Sarawak Malay Material Culture and their Weltanschauung: Some Preliminary Research Themes and Findings

Awang Azman Awang Pawi, Ph.D Malay Studies Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the concept of material culture and its relevance to the Malay material culture in Sarawak. The Malay material culture in Sarawak is considered new as not much research has been done on that subject matter in Malaysia and needs to be studied because of the stark difference between the local knowledge and heritage in Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak. In the broad perspective of the nusantara world, the Malay material culture is under the Malay Archipelago diaspora but different in terms of creativity, innovativeness, thinking and values of the creator. This article argues that the material culture among the Sarawak Malays has its own uniqueness and relevance to the culture, community value and plays a significant role both among the traditional Malays and the modern urban Malay populace. This research has a significant contribution towards understanding the transformation in the projection of their identity and culture, and the social change associated with the preservation and commercialization of parts of the material culture in the zeitgeist of globalization.

Key words: Sarawak Malay Material Culture, Weltanschauung, Heritage, Local Knowledge
INTRODUCTION

Research on material culture is often associated with artifact which often involved in beliefs, value, idea and the characteristics of a community. Observations on material culture also includes observations on culture and part of it of the historical aspect of culture and cultural anthropology. The discipline of material culture is bigger when compared with the history of arts (Jules David Prowan, 1982: 1). Hence, it can be said that material culture covers arts, plays, ornamentals, architecture, creative arts such as furniture and displays, foods and other equipments such as musical instruments (Lissant Bolton, 2001: 251; Jules David Prowan, 1982: 3). Culture existed to facilitate the livelihood of cultured mankind and this involved their skills in producing them (Mohd Taib Osman, 1989: vx). Therefore, it can be said that material culture is a discipline which is fast growing in the west and this discipline is often not the subject of intense research in the Malaysian context. The significance of the research on material culture among the Malay community Sarawak, amongst others, will investigate the function, values and the observations of the world view on the traditional Malays as well as the modern urbanize Malays. In view of the above, there are four research questions which this article will address.

The research questions are: firstly to what extent has material culture of the Malays in Sarawak be link the thinking, culture, and the values of the community; secondly how do material culture play a significant role in the Malay community in Sarawak; thirdly, to what extent does changes in material culture among the influence the life of the traditional Malay and the modern urbanize Malay; and, lastly to what extent has material culture among the Sarawak Malays have been commercialized.

In addition, the objectives of this article are: to interpret the socio-cultural material culture of the Sarawak Malays; evaluate the roles of culture amongst the Sarawak Malay in the traditional and urban Malay communities; and finally to evaluate the cultural aspect of material culture of the Sarawak Malays

LITERATURE REVIEW

Material culture is known to have existed amongst the traditional Malay community. The batik industry, songket, carpentry, weaving was already commercialized since the 14th Century (Kenneth R. Hall, 1996: 87). Magnus opus in the nusantara world such as Sejarah Melayu, Hikayat Banjar, Nagarakertagama had already some form of manifestation of material culture. These material cultures also include clothes, jewelry, decorative, plays and musical instruments.

Material culture plays important roles not only in the daily culture of the ordinary folks. Among the royal families, material culture had been utilized officially. This can be seen in the form of a long keris, Gandik Diraja, Kalung Keraja, Cogan Alam, Cogan Agama, sword, Sundang Diraja, Tengkolok DiRaja, short Keris Diraja, Pending Diraja, Cokmar, Ubur-ubur Kuning, and Tombak Berambu.

Research in the industry regarding material was done by Wan Hashim Wan Teh (1996). The research also includes the making of batiks, weaving songket, carpentry, and weaving of pandan. However, the research is focused on the organizational aspect of it such as they types of
production, wages and marketing analysis, and the roles of motifs and its designs. The research was mainly focused in two states namely in Kelantan and Terangganu in 1985. The significance of the research indicated that material culture among the Malay communities has existed and commercialized since time in memorial and is fast gaining momentum in this modern era.

Most research in material culture among the Malay community has always been seen in a single perspective. This means that the research is only looking at its meaning and the roles that it played. Mohd. Kassim Hj. Ali (1990) for example, observed the ornamental owned by the traditional Malays from the functions aspect of why it is worn not so much on the context of why it is worn form the artistic aspect of the culture on why it is worn critically. Because of that the research is more or less try to give the meaning and even though in the earlier part of the book it gave the impression that it was influenced from the Indian and Chinese, but, it gave little account on the influence from the Java and Islam.

