EVOKING THE ASO': DAYAK BEADED BABY CARRIER PANELS WITH DRAGON-DOG MOTIFS

Valerie Hector

Although fairly well known, beaded baby carriers made by the Dayak peoples of Borneo have not been well studied. This paper focuses on one element of carrier decoration: the square or rectangular bead-plaited or -woven panels known as aban *or* tāp hawat *in Dayak languages. Designed by men, beaded by women, aban harness spiritual power, deploying talismanic motifs that help protect a child's body and soul from harm in the vulnerable first few years of life. One of the most potent motifs is the* aso' *or dragon-dog, an imaginary creature of the watery underworld, feminine in nature, a goddess-like being the Dayak depict in many media besides beads. Analyzing eleven aban dating to ca. 1896-1965, nine of which are previously unpublished, we trace the guises aso' assume, witnessing impressive artistic achievements while posing questions for further research.*

INTRODUCTION

The world's third largest island, Borneo encompasses an area of about 750,000 km^2 along the equator between peninsular Malaysia, the Philippines, and other Indonesian islands. Borneo contains diverse environments with mountainous interiors connected to the low-lying coast through five major rivers (King 1993:18; Sellato 2012a:12). Politically, Borneo is divided amongst three nations. Indonesia oversees Kalimantan which occupies most of the island. The Federation of Malaysia claims the states of Sabah and Sarawak to the north, while the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam occupies a small area on the north coast (Figure 1).

Borneo is home to an estimated 20 million people, including the approximately 3 million indigenous inhabitants known as Dayak and Punan. While the Dayak are settled rice farmers, the Punan are nomadic or semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers. Both groups live in the interior, where they regularly interact, but only the Dayak make baby carriers with beaded panels. Borneo's remaining population consists of Chinese, Buginese, Javanese, Madurese, Bajau, Arabs, and South Indians in addition to the Malay, former Dayaks

Figure 1. Political map of Borneo (image: Peter Fitzgerald).

who relinquished their heritage and converted to Islam (Avé and King 1986:9-10; Sellato 2012a:9). The majority of these peoples live along the coast or major rivers where they work as traders, shopkeepers, and farmers. The coast also supports Borneo's major towns, commercial centers, and ports.

For millennia, the peoples of Borneo have been exposed to other cultures. Bronze artifacts likely produced by the Dong Son culture of Vietnam during the last half of the 1st millennium BC found their way into Borneo, where they may have inspired geometric and spiral motifs (Heppell 2015:32; Maxwell 2010:23-31). With the rise of maritime trade in the first millennium AD, Borneo's prime location brought sailors from distant parts of the world seeking forest products collected by the Dayak such as beeswax, camphor, incense wood, spices, birds' nests, and other items for

sale to wealthy elites in China, India, and the Middle East (Chin 1988:59; Jessup and Vayda 1988:11). In return, the Dayak received beads, ceramics, metal objects, and other exotic commodities, many of which became heirlooms functioning as repositories of family wealth. Soon, trading towns developed along Borneo's coast, followed by the first Indian, Islamic, and Chinese colonies and kingdoms (Sellato 1989:14-15). In the early 16th century, Islam penetrated further into Borneo just as Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish explorers appeared, followed later by the Dutch (Sellato 1989:16). The pace of change accelerated in the 17th century as the British and Dutch attempted to establish trading concerns (Sellato 1989:16). From the mid-19th century, when British and Dutch efforts to colonize portions of Borneo began to succeed, Catholic and Protestant missionaries arrived (Avé and King 1986:19-26, 103 ff.). The growing European presence undermined traditional Dayak ways of life, further eroded by the Japanese occupation of Borneo during World War II (King 1993:150, 161 ff.).

Since the Second World War, change in Borneo has increased as governments have instituted modernization, resettlement, and transmigration programs while allowing commercial exploitation of the island's extensive natural resources (Rousseau 1990:38-39). If Jakarta, Indonesia's flood-prone capital city, relocates as planned to East Kalimantan, the pace of change will intensify, further uprooting the Dayak who may be reduced to a "marginal position" in a "peasant economy" (Rousseau 1990:39). These issues bear mentioning here because the majority of aban discussed in this paper were made before traditional Dayak ways of life were altered forever; as of the early 1970s, beaded baby carrier panels were being made for sale as well as for indigenous use (Munan 1995:59; Whittier 1973:198-199). Before considering them in greater detail, we need a brief understanding of how the Dayak traditionally lived and what they believed.

