

# SOCIAL STATUS GRADATIONS EXPRESSED IN THE BEADWORK PATTERNS OF SARAWAK'S ORANG ULU

Heidi Munan

*The peoples of Central Borneo, known collectively as the Orang Ulu, used to display social stratification by restricting the types of ornaments an individual might use and wear. "High-ranking" motifs were the human figure, the hornbill, and the tiger or leopard. The Orang Ulu are bead connoisseurs who incorporated beadwork in their costume and belongings; a person could only make use of beaded items proper to his or her social stratum. Religious and social changes have democratized these once strictly aristocratic societies and their handicrafts. Today's beadworker produces not only for her own family but for the souvenir market, so she feels free to apply any designs which please the buyer.*

"Lawai, the crocodile, wears a tough garment, a garment made entirely of beads."<sup>1</sup>

## THE ORANG ULU

All Borneo natives were formerly known as "Dayak" and, by this definition, the "Orang Ulu" are a Dayak group. The literal meaning of the name is "upriver people." This useful (if not very accurate) collective term describes the peoples settled above the rapids which demarcate the great rivers' fall from the high plateau of Borneo to the coastal lowlands; Orang Ulu are found in the upper reaches of the Baram and Rejang rivers in Sarawak, as well as the Kayan, Mahakam, Barito and Kapuas rivers in Indonesian Borneo. The main groups of Orang Ulu are the fairly homogenous Kayan, the more diversified Kenyah and a large group of loosely related peoples, as well as the Kelabit and Lun Bawang in the areas bordering on Sabah and Brunei. Their cultures and languages differ, but they have a few things in common: the Orang Ulu originally lived in longhouses. Many still do, though today's model may be a modern sawn-timber structure

with glass windows and indoor sanitation. Orang Ulu women used to tattoo their arms and legs, and wear ornamental brass weights in their elongated earlobes. Orang Ulu societies were more or less strongly stratified, and many Orang Ulu were (and are) gifted artists. The Dutch traveler Dr. Nieuwenhuis (1907:235) wrote:

The Dayak's artistic instincts are much more developed than they are among more advanced peoples. The majority of men and women are capable of ornamenting articles in common use, with none but the simplest tools at their command and no instruction other than watching their elders....

The "Borneo artefacts" — known and eagerly desired by the world's collectors—are nearly all (with the notable exception of *ikat* weaving) made by various Orang Ulu craft-workers or, increasingly, by others who imitate their style.

Orang Ulu societies were stratified into a top level of aristocrats, a fairly well-to-do middle class, an economically and socially demarcated lower class and the slave class. The advent of education, Christianity and an upsurge of indigenous religious revival (based on a *commoner's* dream revelations) have changed many of the once-rigid distinctions (White 1956:472), and drastically simplified the complicated system of rituals and taboos that used to shore up the position of the upper class.

The aristocracy had close ties with the spirits; a high-class individual had a tutelary deity which protected him of her and, by extension, the tribe. Disobeying a leader was equivalent to disobeying the spirits; no wonder a chieftain could order the common folk around! Such arrogance is a thing of the past,

though people may still mutter, "He's got a ghost!" (Henry Luhut 1980s: pers. comm.), when fulfilling—as a courtesy—requests that would have been unceremonious orders 100 years ago.

School has served as a great leveller in this respect. Even the poorest man's child can go to the top of the class. Schoolchildren wear the same uniform. Ambitious young folk move "downriver" if they feel so disposed; gone are the days when the lowest class could neither marry nor leave the longhouse without the chief's permission. A young man of however low birth may join the police or army. Within this framework—in itself quite as stratified as traditional Orang Ulu society—he has scope to rise to a high, universally recognized rank by his own efforts.

## ORANG ULU DESIGNS

The following is a summary of what *was once* vitally important to preserve balance and harmony within isolated communities and allowed little leeway to rebellious souls. The observations apply to artistic expression in beadwork, painting on bark, wood and imported textiles—anywhere that a lively and inventive mind might choose to put decoration.

In most Orang Ulu societies, the full-figure human motif was reserved for the aristocracy. The figure might be depicted upright or squatting, displaying genitalia or arrayed in breeches, but it was only to be found on the belongings of the upper class. The beautiful murals that embellish the inside walls of Kenyah and Kayan longhouses diminish in richness from the center of the house outwards, exactly reflecting the gradation of the social order: the aristocrats live in the center of the longhouse; the lowest classes at either end.

