ABSTRACT

The rapid depletion of raw materials in Belaga, Sarawak due to extensive timber extraction, land clearing for oil palm plantation and inundation of river valleys for hydroelectric power dam construction as well as changing lifestyle and values; consequences of development have affected the production of Orang Ulu rich material culture such as mats, baskets and other utilitarian items sustainable. Arrays of new emergence of Orang Ulu material culture assemblage reflects forms of their adaptation to a dynamic change in culture dictated by the scarcity of raw materials, global taste and acceptance of readily commercialized materials. Although it requires new knowledge and skills in the new reproduction; that is the way their rich material culture can survive. This paper discusses the innovation in the Orang Ulu indigenous material through the introduction of plastic as an alternative material used in traditional crafts and utilitarian objects reproduction; and its implication on values and authenticity of the new reproduction to the indigenous culture as a whole.

Keywords: Orang Ulu, Indigenous Craft, Material Culture, Alternative Material, Sustainability, Innovation

ABSTRAK


Kata Kunci: Orang Ulu, Kraf Tradisional, Benda Budaya, Bahan Alternatif, Pelestarian, Inovasi
INTRODUCTION

In general, Orang Ulu such as Kayan, Kenyah and Penans’ handicrafts have existed for hundreds of years ago and they have been known for fine art and craft makers, that have made them an important contributor to Sarawak culture (Langub, 1991). Each has its own uniqueness, symbolize the wealth tradition and culture of each Orang Ulu subgroup. Their fineness of plaited basketry, carving, metalworking and weaving is frequently regarded as a high quality art. Some of the objects made are often associated with culture skills and social hierarchy. Ingen (harvesting basket) of the Kayan, ba’ (baby carrier) of the Kenyah, serut (personal carrier bag) and mak (sleeping mat) of the Penan are among their many fortes.

For centuries, Orang Ulu art and craft dependent on rich and diverse natural resources. Eversince then, they have been taken the fullest advantage using readily available natural raw material from their surroundings. A vast selection of plant materials includes wei (rattan), bulok (bamboo), lemetung (Donax), tepo’ (Hornstedtia scyphifera), da’a (pandanus) and sang (palm leaves) are among many natural resources in Sarawak forest utilized by Orang Ulu to manufacture artefacts (Chin, 1985; Brosius, 1986).

Since the early 1980s, Belaga district had experienced a rapid development (e.g. logging industry, oil palm plantation and Bakun and Murum Hydroelectric Power Dam construction) that causes an alteration in its main landscape. Inevitably, these various manifestations of development have affected forest ecology system and depleted its resources which Orang Ulu regards as their life and survival. At the same time, the physical and economic transformation of the Belaga district brought by this development is also changing the livelihood and values of the Orang Ulu communities particularly the resettled communities in Sg. Asap. Involvement of these indigenous group of people in a market economy, education and new religion practice has been a major influence for rapid abandonment of traditional way of life and livelihood; essentially detaching themselves from the value, culture and heritage of their ancestors.

All the factors mentioned above to some extent have affected the production of traditional craft throughout the region. How do we consider the ever changing faces of traditional manufactured artefacts; as a form of innovation or destruction of traditional crafts? Is the value of the craft sustained as the material and motifs changed? These are the core questions that initiated the study.

Thus, this study attempts to understand the changing culture of Orang Ulu in Belaga Sarawak by focusing on innovation in their traditional crafts in terms of introduction to new materials, making method and use of tool in manufacturing the reproduction. It also discusses the consequence of this innovation to the artefact’s value in the new lifestyle setting.

This study using a qualitative approach which use an ethnography method, which allows the researcher to engage in participant observation and depth interview with the groups studied. The fieldwork was taken place in Sg. Asap Resettlement Scheme, which involving Kayan of Uma Bawang and Belor, Kenyah of Uma Badeng, Bhukat of Uma Ukit and Penan of Uma Penan Talun. The selection of the communities is based on their active handicraft making activity. The indigenous crafts considered in this study include utilitarian and social organization the widely known representative of Orang Ulu community as a whole such as baskets, mats and machete.

The researcher will deal with three essential elements of innovation in traditional reproduction: main construction material, manufacturing processes and tools used in the production. By using the inductive method to analyze of the data, the researcher hopes to relate why and how the Orang Ulu change their traditional material culture production by introducing some elements of innovation this social practice in relate to the changing lifestyle, livelihood, taste to material objects and scarcity of natural resources.
Traditional Material

Sarawak provides abundance and a great diversity of plant materials due to its variety of habitats for supply of food, medicinal plants, construction materials and trade items to the Orang Ulu (Langub, 1990). In producing crafts and other utilitarian objects for everyday use such as baskets, various types of mats, hats, wooden household storage as well as artefacts for ritual and ceremonial practices, not only that these natural resources have been used as main constructive material, they were also used for dyeing, finishing, joining and embellishment by the Orang Ulu for many years (Chin, 1980, Chin 1986).

