

MEDIA INFO

AN ARTISTIC SIDE TO SARAWAK

The tapestry of Sarawak can not only be appreciated from its potpourri of colourful people but also from the intricate traditional handicraft each ethnic group has. The best way to appreciate the many facets of Sarawak is to take a closer look at their arts and craft, to understand its origin and for some, to learn the mystical significance of each.

Many Sarawakians, made up of 26 tribes at last count, believe strongly in good and evil spirits, figurines and other spiritual practices during weddings, childbirth, and for illnesses.

Whatever the reasons may be for the arts and crafts produced by the ethnic tribes in Sarawak, the end product is truly one to be marveled at. Its colour, finesse, hand work, idea and purpose are all traits to understand and appreciate.

Of course, each tribe has its own specialty such as the Iban for their *pua kumbu*, the Bidayuh for their bamboo carvings and the Melanau for their painting skills. But all art forms are now so easily identifiable with Sarawak that the ethnic boundaries are no longer there.

Just to ensure the skills and traditions are not lost from generation to generation, each tribe ensures there is a younger

generation that takes after their elders. This is to ensure their handicraft will be enjoyed and cherished for more generations to come.

PUA KUMBU

The Iban women are skilled at weaving cotton blankets or more famously, the *pua kumbu* in elaborate and fancy designs. The *pua kumbu* requires minutes, hours, days, weeks and even months of dedicated work as the process is tedious.

However, the results are surely worth it as there is nothing more satisfying for the women than to look at a beautifully weaved *pua kumbu*. In the olden days, the design of the *pua kumbu* would be inherited from the ancestors and imparted in a dream in the form of a message. Some *pua kumbu*, inherited from the ancestors, would have spirits, good or bad, incorporated in the designs.



An ikat or pua kumbu made by the Iban. Source: Tun Jugah Foundation

The *pua kumbu* is done using the *ikat* (tie) and dye method which is the oldest traditional way of making textiles. The long method involves preparing the warp, tying, dyeing and weaving. Preparing the warp or warping (*ngirit*) is the first stage, followed by *ngarap*, *negi*, *ngacuk empelawa jeruk*, *maui* and finally *nipan* (folding) and this is a highly complex process itself. It involves sorting and counting the threads, based on a special numerical classification and counting technique, known only to experienced weavers.

The next stage, tying and dyeing, uses the dried strips of the fibrous leaf *lemba*. This may require some 250,000 of the strips. Nowadays, modern nylon strings are used. Beeswax is coated onto the strings for waterproofing.



The tying process is considered the most tedious process

After all parts of the designs are tied in and the threads protected from this dye, the yarn is immersed in the dye. The dyed background is usually of a reddish-brown colour. Once the yarn is dry, the process is repeated on the previously dyed areas and are subsequently tied and dyed in indigo. After the yarn is dry, the strings are cut off and the whole piece is unfolded to expose the designs. The warp is then mounted onto the weaving loom and woven.



An Iban lady weaving the ikat

Other woven products the Iban are proud of are the *sungkit* and *anyam* or *sulam*. *Sungkit* also has its own counting technique and the wrapping or knotting technique is not simple. The process is also done on the back strap loom. The *anyam* or *sulam* is similar to picking and uses silver, gold or cotton threads. The Iban have their own traditional and modern design motifs.

There are many taboos involved in weaving the *pua kumbu* or the other woven items. The art of making a *pua kumbu* is passed on from mother to daughter, however, only the high level weavers can attempt the more potent designs as they would have been bestowed with spiritual guidance.

Pua plays a significant role in the life and culture of the Iban. It is usually displayed in rituals and ceremonies as invitation to the gods. It also signifies the importance of events in rituals and ceremonies like a baby's first bath and other festivals. It is used for protection of the living room from harmful spirits during the death ritual. Other than that, it is woven for clothing and costume materials.

BEADS

Beads are another mystical item for the ethnic tribes in Sarawak. They are considered as an item of status. The only difference from tribe to tribe would be how the beads are used.

However, how the beads are strung would further determine the use of the beads. As an example, new babies get bead anklets which act as another set of “eyes” to look after them. It is believed that the beads would protect them from any harm or evil.

Beads are also used as part of clothing such as the *marek empang* (a beaded collar) for the Iban’s dress. It is also made into jackets or dresses to be used for special occasions like on weddings or other festivals.



Marik empeng, beaded collar worn by Iban women
Source: Sarawak Craft Council

The Orang Ulu are famous for their beadwork as they decorate their costumes, baby carriers, ladies bags and sunhats with ornately traced designs picked out in primary colours. Woman’s dance costumes have colourful artistic impressions of dogs and dragons embroidered in beads onto a background of black or red velvet.



