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MELANAU BEAD CULTURE: A VANISHING WORLD?

Heidi Munan

Settled on the South China Sea coast of Sarawak, the Melanau comprise an aristocratic society which used to have a strong bead culture, tied to animist religion. Developments in the 19th and 20th centuries have influenced the traditional way of life so that today, only a few Melanau still keep a significant number of beads. Nevertheless, shamen and healers, adherents to the old religion, continue to use beads in healing and purification ceremonies. Bereaved families protect themselves by wearing special beads and by providing the deceased with beads according to his or her status in the traditional hierarchy. Specific kinds of beads are also prominent in traditional marriage ceremonies. Beads continue to adorn blouses and to serve as personal ornaments. Handicrafts embellished with glass seed beads are also produced, but mostly for the souvenir market.

INTRODUCTION

Borneo, the world's third largest island, covers an area of 750,000 km² and is more than three times the size of Great Britain. The major rivers flow towards the sea from the mountainous interior, building up wide alluvial plains along the coast. The island is so big that the various inhabitants did not, in the past, know very much about its extent, or about the mixture of peoples that lived on it (some of this ignorance persists to this day). But they knew and had names for their nearest neighbors up and down the river with whom they were on trading/raiding terms. A rugged interior and vast coastal swamps kept people asunder more effectively than the sea did; there was more regular traffic between south Borneo and Java, west Borneo and Sumatra, and north and east Borneo and the Philippines, than between the opposite coastal areas of the island itself. The coasts were indeed linked by routes, up the main rivers and across the watersheds, but these were not regularly traveled by large numbers of people. Farming communities migrated from time

to time in search of fresh lands, but most of them only moved about 50-100 km every few generations.

The great island of Borneo has not remained untouched by the political, social, and religious currents that swept the Insulindies. A Sanskrit inscription found in Kutei, concerning a prince Mulavarnam, indicates that enterprising Indian traders or temporary settlers had reached the southeast coast of Borneo in the 5th century (Ave and King 1986:19). The 8th-century Srivijaya empire, based on Sumatra, had its trading and cultural connections with neighboring islands, as did Majapahit in Java in the 14th century. After the collapse of these larger groupings, river-mouth chieftains along the Borneo coast acquired considerable regional influence; the principalities of Sambas, Banjarmasin, Kutei, and Brunei were among the most powerful.

The history of the Southeast Asian peoples is based on oral tradition and the written accounts of outside observers. A few early Chinese and Indian seafarers have left us their impressions. In some cases travelers' tales were recorded by other writers; Chau Ju-Kua, ca. 1234, is a famous example (Hirth and Rockhill 1911). Interesting though such works are for the overall picture, they are second- or third-hand evidence filtered by the observers' and recorders' cultural biases.

EARLY BORNEO BEAD TRADE

India and China are the earliest known sources of the semiprecious stone and glass beads that reached Borneo in the days before European contact. Some European beads probably reached the island before the Portuguese sailed these seas, brought by Arab, Indian,

and other traders who had obtained them in the great emporia of India or the Malacca Straits.

Sarawak derived beads from the India-China trade, some of which passed along the northern shore of Borneo. South and east Borneo were better served by various routes from Java and Sulawesi, but merchandise was carried up the rivers and into the heartland of Borneo from the north and west coasts, too.

While it is convenient in this context to talk of a "bead trade," it is unlikely that there ever was a class of traders who dealt in beads and nothing else. Traders carried all sorts of merchandise, including beads which they exchanged for goods. The larger traders bought up small goods in places like Malacca, Palembang, Sukadana, and Bantam and retailed them all over the region, supplying maritime peddlers in their turn. A.R. Wallace's (1869:329 ff) picture of the mart in 19th-century Dobbo on the Aru Islands is probably typical of the general manner of inter-island trade as it was carried on over the centuries.

EARLY SARAWAK BEADS

The earliest imported beads found in Sarawak are not very impressive-looking artifacts. About the size of peppercorns, they come in plain shades of white, turquoise, yellow, red-brown, blue, and sometimes black. Such beads have been recovered from Santubong, Niah, and Gua Sireh in Sarawak, and from Sungei Lumut and Kota Batu in Brunei. They are common in archaeological sites throughout the region.

Santubong, an 8th-14th-century trading town on Sarawak's west coast, was a center of all kinds of commerce including the bead trade and beads were possibly manufactured here. Nineteenth-century entrepreneur H.H. Everett, who lived in Santubong for some time, collected half-finished beads and deposited some in the Sarawak Museum (Everett and Hewitt 1909). Unfortunately these samples have been lost.

Everett's concise account of the beads he observed and his thoughts on their origin remain, however:

There is a great variety in the beads found at Santubong....

... beads in all stages of making are found, some roughly shaped, some not bored, and others only half bored, and one or two have been drilled so badly from two opposite ends that the holes crossed without coinciding.

... All the other kinds of beads may be of foreign origin but many are so crude that we think this improbable. Glass beads of various colors, yellow, red and blue are numerous. Many of these are asymmetrical and peaked at one or both ends as if the plastic glass had been twisted spirally round a wire.

... It seems very probably then that Santubong was once the scene of a bead making industry, but we are in complete ignorance respecting the makers. Natives of Sarawak have now no knowledge of such an art, and beads of the type in question are not affected by the Chinese. The red and yellow beads are often worn by poorer Milanos on their clothing [cf. Bead Tunic section further on], and the few large and handsome beads are of the same type as is treasured by the Milanos; yet these were almost certainly never made by Milanos (Everett and Hewitt 1909:7-9).

THE MELANAU

The people called "Milano" or Melanau (an exonym) account for about 5.8% of Sarawak's population. Most now live between the Rejang delta and the mouth of the Baram. They are related to the Kanowits and some Orang Ulu peoples of the mid-Rejang. Ethnographers consider them to be an indigenous people who moved down the Rejang River into its delta, and then up and down the northwest coast of Borneo. If the evidence of place names may be accepted, the Melanau were more widely dispersed in the past.

