



# Heirlooms and Heritage: Unveiling the Cultural Narratives of the Orang Ulu

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**Abstract:** *Family heirlooms are cherished objects passed down through generations, often accompanied by stories and narratives that hold significant value for families. However, these heirlooms can be lost due to various factors, such as family disputes, natural disasters, or wars. This case study examines the family heirlooms of three Orang Ulu individuals and explores the rich stories behind them. The heirlooms presented include traditional Orang Ulu beads and an iron belt. Interviews with these individuals reveal that each heirloom, inherited from their grandparents, carries a unique story that enhances its cultural and sentimental significance. These heirlooms not only represent priceless artifacts but also embody the connection to the cultural practices, rituals, and traditions of the Orang Ulu people. This study also highlights that many traditional Orang Ulu crafts, especially beads, are often commodified in the modern market, potentially disconnecting them from their rich cultural heritage. Thus, preserving these heirlooms and the narratives surrounding them is vital in maintaining the cultural identity of the Orang Ulu community.*

**Keywords:** Heirlooms, heritage, cultural, Narratives, Orang Ulu

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## 1. Introduction

Family heirlooms are cherished objects passed down through generations, often accompanied by stories and narratives that hold significant value for families. However, these heirlooms can be lost due to various factors, such as family disputes, natural disasters, or wars. This case study examines the family heirlooms of three individuals from the Orang Ulu group and explores the rich stories behind them. The heirlooms presented include traditional Orang Ulu beads, an iron belt, gold ring and a set of gongs. The material culture that is significant to a cultural community, especially within a family, is often associated with the beliefs, customs and values of the people. It is through these objects that one can better understand the lives of the people from which they come from, provide insights and reveal stories about the people, their cultural identities and origins (Derbyshire & Hicks, 2020).

This study examined the stories or narratives behind Orang Ulu family heirlooms which have been passed on from one generation to the next as well as the historical, cultural and sentimental significances of these heirlooms.



## 2. Literature Review

Some of the earliest studies done on Orang Ulu material culture were those by Harrison (1959) as well as Horns (2015) which mainly included photographs of these materials cultures that were mostly traditional practices, items used and the everyday life of the Orang Ulu community. Besides that, works of documentation by the Sarawak Museum Department was also abundant, however, some of the material culture artefacts of the Orang Ulu in the Sarawak Museum are not accompanied by adequate informative narratives to help the audience to appreciate the historical and cultural significance of the artefacts. Nevertheless, we are given to understand that the Sarawak Museum has documented the source of the artefacts displayed there, including some background information on the artefacts but the records are kept in the archives and the public visiting the Sarawak Museum do not get to read the narratives.

There has been a substantial amount of study on the material culture of the Orang Ulu. For instance, Nagu (2018) explores the aesthetic values of the klirieng, salong and lijeng carvings in the social institutional context of the Orang Ulu from Belaga and Baram Districts in Sarawak. Nagu (2018) discovered that the motifs on the carvings were diversified, with high aesthetic values depicting various principles like symbolism, unity, usefulness, meaningfulness, antagonism and fineness, adapted from nature. The aesthetic values of the motif carvings become clearer with the existence of symbols, ideology and codes of conduct relevant to the social institution of the Orang Ulu community. Before that, Langub (1991) also did a study and documentation of Orang Ulu carving and its' significance within the community. Besides that, Munan (1995) as well as Dit and Foong (2010) have conducted a number of studies on beads including those of the Orang Ulu. There is also the work of Sahari (2012, 2014) who explored the tools related to smoking tobacco and chewing betel which have become part of the Orang Ulu material culture. Besides that, research was also done on Kenyah baby carrier by Whittier and Whittier (1989).

Material cultures such as beads, gongs and jars are regarded as not only important heirlooms but also as of high value and a symbol of status within the Orang Ulu community, particularly the Kenyah and Kayan groups (Eghenter, 2001). A study done by Bala (2010, 2015) revealed that items of prestige obtained during their travels or *mengerang mado* derived their meanings and values from these journeys. Most of these prestige items such as T'ang and Ming Chinese jars, were traded goods in exchange for forest products were then adapted into the lifestyles of the people. These items were used for ceremonial purposes and also seen as a symbol of status which eventually became part of their culture.