DAYAK ORIGINS, ETHNIC GROUPS, AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The Dayak likely descended from Austronesian-speaking peoples who began arriving in Borneo ca. 2500 BC, where they eventually supplanted the hunter-gatherer populations that had inhabited the island since before 30,000 BC (King 1993:59 ff.; Sellato 2012a:10). Dayak groups settled in the interior, establishing villages along river basins between mountain ridges (Rousseau 1990:3). The name "Dayak" may derive from *daya*, an Austronesian word meaning "toward the interior" (Alpert 2016:117) or from *aya*, a Malay term for "native," or from various words in Dayak or Javanese languages (King 1993:30). Most Dayak self-identify not as "Dayak" but by their ethnonyms or toponyms, i.e., their group's name or geographic home base (Sellato 2012a:10). Scholars classify the heterogeneous Dayak into six major ethnic categories (not including the Punan) that may be subdivided into at least 80 ethnic subcategories (Sellato 2012a:xiv-xv).

Among the major categories, two seem to have produced aban in fairly high numbers: the Kayan and Kenyah who live largely in the upper reaches of rivers in Sarawak and East Kalimantan (Sellato 1989:21). Both the Kenyah and Kayan comprise multiple subcategories of people who may not have a common geographic origin or speak the same language. Thus, Kayanic peoples include the Busang, Bahau, and Mahakam-Kayan, while the Kenyah distinguish between Lepo' Time, Lepo' Tau, Badang, Sebop, etc. (Rousseau 1990:15-16). This is not to say that Dayak of other or related ethnic categories do not create aban; on the contrary, the Aoheng and Long Gelat certainly do (Sellato 1989:185, Figure 246, 2012b:268, Figure 23). As a general rule, the Dayak groups that produce baby carriers live in central Borneo and stratify themselves loosely or rigidly into three or sometimes four social classes governed by local and regional chiefs who, in former days, like other aristocrats, might own slaves captured in war (King 1993:26, 41-48; Sellato 2012b:262; Whittier 1973:87 ff.). With class status came rights to depict certain motifs in beadwork and other art forms; as we shall see, only aristocrats could render hornbill birds, tigers, and full-bodied anthropomorphs. In contrast to the Kenyah and Kayan, Dayak groups such as the Bidayuh and Iban of West Kalimantan and Sarawak maintained egalitarian social systems (King 1993:48 ff.; Sellato 2012a:xv). Though the Bidayuh and Iban produce exceptional pieces of beadwork, baby carriers are not among them.

Dayak men and women invested great physical, ceremonial, and spiritual effort to ensuring the success of their rice crops while supplementing their diets by growing yams, beets, and other vegetables and collecting forest edibles (Avé and King 1986:30; Padoch 1988). Traditionally, many Dayak lived in longhouses extending up to 300 m in length and sheltering 100 or more families flanking the chief's quarters in the middle (Jessup and Vayda 1988:12-14; Sellato 1989:21). Running along one edge of the structure, a verandah served as a place for work, play, meetings, or story telling (Jessup and Vayda 1988:13-14). Beadwork was typically done inside family apartments or on the verandah, where motifs and skills were easily shared (Figure 2). Communal living helped shield Dayak villagers from enemy attack; headhunting raids were common especially among the Kayan and Kenyah until the early 20th century (Sellato 1989:21). Dayak men also tested their bravery by taking long trips, on some of which they acquired beads.

Figure 2. Kenyah woman plaiting an aban on a longhouse verandah with two completed aban nearby, ca. 1960s (photo: Hedda Morrison).

