

BEADED WEDDING BASKETS OF SOUTHWESTERN SUMATRA

by

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ABSTRACT

Bakul-bakul perkahwinan dari Wilayah Lampung dan Bengkulu, Sumatera Selatan merupakan satu contoh seni halus yang mungkin juga seni halus istana. Manik gelas berlukis dari Indonesia, India dan Eropah, cengkerang dan biji-biji rudraksha dijahit tangan dengan teliti menerusi kain kapas ke atas bakul anyaman tangan dari rotan. Ketebalan benang berbeza dan mencerminkan corak bermanik yang berbagai. Kebanyakan bakul akan dilitupi dengan ampelo (sejenis getah) dari pohon Sepang yang menjadi pelindung dari kehausan dan kelusuhan akibat kegunaan harian. Cara binaan sebegini digunakan seratanya, membayangkan ketaatan terhadap arahan seni yang diterima. Bentuk-bentuk payung seperti kon juga dicipta dengan cara yang sama. Hasil-tangan perkahwinan lain yang bermanik termasuk pengikat langsir untuk katil bertiang empat, penutup makanan, bantal kaki, dompet, hiasan gantung yang berisi dan selipar. Manik gelas satu-satunya berukuran dari 0.5 mm ke 2 mm. Manik-manik diperbuat dengan cara lilitan dan lukisan. Bentuk-bentuk manik terutamanya terdiri dari bentuk bulat, silinder dan bersegi. Terdapat berbagai jenis warna dan ciptaan manik. Kebiasaannya manik adalah monokromatik tetapi terdapat juga manik berhati putih dan dari kertas logam (foil). Reka bentuk yang amat teliti telah dihasilkan dengan menenun bersama manik-manik yang telah teruntai sekelompok; penggunaan benang kapas tenunan tangan juga amat lazim. Reka corak manik yang berwarna-warni mengandungi bentuk-bentuk geometrik, binatang ataupun bunga-bunga yang terperinci. Ucapan selamat juga kadang-kadang dapat dilihat dalam bentuk singkatan. Coraknya mempunyai pengertian kebudayaan yang boleh ditafsirkan. Upacara perkahwinan Sumatra menggunakan bakul-bakul berhias sebegini sebagai persembahan bagi hadiah-hadiah dan hantaran perkahwinan, dimana bakul-bakul tersebut akan dipulangkan balik untuk digunakan lagi bagi tujuan yang sama ataupun disimpan sebagai kenang-kenangan. Muzium Corning Glass di New York memberikan tarikh tiga dari bakul koleksinya sebagai "sekitar tahun 1930-1950". Kaum keluarga yang dijumpa di wilayah Lampung pada tahun 1997 menyatakan bahawa

bakul-bakul manik sebegitu datangnya dari lima generasi yang lampau. Sepanduk bermanik, yang di pameran di Muzium Lampung pada tahun 1997 berusia 250 tahun. Besar kemungkinan juga manik-manik individu yang digunakan dalam sesebuah hasil kerja tangan mempunyai usia yang lebih tua dari usia kerja tangan itu sendiri.

The wedding baskets of the Lampung and Bengkulu Provinces of southwestern Sumatra are examples of fine art, or possibly a level of court art. Drawn glass beads from Indonesia, India, China, and Europe, cowrie shell sections, and rudraksha seeds are intricately hand sewn through a cotton cloth onto a handwoven rattan basket. Thread densities vary and reflect the various beaded patterns. In most cases the finished basket is then covered with ampelo (sap) from the Sepang tree which creates a patina and protects the piece from wear and tear. This construction seems ubiquitous, possibly indicating abidance to strict artistic instructions. Conical umbrella shapes are also created in the same manner. Other beaded wedding pieces include curtain tie-backs for four-poster beds, food covers, pedicure pillows, purses, stuffed hanging decorations, and slippers. Individual glass beads range in size from 0.5 mm to 2 mm. Beadmaking types are a mixture of wound and drawn. The predominant bead shapes are round, cylindrical, and faceted. The shades of colour and types of bead construction are numerous. Commonly the beads are monochromatic but white hearts and foil beads are also evident. Very detailed designs are created by weaving beads together in threaded groupings; the use of handwoven cotton thread seems to be common. Colourful beaded designs can consist of very detailed flora, fauna, and geometric shapes. Greetings and good wishes are sometimes seen in abbreviated form. Patterns of cultural significance can be interpreted. During Sumatran wedding ceremonies these bejewelled baskets are used for the presentation of wedding gifts and dowry items, returning them to their owners for posterity and use again. The Corning Glass Museum of New York dates three of its baskets to “probably 1930–1950”. Families met in Lampung Province in 1997 dated similar beaded baskets back five generations. Beaded banners, displayed in the Lampung Museum in 1997, are dated as 250 years old. Often individual beads are much older than the article they currently adorn.