Aristocrats built their roof higher, and they had the vital "tree of life" painted on the front walls of their apartments. This tree shows that the "higher" animals (hornbills, humans and leopards) belong to the topmost branches and the main stem; in epics, the hero is often addressed as or compared to the tiger, leopard or hornbill. The respectable middle classes made use of modified half-figures, masks and less ostentatious animals, like the dog/dragon in its many adaptations.

The human figure on Orang Ulu beadwork may be standing or squatting, arms and legs forming part of a zigzag pattern to which others are linked; the technique of threaded beadwork makes straight lines, 90° intersections and 45° angles more practical than close curves. The human motif's eyes are always open, the mouth occasionally shows teeth. The ear lobes are long, often incorporated into the pattern formed by other decorative elements; arms may stretch through them. If only a face is used, stylization compresses some features and expands others to fit the available space.

The human figure used in art may show clearly displayed, exaggerated genitalia. Nudity, except in small children, is not acceptable in Sarawak societies; adults may look "half-naked" to the casual observer but they are most particular about preserving the decencies. Images of human private parts were considered potent protective magic; the spirits, themselves sexless, are puzzled and repelled by such incomprehensible appendages. This type of ornamentation was used on garments partly to frighten evil spirits and, thus, to protect the owner and wearer. A frieze of squatting displayed females on a beaded jacket reinforced not only its wearer's status (they were his or her "slaves"), but had an additional protective function. Nieuwenhuis (1907,II:252-256) described the decorations on top of Kayan sword blades as symbolic female genital *labiae*. He also considered the carved decorations on doorsteps as representations of the external generative organs of both sexes. Their presence at the only entrance to a family room blocked entry to evil spirits.

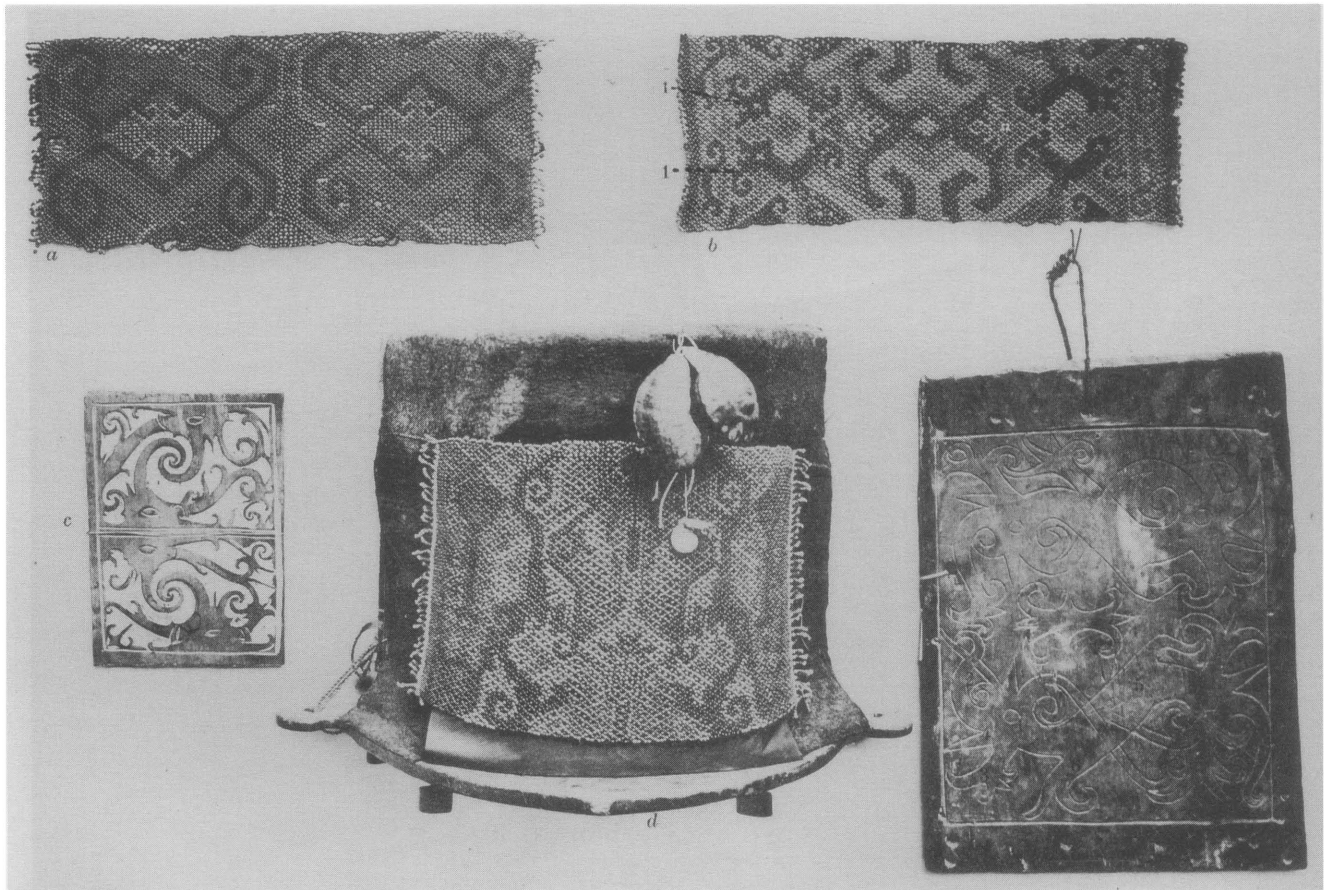
Traditionally, an Orang Ulu refrained from using symbols inappropriate to his or her social stratum. The tiger was a favorite high-class design, symbolic of power, though Borneo people only know the king of the Malayan jungle from hearsay—there are no tigers on their island. Nieuwenhuis (1907,I:63) had promised to bring one of his Orang Ulu friends, a high-ranking chieftain, a tiger head from Sumatra. No Dayak boatman or bearer would touch the crate containing this tabooed item; it had to be abandoned! A tiger tooth he carried had to be kept secret until it could be handed over to the recipient, a chief "strong-souled" enough to own such a potent charm (Nieuwenhuis 1907,II:388). The use—even the



