



Trade Objects

Their Impact on the Cultures of the Indigenous Peoples of Sarawak, Borneo

LUCAS CHIN



There are strong archaeological indications that the island of Borneo had begun to draw foreign traders and merchants to its shores by the 11th century A.D., and perhaps even earlier. It was situated along the passage through the South China Sea that ships sailing between China and peninsular Malaysia, Java, and Sumatra had to pass, and it was rich in forest and other products that were highly desired by the cosmopolitan elites in China, India, and the Middle East. Outside traders brought manufactured goods to Borneo—ceramic and brass vessels (Fig. 1), personal ornaments such as beads and jade bangles, and perhaps silk and other textiles. These they exchanged with the indigenous peoples for exotic raw materials such as rhinoceros horns, helmeted hornbill ivory, “bezoar stones,” kingfishers’ feathers, turtle eggs, birds’ nests, cam-

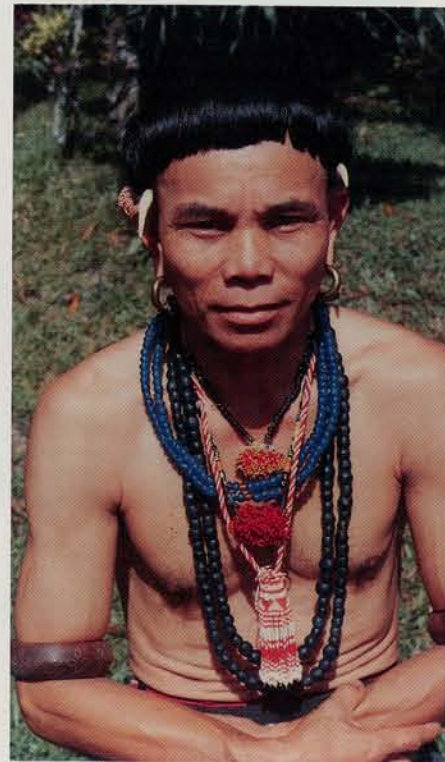
phor, beeswax, resin (*damar*), and spices.

The imported objects not only appealed to the tastes of the people of Borneo, but they became fully integrated into local cultures, often closely linked to customs and beliefs about the spiritual world. Ceramic wares of many kinds, glass beads, and brass objects such as cannons, gongs, kettles, and containers are not only to be found today among coastal and lowland peoples, but they are also present among the Lun Bawang and Kelabit peoples, who live in the highlands some 1,200 m above sea level, in central Borneo (see Fig. 5).

Called *pesaka*, such imported objects are treasured and zealously guarded as revered heirlooms and precious valuables among nearly all Dayak peoples. The social status and wealth of a person is determined by the number of *pesaka* he or she owns, and the larger objects are proudly displayed in the family rooms of longhouses. In this article, we shall look at two groups of imported heirloom items that are

1

A large Chinese storage jar (martaban) collected by W.H. Furness and H.M. Hiller in 1897 in Sarawak. While such imported jars were used to ferment rice wine, store drinking water, and even as burial vessels, they were also regarded as precious capital goods. (UM no. P1304. H. 81.2 cm, W. ca. 38.1 cm)



2a,b (left and center)

A Kelabit aristocratic couple wearing many valuable beads threaded onto skull cap, necklaces, and girdles. The Kelabit place the highest value on dark blue glass beads such as those worn by the man. The jacket and the skirt worn by the woman are decorated with tiny monochrome beads manufactured in Europe.

3 (right)

Bidayuh man wearing a necklace made up of their valued pale blue beads strung with teeth of honey bear and wild boar, and cowrie shells.

central to the cultures of the Dayak peoples of Sarawak—beads and ceramics.

Pesaka Beads

Beads both old and new are valued by Dayak peoples. They are made from seeds, shells, animal teeth, metal, clay, stone, and glass, and many are very colorful. Some beads were probably made locally, but many, especially those made of glass, came from other parts of the world through trade. Since beads are small and can be easily transported, they have found their way into the remotest parts of Borneo.