INTRODUCTION

Sumatran beaded wedding baskets are passed down within the families who made them. In 1997 we were told that this beautiful artwork was not being made anymore. We are very fortunate to have the opportunity to share

what we know about these exquisite works of art. They offer a view of cultural heritage, creativity, symbolism, beauty, and a rich story about rites of passage and world history. We do not know how many of these beaded baskets exist or if they are currently being used. What we do know is that this artwork is incredible and unique, and it should be preserved for others to see. None of us is so different that we cannot appreciate and value the care and love that went into making these incredible works of art. We can understand and respect this heritage because it is like our own, held so important that we pass it on to our children in the hope that they will do the same.

LOCATION AND ORIGIN



Figure 1: Map adapted from Warming and Gaworski (1981: 13).

The beaded wedding baskets discussed here are from the southwestern Lampung and southern Bengkulu Provinces of South Sumatra. The areas surrounding the fishing and agricultural villages Bengkulu, Manna, Bintuhan, Kröe, and Kotaagung at the southern tip of southwest Sumatra (see Figure 1) are known for this beadwork. These drawn and wound glass beads are thought to have originated in Indonesia, India, China, and Europe.

Although most of the pieces are baskets of varying sizes, there are also banners, umbrellas, curtain tie-backs, food covers, pedicure pillows, purses, stuffed hanging ornaments, and slippers. In 1997, there were not any wedding baskets in the Lampung Museum, only beaded banners. A beaded banner in the Lampung Museum was dated as 250 years old and the museum did not give any information about the uses for the banners.

The wedding ceremonies and rites of passage of this area use these adorned baskets for the presentation of wedding gifts, dowry items, food, and *sirih* (betel nut), returning the baskets to their owners for posterity and future rituals. Their colours, the beaded designs, and symbols of the baskets create an auspicious aura for the event (Plate X). This custom of returning the piece to the owners is also practised for ships' cloths used in rites of passage in the same area of Sumatra (Gittinger, 2010: 4–5).

DESCRIPTION

The wedding baskets are created with several layers of natural material. A woven rattan basket serves as the foundation and basket shapes vary. The rattan is often coloured dark and white, which allows the artisan to weave geometric patterns. These patterns are visible on the base of the basket because it is not covered by fabric or beads. Typically each rattan strip is 3–4 mm wide, but can be up to 7 mm wide on larger baskets. Larger baskets are carried on women's heads in procession, and over time this creates indentations in the bottoms.

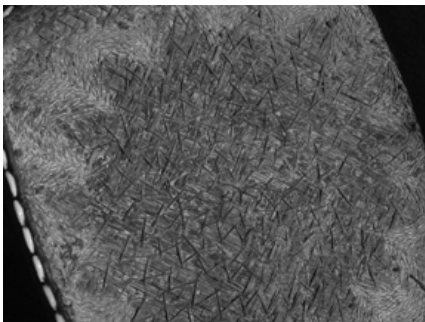


Figure 2: Variety of thread density for beadwork.

The basket is covered with a hand-made cotton cloth or sometimes batik that is stitched through the rattan onto the basket. The beads are stitched onto the basket in several ways, revealed by the thread densities on the inside of the basket, as shown in Figure 2.

Flat cowrie shells are sewn onto the basket in accent rows trimming the basket base, the top, and sometimes framing the topside motifs. The four corners of each basket are predominately accented with rudraksha seeds that seat the top onto the bottom of the basket. Other corner stops are used less frequently, for example, metal beads covered with netted beadwork, barrel-shaped glass beads, stone beads, seeds, buttons, and cotton puffs.