**Figure 1.** Two Kenyah mothers watching an older lady doing beadwork, ca. 1950. The ornately beaded baby carrier on the right is hung with at least a dozen teeth and decorated with shell discs down the sides. For everyday use, these women wear ordinary plaited headbands, though the baby in the carrier has a beaded leglet with a brass bell (photo by permission of the late Hedda Morrison).

touch—of a tiger tooth was inappropriate and dangerous for a commoner, though leopard, bear and (rarely) rhinoceros teeth were worn according to a person's rank and "strength of soul."

Inappropriate use of ornaments and symbols brings disaster: illness, bad harvests and unseasonable weather (and resulting famine). The whole community will suffer (Whittier 1978:108); the



**Figure 2.** Orang Ulu beadworked panels from baby carriers (top), a baby carrier (center) and wooden beadwork matrices (bottom left and right); Bahau, Apo Kayan (Nieuwenhuis 1907,II:Pl. 69).

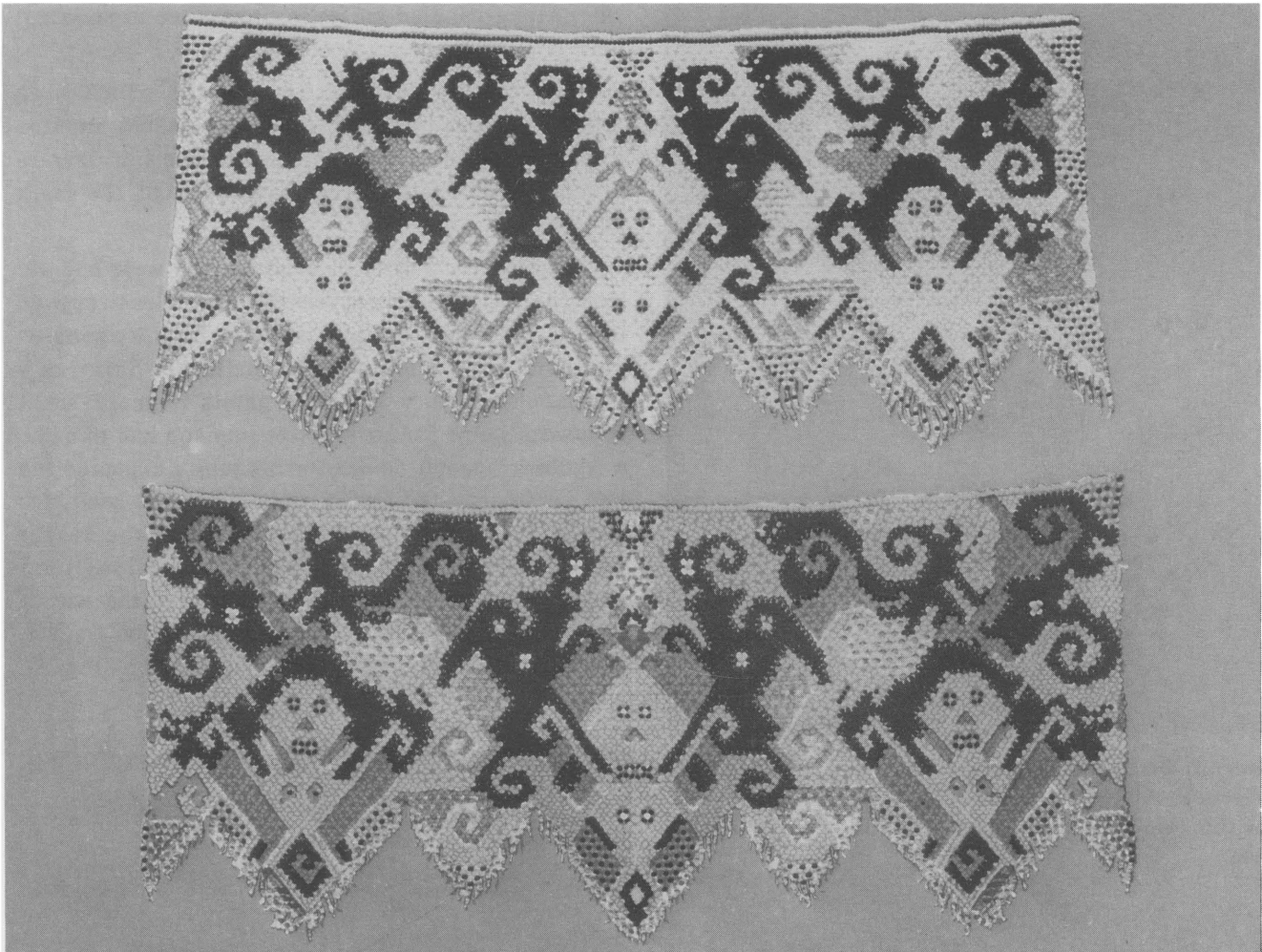
rugged individualist who wants to do things *his* way could not have lived in a traditional Orang Ulu society. He would have been regarded as a public menace, and speedily reduced to order!

An Orang Ulu baby carrier embellished with a curly haired, curly handed and curly toed human figure sheltered a tiny sprig of the aristocracy (Fig. 1; Pl. VIIA). Larger beads, hawk bells and animal teeth were attached to the upper rim of the carrier, partly to soothe the baby with their tinkling, and partly to document his or her status—the use of leopard teeth was restricted, too.

A middle-class baby peeped out at the world from a basket decorated with a human face, stylized animals and beautifully involuted scroll designs (Figs. 2-4). The family might have been wealthy enough to cover the whole object edge-to-edge in beadwork, but they still would not have been able to use "reserved" designs. Down the social scale came the baby carrier

