

**DIGITISING SARAWAK
BORNEO MATERIAL
CULTURE: THE
EXIGENCE NEEDS**

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Abstract

Material culture is a term used to refer to widely ranging objects, from decorative to utilitarian means. Material culture has been physical evidence of human existence and an essential source for interpreting the past. The study of material culture in many fields helps to understand the history, culture, beliefs and values of one's society. The primary purpose of digitising material culture of Sarawak, Borneo is to document and build up an inventory of artefacts in Sarawak as an initial attempt to enabling recovering and persevering material from across vast distances and time. McClung Fleming's model (1974) is adapted as an artefact's analysis tool in this study. Digital database is expected to be a content feeder to stakeholders that have interests related to material culture and will support the Sarawak's Digital Economy initiatives in various sectors particularly tourism and education.

Keywords: Material culture; digitisation; digital economy; Sarawak Borneo; preservation; analysis tool

Introduction

Being the most culturally diverse ethnic communities in Malaysia, the people of Sarawak possess arrays of material culture in the form of arts, crafts, instruments, visual arts, textiles and manuscripts. Each creation applies the indigenous know-how, manufactures with materials and uses specialise invented tools and instruments. Prown in his paper *Mind in Matter* (1982) discussed extensively on the significance of material culture as the concrete evidence of human existence, intelligence, beliefs, values, activities at the time the object was made. That suggests how important it is to study material culture and to keep the record of it in the form of documentation to understand human civilisation. Unfortunately, documentation of some material culture in Borneo was only started by explorers, colonial personnel, geologists, or missionaries at the end of the twentieth century (Sellato, 2016). For the rest of the Sarawak material culture assemblage, they were just remained unknown and lost through time.

Until now, there is still no Sarawak material culture database that has extensive documentation to cater to tourism and academic purposes. As Sellato (2016) discovered, the scholars and curators who studied the material culture, often found limited information from the documented Sarawak material culture, which will make it difficult to understand the society that created it in many aspects inclusively including history, culture, values, and beliefs.

Thus, in a broader scope, the primary purpose of this project is to document and digitalise Sarawak material culture. In more specific intention, it is to cater data for tourism and educational purposes and make this data easily accessible for various material culture study domains including cultural anthropology, archaeology and curatorship. Through Digital Sarawak Centre of Excellence by the Sarawak state government initiative, it is the best opportunity to embark on this project.

What is Material Culture?

Prown (1982) noted that in material culture study, the beliefs, values, ideas, attitude and assumption of a particular community or society during a specific period are examined and analysed through the existing material objects as primary data. It refers to an extensive, unrestricted range of objects. There are many ways material culture defined by scholars in their field: artefacts, material objects or cultural materials. But most of the scholars agreed that material culture is defined as tangible objects that human make and use within the context of their culture and shaped by nature to a society to express its identity (Dant, 2005; Geertz, 2017; Hodder, 2012; Malinowski, 1932) and existential survival (Fleming, 1974). It is also defined as human-made objects which had undergone technological processes (Pearce, 1994).

Material culture covers a broad category of artefacts, objects, things to whatever terms used, ranging from something that is more decorative (or aesthetic) to the more utilitarian. Prown (1982) has grouped material culture into six main categories:

1. Art (paintings, drawings, prints, sculpture, photography)
2. Diversions (books, toys, games, meals, theatrical performances)
3. Adornment (jewellery, clothing, hairstyles, cosmetics, tattooing, other alterations of the body)
4. Modifications of the landscape (architecture, town planning, agriculture, mining)
5. Applied arts (furniture, furnishings, receptacles)
6. Devices (machines, vehicles, scientific instruments, musical instruments, implements)

Material Culture Study: An Overview

Material culture study used to interpret and understand different things in various interdisciplinary fields such as anthropology, archaeology and museum study. In archaeology, archaeologists use the object as evidence to understand past human history and cultural activities (Lavenda & Schultz, 2010). In the perspective of technology, archaeologists used objects to investigate the retained traces of manufacturing, the design and the usage which implicates adoption patterns, use alteration, technology change and innovation (Schiffer & Skibo, 1987; Schiffer et al., 1994; Skibo & Schiffer, 2009; Schiffer et al., 2010), helping them to interpret many aspects in people's life such as contemporary patterns of subsistence technologies and socio-cultural change (Lavenda & Schultz, 2010).