

The Importance Of Preserving Memories: A Story Of A Long Apu Family's Pesaka Beads

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Beads have played an important role in Dayak society for several centuries. They are seen not only as decorative objects valued merely for their aesthetic qualities but have a deeper significant cultural value placed on them. Some beads have ritualistic purposes and are only worn during certain rituals and festivals. Pesaka or heirloom beads are greatly treasured and are passed down from one generation to the next, and behind every heirloom bead there is a story to be told of how it came to be part of a certain family's possession. A beautiful bead is just a tangible piece of material culture, but the stories related to it transform it into a family treasure. This is just one story of a family's pesaka beads.

Introduction

According to Merriam-Webster an heirloom is "A piece of property that descends to the heir as an inseparable part of an inheritance or something of special value handed on from one generation to another." In Sarawak, old beads and beadwork are part of familial heirlooms and are part of Sarawak's rich cultural heritage. Most Dayak tribes used beads and wear them, but not all value them equally. The Orang Ulu tribes-the Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit, Lun Bawang and others are considered by locals and outsiders alike as the experts in beadwork and beads appreciation.

There is archaeological evidence that beads have had a long association with Sarawak. One of the earliest known form of human decorative object, beads and traces of beadwork had been excavated at the ancient human settlement site in the Niah Caves. Our ancestors' fascination with beads might stem from the fact that apart from their aesthetic value, beads do not decay or deteriorate. They are physically strong, being made out of durable materials like stone and¹ glass¹. This factor might symbolise to our ancient ancestors the quality of longevity or eternity, which was probably why when a deceased person was buried in the past, beads were part of the grave goods buried with that person. With the exception of beads made from bones, teeth and pebbles found in archaeological sites, most Borneo beads – whether beads favoured by the Kelabits, Kayans, Kenyahs or Bidayuhs – were imports². The majority of the beads were imported by tradesmen from China, India, the Middle East

¹ The thought that it is strange for attractive pieces of polished glass and pebbles to symbolise a high value, is probably not more strange than pieces of printed paper having monetary value.

² "A Tale of Beads", The Star Online, Saturday February 24, 2007. Retrieved 12 May, 2008 from <http://thestar.com.my/lifestyle/story.asp?file=/2007/2/24/lifefocus/16613442&sec=lifefocus> . The monetary value of a bead in the past might depend on the rarity of the material. Materials that are imported from afar are more expensive by definition. Indigenous stone bead making using serpentine stone had been observed by early European travellers like A.W. Nieuwenhuis and William O.Krohn. These stone beads are now extremely rare. See also William O.Krohn. (2001), "In Borneo Jungles: Among The Dyak Headhunters", Oxford University Press, Selangor Malaysia, p.256. Heidi Munan in her book "Beads Of Borneo" indicated that there once existed an indigenous glass bead making industry but as of yet, no traces of backyard glass working site had been found. See Heidi Munan (2005), "Beads Of Borneo", Singapore Star Standard, Singapore, p.31.

and Europe. From as early as the 6th until the 12th century trade with China and India brought in exotic and beautiful beads and during the last 200 years the English and the Dutch had brought with them a large quantity of beads that originate mainly from Venice and Bohemia³. In the coastal towns of Borneo, they traded them against forest products of the Dayak tribes. There was never a bead trade per se with sailing boats laden with beads only. The traders who came to Borneo brought along with them a whole assortment of trade products like pottery and ceramics, textiles, metal tools and beads. These imported merchandise then passed on to Dayak traders who brought jungle produce like dammar, hornbill casques, birds' nests, rattan, camphor, agarwood (gaharu) and other valuable jungle products. These intrepid traders will then make their long, dangerous and arduous journey into the interior of Borneo at a time when tribal warfare and headhunting was still a common practice.

Apart from the normal peace time practice of barter trading, beads were also obtained through raiding and travelling. In the past, the men will go on headhunting and long voyages to seek fame and fortune and as a rite of passage. It is through the former method that the valuable *Lukut Sekala pesaka* beads that now belong to Eileen Paya Foong's family owes its unique history. Apart from the *Lukut Sekala*, Eileen's family also have in their possession precious beads that were obtained through marriages from the past. Below is her recollection of her family's *pesaka* beads.

My Family Background

"Doh Belawing, my great grandmother comes from the Kayan aristocratic class (*keta'u* in Kenyah or *maren* in Kayan). Her family was from the *Uma Puk* sub-tribe which had settled at Long Senai, Akah, Ulu Baram. The Long Senai settlement is today deserted, because the residents had migrated to Long Spiling, Long Teran and Long Marok which are all located along the banks of the Tinjar river.