Not only are beads treasured as heirlooms that are usually handed down from mother to daughter, but in the old days, before modern money was available, beads were one of the principal forms of curren-



4

The Kayan and Kenyah regard these ornate and decorative beads, known to them as *lukut*, as most valuable. The right one on the top, known as *lukut sekala* was equal in worth to an adult male slave.

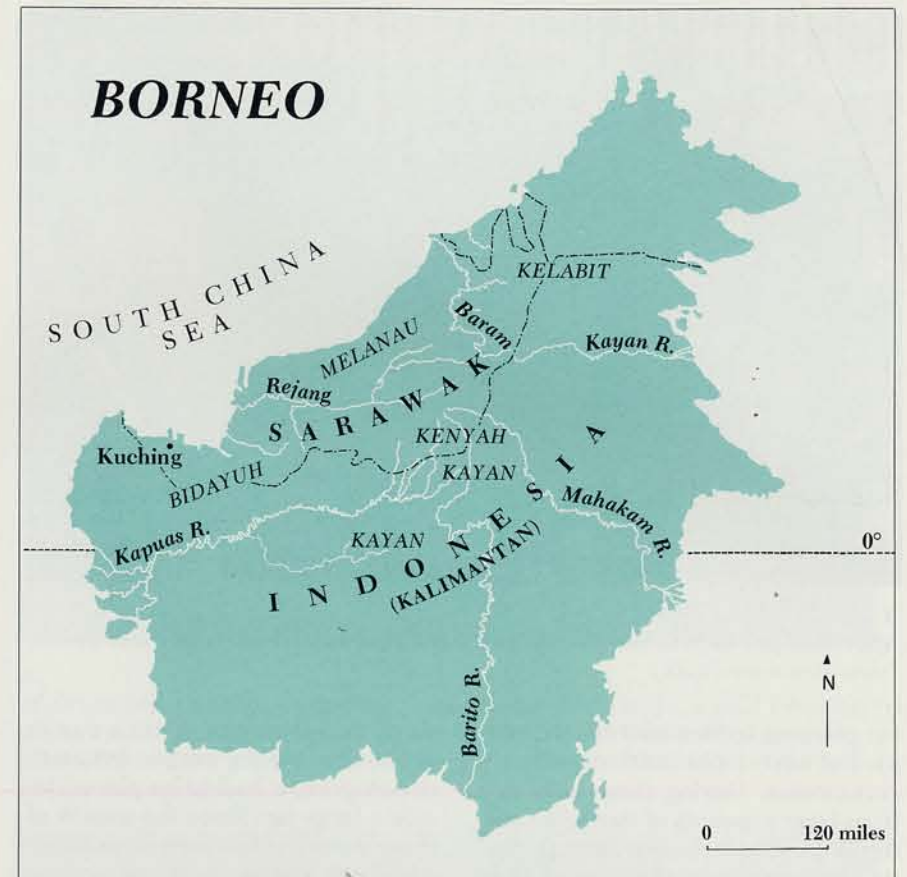
cy. Valuable beads are used as bride wealth, and as grave goods for the dead among aristocrats.

Beads also retain their primary function: they are worn in strings as personal ornaments, and are used to decorate a variety of objects such as skull caps and girdles (Fig. 2a). Some heirloom beads are only worn for rituals and festivals, while others are said to possess supernatural qualities. For example, among the Kelabit an opaque reddish bead is called "bead of the ghost" (*bau'u si'ada*). Two such beads placed at the end of a sharpened stake which is driven into the ground of a rice field before harvest are believed to ensure a good crop.

Special knowledge about beads—their names, relative ages and values—is very detailed, and some older women can easily identify 60 or more different types. Although the name and value assigned to a specific bead type often varies among the different peoples of Borneo, large glassy beads ranging in color from pale greenish-blue to dark blue are generally the most valuable. These beads are usually slightly wider in the center, sloping away evenly to the flat ends, but some are tubular and occasionally decorated with grooves and ridges. On average, they are a little less than 1/2 inch long, with a diameter of about 1/4 inch at the ends. The central perforation is relatively large, as it must admit a coarse, locally manufactured thread made of stripped pineapple leaf fiber.

