

Narrative Analysis of Orang Ulu Heirlooms: Uncovering Their Cultural and Historical Significance

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Abstract: *The narratives associated with family heirlooms often carry deep significance for the families that inherit them. However, due to its portability and despite being passed down through generations, these treasured items are at risk of being lost due to factors such as family conflicts, natural disasters, or even war. This case study examined the heirlooms of three Orang Ulu individuals, focusing on the rich narratives that surround them. The heirlooms discussed include traditional Orang Ulu beaded necklaces, a brass belt, a gold ring, and a set of gongs. Through narrative analysis of in-depth interviews with the participants, the study revealed that each heirloom, inherited from their grandparents, holds a unique story that enhances its sentimental value as well as its cultural and historical significance. These heirlooms, beyond being valuable artifacts, served as living connections to the cultural practices, rituals, and traditions of the Orang Ulu community. The study also underscored the growing commodification of traditional Orang Ulu crafts, particularly beadwork, in the modern market, which may erode their cultural significance. Therefore, safeguarding these heirlooms and their associated narratives is crucial for preserving the cultural identity of the Orang Ulu people.*

Keywords: heirlooms, Orang Ulu, narratives, cultural, historical

1. Introduction

Heirlooms are precious objects which are passed down from one generation to another and stay within a family. Lilius (1999) stated that heirlooms are often portable, inherited by family and have been passed on for generations. Smith (2020) added that an heirloom is something which is tangible. However, heirlooms may also be in the form of inherited lands, architectures as well as intangible forms such as songs, dances, and genealogies which are memorized by elderly generations and passed on to the next within a family (Lilius, 1999).

Generally, heirlooms are regarded as personal items rather than cultural or communal. They may or may not be considered as part of the material culture of a community, namely because they can come in the form of non-cultural items such as jewelry, watches, chinaware and even furniture (Quay, 1996). That is why in archeology, heirlooms are often regarded as incongruities (Lilius, 1999, p.238). On the other hand, many communities around the world often passed on their precious heirlooms to their young generation and it has become part of the family's history and legacy as well as part of the community's culture (Lilius, 1999). For instance, the ancestral glass beads of many Transvaal tribes (Davidson & Clark, 1976), woven

mantles and belts of the Aymara (Adelson & Tracht, 1983), as well as gold chains, pendants and embroidered gowns and caps of the aristocratic Yoruba (Coker, 1958).

Family heirlooms are often accompanied by stories and narratives that hold significant value for families. These narratives helped in understanding the importance of the heirlooms as well as a better understanding about the people or family in particular, and their world, including the family's history, values and identity (Smith, 2020). Smith (2020) in her study of the African American heirlooms, regarded heirlooms as a means to understand their legacies and possible futures even through narratives related to the heirlooms. In fact, the heirlooms and their stories reflect the identity of the family in which they belonged and the African American community in general (Smith, 2020). Smith (2020) also stated that the action of passing on the heirloom to the other person is what she termed as "an intentional approach for givers to reveal parts of their personal history" (p.81). O'Daniel (2017) stated that it is the stories behind these heirlooms that make them valuable and significant.

Often times, these heirlooms have sentimental significance, especially towards the person from whom it was passed on from. Indirectly, this links the receiver of the heirlooms to their ancestral past (Lilios, 1999). Besides that, in many cultures, these heirlooms serve as vital connections to the past as they are deeply rooted in beliefs, customs, and values of the community. In some cultural communities, the materials used to make these heirlooms may have 'mythical or cosmological associations for their owners' (Lilios, 1999, p. 242). One such example is the mythical connection between the jade or pounamu which was used to make a number of Maori heirlooms including jewelry, tools and even weapons. The pounamu is considered as God stone by the Maori and is considered as taonga or treasures (Mountain Jade, 2016). The different carving of the jaded pendants is said to have different meaning and is believed "have the power to enhance life and embody the spirits of the ancestors" (Mountain Jade, 2016). They are also related to the story on and the founding of Aotearoa or New Zealand (Riley, 1987). The Maori three hei tiki carved in jade or pounamu reflects the social status of the wearer. They are even regarded as mana (status) and tapu (sacred) since they were only worn by tribal chiefs in the olden days (Mountain Jade, 2016).

In some communities, possessing these heirlooms may reflect the status of the family within the community. The antu pala or skull of the enemy of the Iban community in Sarawak is regarded as the "ancient symbol of victory" and was often displayed at the ruai or common area of the longhouse to show the homeowner's status (Langgu (2020) in Kiyai, Hashim, Halabi & Ismail, 2023, p.28).

The tajau, a ceramic earthen jar of the Iban of Sarawak is another example. This heirloom is associated with spirituality. Kiyai, Hashim, Halabi, and Ismail (2023), in their study, stated that there are several taboos related to owning the tajau including that of having a proper place or "house" to keep it in known as pantar, covering the tajau with a pua kumbu to calm the spirit and holding rituals such as miring to appease the spirits and to create harmony and peace of the spirit. Besides that, owning a tajau or several of them was also regarded as a symbol of status. Besides that, in many parts of Borneo, families have been inheriting large stoneware jars which are more than a hundred years old, originating from either China, Thailand or Vietnam (Harrison, 1986). These jars are often associated with legends of the Bornean communities and used to place the bones of the dead, as part of their tradition and customs.