She met and married to Paren Njuk my great grandfather, who was an aristocrat from the *Uma Pawek* Kenyah sub-tribe from Long Apu, Ulu Baram. When my great grandmother married, she went and settled (a process called *ngivan*) with my great grandfather at his longhouse. Their marriage was blessed with five children; Anyie Paren, Lutang Paren, Pidang Paren, Julan Paren (my grandmother) and Lirang Paren⁴.

However, Doh Belawing's presence as a Kayan aristocrat amongst the Kenyah of Long Apu community was not well received by the Kenyah aristocratic families. Instead of being treated as an aristocrat, she was treated as an outsider, and hence Paren Njuk's aristocratic status was demoted to that of a *panyin* or commoner". My grandparents had no choice but to obey the decisions taken by the aristocrats of Long Apu."

The history of the family beads

"In the olden days, beads played a very significant role amongst the Kayan and Kenyah tribes, more so then than now. Beads were not only used for barter trading purposes or for traditional costume decoration, but it was also used in religious ceremonies and also as status symbols of families in Kayan and Kenyah societies. Certain beads for example may only be owned by aristocratic families. Due to the dual tribal affiliation of my family, the beads which are in the family's possession had been

³ Thiessen, Tamara. (2008). "Borneo", The Globe Pequot Press, United States of America, pg. 30. There was also a group of Chinese beadmakers who based themselves in Banten, Java around 1600 producing beads specifically for trade to Borneo. See also Peter Francis Jr. (2002) "Asia's Maritime Bead Trade: 300 B.C. To The Present", Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, United States of America.

⁴ Anyie Paren and Pidang Paren had long passed away leaving only three siblings who are currently alive.

preserved as heirlooms, our *pesaka* or “*barang pu’un*”. Amongst the *pesaka* beads which are still in my family’s possessions, which my grandmother can recall the names of are: ‘*Kelem Belak*’, ‘*Inuk Beteng*’ and ‘*Lukut Sekala*. In the olden days, the *Lukut Sekala*’s value was the equivalent to one human life. According to the older generation, the *Lukut Sekala* can be categorised into male and female beads. However, I do not know how to distinguish between the two. As I understand it, the *Lukut Sekala* is still a very valuable bead and my family still has five to six of these beads. Beads also play an important role as part of the traditional wedding dowry in the *Uma Pawek* community. It is believed that without a ‘*Pukut Tik*’ or wedding dowry, the marriage will not prosper or the married couple will not produce any children. Apart from obtaining beads through marriage, the other beads which are in my family’s possession had also been obtained through barter trading with the neighbouring Kayan settlements. I am not certain however, which particular beads were obtained through barter trading.”

The ‘*Lukut Sekala*’ bead story

“Based on our family’s oral history as told by Julan Paren (my grandmother) to me, in one headhunting and raiding expedition my great grandfather, Paren Njuk captured a mother and her child (whose settlement or longhouse location is unknown to me or my grandmother) who she carried in an ornate beaded baby carrier. The mother pleaded for their lives and offered my great grandfather whatever valued possessions she had with her at that time. The unnamed mother had with her, apart from the valuable baby carrier (which was decorated with beautiful beads, boar tusks, shells and bear claws), she had also worn a bead necklace and a bead belt (called a *beteng*’ in Kenyah) to Paren Njuk. It was believed that due to her beautiful attire the mother came from an aristocratic or “*keta’u*” family. Paren Njuk spared the mother and child’s life and took the valuable treasures which had been offered in exchange for their lives. The “*Lukut Sekala*” beads in our family possession did not all owe its origins to the ransoming of the women and her child (even though it had been mentioned that her necklace had the *Lukut Sekala* beads. We are not sure how many of these beads were strung along on her necklace).

In another headhunting and raiding expedition, Paren Njuk’s father, Njuk Bilong (my great, great grandfather) killed an enemy warrior but spared the daughter’s life⁵. Her name was Labi. She was captured during her early teenage years as was described by my grandmother (Labi, according to grandmother, had just “*started to grow her breast*”). She then became the family’s slave or *lipen*. When my great grandfather married my great grandmother and because she was treated as an “outsider” as mentioned earlier the *Uma Pawek* aristocratic community demanded that as a paren, my great grandfather’s family can no longer keep Labi as a slave because owning slaves was a privilege of the aristocratic community. The fact that Paren Njuk owned a slave had caused anger amongst the *Uma Pawek* aristocrat society and therefore a gong and a *Lukut Sekala* bead was given to Paren Njuk’s family as an exchange for poor Labi. The gong and the bead are still in the family possession until today. As for Labi, she died at an old age with no descendants. She was married and had a daughter but the daughter died at an early age. The husband died not long after their daughter had died. When Labi died, she died alone for she was abandoned by the family that took her into their household. This all happened before the *Uma Pawek* migrated from Lumut to Long Apu.”