DAYAK COSMOLOGY AND BELIEFS

Traditionally, the Dayak envisioned a dualistic cosmos divided into an upperworld and an underworld with the human world in between. While the upperworld was associated with heat, maleness, headhunting, war, and deities or spirits that might manifest to humans as birds, the underworld was associated with coolness, femaleness, fertility, agriculture, and deities and spirits that manifested as reptilian creatures including *aso'*, water serpents, crocodiles, and scorpions (Alpert 2016:118; Heppell 2015:47; King 1993:233). As upperworld deities and spirits looked after human welfare in general, lowerworld ones focused on human and agricultural fertility (Heppell 2015:47). As animists, the Dayak believed every entity in the universe possessed its own soul. Further, nearly every object, spirit, being, quality, energy, or condition had its complementary opposite. Thus, binary or dualistic pairs permeated the Dayak worldview, affirming the very structure of the cosmos (King 1985:134). Human beings felt compelled to create balance and harmony in matters cosmic and mortal, thereby producing the ideal state of coolness that repels negative spirits, attracts positive ones, and maintains balance and symmetry in the human realm (Heppell 2015:50-51). This was no easy task; at any moment, humans might be attacked by negative spirits floating freely through the air departing their inverted, disorderly, asymmetrical realm. Ancestor spirits and deities might also make their displeasure known by disturbing human endeavors. On occasion, good and evil spirits might battle over human well-being (Heppell 2015:51). Thus, for the Dayak, the supernatural world was an "ever-present reality" that demanded constant attention through "continuous dialogue" to promote order and friendly relations (King 1993:236, 245).

Humans could interact with the spirit world in several ways: by directly requesting protection from deities and spirits; engaging in rituals, sacrifices, and festivals; creating or wearing talismanic objects such as aban; accepting guidance from dreams; or engaging shamans or other specialists on their behalf (Heppell 2015:47 ff.; King 1993:234 ff.). One of the worst fates that could befall a human was to have his or her soul lost or captured at night during a dream. If that happened, a negative spirit might invade the body or the seat of the soul, which most Dayak located in the head (Heppell 2015:48-49). Spirits might attack rice crops as well, endangering the most important foodstuff. On the flip side, when properly propitiated, spirits such as the dragon goddess might assist mankind (Sellato 1989:39).

Although Dayak art and material culture are diverse, three motifs recur among many groups: the hornbill, an upperworld being; the aso' or dragon-dog, an underworld being; and the tree of life, a symbol of fertility par excellence linking the upperworld and underworld (King 1993:249; Sellato 1989:44-46).

DAYAK BEADS AND BEADWORK

That the Dayak love beads is well known; they have long favored both organic and inorganic varieties made domestically or abroad (Munan 2005). No matter the material or origin, beads were hard and durable, qualities believed to strengthen the Dayak who wore them. That many beads were rare, costly, or sourced from distant locales heightened their potential to serve as magical talismans (Maxwell 1980:36). Rituals validated the power, importance, and value of beads at all stages of Dayak life (Munan 2005:36, 71), while legends and myths told of brave heroes who went on arduous journeys just to find certain highly valuable beads (Maxwell 1980:136). Teeming with supernatural potential, glass beads in particular possessed high mana or life-force value (Sellato 1989:45). The Maloh of the Upper Kapuas River associated beads with fertility, believing that the more beadwork they wore, the more abundant their rice grains would be (Maxwell 1980:135). Bidayuh priestesses sprinkled rice seeds with beads dipped in water to facilitate germination (Munan 2005:56).While Dayak from all social strata could own and wear beads, aristocrats generally owned more and better, confirming their higher status (Rousseau 1990:187). One aristocratic Kayan woman sold "a great quantity of fine birds' nests from caves she owned"

in order to purchase the "fabulously expensive" beads she wore ca. 1862 (Jessup and Vayda 1988:8). Indeed, a photo from the late 19th century shows a chief's wife displaying her valuable beads to several respectful onlookers (Figure 3). Able to discern many bead types, women knew their relative values by heart (Munan 2005:78).

Figure 3. Sulau, the wife of a Kayan chief, displaying her collection of valuable old beads (Hose and McDougall 1912, 1:Plate 31).

