

## KELABIT BEADS

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The visitor to the Kelabit Highlands is immediately struck by the beads worn by the women of Bario. Bario, a large cluster of longhouse communities, is nowadays the focal center of the Kelabit Highlands. Practically all women in Bario wear necklaces made of "ancient beads" (*ba'o ma'on*) nearly all of the time that they are outside their own longhouse, and many of them - probably all those who own them - also wear bead caps - *petaa* - made up of the most highly valued beads.

Beads are of great importance in the Kelabit Highlands. There are dozens of named varieties. In this paper I shall give an overview of the wearing of beads in the Highlands, and explore a little the rationale behind the possession of them.

Bario is today the major Kelabit center of population, consisting of eight longhouse communities within less than an hour's walk from each other but separate in jural and administrative terms and in terms of land use. Outside the immediate Bario area there are seven other longhouse communities, three within a few hours' walk of Bario and four in the southern part of the Highlands a days' walk or more away. Within the immediate Bario area there is also a community of traders by the airstrip, consisting of people coming from a number of different longhouses. Until recently, these people did not live in longhouses but in separate houses; they have recently built a longhouse approximately 40 minutes' walk from the airstrip where they all have apartments, but many spend little time there.

The Kelabit Highlands is part of a flat tableland at the headwaters of a number of rivers, and which is quite clearly separated from areas outside the highlands by mountains and difficult terrain. The part of this tableland which forms the Kelabit Highlands is at the headwaters of the Baram river, which drains to the sea near Miri in Sarawak. It is separated from the rest of the tableland by ranges of mountains, which are however easily crossed by a number of passes. Most of the rest of the tableland area is inhabited by people closely related linguistically and culturally to the Kelabit. These people have been described by various names, including Murut, Lun Dayeh and Lun Bawang. Jayl Langub (1987) has suggested that the term Lun Bawang is the most appropriate for this group, and I shall use this term. The Lun Bawang to the east of the Kelabit live in Kalimantan, since the international border follows the range of mountains separating the Kelabit Highlands from their area. Those to the north, in the Ba Kelalan and Long Semadoh area, are in the Fifth Division of Sarawak.

Kin, social and trading relations between the Kelabit and the highland Lun Bawang are quite close at the present time, and in the past it is likely that this was also the case, although broken by periods of feuding.

The Kelabit did not, until the introduction of a regular air service, have very significant trading relations with areas outside the highland Kelabit and Lun Bawang area. Travel to places further down the Baram was very difficult in the past, involving a journey of some weeks in many cases. On the west and south the Kelabit Highlands are separated from areas inhabited by other tribes by very rugged terrain. In this direction were nevertheless traded, although probably on an infrequent basis, items in demand outside the Highland area, but the production of which the Highlands was specialized, such as demar resin, the salt produced in the Highlands from salt springs and tobacco. These goods were traded for manufactured items such as iron pots and for prestige items - Chinese jars, gongs and beads.

In the course of such trade the Kelabit were exposed to the culture of the Kenyah and Kayan living farther down the Baram. This exposure has had some influence on the Kelabit; while at an underlying level the Kelabit appear to be much closer to the Lun Bawang, in some ways they resemble, in particular, the Kenyah groups. Their tastes in the decoration of handicrafts have many similarities to those of the Kenyah.

As far as old beads are concerned, however, the Kelabit were until recently influenced in their tastes only to a very limited extent by peoples outside the highland area. The beads which have been valued by the Kelabit are almost all different from those valued by peoples farther down the Baram, but appear to be very similar to those valued by the Lun Bawang. Recently, with the

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enormously greater exposure of the Kelabit Highlands to outside, down-Baram influences, the Kelabit have begun to acquire more beads of kinds valued by the Kenyah and Kayan who live down-river, but these are still not considered to be of truly high value. The beads most esteemed nowadays are still beads which appear to be peculiar to the Kelabit and Lun Bawang of the highland area.