Beads are often passed on to the next generation, especially in Asian communities. The age of the beads, which could be about hundreds of years, make these beads valuable heirlooms

(Abellera, 1981; Francis, 1992; Legarda, 1977). These valuable beads mark the social status and distinctions of the family (Lilios, 1999). Some communities in which beads are often passed on as heirlooms are the Akha community in Thailand, the Chin in Myanmar, the aboriginal people of Taiwan, which is the Paiwan, the Toraja in Sulawesi, as well as the Kalinga, the Ifugao, the Bontoc, Gad-dang and Tboli of the Philippines (Francis, 1992). These inherited beads were a symbol of social and marital status and were often used in marriage as a form of gift (Francis, 1992). For the Bidayuh of Sarawak, Francis (1992) stated that for one Bidayuh which he interviewed, the beads inherited were considered as magical and enabled him to communicate with spirits.

However, these heirlooms are increasingly at risk of being lost due to various factors, including family disputes, natural disasters, theft, loss or destruction and the impact of globalization and modernization (Lilios, 1999). Another threat to heirlooms is commodification. Due to modernization, many have opted to sell their heirlooms, namely because of their marketable and high-priced values. Harrison (1986) noted that the Borneo earthen jars are increasing being sold to tourists and antique dealers to raise cash. Besides that, many websites are selling and buying these antiques heirlooms, again due to their value (Lilios, 1999). Due to all these factors, these precious heirlooms may be at risk of being lost and together with it, the loss of the family's legacy and history. This is also the case with the heirlooms of the indigenous communities in Sarawak, in this case, the Orang Ulu community.

This case study focuses on the family heirlooms of three individuals from the Orang Ulu group, a culturally rich community known for its unique traditions and practices. The term Orang Ulu which means 'people of the upriver', is a term used to refer to 27 ethnically diverse groups in Sarawak which consist of the Kayan, Lun Bawang, Kelabit, Kenyah, Penan, Sebu, Bisaya as well as Tagal and Punan Bah (Lian, 2003; Tang, 2020). With a total population of about 150 000, equivalent to 5% of Sarawak's population and 0.4% of Malaysian population (Lian, 2003), the Orang Ulu villages are mainly found in the inland areas of Kapit, Bintulu, Miri and Limbang in Sarawak. Most of these villages, which are located in the upriver and uphill areas, are accessible by timber tracks which are passable only by 4WD vehicles (Lian, 2003).

Material culture is significant to a cultural community. IN this case, it is the heirlooms within a family, as it serves as a medium through which the lives, histories, and identities of individuals can be expressed. As noted by Derbyshire and Hicks (2020), it is through these objects that we can gain insights into the cultural identities and origins of the people from which they come. This study aims to explore the narratives behind these heirlooms, examining their historical, cultural, and sentimental significances. Additionally, it seeks to address the challenges faced by these heirlooms in the contemporary world, emphasizing the importance of preserving such artifacts for future generations. By employing qualitative interviews, the research aimed to uncover the rich stories associated with these heirlooms and highlight their significance and role in maintaining the cultural identity of the Orang Ulu community.

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, documentation work 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, the source of the artefacts, including the background, are displayed in the museum.

There has been a substantial amount of study on the material culture of the Orang Ulu. For instance, Nagu (2018) explored 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 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, in this case, the heirlooms of Orang Ulu families, 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

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the narratives surrounding family heirlooms within the Orang Ulu community. By utilizing in-depth interviews, the research aimed to capture the personal experiences and cultural significance associated with these heirlooms.

The participants for this study were three informants from the Orang Ulu group, anonymized as Informant A, B, and C. The parents of all the informants are of Orang Ulu descent. The Orang Ulu encompasses various indigenous groups, including the Apo Kayan, Kenyah, Kajang, Kajaman, Lahanan, Sian, Penan, Sebop, Kendayan, Ukit, Murut, Tagol, Punan, Lisum, Apo Duat, Kelabit, Berawan, Kiput, Lun Bawang, and Sa'ban.

Semi-structured interview guides were developed to allow flexibility in the participants' responses. The questions included: (1) What is the name of this heirloom? (2) Where did you acquire the heirloom? (3) Is there a story behind this heirloom? (4) Why is this heirloom important to you and your family? Informants were encouraged to share their stories in their own words, with the aim of gathering richer, more nuanced data.

Interviews were conducted at the convenience of the informants and were audio recorded using an MP4 recorder. The recorded interviews were then transcribed in Bahasa Melayu and translated into English when necessary for the purposes of this paper. Narrative analysis was employed to extract information related to the heirlooms and the stories behind them. Key themes and patterns within the narratives were also identified to provide a deeper understanding of the significance of the heirlooms.