Yet, beads were not just for adornment or storing wealth. They were made to perform in secular and sacred contexts whether healing, fertilizing, sealing agreements, restoring order, or communicating with the spirit world. For example, Dayak midwives used beads to soothe mothers during childbirth (Munan 2005:48). Dayak mothers tied beads to a newborn's wrist to deflect evil spirits (Nieuwenhuis 1904:71) or wore bead necklaces while nursing to keep a baby "cool" (Munan 2005:48, 54). Grooms gave beads to brides as engagement gifts (Munan 2005:59); builders buried beads in longhouse post holes (Maxwell 1980:136); shamans carried beads harboring potent spirits or treated patients by applying beads (Munan 2005:47-67); longhouse elders levied fines in beads (Munan 2005:75); marauding enemies could be pacified with beads (Munan 2005:79); warriors might fly or become invisible thanks to beads (Maxwell 1980:136); women sang songs or shared origin stories about valuable beads (Munan 2005:74); families interred loved ones with beads meant as gifts for ancestors (Munan 2005:62); and so on. In all these ways, beads enriched human lives and augmented human abilities.

Like other forms of Dayak art (Heppell 2015:23, 57; King 1991:117; Maxwell 1980:131), Dayak beadwork has not been sufficiently studied; three short publications focus on Maloh and Iban beadwork and the beadwork of central Borneo (Heppell 2020; Maxwell 1980:131-140; Westerkamp 2002). Several dozen other publications, however, feature one or more pieces of Dayak beadwork (pers. obs.).

Beadwork was largely a female specialty practiced in a woman's spare time using thread-based beading techniques ranging from simple stringing, spacer-plate stringing, looping, and embroidery to weft-wrapping, plaiting, and weaving. Needles were originally made from mammal and fish bones, or thorns (King 1993:254) while threads were refined from pineapple leaves or other vegetal fibers (Tillema 1989:Figs. 150-151). Girls started beading when young, gaining proficiency with smaller pieces (Sheppard 1978:91). Whether females or males practiced the simpler threadless beading techniques of inlay or matrix work remains to be established.

Costly in terms of material and labor, beaded objects not only signaled the wealth, status, and spiritual vitality of families that could afford to produce them but attracted positive spirits pleased to see beautiful things (Munan 2005:47). Beaded objects fascinated human viewers as well with lush, intricate surfaces bespeaking long hours of expert stitching; the laboriousness of the beading process could become an aesthetic consideration in itself (Taylor and Aragon 1991:28). Many beaded garments and accessories were made specifically for display on ritual or ceremonial occasions and carefully stored when not in use. As we shall see, other items, such as beaded baby carriers, were used on a daily basis yet regarded as treasured possessions to be kept within sight. To them we turn.

BABY CARRIERS

Made only by the Dayak and Punan peoples of central Borneo during the first two to five years of a child's life, baby carriers allowed a mother to secure her child to her chest or back as she worked in the forest or field or performed domestic chores. Baby carriers also provided spiritual protection by creating a familiar physical locus for a child's soul lest it wander and perish. Not long after birth, through rituals and incantations, mothers taught babies to stay close to their carriers in hopes the young soul will stay put (Capistrano-Baker 1994:34-35; Nieuwenhuis 1904:71-72), lessons reinforced by the presence of baby carriers in name-giving and other child-focused ceremonies (Figure 4) (Lau 1999:56; Whittier and Whittier 1988:53). Among the Kenyah, baby carriers strengthened social ties, temporarily redistributed wealth, and focused attention on new members of society as mothers borrowed from relatives and friends the heirlooms beads, bells, and other items needed for embellishment (Whittier 1973:221; Whittier and Whitter 1988:58).

Figure 4. Young boys with their baby carriers during a second and final naming ceremony at Long Selatong, Uku Baram, Sarawk, 1993 (photo: Dennis Lau).

Baby carrier materials, methods of construction, and forms of ornamentation varied widely among Dayak groups. To function properly, each carrier required a crescent-shaped wood seat, a backrest of wood or rattan, two carrying straps, and padding for comfort; ornamentation was optional (Sellato 2012b:263-264; Whittier and Whittier 1988:51-52). Suspended from a string running between a carrier's two upper corners, simple ornaments might include a snail shell filled with the child's umbilical cord (Whittier and Whittier 1988:Figure 7); small packets of edible offerings for the spirits; a dog's tooth; a European white porcelain button; two pierced conch shell disks; the child's first bracelets; woven pandanus-leaf strips; and strings of glass beads, or other talismanic items (Nieuwenhuis 1904:72). The clacking of the charms was believed to soothe the child while frightening away evil spirits.