The Kelabit assess the value of beads largely according to what they consider to be their age. Their general estimate of the relative ages of different beads appears to be fairly accurate (personal communications, Ian Glover and Heidi Munan). Many of those they consider "really ancient" are likely to be at least a thousand years old.

For the Kelabit, the older a bead is considered to be, the higher its value.<sup>1</sup> The beads which the Kelabit say are the most "ancient" (*ma'on*) do appear to be among the oldest they possess. However, many of the varieties which they possess but which they do not consider among the oldest probably are as old as any they have.

A major point about very valuable beads is that they are said to derive "from our ancestors", *let tetepo*. This is significant, and I shall return to it at the end of this paper. It is also clear that there have been changes in bead fashion taking place. At various times different varieties of "ancient" beads have been most particularly valued, and others prized less.

One of the major ways of displaying ownership of highly valued beads is in the bead cap, *petaa*. At the front of the *petaa* highly valued beads are placed in a broad band, with beads of little or no value at the sides and back. It appears that in the early part of this century the heavy carnelian beads known as *ba'o burur* were the most highly valued, and these were placed at the front of the cap. Later the green and blue glassy beads known as *let* displaced *ba'o buru*. There is quite a lot of variation in *let*. The color varies from dark blue or green to very light blue or green and the shape may be rounded or flattened. More recently, from about the 1950s onwards, the small elongated orange beads called *ba'o rawir* ("long beads", literally) have become particularly sought after for bead caps, and all those that I know of except one have these beads at the front.

The rest of the bead cap consists of beads which are considered to have little value. In the modern bead cap they may even be modern machine-made beads, which are considered to be of no value at all. Beads are simply used which are of approximately the same diameter as the high-value beads at the front and which create what is considered an aesthetically pleasing color scheme.

There is a standardized pattern to the choice of beads used for the Kelabit bead cap. This applies to the present-day *petaa ba'o rawir*, and it appears to have been the case with bead caps based on *ba'o burur* and *ba'o bata* as the high-value front beads as well. Not only are the high-value beads at the front of the cap the same in all bead caps based on a particular high-value bead, but those used for the rest of the cap are placed in a standardized order according to color. There is some room for innovation - while it is usual to use one type of small red bead in one part of the cap, other types, including modern ones, may be used, for example. Also, the width of the band of high-value beads at the front of the cap varies; it is more prestigious to have a wider band. However the general pattern of the cap hardly varies at all.

The high-value beads at the front of the cap account for 95 percent of its value. They are, nowadays, valued in money terms. Each *ba'o rawir* at the front is worth about M\$20, which means that the cap is worth from M\$4000 to (I have been told) M\$8000, according to the width of the band of *ba'o rawir*. These sums are equivalent to £1000 and £4000 respectively and indicate the enormous repositories of wealth which these cap represent.

All beads, including those of high value, may be made into necklaces, *bane*. The most popular bead for a high-prestige necklace is called *alai*. These are the most valuable beads of all. *Alai* are opaque yellow beads. There are two types of *alai*, one considered more ancient than the other. I am unable to tell the difference between the two types, but the more prestigious Kelabit ladies, who own *alai*, have no trouble. The more ancient type may be worth as much as M\$150 (about £43) each, while the less ancient type may be bought for M\$30 (about £7.50) apiece. Because of their enormous value, *alai* are not beads which have been regularly used for bead caps, since the number required would mean that the cap would be worth perhaps M\$80,000 (£20,000). I do know of one bead cap with these beads at the front. It belonged, until she died in 1990, to a wealthy and rather eccentric old lady in the southern part of the Kelabit Highlands, who also owned a bead cap based on *ba'o rawir*.

All of the above beads of high value, as well as all the side and back beads used in bead caps, are monochrome. Most of them are glass, except for the cornelian *ba'o burur* and a variety called *ulub* which used to be used at the side of *ba'o bata* and *ba'o buru* bead caps and necklaces, which is made of shell.

There are very few Kelabit traditional beads which are multichrome. The few that exist are of high value, however, and their ownership history is well known. One type of multichrome bead called *labang kalong*, considered to be one of the Kelabit "ancient beads", are said to have been worth a human life each.