![Figure 1 Traditional Uses of Natural Raw Materials](image)

Thus, rapid depletion of raw material resources due to extensive timber extraction, lands, clearing for oil palm plantation and inundation of river valleys for hydroelectric power dam construction has caused difficulty and costly for Orang Ulu to access the material due to a far location of the resources from their new settlement. Subsequently, this has led the community to opt for alternative material. Availability, accessibility, properties and contemporary trend of the alternative material are the main factors that influence their selection.

Innovation in Reproduction

There are three forms of innovation in the Orang Ulu traditional reproduction artefacts observed in Sg Asap in relate to natural material scarcity and modernization; i) combination of materials (natural and synthetic); ii) introduction of new material (synthetic) and iii) new design and motif. Changes in the material utilization in the manufacturing the artefact may or may not change the tools, methods and technique used in the traditional making process. Next are some examples of Orang Ulu traditional artefacts that have gone through the alteration.

Plastic as Main Construction Material in Basketry

*Ingen, blanyat, barang, tapan* are some of basketry made by Orang Ulu. In the past, these utilitarian objects were made mostly of rattan. Nowadays, the reproduction of these basketry objects is prone to combine materials (natural and synthetic) or replace the original material completely for a new one due to rattan scarcity.

The basket has two main elements constitute of rim and body weave; attached various ties. Loops, shoulder straps and legs are some integral parts incorporated with the basket depending on its specific function. For instance, *ingen* (harvesting basket) needs a good strength rim and legs for it to stand and support the *ingen* body structure as it filled with harvested paddy. Where else, *blanyat* (flexible travelling/personal belonging...
receptacle basket) needs none of these integral parts as *ingen*, instead it just requires a pair of shoulder strap and a set of rings (rather known as *ulat* among the Orang Ulu) attached at the circumference of the basket opening. A string passes through the rings; function as an open/close mechanism.

Figure 2 Three New Styles of Plastic Sa’ap Basket. Source: Author’s collection

Figure 2 shows two baskets for general use, known as *sa’ap* among the Kenyah Badeng. Formerly, *sa’ap* was made of rattan for its body weaves construction, rim and lashing material. In basket making, the rim plays an important role; to secure the end weave, hold body form and support the whole structure of the basket. Thus, it is critical for the rim to be constructed from a substantially strong, rigid material. Half-split or single piece of rattan or wood strip was frequently used for the rim. Now, Orang Ulu have replaced this part completely with synthetic materials; Polyethylene (PE) packaging strip. This alternative synthetic material has been used widely in basketry products of Orang Ulu as for it easily available, ready to use with no preparation required prior to the manufacturing process.

Another example of synthetic material utilization in the Orang Ulu basketry is *blanyat* reproduction. Two types of plastic are used; PE packaging strip for the body weave and Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC) pipe hose for the *ulat*. Figure 3 illustrates traditional *blanyat* and utilization of plastic in the reproduction of the basket.

Traditional weaving technique is retained, better still, with a wide variation of colours of PE strips to choose and ready to use enable the new motif/pattern to be created, adding value and aesthetic quality to the reproduction object. However, as the *janggat* (traditional rattan stripper) is unsuitable for cutting PE strip, due to its fibrous strand, Orang Ulu have invented a new tool, using thread to achieve a clean, straight cut piece.

Figure 3 Blanyat Basket. Source: Author’s collection
Plastic as Adhesive Material in Machete Manufacturing

Malet (machete) is another common tool made by Orang Ulu; used for slashing bushes, cutting plant and chopping firewood. Three main parts of malet: blade, hilt and sheath. In the past, the blade was thrust into the hilt, bind firmly using natural resin, ketipei. According to Matu Tugang (personal communication, 2011), the village head of Penan Long Jaik, they used to collect ketipei throughout the Sg. Apat forest, now that the whole area is planted with oil palm, left them with no more resources to gather. Instead using commercial adhesive, they utilize used material, Low Density Polyethylene (LDPE) rice packaging, which is readily available and no cost involved. LDPE is a thermoplastic, with low melting point 120°C (maximum use temperature 66°C), this material soft easily and malleable when heated. It will quickly set and solidified when cooled, thus giving it a good tack property.