Since the baskets are used within contemporary Islamic society, the presence of rudraksha seeds on the baskets is interesting because of their connection to the Hindu faith. Followers of Lord Shiva use the seeds of the rudraksha tree for prayer beads. Rudraksha seeds represent the 'eyes' of Lord Shiva and they are considered to be very auspicious and virtuous. The rudraksha seeds on the wedding baskets are from trees grown in the area.

The primary component of the wedding baskets is drawn glass beads, although wound beads are present in the mixture. Bead sizes range from approximately 0.5–2 mm. The predominant bead shapes are round, cylindrical, and faceted. The variety of colours among the pieces is abundant (Plate XI). Most are monochromatic, although white hearts and foil beads are also found.

After the baskets are made, they are coated with a tree sap (ampelo). The sap is mined from the Sepang tree and is reconstituted with denatured alcohol. This coating creates a patina, gives the piece a tight feel, and preserves the natural material from wear and tear.

The baskets are decorated in various motifs including fauna, flora, and geometric shapes. Medallions on the basket top dominate the design. The motifs and use of colours relate to the identity of the village and to the sentiments that the piece carries. Letters in the design are abbreviations of '*Selamat makan*' and '*Selamat pakaian*' meaning 'Bless the food' and 'Bless the fabric'. Other letters can be the names or initials of the artist. The *tumpal* motif that is often seen, is a row of isosceles triangles, which symbolizes growth and fertility, the sacred mountain Meru, and can also refer to the tree of life, the lotus, and the lotus bud (Kahlenberg, 1979). Table 1 below lists some other examples of motifs and their meanings.

Table 1: Symbolism in southwestern Sumatran beadwork designs.

Design	Interpretation
Ducks	Monogamy
Swans	Mating for life, fertility
Butterflies	Joy, transitions
Elephants	Power
Chicken's foot/periwinkle and eggs	Fertility
<i>Bandji</i> (swastika)	Sacred symbol of good luck
Fish/birds/flowers	Yin/Yang 'balance'
Tree of life	Fertility, life force, death/rebirth
Human body	Two ideas: protection against evil and depiction of ancestors (the human body has magical force)
Colours red and green	Marital bliss and happiness
Ships	Community, life journey

Many of the motifs refer to rites of passage as 'transition rites'. There is the belief that while going through the rite of passage there is a transition from one state of existence to another, actually regarded as dying and being born again. Persons submitting to these rites are accorded temporary regal honours and are vulnerable as they change from one state of existence to the other. Beaded umbrellas and banners, made in the same fashion as the baskets, are also used in these ceremonies. The umbrella is used to invite ancestral spirits to the rite of passage to provide protection for the participants who are vulnerable at this time. Beaded stuffed ornaments rich with auspicious designs are hung from the underside of the umbrellas. Banners with a motif similar to a *palepai* cloth (ceremonial hanging) representing goodwill are believed to possess the power of emitting good aura. They are prominently positioned at formal gatherings, marriages, or funerals (Van der Hoop, 1949: 96, 140).

Beaded pieces were also used to tie back the curtains around the four-poster wedding bed. About 7.5 cm wide and up to 1 metre long, these pieces consist of fine beadwork with flower and geometric motifs with a circular or S-shaped beaded motif attached (Plate XII). They are backed with cloth, usually batik. A filigree ornate metal alloy serves as the hook for the curtains. In the absence of the metal hook, because some families could not afford it, a thin piece of rattan covered in batik and sewn into the back of the circular motif was used as a hook. Extra beaded motifs were used at the end of the *guling* (Dutch pillow). A pedicure pillow was used for the bride to have her feet cared for prior to the wedding.

Metal medallions have been found, which were mounted on the tops of wedding baskets and predate the use of beadwork. Metalwork was introduced to Sumatra by the Vietnamese Dong-Son culture. Using metal blanks that were pounded thin, the artist followed a sketched motif using a hammer and various tools, inscribing the design into the metal (Plate XIII). Silver, tin, or alloy medallions were sewn onto the basket. Some baskets have a small (12 mm) framed reflective metal piece as a centre of the beaded medallion.

