

ORANG ULU BASKETRY: DESIGN AND MATERIAL ADAPTATIONS

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Abstract

Orang Ulu knowledge and skills in manufacturing objects they use daily and for rituals are firmly rooted in society since the time of their ancestors. Basketry, the focus of this paper is a component of Orang Ulu's material culture that has a highly developed knowledge and skill base. The fast changing physical and socio-economic environments of the Orang Ulu of Belaga in the past 40 years have been accompanied by raw material depletion and new modes of livelihood and lifestyle. These changes have affected the production of Orang Ulu material culture particularly in the basket production. This paper discusses the use of new materials and designs in the manufacture of Orang Ulu basketry assemblages and the implications of these adaptations to traditional basketry and its future.

Keywords: *basketry, material, design, material culture, Orang Ulu*

Introduction – Orang Ulu Traditional Basketry

Belaga is home to many ethnic groups of Orang Ulu namely Kayan, Kenyah, Bhukat and Penan. To many, Orang Ulu baskets may look alike but there is slight variation in forms, styles, patterns, motifs and techniques that easily distinguish the different culture background of the maker. Orang Ulu weave variation of baskets and mats that serves important functions in their life; day to day activities such as farming and jungle produce gathering to ceremonial and ritual events. The creations of their traditional basketry are the manifestation of their wealth culture, technology and intellectual through the complex pattern and motifs, materials and manufacturing methods used by them.

In the past, Orang Ulu baskets were made of plant materials, consistent with basket definition by Ellen (2009) as a container created by weaving semi-rigid vegetable fibres. For centuries, Orang Ulu has fully utilized and relied on the abundant of natural plant materials within the environment which includes a vast selection of *wei* (rattan), *bulok* (bamboo), *lemetung* (*donax*), *tepo'* (*hornstedtia scyphifera*), *da'a* (*pandanus*) and *sang* (palm leaves) to make basketry (Chin, 1985, Brosius, 1986). Rattan is the most common materials used in their basketry making due its robust property and rich sources in the region. Different styles and weaving techniques may used by different ethnic groups of Orang Ulu, but the artefact almost applied in similar manner. Baskets are used as utilitarian object in agriculture, domestic and for personal use; for holding