of fine basketry with just a panel of bead embroidery along the center, or simply a softly lined basket of split rattan or bark.

Ornaments, particularly ornamented personal belongings, were associated with their owner and user. They declared and protected a person's rank. At the same time, some of his or her vitality was lodged in them. This applied to children particularly: neither children's clothing, nor the ornamented back-baskets they were carried around in, could be carelessly disposed of. Part of the child's still-tender soul might adhere to the discarded article, resulting in sickness or death. After a child no longer needed to be carried, the basket was carefully stored away for the next baby in the family. When the basket was worn out, the beadwork panel and other decorations were detached and kept for future use, possibly to be passed on to a close relative. Nieuwenhuis (1907,II:102) found that he could not buy baby carriers, "except a couple which



**Figure 3.** Beadworked panels from Kayan baby carriers featuring human figures and dragon heads; upper Mahakam River, Sarawak. The upper "old" one may have served as a pattern for the "new" lower one (Nieuwenhuis 1907,II:Pl. 71).

had been the property of persons long dead", and that some tribes would not sell any bead-ornamented baskets, "or only at very high prices." The bulk of the very pretty beaded baby carriers now available in the bazaars of Sarawak are brand new, made for the tourist market. No infant nestled in them, and the "leopard teeth" dangling from the rim are carved from deer horn!