To enhance the validity of the findings, triangulation was used by comparing responses across different informants and seeking confirmation through member checking (Creswell, 2009), where participants reviewed the findings to ensure accuracy. Besides that, references to related documents including historical documents, and cultural studies were also conducted to check the historical and cultural significance. Reliability was addressed by maintaining consistency in the interview process and utilizing the same interview guide for each informant (Creswell, 2009).

Ethical considerations were key throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing the informants' identities in the reporting of findings. All research activities adhered to ethical guidelines established by the university institutional review board.

4. Result

Three individuals/families were interviewed and the heirlooms which they showed were (1) a brass belt, (2) a gold ring, (3) a beaded Orang Ulu necklace and (4) a set of gongs (traditional musical instrument). Each of these objects not only reflects the artistic heritage of the Orang Ulu but also embodies narratives that deepen our understanding of their cultural identity as well as the significance of these heirlooms not only to the owner but indirectly to the community.

Brass belt

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

The brass belt itself was made out of coins and iron. Collections of coins were joined 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 for his great grandmother's wedding. Wedding gifts 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, Terry & Venkatasawmy, 2009). According to informant A, the belt has been in the family for about six generations now.



Figure 1: The brass 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 was 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 which looked like 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 for 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 bobble, 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 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, Terry & Venkatasawmy, 2009). The gong was also an indicator of the social and economic 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, carried a unique story that enhanced its sentimental, historical, and cultural significance.

Sentimental significance

In terms of sentimental significance, these heirlooms are considered valuable by their owners. This is in line with what Lilius (1999) stated whereby the heirlooms not only connect the receiver to the giver but is also a link connecting them to their ancestral past. To the present owners of these heirlooms, they are priceless and can never be replaced. It reminded them of their culture and ancestors, in fact they were very sentimental about their heirloom and wished to pass it on to the next generations, hoping that the younger generation would be able to appreciate these family heirlooms. So sentimental were they with their heirlooms, they even mentioned that they would not sell or give them up to the Museums. 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.

Historical significance

The heirlooms also have historical significance, which is reflected in the stories. 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, brass 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 brass 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).

These showed that the heirlooms, even though they are personal and belonged to a family rather than a community, reflected historical evidence which shows that the heirlooms was part of history itself. The tangible evidence revealed the trading and colonial history that surrounded Borneo once upon a time.

Cultural significance

In terms of cultural significance, these heirlooms not only represented priceless artifacts but also embodied the connection to the cultural practices, rituals, and traditions of the Orang Ulu people. For instance, in the case of beads. The Orang Ulu, namely the Kayan, and some other groups of the Orang Ulu, is traditionally divided into three main castes – Maren, the aristocrats, Hipui, the noble folks and Panyen, the commoners (Abdul Ghani, Terry & 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) described the beads

of the Orang Ulu which reflected 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, Terry & Venkatasawmy, 2009).

This cultural significance is similar to some of the communities in other places. The social and symbolic status of the owner is reflected in the heirlooms they possessed similar to the Pueblo Indians of the North American Southwest and the Iban and their inherited skulls, as well as the Philippines and their valuable inherited beads (Lilios, 1999).

Heirlooms and Commodification

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 brass 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 democratized, most of which are produced for souvenir markets rather than for one’s own family.

According to Lilios (1999), there are many websites which offer heirlooms for sale. These included chinaware, faux 18th-century furniture, reproductions of 12th- to 19th-century tapestries and for newborns, bronzed shoes, teethingers, and even lawn mower push toys. These shifts the status of an object from being commodities to heirlooms and vice versa. Lilios (1999) suggested that the need to possess genuine, priceless heirlooms may be one of the reasons why this is happening. Besides that, there is also the need to possess something which links humans to the past and relates them to a myth of origins, which basically means the need to ‘belong’ to something or somewhere, providing them with a sort of identity (Baudrillard, 1996).

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the narratives surrounding family heirlooms within the Orang Ulu group of Sarawak, focusing on their cultural, historical, and sentimental significance. Utilizing qualitative methods, specifically in-depth interviews with three informants, the research gathered rich insights into the personal stories associated with these heirlooms.

The key findings revealed that while these family heirlooms are cherished and preserved within families, they face challenges such as commodification, which undermines their authenticity and cultural value. This highlights the urgent need for initiatives aimed at preserving these heirlooms and the narratives that accompany them. This is mainly because the heirlooms play a crucial role in maintaining the cultural identity of the Orang Ulu community and serve as reminders of family history.

However, this study also has limitations, including the small sample size and the potential for subjectivity in the interpretation of narratives. Future research could benefit from a larger and more diverse participant pool, as well as exploring the perspectives of younger generations to understand how they perceive and interact with these heirlooms.

Further studies could investigate the impact of globalization on the preservation of traditional crafts and heirlooms within the Orang Ulu community, as well as explore strategies for cultural education and heritage conservation.

The key takeaway of this study is the importance of recognizing and preserving family heirlooms not only as tangible artifacts but also as vital custodians of cultural heritage and personal identity. Understanding and sharing these stories can foster greater appreciation for the rich cultural tapestry of communities like the Orang Ulu.

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