The 'tree of life', 'ship of the dead', and *palepai* motifs date back to, at least, the Dong-Son metal drums (Warming & Gaworski, 1981: 134). The banners are constructed in the same fashion as the baskets (Plate XIV). These long rectangular beaded banners were displayed at weddings, funerals, and other rites of passage (Warming & Gaworski, 1981: 135). The 'ship of the dead' is often represented in the arts, not only through objects used in the death ritual, but generally through objects required in the transition rites. On the ships are souls of the deceased and often over them are umbrellas and banners, while in the air there are birds and below the ship, aquatic animals (Van der Hoop, 1949: 304). This generic order from the ship's cloth is mimicked on other beaded pieces.

USE

The wedding baskets are traditionally used in the presentation of gifts and dowry items. The most common gifts are jewellery, clothing, or food, which are tucked into the basket and presented. The gift is taken and the basket returned to the family that gave the gift. They are kept as heirlooms, being passed down through either father or mother. The small baskets are for jewellery or *sirih*. The medium and large baskets are used to carry food, cloth, or other gifts to the ceremony. The very large baskets are used for dowry items (Plate XV). During the days in preparation for the wedding, gift exchanges and rituals occur between the bride's and the groom's families.

A procession is led by the bride and groom, the guests then follow with gift-laden baskets. At the gift presentation, beaded baskets of food are placed in front of each guest. The dowry baskets are lined along the centre under several beaded umbrellas. The umbrellas sit atop a wooden pole which is held by a cut section of a banana tree. Stuffed beaded ornaments hang from the underside of the umbrella. The umbrella is a symbol of inviting ancestral spirits to a rite of passage for protection and to support a fortuitous outcome.

It is unknown how many of these ceremonies take place today, but indications are that there are not very many. From photographs such as that in Plate XV we can gain some idea of how the baskets are used in wedding rites. We are hopeful that the traditional uses of this beadwork will continue to be honoured.

Whenever a beaded wedding basket was shown to us, the family handled it with great respect. The basket was often wrapped in a *tampan* cloth. For added protection, they were placed in a plain rattan basket or a wooden box and placed in a cabinet or in the rafters, as shown in Figure 3. The baskets' natural material means that they are susceptible to destruction by rodents and insects when not protected. Volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and flooding have also destroyed many baskets over the years.



Figure 3: Descending from an attic loft with a rattan protection box that stores the wedding basket.



Figure 4: The *tampan* cloth which wraps and protects the basket.

The wedding baskets are often wrapped in a sacred cloth for the special purpose of spiritual protection. It is made using only four different colours geometrically arranged (Figure 4). This represents the four cardinal points, the four areas of Lampung, and the idea that we are all connected. Familiar in Indonesia is the motto of '*gotong royong*' or the community working together in life. That sacred cloth is different than the traditional ship's cloth also known as a *tampan*.

One of the common qualities of Indonesian culture is the interweaving of community, individual, social, and moral values. In the Indonesian language, *gotong royong* means to offer mutual aid or assistance, creating solidarity. It is an important principle in Indonesian life. Whole communities help each other overcome natural disasters and other crises, to reduce suffering. Generally, anyone in trouble can depend on help. The mutual respect for family members leads to the creation of a very strong unit. The basic philosophy of *gotong royong* binds both families and communities together.

At all levels of organization (family units through to governmental administration), decisions and problem solving are made by consensus. All parties concerned can come to some accord eventually through persistent and lengthy discussion. The Indonesian word *mufakat* means consensus, agreement, or unanimity. At formal gatherings, marriages, funerals, or discussions on village issues in southwestern Sumatra, large beaded banners or ships' cloths are sometimes placed in the venue to create a conducive environment. Holmgren and Spertus (1989: 86) write that in South Sumatra, "the iconographic content of *palepai* sometimes reflected the ceremonial context in which they were displayed. Thus, in the final phases of marriage rites, a single-ship *palepai* replaced a double ship, to signify the merger of family clans or the joining of male and female".