Figure 4 Machete Making Process. Source: Author’s collection

Plastic as Embellishment Material

Orang Ulu crafts are often highly specific to the ethnicity specialization, intended to express their identity. This is particularly the case with ba’, the Kenyah baby carrier wearing on the front or the back of the bearer. The artefact is not truly utilitarian; as to serve the purpose to carry a baby from birth until the infant reaches two years old, but most importantly is it also represents a stratification system of its people in the community. From the adornment to motifs used to elaborately embellish the ba’, the combination of these elements symbolizes wealth and social rank of both baby and the maker (Whittier, 1973, Whittier & Whittier, 1989).

2 A Penan term for a resin used in machete production. It is produced from a sap of a tree from the Dipterocarpacea family of trees found in primary jungle.
The structure of a *ba’* constitutes of a wooden seat, rattan woven backrest and shoulder straps. Decorative beadwork piece (*ba’ aban*), made of fine glass beads is sewn on the *ba’*. In Kenyah tradition particularly, the *ba’ aban* motif dictates by the social ranking of the maker and baby. For instance, the full human figure can only be used by the highest social ranking people, *paren*. As they believed, for common people to be using the prohibited motifs, they will invite illness and can cause death.

Other types of adornment used on the *ba’* such as shells, canine teeth, coins and buttons hanging in front and the back are meant for several reasons including the essentiality to protect the soul of the baby, to signify the infant’s sex and social class and according to individual preference.

![Variations of ba’](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variations of ba’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. <em>sip</em> (canine teeth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. <em>sulau</em> (shell/coin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. <em>limpai</em> (dangling beads)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. <em>wing</em> (jingle bell)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. <em>bolo</em> (bamboo/plain)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Every *ba’* should at least have one shell of a large snail to keep his or her umbilical cord. Two shells are preferable for them to make a clacking sound which is believed to cast away evil spirits that may harm the soul of the baby. Animal canine teeth such as tiger and leopard as well as old heirloom beads are also attached to the *ba’*. These decorative elements perceived as valuable and precious possession which symbolize the wealth and social ranking of the baby.
Nowadays, some decorative elements such as canine teeth and shells are hardly found that ba’ makers have been replacing them with plastic replica, obtained from Kalimantan Indonesian traders with far lower prices. Consequently, as the decorative item attached to the ba’ changed to fake element, it can no longer be considered as a precious belongings that significantly represent wealth or stratification rank, but the value only for its aesthetic quality.

To the extent that, the rattan now is substituted with PP to produce the woven part of the ba’. The utilitarian performance characteristic of the ba’ becomes a priority with the absence of ornamentation element incorporated. Alternative, there are abundant choices of commercialized baby carrier which are easily available in the market with various design to choose from that and wide price range.

![Figure 7 New styles of baby carrier. Source: Author’s collection](image)

**Contemporary Motif and Design**

Emerging new motif in the reproduction shows some transition in the Orang Ulu craft tradition. The influence factor is believed to be the modernization that leads to changing lifestyle, contemporary trend and global taste. Klausen (1957) has defined motifs used by Dayak as representational art. The motifs are truly depending on the observer cum maker – interpret the ideas in the form of a great variety, series of symbols based on their contemporary cultural perception.

When Orang Ulu practice new religion, human or animal figurines are prohibited in any of their creations, thus they will portray motif that has no conviction to their current belief. When ‘1 Malaysia’ words, watch strap and car motifs portrayed in their craft, it is so obvious that these designs are inspired by their present lifestyle and existing materials within their surrounding environment.

**CONCLUSION**

Rapid development in Belaga, Sarawak has caused extensive raw material depletion as well as changing its inhabitant’s lifestyle and values. Subsequently, the impact has affected the production of Orang Ulu rich material culture such as basketry, machete and other utilitarian objects.

Utilization of synthetic material in the their indigenous crafts reproduction reflects forms of their adaptation to dynamic change in culture dictated by the scarcity of raw materials, global taste and acceptance of readily commercialized materials. Although this new reproduction may require new knowledge and skills; that never stopped them to sustain their craft making culture.

The new Orang Ulu traditional crafts reproduction evolved significantly through the introduction of new material, motif and design in its manufacturing. Indisputably, some traditional elements, indigenous
values and symbolism may lose due to this alteration. However, looking at the bigger picture, their effort to uphold craft making tradition within the community by engaging the younger generation in indigenous knowledge and skill transfer and nurturing innovation in craft making, sustaining the culture is what the most concerned matter. For them, as long as the product made by Orang Ulu, it is indigenously them and will always represent their ever unique culture and identity through creation.

REFERENCES