A baby carrier decorated with beads

Their bead necklaces are famous as they include rare antique beads from China, Venice and the Middle East pointing to a trading culture that dates back centuries. The *Lun Bawang* of Long Tuma in the northern tip of Sarawak is reviving this ancient art and now produces their own ceramic beads.

Experts today have simplified the attraction of the beads to the colour it gives to the wearer. For example the Bidayuh's main dress is black and red, therefore, the coloured beads would definitely add a burst of sunshine to their dress.

The beads come from across the sea and the appeal of items that come from far away attracts the people and thus adds to the myths and stories of the beads supernatural wonders.

When stringing the beads, certain items are added to give it more weight such as a wild boar's tooth for strength and responsibility, or a brass bell for the women. In a nutshell, the beads are to protect the wearer from any harm.

For the Melanau and Bidayuh tribe, beads reflect one's wealth and status. Often, beads are taken to the grave as they believe that though the body will eventually disintegrate, the beads will last forever. Beads are normally passed down from generation to generation, adding to its value and worth.

Mothers usually collect the beads from the time their offspring are born. Later, the beads would be used as a dowry for when he wants to get married. How many and what type of beads the man has will reflect his worth and whether he is a good catch for the women!

BASKETRY

Weaving and basketry is the most widespread activity among the different ethnic groups. A variety of materials sourced from the jungle such as rattan, nipah, pandanus, bemban reed, bamboo and tree barks are weaved into all kinds of items.

The items, ranging from functional or aesthetic value, can be made into place mats, sunhats or *terendak*, mats to sit or sleep on, bags, baskets, food covers, shoes and so many more.

The Orang Ulu are known for making *ajat*, an extremely practical basket and a popular tourist souvenir. The black and white basket has found its way into mainstream use and has been fashioned into bags, pencil holders, folders and so on.

It is a wonder to see the baskets being made as the folk are really experts. They could probably weave a basket with their eyes closed. Their deft hands work quickly to produce such attractive and geometric designs based on fruits, ferns, creepers, shoots and even animals like birds and snakes.

Weaving is also an activity of the Iban. They produce many types of baskets, the shape and size depends on the use, some are for collecting wood, some for fish and fruits while the larger ones are for harvesting and storing rice.

The Bidayuh weave split rattan stems to make intricately pleated baskets and colourful mats. They also use materials like *bemban* and

pandan. The baskets have many functions such as to carry firewood or bamboo water pipes.

This tribe is also famous for its *kesah* mats, made from rattan and beaten tree bark, woven together to produce a hardy floor covering that has a unique texture. The mats are also used to dry their crops such as paddy and cocoa.

CERAMICS

Pottery is another activity of the Iban and they produce pots which is used to store many things from rice to *tuak*. Pottery dates back to the stone age as many were found in the Niah Caves in Sarawak. The criss cross pattern on some of the Niah pots has archeologists wondering about the possible link between the potters of thousands of years ago and the ones in Sarawak.

The intricate hand work produced would not fail to marvel anyone but most importantly, every piece of art the Iban produce can last generation to generation.



Intricate designs are etched on the ceramic products

The modern day pottery has a wide range of authentic clay artifacts from replicas of antique pieces to customized orders. For example, lamp stands, ash trays, mugs, pots and jars.

Their designs are usually inspired by nature. Traditionally, the colour would be natural but now in modern days, colours are added. The shape of the ceramic products have also evolved to look more sophisticated.

OTHER HANDICRAFT

The truth is artistry and creativity is endless in Sarawak. These are just some of the more popular handicraft in Sarawak.

Another point of interest would be wood carving. Originally, wood carving was a task for religious festivals and rituals or to decorate the longhouses. Now the skilled woodcarvers produce contemporary works of art like the mandolin-like *sape* (guitar for the Orang Ulu) and beautifully carved panels and doors. The Orang Ulu produce works of human figures, masks, monkeys and dragons.

The bamboo is another resource from the forest closely identified with the Ibans. The bamboo is used to cook their rice in. Some are more creative and use the bamboo to make utensils for use around the house.

Tree bark is used by some of the ethnic groups which are transformed into bags, key chains, hats or are used as a canvas for painting.

Sarawak's fame as a multi cultural and diverse state is reflected in its handicraft. All the different ethnic groups have their own form of expression and artistic sense which is expressed in the handicraft they produce. For sure it is a form of aesthetic appeal and form that will

always be admired, even after long memories of a visit to Sarawak have faded.

For more information, visit the website www.sarawaktourism.com or www.sarawakhandicraft.com

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