Dit and Foong (2010) explained that family heirlooms or *pesaka/ barang pu'un* in the forms of beads played very significant roles in the life of the Kayan and Kenyah, especially for barter trading purposes, traditional costumes decoration and also for religious purposes.

The Sarawak Museum Department and Borneo Cultural Museum has done an extensive job on the collection, documentation and reservation of Orang Ulu material culture. However, the gap of knowledge is the material culture of the Orang Ulu which are not showcased in museums. People who are "outsiders" to the Orang Ulu community may consider the collection in the Borneo Cultures Museum to be the ultimate repository of the Orang Ulu cultural heritage and that people who are familiar with the Orang Ulu culture know that there is a wealth of material culture found



in families as heirlooms which are handed down from one generation to another. This is the part of the Orang Ulu material culture which has not been studied much and must be studied because there is a host of stories on the values and significance of the artefacts. These stories constitute the family and the village history, which collectively constitute the material culture of the Orang Ulu as a whole. These stories behind the material culture of the Orang Ulu need to be captured while the memory of them is still fresh, as the family members could have just inherited it from their grandparents or great grandparents and only one or two generations have passed on. Given a longer time, the richness of the narratives would be lost, and this is a great loss of the indigenous knowledge, and cultural worldviews embedded in the stories of the Orang Ulu material culture artefacts.

### 3. Methodology

The data for this study was derived from interviews with three informants from the Orang Ulu group. They are referred to as Informant A, B and C respectively. The interview sessions were conducted based on the convenience of the informants. These interviews were audio recorded using an MP4 recorder and later transcribed. Since the informants all spoke in Bahasa Melayu, the interviews were transcribed in Bahasa Melayu but whenever necessary, was translated into English especially for the purpose of this paper.

For this study, the informants are of Orang Ulu descent, with at least one of their parents must be Orang Ulu. In this study, the Orang Ulu people are defined as to include indigenous groups, namely, Apo Kayan, Kenyah, Kajang, Kajaman, Lahanan, Sian, Penan, Sebo, Kendayan, Ukit, Murut, Tagol, Punan, Lisum, Apo Duat, Kelabit, Berawan, Kiput, Lun Bawang, and Sa'ban people.

The questions asked during the interview included, but not limited to (1) what is the name of this heirloom? (2) where did you get the heirloom? (3) Is there a story behind this heirloom? (4) why is this heirloom important to you and your family? However, the informants were free to tell their stories as they like.

### 4. Result

From the interview sessions, three individuals/families were interviewed and the heirlooms which they showed were (1) an iron belt, (2) a gold ring, (3) a beaded necklace and (4) a set of gongs (traditional musical instrument).

#### Iron belt

The iron belt belonged to informant A who is from Ulu Tinjar, Baram. He is from the Sebo group, a minority group belonging to the Orang Ulu ethnic group. He began his story by indicating that when he was around 5 or 6 years old, their longhouse in Ulu Tinjar was burned down and most of the family's heirlooms were destroyed in the fire. However, as of the practice of many of the ethnic groups in the olden days, some of the things were also kept in farmhouse at the farm. Thus, the iron belt and ring were saved from being destroyed.

The iron belt itself was made out of coins and iron. Collections of coins were joint together using iron wires and hooked together. At the end of the belt was a plate which bears the symbol of a fish. The belt was about 25 inches, indicating the wearer must have had a small waist, thus it could be

a girl. According to the informant, the belt was one of the wedding gifts or hantaran for his great grandmother's wedding. Wedding gifts or hantaran was a common practice among some of the indigenous groups in Sarawak. For the Orang Ulu, this is part of their wedding traditions (Abdul Ghani, Dit & Venkatasawmy, 2009). According to informant A, the belt has been in the family for about 6 generations now.



