel serious cosmic dangers, and hunt him with relish. Pig for his part would devastate Iban rice crops, the very core of the Iban's existence. Such beliefs would make Iban religion very complicated.

The question as to whether or not Iban beaded textiles can be considered art is more difficult to answer. Connoisseurship suggests that a quick search of gallery and museum collections would supply the answer. If they are art, they would be plentiful, if not, they would be absent. The answer given is that the Iban objects presented here are unlikely to be art as, apart from one *nassa* shell skirt at Yale Art Gallery, one at the British Museum and a *nassa* shell jacket at the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, there is no evidence of other museums and galleries possessing any Iban beaded objects (many of course have few digital images of their collections). By this count, the *Maloh*, in contrast, are regarded as producing beaded objects of great artistic merit with the Australian National Gallery listing 8 beaded skirts/jackets in their catalogue (plus one more masquerading as a *Kantu'* piece). There is little doubt that *Maloh* beadwork was, at its best, very skilled as evidenced by the pieces illustrated in this paper. In contrast, Iban beadwork does not get to the starting line.

On the question of attributions, as time passes and knowledge of local indigenous groups declines, there is some urgency to rescue what little information still remains about their material culture. Anthropology is generally not interested. The galleries possess the curiosities; anthropologists and a decreasing already small number of local people the contexts. The two have little intercourse. The Lugano Museo delle Culture is a shining example of such intercourse. It funds a research capacity and consults with the two anthropologists, Bernard Sellato and Antonio Guerreiro, who have the fullest knowledge of Borneo material culture. It produces interesting publications about its collections (Sellato and Guerreiro being contributors). Unfortunately, other museums and galleries do not or are not able to follow this example. And while they don't, time passes, knowledge disappears as older generations of the cultures in question become forefathers and the likelihood that galleries will hold collections only of curiosities increases. It is not entirely the galleries' fault. They are usually under-resourced to a T. A lack of resources, however, places a greater requirement on strategic plans and the prioritization of them.

Whether or not beaded textiles are art might be in doubt. What is not in doubt is that they were very important ritual textiles. Iban textile techniques were diverse and stretched far beyond the *ikat* cloths (*pua' kumbu'*) and skirts (*kain kebat*) commonly depicted as comprising their 'ritual textiles'. Many techniques were assigned a specific part of a ritual (*pua' sungkit* for receiving a severed head, for example), or a specific ritual (*nassa* shell skirts for ridding a swidden of pests (*pemali umai*), for example). *Nassa* shells were associated with agriculture and fertility and beads with coolness and protection. Each had an important role.

Finally, the jury one hopes is still out on the merit of Iban beaded garments. There's no doubt they are a curiosity. My impressions have certainly been influenced by sitting cross-legged at the feet of a train of young women jingling and clinking their way through shadows and shafts of light to the sounds of curses ringing out in rhyming couplets and being showered with yellow and puffed rice. Iban back when I was there watched such processions spellbound. It mattered not that this might not have been art. What mattered was that the deities loved it.

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Figure 59. Pair of Maloh watchamacallits or thingamabobs. They are not shaving brushes.