At present, the Melanau are divided into the Mukah/Dalat/Balingian, the Matu/Daro (Rejang), and the Bintulu sub-groups. They all speak related Melanau languages with strong dialect variations; a research assistant from Mukah could communicate with the people of Matu and Daro, but her "funny" accent and choice of vocabulary were often commented

upon. To point out the perceived distinction: a lady in Mukah stated that bead-decorated hats are “Igan style –we Melanau don’t wear them!”

Even if the Melanau originated in Central Borneo, they evolved into a seafaring people. Settled near the coast, they were exposed to outside influences which hardly touched the people of the interior. As succeeding waves of travelers found, the Melanau were not “simple natives” in the sense that more sophisticated outsiders could cheat or bully them. The Melanau knew the commercial value of things as well as any foreign trader did.

Today, it is difficult to say what the “original” Melanau culture was like. Their animist religion was linked with a complex system of laws which regulated all aspects of life. Some Melanau still follow the “old religion,” but it has become strongly modified by the combined influences of new religions, education, and the profound socio-economic changes of the 20th century. For the purpose of this paper, adherents of the animist religion will be referred to by the somewhat imprecise term *Melanau Likou*, commonly used among the Melanau themselves; the literal meaning is “people (of one river system)” (Bonadventure Hamdan bin Buyun 1998:5)

Living as they did along the coast and on the lower reaches of the major rivers, the Melanau had to be on good terms with the ruler of the day. Until the 19th century, the official overlord’s sway didn’t effectively stretch beyond the river-mouth settlements, and even there it was only intermittently enforced. The Melanau were within easy sailing distance of the royal town of Brunei, under the suzerainty of its *Yang Dipertuan* or sultan. Melanau headmen and chief traders, or anybody else who wanted to get ahead in life, had to stand in well with such representatives of political power as dwelt among them or dropped in from time to time. Some Melanau converted to Islam during the time of Brunei rule, or to Christianity during the Brooke and Colonial eras.

Until quite recently, the Melanau followed the accepted Borneo convention of considering every Muslim as a “Malay” regardless of ethnicity. According to the former Curator of Sarawak Museum, Tom Harrisson (1970:155-159), many local Malays are the descendants of ethnic Borneans who converted to Islam. This is not an imposed definition; converts

adapted their lifestyle, habitation, and clothing to the Malay pattern, and described themselves thus *vis-à-vis* the authorities. In 1939, no Melanau were reported to be living in Sibu which is, in fact, a main concentration of “urbanized” Melanau. Muslim Melanaus called themselves “Malay” *because* they were Muslims. One elderly villager in Matu in 1998 stated:

Melanau culture used to be simple. We just ate vegetables and fish, sparingly; people didn’t get cancer then. Now we eat *belachan* [fermented shrimp paste], *kechup* [soy sauce], all these new things. Today’s young people don’t care if they get rain on the head—a very dangerous thing! In the old [Colonial] days the Malays looked down on the Melanau; they said we eat raw fish “just like cats do,” and “dirty” sago worms! [i.e., two foods deemed delicacies by the Melanau].

Maybe sneers of this kind moved a Muslim Melanau to opt for “Malay” in the census 50 years ago. Today there is a much stronger ethnic consciousness among all indigenous Borneo people. In 1980, Matu-Daro, in the Rejang/Igan delta, was inhabited by 12,207 Melanau, the majority of them Muslim, and 227 Malays (Department of Statistics Malaysia 1996).

The Melanau convert’s immediate and extended family accepts a change in religion quite equanimously. Reasons vary. Marriage with a Muslim makes conversion of the non-Muslim partner mandatory, but considerations of career or political advancement are acceptable. Very few Melanau don’t have Christian, Muslim, and Likou relatives, and are on normal terms with all of them—a situation that tends to puzzle Muslims from other parts of Malaysia.

Religion and politics regardless, Melanau culture and lifestyle were shaped in part by geography. By the end of the 18th century, most Melanau lived along the coast (Fig. 1). Their staple food was sago (Fig. 2), a tree crop of the slightly brackish coastal swamps which—unlike rice—grows permanently. The Melanau didn’t have to migrate in search of arable land. Superstitions and taboos hedge about the cultivation, harvesting, and processing of sago. It is no coincidence that the fetishes required for rites of passage, healing/cursing, and propitiation are carved from sago pith or plaited from sago leaf.

Proximity to the river mouths meant that the Melanau had “first choice” of any merchandise that



Figure 1. A Melanau village: Kampung Tellian Ulu (all photos: H. Munan).

arrived on the northwest coast of Borneo: textiles, ceramics, and beads. The people of the interior had to adapt their tastes to what reached the mountain fastnesses. The downside of a coastal domicile was that the Melanau were subject to pirate attacks, and more exposed to the attentions of their overlord and his minions than may have been strictly desirable. Seafarers and fishermen themselves, they nevertheless built strong, tall longhouses for the protection of their families, especially if they lived in easily accessible locations.

The Melanau “tallhouse” was more than just a strong house; it was the spiritual home of the community. Building a new house was not lightly undertaken—the magician was as necessary as the carpenter. Great importance was attached to the main pillars of the house which were, and still are, credited with curative powers. The main pillar of an old house may be preserved after the building itself has fallen into disrepair; a new house can be built around the old pillars. In the last surviving Melanau longhouse, Sok Matu, the otherwise unremarkable “mother post” is pointed out to visitors.

A “Rajah’s Servant” (official of the Brooke regime) saw the Melanau thus:

The Melanaus are conservative, not open to quick friendships, rather suspicious and generally improvident. 75% of the crews of coasting vessels are Melanau; they have no superior in sea and fishing lore... a people with a fondness for litigation, and of peculiar morals. They are the best fishermen, the best sago workers, the best basket workers, the best paddlers, and best boat builders, and (to my mind) the prettiest women (*Sarawak Gazette* 1929:68).

Until the quite recent past, the Melanau were a strongly stratified society. Rank gradations are expressed in a unit of weight, the *picul* (about 60 kg). This is a reference to the amount of dowry due a bride, payable in brass cannons. Fifteen *picul* is the highest rank possible in the Rejang area; nine *picul* the highest in Mukah/Dalat. Seven *picul* is “middle class;” the slave class had no *picul* ranking. No special insignia of rank were worn as within a village everybody knew the aristocrats. At times of festivals—particularly betrothals, weddings, and funerals—old beads served to indicate rank.