Class followed a man from the cradle to the tomb. Literally and visibly so: to build a repository or an ossuary (burial customs varied) befitting the deceased's status, a bereaved aristocratic family could spare no expense. Apart from the huge feasts they were obliged to give as part of mourning ritual (for the provisioning of which they could tax the lower orders), they had to call in the best artists in the

region to build the tomb. Feasting and paying them royally ensured that the monument would be a work of art, guarded on the rooftop by leopard or dragon figures and at all four corner posts by the characteristic Borneo interior "dog" with wide open jaws, the teeth and ears curling into and around each other.

Stint at such a time would be unthinkable. Beside a vague feeling that an insulted ghost might make trouble, public opinion in the form of censorious neighbors was always alert, appeased only by outstanding effort. Even a low-ranking craftsman could be engaged on an aristocrat's monument if he was really good; the bereaved family had to present him with special gifts of iron to strengthen his soul, and beads to preserve his eyes from so much class!



**Figure 4.** Orang Ulu baby carrier in the Sarawak Museum's collection, 1960s. The pocket mirrors are a popular innovation that take the place of shell discs (photo: Sarawak Museum).

### GENDER-RESTRICTED BEADWORK

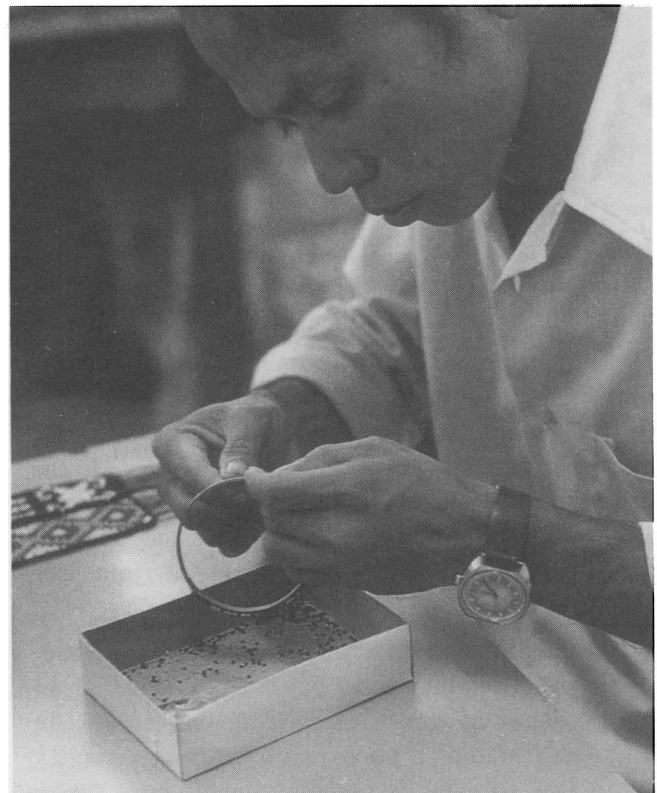
There is a curious distinction between the Orang Ulu and the Iban, a "downriver" people who are equally at home in river craft and at sea. Iban weavers learn from their mothers, and acquire the final touch of mastery from dreams which authorize the execution of a new design; i.e., from within themselves. Not only are men not encouraged to help, they are kept away from the whole "women's business" quite firmly. Among conservative Ibans, even the symbolic significance of sleeping-mat patterns can only be discussed in all-female company. A man is expected to make weaving implements for his wife, and then go off hunting or fishing while she wields them.

Orang Ulu ladies, on the other hand, rely on men to provide them with design patterns for beadwork, tattoo and other art motifs. Such patterns used to be carved wooden matrices (Fig. 2). However, since the general availability of paper, stencils cut with a very

sharp, long-handled knife (in preference to scissors) have become the norm for beadwork.

