

# BORNEO, BEADS & BEYOND: SYMBOLOLOGY

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*Exhibitions, Education, Acquisitions*

Three different jungle fern fronds sizzled in the wok being used to prepare our dinner at the peaceful Iban head hunters' longhouse along the Skrang River in Sarawak, Borneo. All differed in flavor and each was delectable, but what added to their appeal was the current research being done suggesting them as possible preventative or cures for cancer! By looking at the vital, spry 86-year-old, chain smoking, rice wine drinking chief, or penghulu, I tend to be a believer! His tattoos told stories of his head-taking conquests (whose skulls we were privy to see) as well as his service as a Ranger for the British during World War II. The chief and four other elders (also Rangers and head-takers) bore the "lukut" wrist tattoo: a permanent "charm to prevent the escape of the soul and ward off all disease." The wrist "lukut" followed the use of the "lukut" or bead bracelet worn to "anchor a person's soul safely to the body." In fact, the word "lukut" originally meant "large decorated beads." Beads and tattoos not only mark accomplishments, wealth and status but more importantly they act as magical, protective devices to ward off evil spirits. Bead and other longhouse treasures came out late one night after sharing the customary rice wine and rice whiskey. The protection I felt at this distant longhouse came to me threefold: from fresh jungle nourishment, tattoos as well as the beads!

My travels took me throughout East Malaysia, to Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei Darussalam, all on the island of Borneo. My goals on this trip were:

- to gain an overview of ethnic minority adornment throughout this region as well as their availability in the marketplace;
- to examine the indigenous beads and beadwork, including the "value" beads; and
- to provide updated market values for the beads seen on Peter Francis Jr.'s beadsite (see thebeadsite.com: Beads from Borneo: the Southwell Collection of Kayan Beads).

With some fifty ethnic groups in Sabah and thirty or so different ethnicities in Sarawak, I was in fertile ground. The rich diversity of this land lies not only in copious animal, plant and insect species but in its people.

Throughout Borneo it is believed that in the outside world beyond the village dwell uncontrolled spiritual forces. Protective devices such as beads,

amulets, designs on clothing, equipment or on the self as a tattoo, are imperative to an individual's life, as are the protective images which surround the community. The lives of Borneans and the world around them are infused with an animistic spirituality, even among those who have adopted a new religion. Our half-Bidayuh guide who embraced Islam, moved cautiously through the jungle, stopping regularly to pay tribute to the spirits that dwell in various spots, predominantly at the base of boulders and large (old) trees.

Beads play a very important role in all aspects of the human lifespan from birth to death. Beads "house powerful protective spirits and accompany man from birth when a bead is tied to the baby's wrist until death when beads are part of the gravegoods." The use of a bead can protect the individual from a spirit's wrath. Older (usually larger) beads are highly valued and kept as heirlooms, used to pay brides' wealth, fines, shaman's services, as a form of currency, rank, status symbol—and used by shamans during rituals. The belief that beads possess *mana*, or life force, accounts for their cherished status. In some communities their value is greater than money. The smaller beads are used in beadwork, many of which are older as well, as documented by the late Peter Francis, Jr. (Indo Pacific beads and Sung Dynasty Chinese). The smaller beads themselves do not have magical powers, but the beadwork made from them also functions in a protective manner as well as conveying status and rank. Often the beadwork is done on fibers of pineapple leaves. Most of the designs depict images which deter evil and are found on objects worn when outside the protection of the village (longhouse), such as sun hats, baby carriers and beaded apparel. Certain designs, such as the tiger, hornbill bird, full "aso" or "dog-dragon" or the full human figure, are restricted to aristocrats. A slightly lower



The chief or penghulu



Beaded baby carrier panels with stylized "jungle faces," dragons and a human form

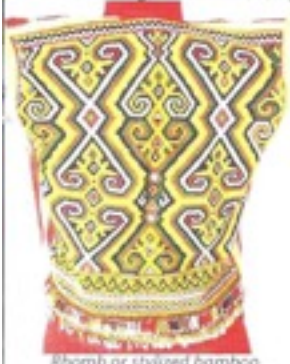


rank might have the stylized human head motif or a "jungle face" and lower status levels may have other creatures or an abstract design consisting mostly of geometric motifs.