The glassy beads are usually worn as necklaces by both men and women. The smaller and more valuable are worn as wristlets. One can easily determine the social standing of an aristocratic woman by the number and quality of beads she wears around her neck, wrist and waist.

The Bidayuh value rounded pale blue glassy beads which are threaded into necklaces together with teeth and claws of honey bear, wild boar, and anteater (Fig. 3); they are also made into belts. The necklaces are worn by curers and priests during ceremonies, along with other charms. The Kayan and Kenyah place more value on ornate and decorative beads, particularly those known to them as *lukut* (Fig. 4).



5

These beads are threaded into necklaces and are also used for bride wealth. The Kelabit seldom part with their beads except in times of starvation or to settle a dispute over inheritance.

Ceramics

Among the ceramic wares that were traded to the indigenous peoples of Borneo and other islands of southeast Asia, the so-called *martaban* or storage jars are the most impressive (Fig. 1). The value placed on jars in general is enormous, but each one has its own relative value, depending on age and type. The Iban, for example, identify twelve types and values of jars, each with a special name (*guchi* or *gusi*, *sergiu*, *ningka bendar*, *rusa randok*, *salangalang*). The most valuable storage jars were equivalent in value to a male slave. If one was smashed by someone who could not replace it, he or she had to become the slave of the owner of the broken jar for life. Even if the jar was replaced, addi-

tional compensation (usually in the form of pigs and chickens) had to be made for the distress suffered by the owner. Such customary laws made it relatively certain that such *pesaka* jars remained safe.

Large jars are used in several ways. Apart from being proudly displayed in the family room of the longhouse as symbols of wealth and social status (Fig. 6), they are also used in the daily lives of people, serving as storage vessels to keep water cool and sweet, and to protect food from insects and rats. The rice

"The most valuable storage jars were equivalent in value to a male slave."

wine, *tuak*, is fermented in them. Rice wine is an essential part of most festivals, from minor observances such as hair cutting and



6 Martaban jars kept in the family room. They are used to store rice and to brew rice wine (tuak).

ear piercing, to the major rituals such as harvest rites and marriage ceremonies. During these celebrations large amounts of rice wine are drunk by those who participate, for its consumption is thought of as a form of cleansing.

Storage jars can serve as funerary equipment. Occasionally, one notes a jar conspicuously standing upside down in the family room. This indicates that an elderly woman has reserved it for her funeral, and she does not wish it to be used for fermenting wine. At traditional death observances among the Berawan, the corpse was first washed, then laid out on the veran-

da of the longhouse. After a day or so, but before the corpse began to decompose, it had to be placed inside a large jar. Since the mouth of these vessels is too narrow to admit a body, it was necessary to remove the top of the jar by carefully cutting around the shoulder. The corpse was packed inside, with knees drawn up tightly under the chin, and the top was replaced and sealed with *damar* (resin) gum. The coffin-jar was then placed either on the veranda of the longhouse or on a temporary platform in a graveyard. As decomposition progressed, the fluids were drained off through a small hole specially drilled in the bot-



7 Ceramics, brass wares, and ancient beads serve as accompanying grave goods among the Melanau. After a person died, when the body had been dressed, a blue and white plate was placed under the head, and smaller plates under the feet and hands.

tom of the jar, through an attached bamboo tube, and onto the ground below.

Smaller ceramic vessels also play an important role as grave goods, and the gradual replacement of locally made pottery by imported wares can be traced in the archaeology of burial sites throughout Sarawak. The specific ways in which ceramic *pesaka* were used can be seen in the traditional burial rituals of the coastal Melanau people. When a Melanau died, the corpse was first laid out in the house. After the body had been dressed, the head was rested on a blue-and-white plate, and the feet and hands were placed on smaller ceramic plates. Some brass objects were put near the body, and a string of heirloom blue glass beads was tied around one wrist (Fig. 7). After a few days, the body was taken out of the house and allowed to decompose. When a year or more had passed, the bones were collected and placed in a large storage jar along with an assortment of blue-and-white plates, bowls, small jars, and beads.