The craftswoman carries out the painstaking process of threading the beads. Her creative input is limited to the choice of color, and the addition of extra ornamentation within the framework of the main pattern.

While the majority of beadworkers were and are women, it is becoming acceptable for males to engage in this craft, just as in a modern, "non-longhouse" context, women may design patterns. Sarawak's teachers sometimes get their pupils to make small beadwork items for art projects (my son had to make a beadwork pencil holder for his junior exams in the late 1970s, and the family walked on tiny beads for weeks!). Occupational therapists at the larger hospitals teach reed- and beadwork to long-term patients, especially those who have lost the use of their legs. A number of invalids, male and female, produce craftwork for their financial support (Fig. 5).



**Figure 5.** While recovering from an accident, this man is quite happy to earn some money by doing beadwork, a formerly feminine occupation; 1974 (photo: M. Oettli).

## BEADWORKING METHODS

Beads are worked on a rectangular board on which the pattern is incised (Figs. 2, 6) or, more recently, over which a paper containing the pattern is pinned. A string of beads destined to be the upper edge is stretched across the top of the pattern board. The warp threads are attached to this string with half-hitch knots, between regular numbers of beads. The fabric is then worked downwards by threading beads on the vertical threads, and crossing them at intervals by feeding two strands through one bead. The pattern is produced by color selection.

Not all beadwork is rectangular. Round pieces—the very elaborate hat-tops (Figs. 7-8), for instance—are started with a central ring. Extra threads are hitched on as the circle grows. Beadwork is shaped

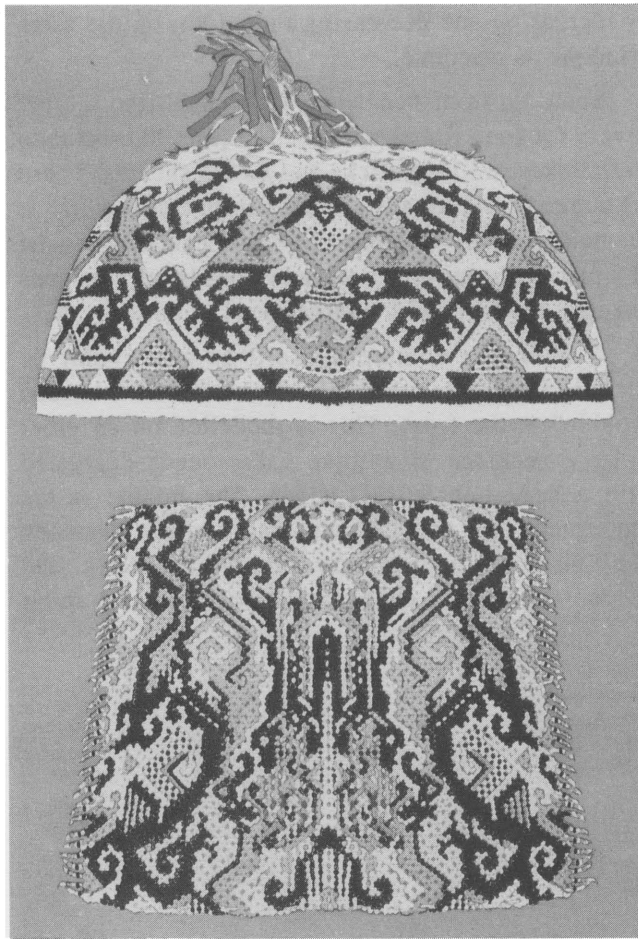
by increasing and decreasing the width, on the same principle as macramé.

Some types of beadwork are shaped like a tube: covers for long round-sectioned objects like bamboo *sireh* boxes, walking sticks and sword sheaths. These are worked cylindrically around a solid center which is eventually removed. Some old bead necklaces consist of a piece of stout rope covered in beadwork, the ends linked at the front with a larger bead as button.

A necklace commonly sold as a souvenir of Sarawak is a beadworked tube necklace with a beaded "bobble" at the front. This is modelled on an older style: a necklace of antique value beads decorated with a bead bobble (Pl. VIIB). The bobble is the centerpiece of a necklace and traditionally consisted of 30-60 small loops of very tiny, red and black seed beads. The loops, each formed of a strand about



**Figure 6.** Kayan beadworkers on the upper Mahakam River, ca. 1900. The woman on the left is decorating the tail of a loincloth; the one on the right works beads after a prepared pattern (Nieuwenhuis 1907,II:Pl. 41).