The designs or patterns ultimately represent protective spirits. Anything decorated is placed under spirit protection. Profusely depicted on beadwork, textiles and on most objects, are the ubiquitous dragon and/or dragon face. "In all of Borneo the underworld, the source of fertility, is the realm of the dragon. The Bornean dragon corresponds to the Indian makara water monster, the Balinese barong and the Batak singa. The Chinese dragon is a male symbol whereas the Bornean dragon is a female symbol. This dragon provides protection in daily life, mostly through dragon spirits represented as emanations from her. Sacrifices to this spirit secure agricultural and human fertility. She guards over the dead and ensures their passage from this world to the next. She is associated with earth, water, storms, lightning and is represented on virtually all artifacts, from kitchen utensils to funeral monuments."

Stylized dragons, double dragons forming a "jungle face", "S" shapes and the dragons' eye which can be represented as a spiral, double spiral or rosette are seen on every art form, including the human skin as a tattoo.

Other symbols of the dragon include the crocodile, lizard, turtle, snake, frogs and fish. I read that a man stopping to cook rice in the forest will often carve motifs into his spoon or utensil before use and then discard it after. His act was one of protection as once a dragon or dragon symbol is carved into the wood, it invokes the dragon goddess, creating a new dragon spirit and dwelling which will then protect him.



Rhomb or stylized bamboo shoot designs on beaded vest

By contrast, the upper world, or male aspect, is symbolized by the hornbill/bird. Highly stylized, this symbol is seen on "spirit ships" which assist in carrying the shaman's spirit to the spirit world during healing rituals. It is also seen on textiles and beadwork.

Another widespread symbol of *mana*, or vital force, is the bamboo shoot, represented as a triangular design commonly transforming into a rhomb pattern and often associated with spirals. This design is found on many textiles, shields and decorative art.

Odd numbers seemed to predominate within one

of the most fierce head-hunting communities: the Iban. Their domicile is divided into five areas, thirteen bracelets worn on the arms, an odd number of leopard teeth are strung onto a female baby carrier (an even number for a male). Three coin belts and brass ring belts are worn by the Penampang Kadazan of Sabah. Coil bracelets were seen with nine coils.

Predominant colors used in the Borneo beadwork are black as a background, white and yellow for designs, with red, green and occasionally blue as highlights. Most of the highly treasured heirloom beads are black with the above-mentioned color decoration.

Bead necklaces, bead belts, antique hand-engraved silver jewelry, silver "girdles" and silver coin belts have all been passed down through generations. Bronze, brass, some copper as well as silver are worn; however, silver (and aluminum and tin imitations) is the preferred metal. Silver coin belts are found throughout Borneo; the coins are usually silver dollars dating to the late 1800's and early 1900's from Straits Settlements, Hong Kong dollars (British "trade" dollars) and Dutch Queen Wilhelmina Guilders. The number of coin belts worn can indicate marital status in some communities. Silver coins were the source of much of the silver jewelry items. The Iban are particularly fond of silver and wear coin belts, girdles, bracelets, necklaces and head dresses in silver at festivals. The Maloh people of Sarawak produce fine beadwork and excellent brass and silver jewelry. Much of the Iban silver is of Maloh manufacture. The Maloh were safe among head-hunting tribes due to this talent.

Brass objects were often formed from broken brass gongs. Small antique brass bells are very cherished and seen in heirloom jewelry throughout Borneo. Brass arm, leg or neck coils are worn during festivals by several communities, including the Rungus of Sabah and some Dusun women of Sarawak. Extraordinarily heavy brass ear weights are found throughout the region.

Gold is mined indigenously but rarely used for ornament except by the very wealthy. Often the gold was traded for the more highly valued beads.

Shell, predominantly from the giant clam, *Tridachna gigas*, is formed into bracelets, beads and discs and is seen throughout Borneo.

Beautiful examples of Bornean beadwork and artifacts from this trip still need to be studied and documented. Please visit our current exhibition of objects procured and described in this article, as well as some of The Bead Museum's collection of beads and objects from the Malay and Indonesian archipelago.

All photographs by author.

References:

- 1 *Beads*. Sarawak Museum Occasional Paper No.2. pg.4
- 2 *Hornbill and Dragon*. Bernard Seilato.



Iban festival wear