Among the Dayak peoples of Sarawak, jars as well as other types of imported pottery can serve as part of the exchanges made in connection with marriage, and also as payment of fines assessed in adultery cases and divorce. The traditional bride wealth of the Melanau, which is given by the father of the bridegroom to the father of the bride before the wedding, is called *ulou berian*, and the value of it is related

to the social status of the bride. The *ulou berian* of a high status bride consists of a blue-and-white plate with a Chinese character on the underside, a gold bracelet that winds round the wrist nine times, and a *kris* or imported short sword (Fig. 8). These items are placed in a round wooden box which is wrapped in a cloth. An oil made of coconut (*nyo tejak*) is rubbed on the forehead, elbows, and knees of the young couple on the first three nights after the wedding ceremony. The oil is kept in a small celadon jar (*selepak timun*), with a celadon bowl (*sube timun*) placed above, and three other celadon bowls (*makok timun*) placed below (Fig. 9). These vessels rest, in turn, on a blue-and-white plate, called the *meluku*; all are *pesaka* ceramics.

Three nights after the marriage ceremony, the bride goes to visit her father-in-law. At the landing stage of his longhouse, she is met by the household members, who bring a brass box and tie a string of old and valuable blue beads around her wrist. The number of beads reflects the social standing of the bride. On entering the house, water is poured on her right foot from a special coarse stoneware jar (*kanan seni jijug*), which is placed near the door. The bride touches the jar with her toe, then steps into her husband's house for the first time.

Ceramics in Myth and Religion

Some jars are closely associated with myths and the spirit world. For example, the vessels that the Iban call *guchi* or *gusi* can become the abodes of spirits and household gods, and thereby they become shrines. Other jars are used to foretell the future. The sounds they emit when struck summon certain spirits, who reveal the information desired. Still other jars are believed to possess magical power that can cure many kinds of illnesses. Such jars are looked upon as objects to be respected and avoided; appropriate homage must be paid to them, such as "feeding," otherwise bad fortune will befall the owners.

Jars can be viewed as having human characteristics. They can



8 Melanau bride wealth, consisting of a blue and white plate, a gold bracelet, and a kris, all placed in a specially made wooden box and wrapped up in a cloth. These were given by the father of the groom to the father of the bride before the wedding.



9 Ceramics associated with the Melanau marriage ceremony. Coconut oil, which is kept in the small celadon jar (at the top, under the bowl), is used to rub the forehead, elbows, and knees of the newly married couple on the first three nights after their marriage.

have gender: one with a wide shoulder is regarded as a female, while one having a sloping shoulder and a more rounded body is a male. Specific personalities may even be associated with jars. Researchers Eine Moore and Tuton Kaboy relate the following legend:

An old Melanau man, Kelupu, had inherited a jar called Gusi Babui ("Jar, Pig") from his grandfather, Siga. One day Siga was hunting in the forest with his dog when the dog started barking at a wild pig. Siga speared the pig and left it near a pool, where wild pigs came to bathe, whilst he went to look for tree bark with which he would carry the dead pig home. When he returned to the pool, however, the pig was gone, and in its place, he found a jar. So, he took the jar home where he just set it down carelessly. Next day the jar was gone. In a dream the following night an old man appeared to Siga saying that he was the jar and that he had run away because he was not placed in an appropriate place in the house. Next morning Siga went back to the place where he had killed the pig, and there again he found the jar. Again, he carried the jar home, but this time he put it in a proper place and carefully tied it to a post.