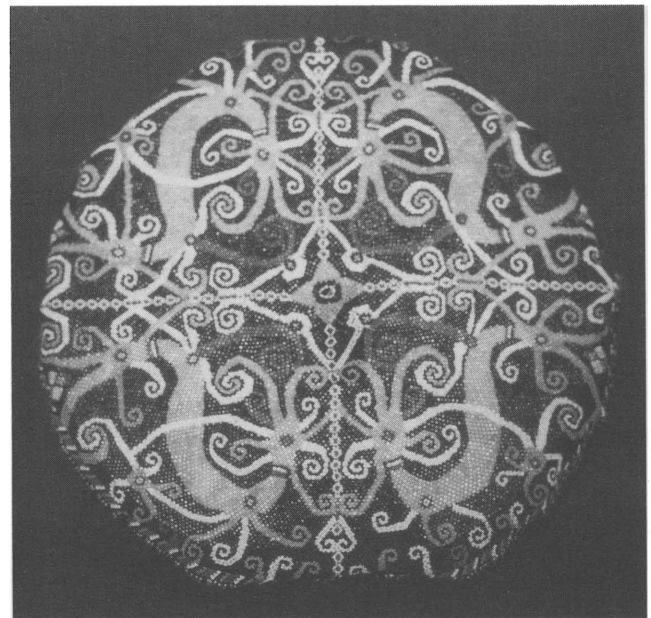


**Figure 7.** A Kayan man's beaded cap (above), and a woman's beaded headgear panel (below) (Nieuwenhuis 1907,II:Pl. 75).

7.5 cm long, were made uniform by looping them around a piece of wood which served as a gauge.

### SEED BEADS

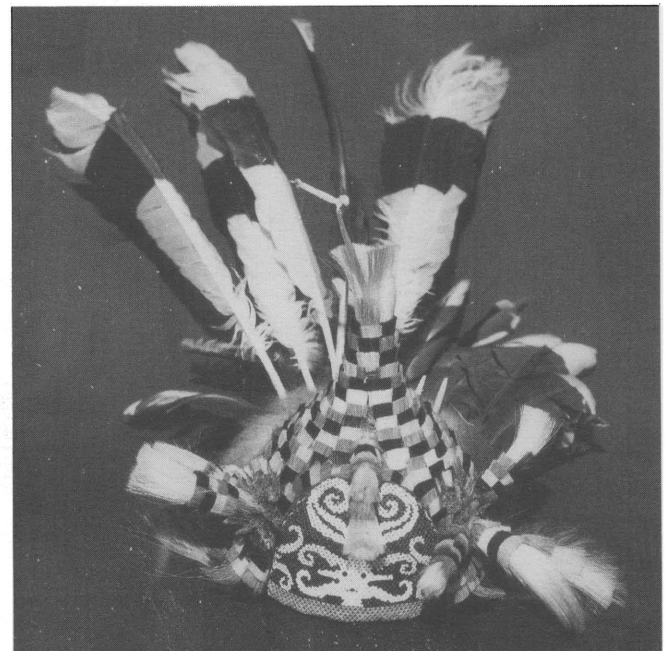
Beadwork as a craft is done with seed beads from the size of a mustard seed to a peppercorn which are available in increasingly greater and brighter colors. Archaeological excavations indicate that beads have been imported into Borneo since ancient times; the "Indo-Pacific beads" described by Francis (1989) are commonly found here. These fall within the modern definition of seed beads: small monochrome rings of opaque or translucent glass. Within the last two centuries, seed beads sold in the trading radius of Singapore originated mostly from Italy, Bohemia and



**Figure 8.** A "middle class" Orang Ulu sun-hat center decorated with dragons and scrolls, 1960s (photo: Sarawak Museum).

England; Japan and Korea have joined the ranks of seed-bead exporters since World War II.

The most common colors on old beadworked artifacts are red/russet, white, yellow and black—the



**Figure 9.** Kayan war cap with frontal beaded blaze, 1960s (photo: Sarawak Museum).





**Figure 10.** New Orang Ulu beaded sun hat made for sale, 1988 (photo: H. Munan).

hues of the majestic hornbill's huge beak. Muted blues and greens were added to the palette in the late 19th century. Whether this choice of colors reflects the craftswomen's preference or the availability of materials, it is now impossible to say.