Figure 2. Sago grove; the Melanau settled in the coastal wetlands so they could cultivate this, their dietary staple.

MELANAU BEADS

The Melanau distinguish between ritual beads and “common beads.” Common Melanau beads are, by preference, small, daintily, decorated polychromes. They are usually worn in single-strand necklaces or wristlets, often with a central pendant of embossed silver or silver-gilt. Beads may be used to decorate clothing (*see* *Bead Tunic* below). The Melanau taste in clothing and ornament tends towards small, exquisite items rather than massed or showy displays. A lady wears one or two strings of beads, but they have to be select!

Common beads are colorful, pretty, and worn for ornament only. Any woman who has them can wear them. After a period when beads were not in fashion at all, younger people began to wear grandma’s treasures again in the 1990s.

Where are the Melanau beads from? Some, particularly the highly prized small, monochrome, opaque yellow glass beads (“peanut beads”), may be from India. The majority of common beads are of European manufacture (Venice, Bohemia, and the Netherlands), a source that dried up 50 or more years ago. New beads are coming in from Indonesia, but there is never any question of confusing them with the old ones. The Melanau share in the common Borneo bead stock; it is the way they are strung or stitched that identifies them as *Melanau beads* (Table 1).

Two beads used by the Melanau have special significance:

1. *Manik tilek*: large undecorated blue beads with a large perforation. They are about the size of a cherry, spherical or flattened spheres, of black-blue to greenish-blue glass, some of them of matte “vaseline glass.” Some *manik tilek* are irregularly shaped, pitted, or otherwise rough, but this is seen as a sign of age and considered to make the bead more valuable.
2. *Manik kahat (kahet)*: long (up to 50 mm) rounded black or deep brown beads with white stripes or spirals, made of onyx, agate, or glass in imitation of these stones.

“Good beads,” the old Melanau ladies agree, “cannot be bought any more. They came to us by inheritance.” Beads may be left to daughters, granddaughters, or daughters-in-law. There is no fixed rule. A woman could bequeath or give her beads to an outsider if she liked. The family wouldn’t like such a proceeding, but neither would they query the owner’s right. She may even sell them. Collectors will pay good prices for old beads, and most Melanau sell beads long before they would part with silver or antique ceramics.

A grandmother may give a string of beads to a first-born baby girl, or any favorite grandchild. Small children often have beads put around their wrists or necks, partly to show the family’s fondness for the little ones, partly as protection; this depends on the type of bead used (*see* *Ritual Beads* below). Little girls used to wear no clothing other than coconut shell or silver “fig leaves” to cover the pubic area; this modesty shield could be suspended with a plain cord, or a string of beads.

Table 1. Glossary of Melanau Beads and Bead-Related Terms (*m.* = *manik* = bead).

<i>Adat</i>	Customary law, custom.
<i>Baju baben</i>	In Mukah-Dalat, a long loose blouse or tunic (<i>baju kurong</i>) fitted at the waist with long front tails (<i>kebaya panjang</i>), silver gilt buttons at the neck, front, and sleeves.
<i>Baju senahak</i>	In Matu, a long loose blouse or tunic (<i>baju kurong</i>) fitted at the waist with long front tails (<i>kebaya panjang</i>), silver gilt buttons at neck, front opening, and sleeves.
<i>Bomoh</i>	Traditional healer, magician.
<i>Buah benah</i>	Name used in Kampung Sekaan, Matu (<i>see m. tilat</i>).
<i>Buah blud</i>	Long black-brown onyx bead; set in gold and worn as a brooch, ring, etc.
<i>Buah bukuk</i>	Small silver gilt buttons for female formal attire.
<i>Buah lipas</i>	Seed used as bead (?).
<i>Buah pasin</i>	Seed (used as bead), very hard; symbolizes strength of marriage.
<i>Burong tiong</i>	Minah bird with bright yellow dewlaps; also the name of a bead.
<i>Dukun</i>	Traditional healer, magician.
<i>Jerunai</i>	A long carved pole to which were attached human burials.
<i>Kahet-type</i>	Long black glass bead, white spiral: <i>kahet</i> bead of a kind not suitable for weddings.
<i>Kahet-type</i>	Long banded onyx bead with band of gold; "made by <i>jins</i> ."
<i>Lugi</i>	In Mukah, a woven gold brocade cloth.
<i>M. belidei</i>	Long black glass bead with white stripes (<i>belidei</i> means edible grass).
<i>M. burong tiong</i>	Small barrel bead, black glass, yellow zigzag; "Melanau bead."
<i>M. jelu'it, jeluyut, jelu'ut</i>	<i>Jaluyut</i> in Matu; small polychrome (non-ritual) beads.
<i>M. kahat (kahet)</i>	Long black onyx beads with white stripes; also faceted glass beads; for weddings.
<i>M. kahat lilin</i>	Long (30 mm) dark brown (amber?) bead; "good," but not for weddings.
<i>M. lida anjing</i>	Leaf-shaped flat onyx bead, perforated at the tip; "dog tongue."
<i>M. lilin</i>	Similar to <i>pasin</i> , but flattened or four-faceted (Matu).
<i>M. mata lelamaih</i>	Small spherical black, white spot(s); "caterpillar" (<i>lelamih</i> is a larva).
<i>M. mata tatin</i>	Black with white-red-green "eye;" "dragonfly eye."
<i>M. pasin</i>	"Peanut"—opaque yellow glass bead, pitted; part of wedding gifts.
<i>M. tajok kahat</i>	Hexagonally faceted spindle-shaped carnelian bead; "palm heart."
<i>M. tilat (tilek)</i>	Spherical "vaseline glass" bead, 10mm diameter, deep blue to turquoise-grey.
<i>M. timei</i>	Short fat oval carnelian bead; <i>timei</i> means shellfish.
<i>Mata utei</i>	Black/white flat onyx hexagonal bead, for bracelets; "honeycomb."
<i>Naga uling (nikah)</i>	"Wedding dragon"—silver comb (with beads); beaded headband.
<i>Naga</i>	Dragon; plays an important part in Melanau mythology.
<i>Pahe', pahet</i>	Offering (at healing ceremony).
<i>Pangkat</i>	(Ceremonial) rank.
<i>Picul, pikul</i>	Unit of weight, about 60 kg.
<i>Seraong (terindak)</i>	In Matu, a hat occasionally decorated with pendant strings of beads around the edge.
<i>Seraong Sambas</i>	Hat of fine bamboo with applique glass seed-bead embroidery.
<i>Suk</i>	Fishing fetish carved from bone or horn.
<i>Tali tengeng, tingang</i>	Creeper (bark?) fiber.