MARITIME TRADE AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON SUMATRAN BEAD ORIGINS

Sumatra is the fifth largest island on our planet; it has been on the crossroads of maritime trade for at least two millennia. The north Sumatran province of Aceh is situated on the north approach to the Straits of Malacca. This location facilitated a junction of maritime trade between China, Japan, India, the Middle East, and eventually Europe. Exploration for new resources led to discoveries along the southwestern Sumatran coast.

Around the 3rd century, Indian traders looking for minerals, wood, pepper, and coffee mingled their cultural, philosophical, and religious influences with their trading friends. As today, clove, coconut, and coffee grew extensively along the southwestern Sumatran coast, while to the east and in the Barisan Mountain chain, pepper, cassava, cocoa, rice, and tobacco were the trade attractions. Along with the agricultural lure, raw materials such as agate, onyx, tin and silver alloys, along with abundant calcium carbonate in existing ocean reef material or geologically preserved limestone provided the means for basic glass beadmaking. Common organic material and geological deposits of metal oxides which yield coloured glass can all be found in the southwestern Sumatran area. An indication of the variety available is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Common colour agents for glass.

Colour	Agent
Amber brown	Carbon oxides
Black	Organic material
Blue, green, red	Copper compounds
Blue-violet	Cobalt oxide
Greens and browns	Chromic and iron oxides
Orange	Uranium
Purple	Manganese dioxide
Red	Gold chloride, selenium oxide
Violet	Nickel oxide
White	Antimony oxides, tin, arsenic
Yellow	Lead compounds, cadmium sulphide, sulphur, uranium
De-colouring agent	Manganese dioxide
De-colouring agent	Sodium nitrate

From Francis, Peter, Jr. (1994) and <http://geology.com/articles/color-in-glass.shtml>

It has been postulated that the earliest glass beads were introduced to South Sumatra between the 1st and 3rd centuries. They were monochrome (yellow, blue, green) and in the drawn Arikamedu technique (Dubin, 1995: 85). The most direct routes from Arikamedu, a major trade port and beadmaking centre in India (Francis, 1989: 4), were to the west coast of Sumatra across the Indian Ocean. This west-Sumatran-coast trade avoided the Malacca Straits where difficult navigation and shallow water allowed marauding pirates to interrupt transit as they still do today.

Trade involved villages on the west coast, south of the city of Padang, including the fishing and agricultural villages of Bengkulu, Manna, Bintuhan, Kröe, and Kotaagung, which is situated at the head of Semangka Bay. When maritime order in the Malacca Straits could not be maintained, the shorter and wider Sunda Strait became the accepted alternative route (Holmgren & Spertus, 1989: 74). Sometime around the 2nd to 4th century, Lampung Province became a focus for trade and the area blossomed.

Recent archaeological work around Palembang, South Sumatra confirms the area was a large beadmaking centre from about the 7th to 13th century (Adhyatman & Arifin, 1993: 27; Francis, 1994: 94). During this time, the great Srivijayan Empire (650–1400) was influential over large areas of Southeast Asia. Palembang was the eastern gateway to the Lampung Province. The bead styles and technique were similar to those of the southeast Indian port of Arikamedu (Francis, 1994: 94) until approximately the 12th century. Moreover, until at least 1978, in the region

around Palembang, fine woven fabric and unique Hindu-like dances were still performed, and wedding costumes were still patterned after the royal courts of the old Srivijayan Empire (Dalton, 1978: 266). It can be deduced that Indian-Hindu trade had the first influential impact on southwestern Sumatran philosophy, religion, theatre, and fine arts.

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Plate X: Assorted beaded wedding baskets.



Plate XII: Wedding bed tie-backs.



Plate XI: Example of bead variety and design.



Plate XIII: Example of metal medallions 8.5 cm in diameter for top centre of basket. Note holes along edge for attaching to basket.



Plate XIV: Beaded *palepai* banner for ceremonial use (126 cm x 34.5 cm). Glass beads and cowrie shells are sewn through a cotton cloth onto a woven rattan base.



Plate XV: Wedding reception. Dowry baskets in the centre, other gifts and food baskets in front of seated guests. Photo: courtesy of Abdul Muis.