

Beads play an important part in the lives of peoples of Sarawak

BY ANYIE WAN

Sarawak is the largest of the thirteen states that make up Malaysia. Covering an area of about 124,000 sq. km. it stretches some 700 km along the northwestern coast of Borneo (the third largest island in the world) and is flanked by Kalimantan (Indonesia) in the south, and Sabah and Brunei in the north.

Separated from peninsular Malaysia by the South China Sea, Sarawak has a warm and equable climate with an average annual temperature of 25.6 degrees celcius and has a population of about 1.6 millions consisting of more than twenty different ethnic groups.

In 1947 the Sarawak Museum started exploration and excavation of sites in the Sarawak Delta. Several thousand trade ceramic shards were recovered from six open proto-historic sites in this delta area in association with large quantities of locally made soft pottery, gold ornaments, a wide variety of ancient glass beads, Chinese coins and other relics including a Tantric shrine, a stone Buddha figure in the Gupta tradition and a number of rock petrolyphs (carving). All these evidences recovered from this delta area indicate that the area was an important trade centre in about the 14th century AD. Systematic archaeological work was carried out in the Niah Great Cave in 1954 and field work continued on until 1967 when it was suspended. The West Mouth of the Niah Great Cave is considered one of the more important archaeological cave sites ever found in

Southeast Asia, as evidence of the history of human evolution dating back to 40,000 years have been recovered *in situ*.

Since 1967 an abundance of new materials have been excavated from other sites: Annamese wares of the 13th-14th centuries, Sawankhalok of the 14th-15th centuries, blue and white wares of the 17th-19th centuries. All these bear evidence that maritime trade continued to take place along the coast of Sarawak right up to the 19th century when Europeans appeared on the scene.

Today, ancient beads are valued as adornments, for the social status and wealth they reflect on the owner and sometimes for their mystical qualities. In the old days beads were one of the principal forms of currency. They were handed down as heirlooms from generation to generation, often made into skull caps, necklaces, girdles or

wristlets and are still worn nowadays by Kayan, Kenyah, Lun Bawang, Kelabit, Iban and Bidayuh. Some ancient beads are only worn for rituals or festivals, others are thought to possess a magical quality.

A rare ancient bead has a reputation similar to a precious stone or a fine antique in other parts of the world. The detailed knowledge of each bead, its name and age is remarkable amongst some of the older women who can easily identify sixty or more different types. But names and values of beads often vary amongst different people, for instance the ornate Roman-Egyptian type beads, valued highly by many, is not of great interest to the Kelabit who value the ancient plain bluish glassy or stone beads most of all. However, the value of beads is not static.

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BY JOHN WATSON

Sarawak: the land of the thirteen states

Besides the ancient beads, the more recent very small glass beads are in great demand. Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit, Lun Bawang and Iban women thread these small beads into most intricate patterns for head bands, collars, necklaces, earrings and for the decoration of jackets, hats, walking sticks, bamboo containers, boxes and the sheath of the *parang* (sword). Chinese, Malay and Melanau women also use these beads for delicate embroidery work.

Beadwork still flourishes in Sarawak. It is taught in schools and old and new exciting designs are made by children of all the peoples, thus keeping alive and developing one of the many beautiful traditional crafts of this country.

Sarawak's own 8th to 13th century coastal settlement, Santubong, was a centre of all kinds of commerce including beads

trade. Beads were most likely manufactured here too, though there is very little evidence still available. Everett, (1908: 7ff), stated that there is a great variety in the beads found at Santubong.

China had trade contacts with Sarawak soon after the turn of the century and perhaps even earlier. Amongst other items such as Chinese ceramic jars or silks, beads were exchanged for bird's nests, turtle's eggs, rattan, rhinoceros horns and hornbills. But although beads, especially jade beads, have been made in China for more than 3,000 years, some of the glass beads presumed to be of Chinese origin were probably made in other parts of the world, as early Chinese glass beads have a very high specific gravity lead content, whereas the Sarawak beads have practically no lead in their constitution (Beck, 1930). Yet it seems unlikely that no glass beads were brought to Sarawak from China by traders

as beads are still very much in evidence in Sarawak today.

The famous Sarawak *lukut sekala* beads (which is also depicted in Hose and McDougall's book, 1912) is said by Seligman and Beck to be of a type found in Egypt dating back to 900-600 BC. It persisted later as well (Braddell 1947), though whether it was made later remains unknown. "The rose beads also are a group by themselves and so attractive in appearance that it seems inconceivable that they should not be found in Europe if originally made there." Many specimens have been found in China either (Beck, 1930). A single *lukut sekala* bead was worth an adult male slave in the 19th century and around 1900 Niewenhuis estimated the price to be 100 fl. *Lukut* in Sarawak is a general term for large decorated beads. According to Hose and McDougall (1912) the design tattooed on the wrist is called

lukut as well. Instead of fastening a *lukut* bead on a string around the wrist to prevent the departure of the soul from the body, the *lukut* design is tattooed on to the wrist; there is no risk of the string breaking and losing the bead. *Lukut* as bead or tattoo is regarded as a charm to prevent the escape of the soul and to ward off all disease.

The Kayan and Kenyah people of Sarawak share an interest in beautiful polychrome beads worn by both sexes. Beads are ornaments and status symbols here; a lady of the upper classes thinks nothing of appearing in public with several thousand dollars worth (in ringgit, 1987 valuation) of beads around her neck.

The very latest development in Sarawak is the manufacture out of clay of Lun Bawan bead replicas. The villagers who are engaged in this trade have no intention of

deceiving the unwary. They started making new beads to preserve their old, genuine beads. Lun Bawang fashion demands the wearing of ten or twelve necklaces at one time; if a lady accidentally breaks a string or two her loss is great for these beads are valued at many dollars per piece.

Archaeological evidence shows that these beads are not manufactured in Sarawak though through ethnographic evidence it has been in the hands of these ethnic groups for hundreds of years. It is very difficult for anyone to add to their collection as owners don't want to part with their heirloom beads, which are no longer manufactured. The price offered comes to thousands of ringgit a piece. These ancient beads still play an important role in Sarawak culture and customs today.

SOURCES

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