Given sufficient beads and leisure, there is nothing Sarawak's Orang Ulu ladies cannot decorate with beads. Jackets and skirts are lavishly decorated with beadwork, as are war caps (Fig. 9), seat mats (Pl. VIIC) and the ends of loin cloths. Armbands, necklaces, ear hangings and belts may be embellished with beads or entirely composed of them. Sun hats with beautifully worked bead tops are much sought after by local and foreign buyers alike (Fig. 10).

Beaded headbands are still worn by some people, especially for semi-formal festive occasions (Fig. 11). Originally, they were designed to hold the wearer's long hair in place. A now-vanished fashion among Kayan ladies was a tall, slightly tapering bead hat worked in the standard fashion and mounted on a framework of rattan and padded with bark cloth. These bead hats were worn to show the owner's status and wealth. A simple plaited headband would hold the hair in place as effectively as a beaded band does—but any commoner or slave can weave a few strips of creeper fiber!

## COMMERCIAL BEADCRAFT

Today, many beadworkers produce souvenir items for the tourist trade. Besides the more obvious items (like bracelets and necklaces, headbands, loin cloth tails, baby carriers and baskets), there are purses, handbags, fashion accessories and a number of truly startling innovations. The latter include pencil covers which make pencils very pretty—and quite unusable. I have even seen a beadwork necktie, but not around anyone's neck, however.

Beatrice Kedoh, general manager of Kraftangan (a handicraft promotion agency supported by the Sarawak government), does not find beadwork a top-selling item. Some of this she commissions from cottage workers; other items she buys from producers who bring their wares to her shop. But the supply is never steady. Rural women may fill an idle moment with beadwork or other handicrafts, but to earn a proper income, town-supply farming is more lucrative. The rural-urban drift has brought a number of competent craftworkers to town. Of these, the young prefer working regular hours in the companionable environment of factories or service industries. Older women are likely to live with a son or daughter who has settled in town; their time is taken up with baby-minding and housekeeping. There are few full-time career craftswomen in Sarawak today.

## CONCLUSION

The old problem of status-linked motifs is no longer an issue. None of the beadworkers I interviewed in the Kuching area had any scruples on this point. The *production* of artwork was never restricted, they agree, only the use and wearing of it was. Even in the past, a low-class artist could carve, paint or bead designs on commission, for instance, for an aristocratic wedding or tomb, without personal risk. The unauthorized *wearer* or *owner* of the article endangered himself and his community. One informant told me:

For one thing, we don't really care about these taboo things any more. That was in the old days! Now we produce the designs local or foreign people like to buy. They themselves know whether they are strong enough to wear them. We really don't think anybody will get hurt.



**Figure 11.** Orang Ulu ladies participating in a bead workshop at the Sarawak Museum in 1988. Some sport beaded headbands and handbags. Note the elongated ears and tattooed hands, marks of status and beauty in the old days (photo: H. Munan).

In any case, the bad harvests or epidemics would not hit the producer, but the buyer and wearer. *Caveat emptor!*

#### ENDNOTE

1. Kenyah; from "Trance Song of Spirit Medium," sung by Balu Asong Gau of Long San, Upper Baram, 4th Division (Rubenstein 1973:1308).

#### REFERENCES CITED

**Francis, P., Jr.**

1989 Mantai: Bead Crossroads of the Medieval World. *Ornament* 12(3):82-91.

**Nieuwenhuis, A.W.**

1907 *Quer durch Borneo*. 2 vols. E.J. Brill, Leiden.

**Rubenstein, C.**

1973 Poems of Indigenous Peoples of Sarawak: Some of the Songs and Chants (Part II). *Sarawak Museum Journal* XXI(42).

**White, E.**

1956 Bungan, a New Kayan Belief. *Sarawak Museum Journal* VII(8):472-475.

**Whittier, H.L.**

1978 Concepts of Adat and Cosmology among the Kenyah Dayak of Borneo. *Sarawak Museum Journal* XXVI(47):103-113.

Heidi Munan  
(Hon. Curator of Beads,  
Sarawak Museum)  
301 Golden Farm Road  
93250 Kuching  
Sarawak  
Malaysia