Culture can be classified into two that is material culture and non material culture. In Sarawak, non material culture such as family kinship and its relationship with the community and culture is well written by Abang Yusuf Puteh. In the Malay Culture of Sarawak, Abang Yusuf Puteh (1996a), analyzed the influence of culture on the family and community and in another book entitled the Malay Mind which was published in 1996, Abang Yusuf Puteh (1996b) wrote on the Malay mindset, leadership and the Malays economy especially those in the urban and the rural areas which according to him has caused conflict and uncertainty in the minds of the Sarawak Malays.

The material culture aspect of the traditional Malay community in Sarawak including, tops (gasing) kelong, tapak sireh, drums, the Malay house, keringkam, traditional foods and etc which can be linked to the socio-cultural aspects of the Sarawak Malays has never been the subject of intense research specifically. Food, according to Lissant Bolton (2001: 251-268) is one aspects of material culture. In Sarawak, hot porridge or bubur pedas, that is the traditional food of the Malays is known to have been originated from Sambas and later it was adapted to be the food of the Sarawak Malays. The same can be said of the kek lapis Sarawak or the Sarawak ‘layered cake’. The form in which such food come into being indicated the socio cultural and economic evolvement during the traditional era which is nurtured until today.

The construction of the traditional Malay house is one aspects of material culture which is discussed here. It is not only the spacious, but it was constructed based on the rules and guidelines on what need to be done first. The Malay traditional house in Sarawak (and also in Peninsular Malaysia) for example has the connotation of Islam and the Malay culture itself. One of the pioneer researches on the tradition of the Malays in Pusa, Sarawak found out that the Malay traditional house represents the Malay material culture and is linked to the cultural and religious aspects of the community. The ladder leading to the house has odd numbers such as 5, 7 or 9. The rationale behind it is because it is supposed to have a good position as compared to even numbers. The concept of verandah among the Malays in Pusa is different from those of the Malays from Peninsular Malaysia.

The front door or the main door of the traditional Malay house cannot be built too close to any posts. The visitor’s room must be adjoining to the main door. This is linked to the esthetic nature
of the Malay house. The toilet should not face the direction of the kiblat as a form of respect to the direction of the kiblat as a direction of worship among Muslims. The visitor’s room and the verandah is built to be spacious because they have to take into consideration of religious activities such as berzikir, makan selamat, marriage ceremonies, and other form of activities from time to time. Square belian post must be used because it can last. In addition there are some big posts and other smaller posts. The erecting of the foundation of the house must be done by Friday and they have to recite the ‘selawat prayer three times (Personal Comunication, Abang Ismail Abang Julhi, 2008). That is the ritual aspect of constructing a house which is being influence by religious beliefs. In this context is their religion is Islam.

The significance of material culture among the Malay community in their daily life can be seen with the commercialization of the material culture industry. This can be seen in the batiks industry, songket, carpentry and weaving which have been developed by the Handicraft Corporation and with support of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Heritage. The tools of material culture which becomes the identity of the Malay community which is shown in activities, ceremonies related to traditional customs, rituals and culture. In Sarawak, the traditional Malay community used the material culture known as panggo, or the platform used during the wedding ceremony which has its own shapes and practices. In addition the traditional Malay costumes have its own motifs which become part of the identity of the Malay community which many need further research.

Among the urban Malays in Kuching, culture is commercialized especially material culture for certain ceremonies. Based on some preliminary observations it was found that some individuals are engaged in providing services based on these material cultures such as for wedding ceremonies, engagement and during their children thanks giving prayers. The existence of such services is because of the demands from the Malay community. This is evident because the urban Malays wish to maintain the social status and material culture which is said to has an esthetic value and social functions in a modern society. However, the world view or weltschauung is yet to be seen in this context. In addition, material culture of the urban Malay of Kuching, Sarawak has yet to be research intensely apart from the final year project by Marina Mustafa (2003). However, Marina research is just focused on the organizing of the keringkam which is implemented in Kuching.