BEAD TUNIC (*BAJU BABEN*)

The bead bodice or tunic worn by Melanau ladies is unique to this ethnic group. Various known as *baju baben*, *bab'n*, or *baban* (*baju* means tunic or blouse), it is a black satin or velvet tunic, buttoned with chunky silver-gilt buttons, and decorated with a variety of small polychrome beads threaded along the hem, and seed beadwork sleeve yokes. A chain of finely worked silver platelets may also be used as hem decoration. These embellishments are usually unstitched before washing the garment, and sewn on again after drying, though some very careful owners wash the *baju baben* with the beads on. It is seldom worn so it never gets very soiled.

There are two main styles, with the following features in common:

1. The bead tunic is always black, made of satin or velvet.
2. The lower hem is decorated with a string of beads (peanut-sized monochromes and polychromes) stitched in place so that, should the stitching come undone in places, the main string will still hold the precious beads.
3. A sleeve yoke consisting of an inch-wide strip of beadwork is inset between the top of the sleeve and the armhole. The patterns, made of fine seed beads, may be flowery, zigzag, blocks of color, or anything the lady wishes to make; there is no restriction on beadwork designs. Some Melanau informants compare it to "snake skin; that's where our ancestors copied the patterns from." *Dipa ngauen* (*pemalei*), the snake that changes into a dragon, is an important figure in Melanau mythology.
4. The close-fitting sleeves are twice too long, slit open from the elbow downwards, and decorated with large silver-gilt buttons. The dangling ends of the sleeve are looped back and tied around the wearer's wrist (*mukah*), or tied around the arm just below the elbow (*dalat*) so the silver buttons hang around the wearer's arm.

Most bead tunics seen today follow the style of the Malay (Muslim) *baju kurong*, which dictates that a woman's garments must not emphasize her figure. This type of tunic has a round neck and a frontal slit,

about three inches deep, buttoned with heavy silver buttons or fastened with a silver-gilt brooch sometimes called "Melanau gold." When unbuttoned, the neck opening is just big enough to permit the wearer to slip her head through it.

The tunic called *baju senahak* was closely fitting like the *baju kebaya* (Malaysian Airlines stewardesses wear *kebaya* as cabin uniforms). This tunic is open down the front, and buttoned with common beads threaded through cloth loops like buttonholes. Silver-gilt buttons or colorful beads decorate the sleeve hem. This style is only seen at "costume parades" nowadays.

The Melanau bead tunic is black because, according to one elder, "this is more serious and official." Ladies used to wear bead tunics for formal wear, on occasions such as meeting important guests or going to the *astana* (palace) to receive an award. It was worn by the bridal party at a traditional wedding; this fashion has recently been revived (Pl. VA). New bead tunics are occasionally made for weddings, and worn during one of the wedding dinners; these are decorated with newly imported Indonesian beads which are acceptable substitutes for the old "common beads." Bead tunics with authentic old beads are sometimes lent as a special favor; everybody in the village knows who has one.

RITUAL BEADS

Beads are worn by Melanau women and children. Men shunned such ornaments until quite recently. One class of men, however, was outside this rule: the traditional healer, locally known as *abayoh* (*bomoh* or *dukun* in Malay.) His role as a mediator with the spirit world gives him a special, semi-defined status between the genders. He (or, less commonly, she) wears beads as part of his professional clothing, the way a medical doctor wears a white coat, and a stethoscope around his neck. An *abayoh's* necklace may include beads of any kind including the "common" types, those preferred by women for ornamental wear. This is why one female Melanau informant considers the use of beads "a womanish thing to do—but for a *bomoh* I suppose that's all right...."



Figure 3. Access to Kampung Tellian Ulu is by a precarious one-plank bridge over a black peat river.

Healing

The Sarawak Museum collection contains a string of beads described as: “70/101. A glass bead necklace with two boar tusks, long glass bead, formerly used by Datu Pengiran of Matu *for smoking* (author’s italics). Presented by Dr. Wong” (Pl. VB). The *Datu Pengiran* of Matu was a community leader and a traditional healer. He did not wear beads while smoking a cigar, but while performing a healing ceremony involving smoke (fire and incense) inside a patient’s house.

This is not the place to describe the Melanau “smoking ceremony” in full (for details, see Buck 1933:168-172; Chong Chin Seng 1987:38-49). There is a graduated system of healing ceremonies, ranging from *bebayoh* to *bejiji*; the officiating *abayoh* decides which is appropriate depending on the patient’s condition. For some a tent-like *payun* structure is built. To strengthen the framework, beads and hawks’ bells are added where the rods meet at the top or where supports are attached to the ceiling beams. This concept of strengthening something by means of a powerful token extends to (or is taken from?) daily life: the carved *suk* images that Melanau fishermen attach to their nets are not meant to catch or lure the fish, but to strengthen the lines.

A traditional healer can do both “black” and “white” magic; i.e., he can help and heal, or harm, usually at the instigation of somebody seeking revenge. His social position is uncertain; people respect and possibly fear him, but many *abayoh* are quite poor. “Respectable” families would not wish their children to marry an *abayoh*’s offspring. This attitude may explain the caption “Melanau witch” which appears with a Sarawak Museum field photo taken in the 1960s; one must assume the term was obtained from a village informant, and not intended to give offence. The officiant sits on a swing on which she rocks herself into a trance. The swing is decorated with dragon figures, little umbrellas, dangling strings of beads, and “frog-head bells” which tinkle with each movement.