**Figure 1: The iron belt**

Since the size of the belt was 25 inches, the informant guessed that it could be because his great grandmother was a teenager at the time, which is not unusual since according to the informant, most people married very young in the olden days.

When asked where their great grandparents acquired the belt, the informant was unsure. However, he guessed that they could have taken the coins and made the belt themselves, which was the most likely explanation. The coins on the belts were those from the times of Queen Victoria (1894), King Edward (1902) and Charles Brooke (1900 and 1906), There were also coins from the Strait Settlements as well as Hong Kong coins.

### **Gold ring**

Another heirloom is the gold ring which, according to the informant, was actually from his great grandmother's elder brother and he gave it to his sister, who was the informant's great grandmother. In the olden days, gold was one of the important mineral exports of Sarawak and it was a valuable piece of mineral (Wahyudhi, 2023).



**Figure 2: The gold ring**

The ring had a Chinese inscription on the inside part of it and a carving of a person kicking a ball on the outer part. It was made of pure gold, and it was very solid and heavy. This ring was given to the informant's aunt by his grandmother who in turn passed it on to his younger sister. When asked if there was any system to the passing of the heirloom, the informant informed that usually heirlooms are given to those who were close to the giver. In this case, the ring was given to his sister, because she was close to his aunt.

### **Beaded necklace**

The beaded necklace belonged to informant B, a male informant from the Kelabit group from Baram. The bead consisted of blue colored beads and the "pendant" is made from smaller red beads and is known as busak which means "Flower", namely because the pendant resembles a flower.

This necklace is a men's necklace. It is common to see men wearing these types of necklaces, especially among the Orang Ulu group. Gennaro (2013) stated that this type of necklace was only used by tribal men in the olden days, and it was a taboo for women to wear it then. According to Gennaro (2013), the red booble, which Informant B said is called busak is also known as *Kabo* among the Kelabit, Kayan and Kenyah groups.

The necklace was given to the informant's father by his in-law (mother's parents/informant B's grandparents) as a part of wedding gift. It was later given to him since he was the only son in the family. Since this is a men's necklace, it is often given to the male in the family. According to Informant B, the necklace is more than 100 years old.

Based on the interview, informant B said that blue beads were considered very valuable in the olden days. There are some differences in the blue beads used nowadays. The original beads were more transparent than what is used in today's bead making. Besides that, the types of beads used to make the necklace also play a role. If one had many beads, they are regarded as those of higher levels. In fact, so valuable was beads in the olden days that people would steal and even kill for it. This was supported by Dit and Foong (2010) who stated that beads were a status symbol of families among the Kenyah and Kayan group and that only aristocrat families could own certain beads.



Figure 3: The beaded necklace

### Set of gongs

The set of gongs was made of iron and contained various types of musical instruments which were *gong*, *tawak*, *canang* and *ketabuh*. Usually, these instruments were played during festivities only. This set was given to Informant C by her grandparents, who obtained them from their parents and grandparents. It has been passed down for many generations. The origin, however, was unknown.

Gongs were usually passed down from one generation to the next and often times belonged to the aristocrat families. It was also used as part of a wedding gift (Abdul Ghani, Dit & Venkatasawmy, 2009). The gong was also an indicator of the social and economical status of the family, especially as a part of wedding gift (Abdullah, 2021).



Figure 4: The gong set



## 5. Discussion

The narratives behind these heirlooms revealed that each heirloom, inherited from their grandparents, carries a unique story that enhances its historical, cultural and sentimental significance.

First of all, in terms of its historical significance, the stories reflected the historical trading activities of their people in general and their ancestors particularly. Based on their narratives of the origin of the heirloom, it showed that their ancestors were involved in the trading activities either directly or indirectly. The set of gongs, beads, gold ring, iron belt (or coins surrounding the belts), may have been obtained through trading activities. Although the true origin of the heirlooms was not known but it may have come through trading since it was one of the main activities in the olden days. Historical documents supported this fact. According to Dit and Foong (2010) the beads of the Bornean were brought in from China, India, Middle East and Europe as part of the barter trading system within the 6th to the 12th century. Some beads were originally from Venetia and Bohemia, especially those brought in by the English and Dutch merchants (Dit & Foong, 2010).