Based on the preliminary observations made by the group there are some small industries involved in the material culture of the Malays in Kuching. Some of include the production of keringkam on either a full-time basis or on part-time basis. Bookings of keringkam sometimes come from the Malays who are more well off or can be referred to the upper middle class Malays and also from tourists who are mostly Malays from Peninsular Malaysia and overseas as souvenirs to indicate the Sarawak Malay identity. The upper middle class during the era of the traditional Malays are very skillful in weaving cloths and they are very proud of having such skills. This was found in the writings of Margaret Ranee (1986: 30). This opinion is true in the context of Marx premise that material culture exist because of the explicit social awareness regarding the concept of invention, the functions and status of the objects invented. Certain meanings are invented for the symbolic functions, social identity and social meanings of the objects.
In addition to the above, Sarawak songket is an iconic material culture of the Sarawak Malays which shows how elaborate it was produced in terms of its beauty and also its design. In terms of its forms, Sarawak songket can be divided into four forms, that is Kain Belatak, Kain Brunei, Kain Beturus and Kain Tenun Biasa (Kain Songket). Each of the forms mentioned earlier has its own unique features and form (Maimunah Daud, 1999:123-124). However, our group have not conduct any research to ascertain the origin of the songket, the interpretations of its symbols, esthetic values.

Because material culture in the form of musical instruments such as kompang, drum cannot be discussed is a vacuum, hence the complimentary aspects such as songs which are presented become the foundation to discuss the world view and the environment concept of the Malays. As it is now, there is no research to link such culture with the Malay literature. Because of this, observations need to be made on the world view of the Malays in relation to the environment and its relation to the material culture of the Malays.

Obviously, material culture and the world view of Sarawak Malay, as a field, has yet to be research widely in Sarawak. Material culture which is focused exclusively among the Malay Sarawak ethnic is only found in the writing of Hajjah Maimunah Daud in her book entitled the Glimpses of Malay Life in Sarawak in 1999. However, she does not focus her writing on material culture in more detail, but, more on the life of the Sarawak Malays. In terms of the Malays which she refers to is more on the Kuching Malays and not focused on the Malays in the other division of Sarawak especially of Sri Aman Division and Sibu Division, who have their own aspects of material culture. The aspect of material culture of the Sarawak Malay such as pang, kain songket, selayah keringkan, baju kurung Melayu Sarawak, gajah olen and wedding costume were discuss by Siti Zaharah Abg Husaini (1991: 91 – 106), but, very briefly. She did not interpret these material culture in term of its artistic, symbol, functional and its relationship with the Malay world view.

The lack of observations and research on the material culture of the Sarawak Malays bring a lot of challenges for a more detail research on material culture. Research on material culture will not be meaningful if it is not linked to the Malay world view of material culture which can be linked to their belief, tradition and customs, esthetics value of the Sarawak Malays. This research is hoped to address the gap in material culture of the Malays. Other researches on material culture in Sarawak such as gongs was done by V. K. Gorlinski (1994: 81 – 99), pua kumbu (Noria anak Tugang: 2004), Baruk (Charli anak Unggang: 2006) all of which discussed the material culture of the of other ethnic groups such as Kayan, Iban and Bidayuh respectively. Heidi Munan wrote on the Sarawak handicraft in her book entitled Sarawak Craft: Methods, Materials and Motifs in 1989, focused mainly on the handicraft of other ethnic communities such as Iban, Bidayuh, Penan, Kelabit, Kayan, and Lun Bawang in more detail. However, the material culture and the handicraft of the Malays was distinctively left out. There are others who use visual or photographs in analysing the cultural heritage of Sarawak. Such works done by Luca Invernizzi Tettoni & Edric Ong (1996), Robert Hoebel (1986), and Junaidi Payne et al (1994). In trying to research on culture in Sarawak, local knowledge is very important as this will bring new and local perspective on the subject matter (Clifford Geertz, 1983). The purpose is to avoid what outsiders perceive or think and Victorian preconceive ideas of the Sarawak Malays, who do not fully understand the culture of Sarawak Malays.
According to other previous researches, it was found that most of them wrote on the material cultures of other ethnics in Sarawak. This is because they perceived that the material cultures of the Malays in Sarawak are probably similar with that of the Malays in Peninsular Malaysia. However, the preliminary research done by our research team found that even though there are some similarities in some aspect of the Malay material culture, but at the same time there are stark contrasts between the material culture of the Sarawak Malays and the Malays from Peninsular Malaysia. This is because of the influences from the government of Brunei, Sambas and Banjar which become more dominant. However, more study need to be done before we can make such conclusion. Hence, the time has come for us to study material culture of the Sarawak Malays in the context of the Malay world view.