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Multichrome beads, known to the Kelabit as *ba'o barit*, literally "painted beads", appear to be of European origin and to have entered the area later than the monochrome beads, which appear originally to have been largely of Indian origin (later many were manufactured in South East Asia itself).

Recently, multichrome beads have been entering the Highlands in greater numbers. Most of these derive from the Kenyah and Keyan. Some are becoming quite popular, especially among some of the young ladies in Bario. They are disparaged by most women, however. The prices which are given for them do not compare with those given for the most valuable of the high-value Kelabit beads, never exceeding M\$20 (£5) per bead and usually ranging between M\$5 (£1.25) and M\$10 (£2.50).

Besides old handmade beads, the Kelabit also have some machine-made beads. They practice beadwork of the Kayan/Kenyah type, using tiny town-bought glass beads. Centers for sun hats, beaded decorations for rattan baskets and beaded necklaces are made. These may be made entirely of tiny beads or partly of tiny beads strung and then wound into a bunch and partly of valuable old beads. Beaded decorations associated with the wearing of leopards, teeth in the ears, common among men until the 1960s, are also made. The tiny beads used for beading are sought after in the Highlands and prices given for them exceed considerably their value in town. There are few ladies who are able to do beadwork, and their work, as well as the beads themselves, is priced very high.

In the past the Kelabit appear to have made bead jackets (Sarawak Museum 1978). These were made from small town-bought beads and probably some "ancient" beads. However, these are no longer made and I have never seen one. Belts (*brit*) are sometimes made from the smaller beads, mostly the less valuable ones, and in the last couple of years in particular this has become fashionable.

The Kelabit are interested in buying the larger machine-made glass and plastic beads which are available in town nowadays. These are sometimes mixed with old beads in necklaces, usually with beads of little value. They also make beads themselves out of lead, cast in small-bore bamboo. These are used at the sides of the present-day bead cap with *ba'o rawir* at the front.

The Kelabits are quite innovative in their interest in beads. When I showed them a catalogue from a bead shop in London, enormous interest was shown and everybody wanted to order some, being willing to pay quite high prices. In the end, not knowing to whom to give the beads which I eventually obtained from the shop, I gave them to the church to be auctioned. They fetched

quite considerable prices, greater than their value in London, although much less than "ancient" Kelabit beads. They began immediately to be incorporated into necklaces, often together with high-value beads, and their value began to rise.

#### THE WEARING AND OWNERSHIP OF BEADS

It is nowadays mainly adult women who wear beads, particularly high-value beads. Many adult men do not wear beads any longer, although it is clear from old photographs and information from informants that in the past they did. It is likely that exposure to a town culture which discourages the wearing of beads by men has had its effect. It does appear, however, that beads were always more of a female business than a male one. While men usually inherited ancient dragon jars, women usually inherited beads. Although men wore beads, it is likely that, as is the case now, it was women who discussed beads, as they do now, with the greatest interest and expertise.

Among the young, beads are worn by both sexes. Children up to their teens sometimes have necklaces belonging to their mothers placed around their necks. It is possible that in the past the wearing of beads by children may have been more widespread than it is today. Young men never wear beads of high value but only short necklaces of beads of little value, or which are no longer sought after despite their age and theoretical value - *ba'o burur* and *let* may often be seen in young men's necklaces. Young girls wear beads less than young men but when they do wear them, they tend to borrow necklaces of greater value from their mothers or other relatives.

The Kelabit are a group among whom there is prestige differentiation; the term "stratification" seems inappropriate since it is not possible to isolate "strata", although it is clear that not all individuals have the same amount of prestige. The higher the status of an individual the more "good" (*doo*) he or she is considered to be. In the past, I was told, only "good people", *lun doo*, had beads, and the highest value beads were owned by people of the highest status, "really good people", *lun doo to'o*. The other two major markers of status of this type were Chinese dragon jars and gongs. Of the three markers, however, only beads are still actively sought and displayed.

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