In the past, the patient paid the healer in beads, gold, and iron (knife blade) or brass. The fact that an appropriate reward is given is more important than the reward itself. Today the debt is usually settled in money.

The healer, acting as an intermediary between the human and the spirit world, protects himself by wearing or holding beads. “Each person has his or her own style,” says respected *abayoh Ketua Kampung*

(village elder) Peteran bin Libai of Tellian Ulu (Fig. 3; Pl. VC top), one of today's best-known Melanau healers. He not only wears his own beads when engaged in a ceremony, he also puts beads on his patient; he stressed that not all *abayoh* do this.

One cherry-sized blue glass bead or three opaque black glass beads (depending on the case) are tied to the patient's wrist before the ceremony starts. "These beads show that he is my patient," K.K. Peteran says. "The spirits will recognize him by the beads, and know whose patient he is." He points to a government officer who wears the standard name tag: "The beads are like a government officer's badge! People respect the master he serves." Beads serve to appease the more irascible spirits who may resent being called up: "They say, 'Why do you call us all the time? Who are you, anyway? What's in it for us?' Well, the beads are food for the spirits. We also put beads among the offerings and gifts which are laid out for their refreshment." After the healing ceremony is completed, the patient continues to wear the beads for three to seven days, then they may be taken off as the *abayoh* directs.

K.K. Peteran got most of his beads from his grandfather, who was an exceptionally powerful healer. His father, also an *abayoh*, added more beads to the string; K.K. Peteran in turn affixed a few items. The villagers consider Peteran as his grandfather's successor and heir to some of the elder's power.

K.K. Peteran's heirloom necklace consists of mixed beads, strung in no apparent order (Pl. VC bottom). While the majority are small polychromes of European origin, there are a few larger monochromes and recognized Orang Ulu value beads, including a fine specimen of the Kayan *batang uma*. The French Indochina silver piaster is one of three such coins which the old gentleman gave to his grandsons. A pretty pink shell washed up on Damai Beach near Sarawak's capital Kuching was added to the necklace "because the color is pleasant." It was found while K.K. Peteran was a consultant during the construction and outfitting of the Melanau Tallhouse in Damai Cultural Village. His expertise was sought both on traditional building and furnishings, as well as on how to conduct "tourist shows" of ceremonies in such a way that they would not harm anybody. As a visible token of the trust even the government puts in him, the little

shell was an appropriate addition to a powerful necklace. K.K. Peteran put a tin whistle on the string for a similar reason: he was formerly in charge of the grass airstrip in Mukah, and used to blow this whistle to clear the landing area each time a plane arrived. In its way, this whistle is a symbol of authority, though the healer says he never blows it in connection with healing.

An *abayoh*'s beads may be borrowed by relations qualified to perform the appropriate ceremonies, but they have to be paid for. The usual price is a gold ring or the monetary equivalent. This is necessary for the safety of all parties: "You can't just take beads out anyhow!" Beads have a spirit which is very strong both to protect, and (if not properly appeased) to harm. After my last interview with K.K. Peteran, I asked for permission to photograph his beads. It was politely pointed out (but not by the *abayoh* himself) that a token payment would be required, a *sagu hati*. This is partly as compensation for the owner's trouble, partly for taking the beads out needlessly, and partly to protect the "outsider" who came to talk about and touch them but did not require their actual healing services.

Protection and minor healing can be performed without an *abayoh*. Any woman—mother, midwife, or grandmother—may tie a string of *tengang* fiber around a baby's wrist to check that the infant is gaining weight and size; it is loosened and re-knotted as the child grows; if necessary a new bit of string is added. This string may have a bead tied to it, though this is not invariably done. A lot depends on the mother (and grandmother) of the infant. Excessive drooling may be cured by putting a necklace of white beads on a baby. Some Melanau children wear bead necklaces "for protection" until they are six or seven years old. After this age boys would refuse to be seen with beads.

When a baby is brought to its grandparents' house for the first time, the grandmother ties a set of two *tilek* beads and one silver button to the baby's wrist. These beads are getting rare. One elderly lady in Matu was asked how she could keep up supplies for a growing family of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. A quiet chuckle passed around the assembly of aunts and grandmothers. "We ask the parents to return the beads after a day or two, and use them for the next grandchild!"



Figure 4. *Ketua Kampung* Peteran bin Libai at an old burial site; bodies were formerly laid to rest above ground.

Death

After a person has passed away, immediate family members put a few *manik tilek* on their wrists. Then the body is washed by pouring water over it from antique plates; this last office should be performed by close relatives. After washing, the body is laid out. The chin is tied into a seemly position with a string of small beads. Mourners and helpers note (and remember) if this string was long enough to pass twice or even three times around the head, or only once. The “yellow peanut” is preferred for this purpose, but other common beads, including monochrome glass “seed” beads, can be used.

Beads of the *manik tilek* type, not necessarily the very good ones, are tied to the wrist of the corpse. After the deceased has stiffened and is dressed, the string of beads holding the chin is taken off and laid on the pillow. Antique plates are placed under the body’s neck, hands, knees, and heels, depending on local custom and the family’s ability to furnish such valuables. Similarly, the string of beads may be laid in the coffin and buried as “passage money” to the underworld (Morris 1997:109), laid beside the coffin but put aside after the wake, or laid on the coffin in its final resting place. The last option relates to the time

when the Melanau deposited their dead above ground, usually on platform-like structures (Fig. 4), at some distance from the village. No villager would have dared to remove any of the valuables from these repositories, not even long after the bodies had crumbled to dust. When earth burial became the accepted norm, many Melanau families still went to the trouble of erecting a hut over the grave where the necessary gifts could be deposited.