METHODOLOGY

In this research it is not sufficient to employ just one research methodology. This is because there are many research questions that need to be examined and answered and because of that a myriad research technique need to be employed. A survey technique will not be able to come up with a conclusive findings on the understanding of the object of the research. Observations however has its own constraints especially with regards to time and also the context of when the research will be carried out. Because of that it is deemed necessary to combine both methods strategically and creatively so that those methods will be able to give a wider and holistic perspectives in researching the subject matter.

Research at the macro level was done to review the material culture in the Nusantara environment, than a more focused research will be conducted on the material culture of the Sarawak Malays. The functions of material culture amongst the Sarawak Malays will also be reviewed in the forms of researches which other researchers have conducted and also the Sarawak Malays classic texts or those who share the same material culture in Borneo. Research at the micro level will look at the individual or a number of groups as respondents for information. The significance of this is because we will be able to gather information which cannot be gathered from the macro perspective. Field work will be done at some selected locations namely in Kuching, Kalaka and Saribas Districts as the main locations because the Malays who reside in these two districts are basically traditional Malays and they are still practicing the old traditions and culture. In addition, Kuching is chosen based on the premise that there are many modern, middle and upper class Malays are found in the urbanized Kuching city. At the same time the research will also be focused in other areas such as Tanjung Datu and Kota Samarahan will also be chosen because these two places has a sizeable number of Malays population. Field work will also be conducted in Sambas, Kalimantan and Brunei to trace the root of the material culture of the Sarawak Malays because some of the Sarawak Malays are known to have migrated to Sarawak from these two places. In addition, past researches indicated that some of the material culture of the Sarawak Malays are has some influence from that of the Sambas and Brunei Malays. Hence, a more in depth research is required to unravel the truth in such assertions.

Some early observations, it was found that material culture in locations that are near an in the fringe of the city which are fast developing into an urbanized settings do not have many material culture. In these areas 50 individuals and groups were picked as respondents. They were
interviewed and asked on the material culture of the Malays found in the area which includes to what extent do material cultures is linked to the thinking, culture, their world view and esthetics in the Malay community. Apart from that, the change in the values of the traditional and modern Malays on material culture will also be examined. Arts and socio-cultural interpretations is also be done by taking into considerations the opinions n the local and the understandings on the esthetic aspects of material culture.

In addition interviews is conducted with selected target groups especially those experts in material culture. They are the main respondents in the study. This aspect of micro research enables the research to understand the subject matter in more detail. The strength of this research is that the researcher will be able to obtain primary data which cannot be obtained at the macro level. At the same time, it complements the other methods employed in the research such as the digital documentations of the material culture for further analysis. The strength of this research is it is headed by a local researcher, this will enhance the understanding of research process and at the same time will get the right perspective of the research.

SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

(a) Material culture of the Malays in Sarawak can be linked to their thinking, culture and values

The material culture of the Malays in Sarawak can be linked with their thinking, culture, value and esthetic of the community. Beliefs and religion is seen to have enormous influence in material culture. Animism, Hindu and Islam have some influence on material culture of the Malays. However, beliefs are supposed to have a higher influence on their daily life. Because of that, any material culture which is contrary with Islam is often regarded as a heritage and sometimes when they are carried out it has to be carried out in accordance with the Islamic values and beliefs. For example some aspects of material culture with regards the use of “gajah olen” in the solemnization of marriages. It is not found in the Islamic belief regarding the use of ‘gajah olen’ but it is still practised among the traditional Malays and probably it was the influence from Hindu or probably an animistic belief.

*Keringkam* is known to be the cultural heritage of the Sarawak Malay. The ownership of the *keringkam* is linked to the status of the owners. The cover of the *keringkam* is a of material culture in the form of heirlooms of the Sarawak Malays. Owners of expensive *keringkam* is linked with prestige and the social status of the families who owned it. Not many families of the Sarawak Malays are able to own *keringkan*. The costs of golden threads and silver needles to produce and/or make *keringkan* is rather exorbitant.