Besides that, another historical significance can be seen in the coins used in the iron belt. The coins used were those used from the times of Queen Victoria (1894), King Edward (1902) and Charles Brooke (1900 and 1906), There were also coins from the Strait Settlements as well as Hong Kong coins. This not only showed the influence of the British towards the trades in Borneo but also their influence in the monetary system. According to Zou and Kim (2022), during the Brooke era, especially the times of Charles Brooke, they “closely linked the Sarawak dollar to the Strait Settlement currency” (p.3) to increase trading activities with Singapore, who was part of the Strait Settlements. One Sarawak dollar was equivalent to one Strait Settlement dollar (Zou & Kim, 2022).

In terms of cultural significance, these heirlooms not only represent priceless artifacts but also embody the connection to the cultural practices, rituals, and traditions of the Orang Ulu people. For instance, in the case of beads. The Orang Ulu is traditionally divided into three main castes – Maren, the aristocrats, Hipui, the noble folks and Panyen, the commoners (Abdul Ghani, Dit & Venkatasawmy, 2009). Within the Orang Ulu cultural practices, some types of beads can only be owned by the Aristocrats, the Maren. In fact, according to Dit and Foong (2010), the lower caste of some of these groups were rarely seen or even allowed to own certain types of beads. It was also regarded as a status symbol among some Orang Ulu groups. Munan (1995) describes the beads of the Orang Ulu which reflect the social stratification of the community through the display of different motifs, some of which could only be used by the higher-ranking members of the community.

The bead necklace in this study, known as *Kabo* was something that only men would wear and women wearing them was considered a taboo in the olden days. Often times, these necklaces were worn when the men went hunting or travelling to another village, often indicating which tribe they come from, based on the size of the beads (Gennaro, 2013).



The same could be said of the gong set which is also a valuable heirloom. Just like the beads, these gongs were indicators of both social and economical status of the family (Abdullah, 2021). The gong itself is a musical instrument of the people, usually played during weddings and festivities and often given as wedding gift as part of their tradition (Abdul Ghani, Dit & Venkatasawmy, 2009).

In terms of sentimental significance, these heirlooms are considered as valuable by their owners. To them it is priceless and can never be replaced. It reminded them of their culture and ancestors, in fact they are quite sentimental about their heirloom and wish to pass it on to the next generations. They hoped that the younger generation would be able to appreciate these family heirlooms. These heirlooms reflect the tradition of the Orang Ulu, given to the person who was or is closed to the owner of the heirloom, as a sort of remembrance.

However, one issue that was brought to light by the informants was the fact that many traditional Orang Ulu material culture is often commodified in the modern market, potentially disconnecting them from their rich cultural heritage. Due to tourism and the need to promote the different cultures in Sarawak, some of this heritage has been commodified. For instance, the beads used nowadays are not the original beads, some are even made from plastic. According to informant B, the original blue beads are more transparent, while most so-called iron belts nowadays are made from aluminum or steel. Besides that, the coins used to adorn the belt nowadays, use either artificial coins or the Malaysian coins. This was echoed by Munan (1995), “a person could only make use of beaded items proper to his or her social stratum”. However, due to religious and social change, the significance of these beads and their motifs have been democratised, most of which are produced for souvenir markets rather than for one’s own family.

## 6. Conclusion

This study explored the narratives behind family heirlooms of the Orang Ulu group of Sarawak as well as delve into the cultural, historical and sentimental significance of these heirlooms. Although these family heirlooms are still kept within the families, one of the issues that came about is the commodification of these material cultures which has compromised the authenticity of these material cultures. Thus, preserving these heirlooms and the narratives surrounding them is vital in maintaining the cultural identity of the Orang Ulu community and on a personal level, it is a reminder of the family history.

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