In the case of a high-ranking woman, particularly if she had no children, her blue wedding beads may be put on her wrist. If she specifically asked to be buried in her bead tunic, or with *manik tilek*, the family will respect her wish. A framework may be erected over the body where it lies in state, decorated with beads and sago leaf plaitings. The leaf decorations are taken to the cemetery, but the beads are put away for future use. The generally stated reason for burying the dead without traditional provisions is the danger of tomb robbery. Christians and Muslims also state that the “passage money” of beads, to be handed to a “heathen deity” at the gate of the pagan paradise, is not needed by members of their faiths.

While the body is still in the house, family members have *manik tilek* tied to their wrists; this

custom is observed, sometimes surreptitiously, by many Muslims and Christians. The beads are kept on until after the funeral party has returned from the graveyard, then the family has to take a bath in the river. According to Morris, in some areas this is an occasion for dirt-smearing and horseplay of a kind not usually seen among the Melanau (Morris 1997:131-132). In some areas beads are only put on for the ritual bath; the ladies in Dalat stress that these beads must be from the family's own store, or borrowed from very close relatives.

In Matu, bereaved family members wore an opaque black glass bead decorated with a red-and-white zigzag on a string while the body was still in the house (2-4 days, to give the chief mourners time to get there if they were absent from the village). A bird shape, *manok siau*, was plaited of palm leaves. Friends held the leaf bird and pretended to "peck" the mourners' beads with it. The bird, having been sufficiently "fed" on a valuable old bead, was then placed on the new grave, or discarded in the cemetery. This bird protected the departed from bad graveyard spirits which might disturb his rest and haunt his former abode and next-of-kin. A widow or widower was considered to be at particular risk, and was, therefore, subject to restrictions and taboos for a set period of time. The real danger appears not to be from the spirit of the departed (who was, after all, a beloved family member) but from a tribe of evil graveyard spirits which haunt the place, and menace not only the living who invade their space, but also the (souls of the?) newly buried or deposited dead.

The time between death and burial is fraught with ritual danger and taboos which have to be washed away in the prescribed manner. Madam Mary Sibew of Medong (1998:pers. comm.) relates:

After my grandfather's funeral, the mourners returned to the house. Then they put on *bomoh* beads [i.e., large blue-black glass beads] and took a bath in the river, with all their clothes on. We all poured water over ourselves with antique plates. After this, the beads and the plates were kept in a special sago leaf basket, called *jahai*.

This is a basket with four reinforced corners, no lid, and designs worked into the sides, generally used for storing ritual objects.

After a death, an elder or an *abayoh* could advise the bereaved family to continue wearing the blue beads for the period of mourning (40 days for a parent). The mourners had to wear black clothing without jewelry other than the blue beads. A widow in particular wasn't allowed to dress her hair smartly lest she be suspected of trying to attract men. Men wore black armbands in mourning, a custom probably picked up from the Chinese or the Europeans. During the period of mourning, people couldn't go to their farms or to sea. Neither were they allowed to make music or attend parties.

Some aspects of the old culture have slipped into today's Melanau Muslim and Christian funerary rites. The religious authorities are on the whole tolerant, only objecting if the "heathen practices" get too ostentatious. The coffin of a dear friend and distinguished bead expert, Harriet Brodie of Mukah, was carried through the streets under a canopy of umbrellas in 1998. This structure was left on the church porch during the requiem mass, but was later reassembled over the grave. "*Adat is adat, religion is religion,*" an authority on Melanau traditional law says to that. "There's no reason why they should disagree. Just don't mix the two!" (Madam Rose Laga of Kampung Tellian Tengah 1998:pers. comm.)

Occasionally, building or agricultural activity uncovers beads and ceramics in the ground. If the digger does not know where these things are from (i.e., a burial so old that no trace remains), and if his soul is strong enough to take the risk, he may keep them. Today, the fear of the unknown is driven out by the obvious commercial value of "antique finds." Melanau elders lament the fact that unscrupulous persons systematically plunder and even excavate old grave sites in the jungle—mores and manners are changing!

WEDDING BEADS

The customary laws or *adat* from different Melanau areas show considerable variety. All agree, however, on a rank system based on *picul* (weight) valuations, which has to be observed particularly during wedding and funeral ceremonies. Bride wealth was formerly reckoned in brass cannon of the appropriate weight, though nobody remembers having

seen such payments actually made in kind. An old Brunei cannon may indeed form part of a dowry, but the normal thing is to present other valuables, or money. In 1900, one *picul* was fixed at 25 Sarawak dollars.

Besides regulating the details of engagement and marriage gifts, a person's *picul*-status conferred rank and power in the old days. A high-ranking person could commandeer the services of the lower classes (not just his slaves) to help with tasks like building a boat or a house. The people feared to disobey him openly because of his rank, considered to be under supernatural protection. As recently as the 1950s, an aristocrat in Mukah could punish offences against tradition (excavating and selling antique ceramics found at a building site) by fining people he caught in the act.

Rank was normally acquired through birth. A 9-*picul* girl should marry a man of equivalent standing. If she married "down," her children would normally acquire their father's status. In some cases, however, it was possible for a lower-ranking but ambitious and wealthy man to "buy" himself, or at least his children, into his bride's level by making a higher dowry payment. Much depended on the families involved, and the headmen and elders, to sanction such proceedings; society accepted but never completely forgot them. Even in Muslim areas like Daro or Matu, where rank is hardly regarded today, people know very well who was "truly 9 *picul*" in the past and who wasn't, or who descends from the very select 15-*picul* clan of the lower Rejang.

Besides the symbolic cannon, engagement and bridal ceremonies and gifts were elaborately prescribed. There could be much haggling over the actual value of gifts—how much cash for one *picul*? How much for one *amas* (a unit of gold)? The Native Customary Laws Council of Sarawak has recently published a summary of betrothal and wedding gifts (Bonadventure Hamdan 1998:Tables A-F). Opinions vary, however, and an elder from the same village as the report's author queried three of the listed items and added one which he described as "very important."