(b) Material culture plays important roles among the Malay community in Sarawak

Material culture plays important roles among the Malays communities in Sarawak in their daily life and also in their customs and traditions. In the context of the construction of Malay traditional house they have to abide by the traditional beliefs of the community. *Tapak sirih, tar, kek lapis, keringkam* are some of the forms of the material culture. In the past the cover of the *keringkan* are often used in officials functions such as in the engagement and wedding
ceremony, but, now the cover of the keringkam is used in almost all official ceremonies. The same can be said of the kek lapis, in the past it was only served during the Hari Raya Aidil Fitri, but now, it has been commercialized.

(c) Changes in material culture values among the traditional and the urbanized Malays

There are some changes and differences in material culture of the traditional and urban Malays. The Sarawak Malays are facing a rapid phase of transformation and they are very dynamic. As a result of that there are along of changes taking place in terms of their values and this also includes their culture. At one time, material culture was considered as part of the Malay culture, but now the existence of material culture, for example, among the educated, material culture formed part of the Malay community of Sarawak identity. In addition, with such material culture one can easily differentiate the Sarawak Malays with that of their counterparts from Peninsular Malaysia. Apart from that the material cultures of the Sarawak Malays is also different that those of the other ethnic communities in Sarawak, apart from religious differences.

Identity is an important element for the communities especially among the diverse ethnic in Sarawak which has more than 20 ethnic groups. These identities give high life and esthetic values which enrich the civilization. Therefore, to safeguard such identity, they begin to develop and nurture their culture, and likewise the Sarawak Malays too, are trying to develop and nurture this heritage.

As one of the ethnic heritage, material culture is also on the brink of extinction. This happened because as the community develop some aspects of the culture which become less relevant will automatically be ignored or even become impractical and will no longer be used and nurtured. As a result not all of the Sarawak Malay community will be able to treasure the significances of their material culture because it is only used symbolically in some ceremonies. Because of that, they tend to ignore its importance and as such it automatically caused its extinction.

However, there are some who are aware of such extinction and they see this as an opportunity for them nurture the material culture and because of that they want to create value to it. As a result of this awareness, these group of people try to commercialize the material culture and try to repackage them in the form of business dealings. Therefore in Kuching for example shops are open where the other members of the Malay communities can rent traditional costumes for wedding ceremonies and the like. It is obvious, therefore that material culture of the Malays are being packaged commercially and get the supports from the urban Malays populace in Kuching.

This also implies even though some aspects of material culture are on the brink of extinction, on one hand, there are some enterprising Malays will try to create value in the material culture by trying to commercialize them especially with regards to wedding or marriages packages. Keringkam has also get the attention of the State government of Sarawak, and the Sarawak Handicraft Board has organized activities which try to popularize and develop the keringkam industry. Keringkam is said to have a high demand and it is quite exclusive. Selendang keringkam empat segi is estimated to cost between RM80.00 to RM90.00 while selendang benang perak costs about RM300.00, and the keringkam selendang benang emas costs more than RM700.00 each each.
CONCLUSION

There are other aspects of material culture of the Sarawak Malays which the researcher has yet to research on and analyzed. This is because the research project is not fully completed especially on the interpretations of the arts, symbols, the philosophy behind and the world view which are still being research on. However, these preliminary findings will open more space for more detail research in future.

Acknowledgement:
The author wishes to thank Profesor Dr. Siti Zainon Ismail, for her generous help. This paper is a part of a larger research project supported by Ministry of Higher Education, Fundamental Research Grant Scheme, (Ref No FRGS/04(02)681/2008(14).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


The Keringkam / Selayah is a head scarf embroidered with botanical motifs in gold thread. It is unique to only Sarawak and Brunei. The traditional Keringkam / Selayah was short, measuring about 54 cm by 95 cm and made of a thin transparent voile or synthetic cloth. Its refined design and embroidery brings out that stylish appearance of the artwork with a touch of unique splendor. The Keringkam head scarf was often worn by the women of the aristocrats in official ceremonies together with Kain Songket in the nineteen-sixties.


*Literally, Nusantara (Malay Archipelago) means Nusa(states) in between. It is refer to the states (kerajaan) between the Asian and Australian continents.