⁵ Njuk Bilong was one of four siblings, Usun Bilong, Paya Bilong and Doh Bilong. The current headman of Long Apu, Tinggang Use’ is the great, great grandson of Usun Bilong. Tinggang’s father, Use’ was a good friend of Paren Njuk and the two had the distinction of killing a rhino while on a hunting trip. The rhino horn is a treasured family heirloom and is currently being kept by the family of Tinggang Use’.

The Brideprice/'Pukut Tik' beads

“Beads are also used as part of the brideprice in the Kayan and Kenyah communities. Without brideprice beads, an *Uma Pawek* wedding will not be allowed to take place. The most important beads or the main bead in an *Uma Pawek* brideprice ensemble is known as the *Kelem*. Beads that accompany the *Kelem* beads are known as *Inuk Na' Bake* which consists of beads known as *Inuk Mate* by the *Uma Pawek*. There are two particular types of beads which constitute the *Inuk Mate* – *Lukut Belak Wa* and *Matan Dau* beads. The brideprice is given by the bridegroom's family to the bride's family. If the bride comes from a *keta'u* family, eight beads are required for the *Pukut Tik*. Four *kelem* beads must be accompanied by a pair each of *Lukut Belak Wai* and *Matan Dau* or four beads from either *Lukut Belak Wai* or *Matan Dau*. If the bride comes from a *panyin* family, four beads are required; two *kelem* beads accompanied by two *Inuk Mate* or a pair each of the “*Inuk Mate*” beads.

The *Pukut Tik* beads are placed inside the *belavit* (scabbard) of a small knife that is normally attached to the main scabbard of a parang or *malat suwang* (part of the required wedding dowry apart from beads). The brideprice items will be presented by eight (for a *keta'u* bride) or four (for a *panyin* bride) selected persons of good repute (which consists of both male and female representatives) to the bride's house. In the olden days, the so called “persons of good repute” are the wise elders of the community, who must not have the misfortune of having their children passing away. In the modern era, the “persons of good repute” can be a mixture of the elderly and the young. However the young people who are to present the dowry must be of unmarried status. The beads will be presented and examined meticulously by the bride's representatives to ensure the beads are clean, smooth and not cracked. The *malat suwang* will also be scrutinised closely, as it was believed that any damage on the *malat suwang* or the beads will bring misfortune to the married couple.”

Why beads are important for the tradition and customs of the Kenyah community.

“In the old days, beads were used for barter trading, wedding dowries and as in the case of my family history, as a ransom payment for a captured prisoner's and her child's life and also as compensation for the taking of a slave owned by my family by the *keta'u* of *Uma Pawek*. As I see it today, beads in the context of my community still play an important role. Today, most of the Kenyah community still uses beads as part of the wedding dowry. It is critical to identify, to know and to remember the bead names and the bead usage, especially in a traditional Kenyah wedding ceremony. The beads, as well as the gong and *tawak* are still seen as symbols of wealth and high status in the Kenyah community. Traditional beads must not only be viewed from an aesthetic point of view, but we must also treasure the stories behind the beads especially the *Lukut Sekala*.”

Conclusion

Ancestral family heirlooms connect generations in a deep, personal way. Anyone who has seen their great-grandmother's weaving loom, grandfather's ceremonial *parang ilang*, or a photo of a relative going off to war knows how poignant these pieces of history can be. These treasured items, passed down from generation to generation as remembrances' with great sentimental value, provide insight into the lives of our ancestors and a richer understanding of our family's history. Often these treasured family heirlooms make the journey from one generation to the next, but the stories that help give meaning to these treasures often do not survive the trip. People love to research the past but sometimes they do little to protect the pieces of family life they find for the future. The study of genealogy, have grown in popularity in Western countries. Perhaps this is due to the natural human curiosity of trying to find out about whom they are and where they fit in the larger scheme of things. Western genealogists have an advantage over their Dayak counterparts. Most Western countries have written records to document birth, death, tax, land titles, military enlistment and so forth, but Dayaks

like many indigenous Asian societies, rely upon oral history to record the achievements and despair of their ancestors. Some families have real heirlooms with fascinating stories behind them –like Eileen Paya Foong’s family collection of *pesaka* beads, which have been handed down from generation to generation. Very few people today have the family stories that are associated with their *pesaka* or heirlooms. When we can pass both the heirloom and stories on to our future generations, it makes them even more valuable.

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Pesaka or *barang pu'un* bead necklace



Lukut Sekala beads