It is not intended to describe a Melanau wedding ceremony here in full (for this, see Morris 1997:87-104), but to look at the essential wedding beads. These are listed by Bonadventure Hamdan (1998), mentioned by every person I interviewed, and

described by earlier writers. Among the upper classes, beads of a carefully prescribed kind and in the appropriate number had to be tied to the bride's wrist by her mother-in-law upon first entering her new husband's home. This may be done on the doorstep, after the bride has ascended the stairs and has had her feet washed in antique celadon bowls on every step. It could be done at the bottom of the steps, or (in a longhouse) in the doorway of the bridegroom's family rooms, before or after the mother-in-law has put a drop of oil from a celadon bowl on the bride's forehead. Even in Matu, some elderly ladies insist on bringing the "wedding beads" out of some bottom drawer and placing them on the young woman's wrist. The correct number is no longer an issue in this Muslim community; the protection offered by the beads is.

W.S.B. Buck (1933:164-165) observed in Oya in 1929, that beads were attached to the bride's wrist *after* she had stayed for three days with her new husband's family and was about to visit her own. The beads and other gifts were then kept by her mother, and would eventually descend to her children.

If the right beads are not available, money might be accepted as a substitute (Bonadventure Hamdan bin Buyun 1998:pers. comm.), but many families (read: grandmothers) insist on beads. It is generally known in a village who has beads; they can be borrowed for a wedding ceremony against a token payment (i.e., RM 5.- or 10.-) to "appease their spirits."

In a traditional ceremony, the number of wedding beads has to correspond to the bride's *picul*-status, or—if she is marrying upwards—the groom's and thus her new family's status. According to Hamdan's (1998) list, a 9-*picul* bride requires 9 *manik kahet* and 7 *manik tilek*; he also lists the numbers for 7 and 5 *picul*. This prescription was queried by other elders in Mukah; one stated that "*Kahat* and *tilek* beads are of no use to lower-ranking people, because only 9 *picul* and 7 *picul* need beads as wedding tokens!"

The wedding beads may be threaded on a string and tied to the bride's wrist, but (especially in Mukah) this is not enough. There, the beads are tied to a brass bangle, together with a chip of a broken *kwali* (large iron cooking pan) wrapped in black cloth; this bangle is put on the bride's wrist.

A traditionally dressed Melanau bride wears a silver or silver-gilt head comb (Pl. VA). This could be

decorated with small beads though most informants agree that this *naga nikah* or *naga uling* (wedding dragon) is "not the fashion nowadays." Another style no longer seen is a beaded headband, resembling that worn by some of the Central Borneo people, and possibly one of the clues to the Melanau's origin.

The bride also wears a string of old beads around her neck, with a filigree silver box on it, and a silver belt buckle with or without the matching belt. This bead necklace, however, is "for decoration" and to show that the family has such ornaments.

The wedding beads proper—blue glass and brown onyx—are for protection. A young girl, entering into a new life as a wife and eventually mother, needs the strength the blue beads will give to her spirit. She has left her mother's tutelage; her mother-in-law offers symbolic shelter and welcome by placing powerful beads on her hands.

These wedding beads have to be worn for three nights and three days. During this time the bridal couple may not leave the house, and are under numerous taboos: they may not nap in the daytime, they may not scratch themselves except with the rib of a coconut frond, and so on. On the third day "the mosquito net is opened" and the taboos are at an end.

In the old days, a resin candle was kept burning in the bridal chamber for the first three nights, guarded by an old woman. This meant the couple could converse and get to know each other (or sleep) in the partial privacy of the mosquito net, but the marriage was not consummated. If the bride decided, before or on the third day, that she didn't wish to get married to this man after all, she could go back to live with her parents. The union was "annulled" and her status was that of a woman never married, not a *divorcée*.

BEAD ORIGINS

Wedding beads are totally unlike the dainty artifacts of Venice and Amsterdam otherwise favored by the Melanau. The white-banded onyx beads and their glass imitations may be in a good state of preservation, or chipped and worn. Many of the blue glass beads look sand-scratched and worn; visually they resemble beads from the Ban Chiang excavations in northern Thailand to a remarkable degree. Their

origin cannot, however, be verified without chemical analysis.

How old are Melanau wedding beads? A bead found in an undisturbed site, a grave for instance, may be dated by association with other recovered articles. This fixes the time when the bead was deposited, but *not* the time when it was made. It could have been traded up and down the Malacca Straits and the Insulindies for a few hundred years before that. It could have remained in the possession of one family for generations before it was laid to rest with a respected elder.

Beads collected in the field are almost impossible to date. Family histories may fix a bead at "ten generations," but is one generation to be considered twenty years or fourteen? In an orally related family history, ten *generations* may actually mean ten *owners*. It is necessary to know whether the bead changed hands after each owner's death (70 years), or whether it was handed over by a fond parent to the first child of the family who got married (18-20 years).

Trade within the land mass of Southeast Asia and from island to island has been going on since people set foot here. Few Borneo tribes have a recognized "trader" but few Borneo tribesmen have not gone on at least one trading trip. Young men in particular like traveling about, taking up work here and there, and returning laden with treasure: jars, cannon, gongs... and what commodity is more portable than beads?

Where do the Melanau think their beads came from? Generally, this was not considered a very interesting point by my informants: "The beads are here, they're ours—what else is there to worry about?", or "Beads used to be bought from shopkeepers and traders, 'long ago'." Ladies refused to be drawn on this question, but if pressed, a man would say "100 years ago;" i.e., beyond anybody's personal memory.

One community elder in Kampung Seka'an, Matu, was more forthcoming:

Beads always come from outside, from far-away countries. Our ancestors went trading as far as Brunei [about 300 km], Selat [Singapore], Sambas [West Borneo], they bartered other items for beads. Some of the sago trade was conducted in beads, brass, and similar items. Brass hawks' bells from Brunei are very popular, they were traded together with beads. *Hajis* [pil-

grims] brought beads back from Meccah, especially the banded agate which is still available there today. One type of banded agate has stripes of gold inlay instead of the white bands, these are very potent beads, and were made by *jinn* [spirits], my friend Hj. Ismail has got one (Penghulu Hj. Wasli bin Taha 1998:pers. comm.).