Thus Kelupu came to inherit the jar. One day a shaman visited Kelupu and asked to see the jar. That night an old man appeared to the shaman in a dream, saying that he was the jar and was ashamed to be seen naked, just standing there

without clothes. This dream was related to Kelupu, and a piece of yellow cloth was given to him to wrap around the jar. Today, the jar is wrapped in a shirt and kept in a basket specially made to hold it.

Another tale tells of a jar whose origin was a snake. An old man was paddling in his canoe one day when he was caught in a heavy rainstorm. He stopped at the mouth of a river where he saw a python swimming, which he shot and killed. That night an old man appeared to him in a dream, saying that he was the snake and that he had turned into a jar when he was shot. He asked to be brought back to the house. This was done, and today the jar has a special function in connection with childbirth.

Traditionally, the Kelabit used certain imported ceramics in their (now extinct) trophy head rite. Small jars were hung up with the severed heads that had been taken from slain enemies, so they would absorb the powerful qualities of the trophies. Wooden or antler stoppers were carved to seal the jars, so that the "spirits" they contained would be preserved. Such a small jar was considered to be the equivalent of a head, in the same sense that an old jar which was worth a human life could be exchanged for a slave or could be substituted as the victim in a human sacrifice.

Another group of ceramics associated with the Kelabit head rite consisted of 17th century K'ang-hsi polychrome vessels in the forms of ducks, crayfish, and cranebirds. These were used by aristocrats to

pass around ritual rice wine. Until recently, these objects were so valued and so sacred that outsiders were not permitted to handle them.

The Gawai Kenyalang is one of the principal rituals celebrated by the lowland Iban in honor of their god, Sengalang Burong. In this feast, a tall carved pole topped with a large carving representing a rhinoceros hornbill is erected outside the open veranda of the longhouse. Trophy heads of slain enemies are hung from the pole, and an assortment of imported ceramic plates—celadon, Swatow, Japanese, and European—containing offerings of food are placed round the foot of the pole.

The Impact of Trade Items

Imported objects, especially beads and ceramics, occupy a special place of high social value in Dayak cultures. They are not just rare, economically valued objects, they are sacred heirlooms that are infused with special properties and qualities. Consequently, they have the power to impress and motivate people, either because they are extremely valuable or because they possess mystical and magical qualities. While some are believed to have had supernatural origins, others have received their extraordinary powers as a result of associations with supernatural beings. In all cases these imported objects are utilized to express and mediate important social relationships either among people or between humans and supernatural beings. **Z**

Bibliography

Cheng, Te-K'un
1969

Archaeology in Sarawak. Cambridge: Hefer.

Chin, Lucas
1980

Cultural Heritage of Sarawak. Kuching: Sarawak Museum.

Freeman, John Derek
1975

"Iban Pottery." *Sarawak Museum Journal* 8(10):153-176.

Harrison, Tom
1950

"Kelabit, Land Dayak, and Other Related Glass Beads in Sarawak." *Sarawak Museum Journal* 5(2):201-220.

1964

"Monochrome Glass Beads from Malaysia and Elsewhere." *Man* 64(11):37-41.

Hose, Charles and William McDougal
1912

The Pagan Tribes of Borneo. 2 vols. London: Macmillan

Roth, Henry Ling
1896

The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo. 2 vols. London: Truslove and Hanson.

Zanie, Carla, and Tom Harrison
1967

"Early Chinese Stonewares Excavated in Sarawak." *Sarawak Museum Journal* 15(30-31):30-90.

Lucas Chin has been Director of the Sarawak Museum since 1974. He



is the second Malaysian to head the Museum since Sarawak achieved its independence in 1963 and joined Malaysia. Mr. Chin was born in Sarawak and completed his secondary education

there. He studied anthropology at the University of Hawaii, Honolulu, for two and one-half years, and received museum training at the Bernice P. Bishop Museum, the Honolulu Academy of Art, and the Field Museum, Univ. of Chicago. His research specialty is material culture, and he has written *The Cultural Heritage of Sarawak*. His second book on the ceramics of Sarawak is now in press.