

Sustainability of Orang Ulu Traditional Craft

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Abstract:

Since the early 1980s the Belaga district has experienced a rapid alteration in its main resource base due to extensive timber extraction, land clearing for oil palm plantations, and inundation of river valleys. Inevitably these various manifestations of development have depleted forest resources. The physical and economic transformation of the Belaga district is also changing the livelihood and values of the Orang Ulu communities. Urbanism is spreading among the resettled communities in the new township of Sungai Asap. This paper discusses the sustainability of Orang Ulu material culture – the indigenous material assemblage such as baskets, various types of mats, hats, wooden household storage, and crafts which are the commoditized forms of these household objects, in the face of the depletion of the forest and the changing livelihood and modern values of the Orang Ulu inhabitants of the district.

This paper argues that while the depletion in the supply of raw materials negatively affects the manufacture of these utilitarian objects and crafts, changing livelihood and values are corroding the peoples' demand for these objects thus rendering them redundant. The twin forces of raw material depletion and changing value (in taste/fashion/demand for these indigenous utilitarian objects) threaten the continued manufacture of these objects. The current situation suggests that their manufactured items as utilitarian objects would cease and be replaced by industrially manufactured consumer products fulfilling modern household needs. What remains of the once rich indigenous material assemblage would be the commoditized production of some such objects as crafts for the tourism industry. Even in the production of commoditized crafts would be dictated by the scarcity of traditional raw material, global taste and demand, and the availability of synthetic materials.

Keywords: sustainability, Orang Ulu, material culture, natural resources depletion, deforestation