Beads were always prestige or value articles; they were not used for bartering inside the community. Pilgrims to Mecca still bring back bead rosaries (onyx, carnelian, jasper, and other semiprecious stones; lapis lazuli is very popular just at present) and necklaces for female relatives. Such items are not for bartering or reselling, but as mementoes of a very important event in a Muslim's life.

K.K. Peteran says that "you can tell old beads from new ones, the old ones have bigger holes. In the old days, *tali tengeng* (*tengang*) was used to string beads, this cannot be made into a thin thread because it would be too weak. *Tengeng* is the root fiber of a plant, people used to cultivate it; it's stripped, then beaten to make it pliable." Other informants claim *tengang* is the stem of the creeper; I have seen the twisted string but not the plant. This is the same fiber that is used to make the wristlet intended to gauge a baby's growth.

CONCLUSION

What is the future of Melanau beads? Their value as necessary protective or ritual objects is practically nil today; people sell old beads to raise money long before they sell other valuables. The commercial value of beads, however, is constantly rising. More than one informant states ruefully that "my mother sold a string of beads for just 20 dollars in 1950, today it would be worth RM 500.-!" (Harriet Brodie 1996:pers. comm.)

"People thought beads weren't very important. They sold beads very cheaply to collectors who came to the village, or they took them to an antique shop in Sibuh that was known to buy such items. Sometimes they gave them away to anybody who asked," said one old lady from Sok Matu, adding that she feels sad that all these old things have gone, and will never come back. Some elderly Melanau, especially those living in the villages, fear that a wave of new things is threatening to overwhelm their old culture.

At Matu, a man offered us some beads for sale: a string of badly worn small polychromes, including some monochrome yellow "peanut" beads; a string of two mauve and one blue hexagonally faceted glass spindles; and three opaque blue glass barrels/spheres, and transparent amber and white glass spheres. According to the seller, these beads were "found in the ground" at known sites of old settlements, platform burials, or cemeteries, but he was not keen to give exact details. My assistant, Diana Rose, though a keen student of her people's culture and a collector of Melanau artifacts, declined the proffer of very worn-looking *manik tilek* "because they're beads of the dead."

It was mentioned in Sok Matu that children playing under the house occasionally find beads, or ceramic sherds. My visit may have stimulated an interest in beads to the extent that all the boys are digging for treasure in the soft mud under their longhouse now!

Beads are kept, and used for traditional purposes (like weddings) in some culturally aware families. Melanau who live in towns are aware of a new "ethnic chic" which enables them to wear grandmother's jewelry with modern clothing (Pl. VD). This is a young people's fashion, encouraging for the future of beads. In the villages, however, beads tend to be regarded as "something grandmothers keep," a magical resource that might be resorted to in moments of stress.

Traditional glass "seed" beadwork fares better. The large conical palm-leaf hat formerly worn outdoors was usually decorated with colored or cut-out leaves only, but included a fringe of beads around the edge for holiday wear. Such hats are made again for use at traditional festivals which, after a few decades of neglect, are actively fostered today. At the *kaul* sea-blessing festival, young men kitted out in the sober black Melanau suit and maroon sarong wear their elders' beads without any ritual intent, just for decoration. Even new seed-bead necklaces are worn on this occasion.

A smaller, woven-bamboo version of the hat is still made in the area of Matu. It is known as the *seraong Sambas* (after the west Borneo Sultanate of Sambas from where the style originates). This hat is decorated with small motifs of seed-bead embroidery, and much sought after by handicraft and souvenir shops in Sibuh and Kuching.

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Plate VA. Melanau: Melanau girl in bridal costume; she wears a bead tunic (photo: H. Munan).

Plate VC. Melanau: Top: *Ketua Kampung* (village elder) Peteran bin Libai (center) wearing his beads. Bottom: Detail of the beads (photo: H. Munan).

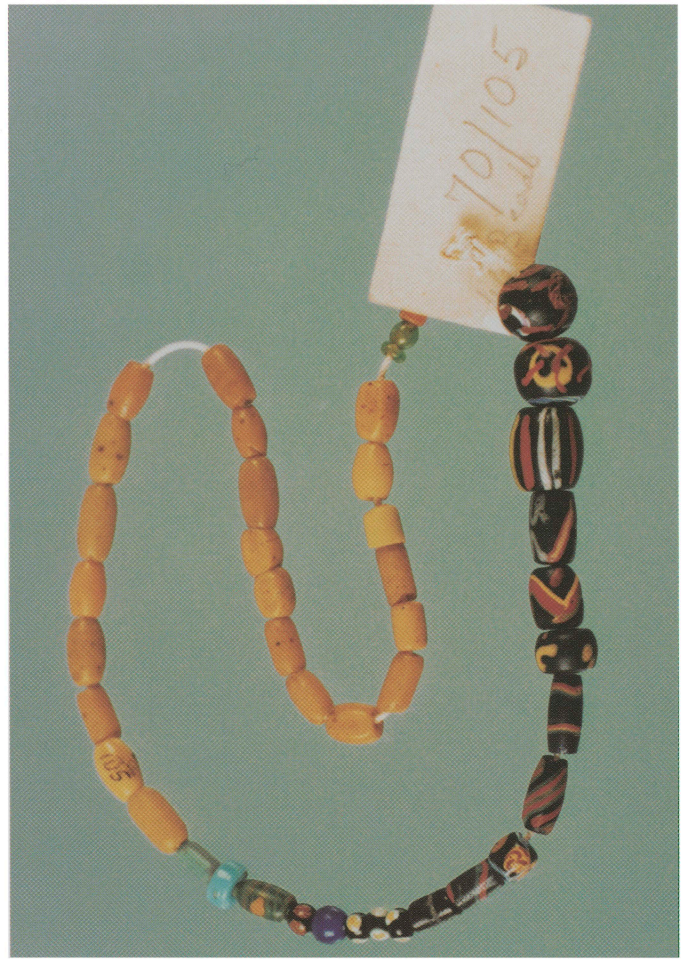


Plate VB. Melanau: String of Melanau "magic" beads (photo: Sarawak Museum).

Plate VD. Melanau: Young man dressed for a festival; he wears his grandfather's beads and some new ones "just for fun" (photo: H. Munan).