More complex ornamentation might include a square or rectangular beaded panel known as *tâp hawat* among the Mahakam Kayan (Nieuwenhuis 1907:272) or *aban* among the Kenyah (Whittier and Whittier 1988:52). Hereafter, we will call such panels "aban." The Dayak have stitched these "fine beadwork panels" to baby carriers since at least 1862 (Whittier and Whittier 1988:54). From 1887-1901, approximately 20 aban attached to or detached from baby carriers entered the Rijskmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden (RV-614-38a-b, RV-1305-53, RV-1308-24, RV-1308-305-307, RV-1308-427-435, RV-1308-499); the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Philadelphia (P627-8); and the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam (TM-101-1). It remains to be seen how many aban, attached or detached, reside in other museums with major collections of Dayak art in Europe, the United States, Asia, or elsewhere (King 1991:108-109).

While it may seem inadvisable to discuss aban apart from the carriers for which they were made, in doing so, we follow precedents set by the Dayak themselves who detached and preserved aban after a child had successfully completed its first few years of life (Munan 2005:50; Whittier1973:197). The carrier structure was far less important; it could be disassembled or reused for another child (Munan 2005:50). Detached aban were put to use in several ways. Other mothers in the family or village might study an old aban when creating a new one in a similar style, just as Dayak women mat plaiters retained old mats with complex patterns or made pattern samplers for reference (Sellato 2012a:22). Indeed, a photo from the late 19th century appears to show an elderly Kayan woman beading a new panel, possibly an aban, while holding a pre-existing panel on her worktable (Figure 5), a practice still followed in 1970s Sarawak to make a beader's task "less formidable" (Sheppard 1978:91) and in Kalimantan in 1989 (Taylor and Aragon 1991:Figure VII).

Figure 5. Elderly Kayan woman (right) beading a new rectangular panel with a model beaded panel to her left; Kalimantan, 1899-1900 (photo: Dhr. Jean Demmeni; courtesy: Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, TM-60046433).

A tangible precedent not only provided a model, thereby easing the beading process, it affirmed the production of spiritually resilient patterns already tested by time and use. A woman engaged in beading a new aban might have felt a sense of spiritual kinship to the woman who beaded the old aban. By virtue of their proven efficacy, old aban might also be recycled and attached to newly made carriers or other objects (Sellato 2012b:262). Some of these motivations may have escaped Dutch explorer, collector, and physician A.W. Nieuwenhuis who complained that Dayak women he encountered in the 1890s kept reworking old aban designs without inventing new ones, as if iconographic continuity and respect for traditional forms of community practice sanctioned by the ancestors presupposed a decline in creative ability (Nieuwenhuis 1907:272). This could

be attributed to a misunderstanding possibly stemming from language difficulties (Sellato 1993:23). What Nieuwenhuis meant by "reworking" we do not know. Nor can we be sure beadworkers were producing literal copies of pre-existing aban; two seemingly identical aban show appreciable differences in color and detail (Nieuwenhuis 1907:Plate 71a-b) consistent with the notion that beaders were interpreting, rather than copying, existing aban incorporating culturally permissible variations (Taylor and Aragon 1991:30-31). As far as we know, no two aban were or are exactly alike.

Apart from interpreting pre-existing models, aban were beaded in various ways: by stitching beads directly to carrier backs (Tillema 1989:Figure 169) or to panels of cotton or bark cloth (Sellato 1989:Figures 241, 243-244); or by bead-plaiting or -weaving freestanding, textile-like panels (Nieuwenhuis 1907:Plates 69a-b, d, 70-72; Tillema 1989:Figure 158; Sellato 1989:Figures 225, 238-239, 245-246) over templates generated by male artists in return for small payments (for definitions of "bead plaiting" and "-weaving," see Hector 2016:68 ff.).

In use between the 1890s and 1920s, carved wood templates were apparently superseded by cut newspaper templates by the 1930s or before (Figures 6-7) (Nieuwenhuis 1907:Plate 69c, e; Tillema 1989:Figures 152-153; Westerkamp 2002:216). In some cases, as we shall see, close observation of an aban may reveal the type of template used to create it. According to received wisdom, a Dayak woman had little or no creative leeway when beading over a template. Her job was to select appropriate colors and exactly reproduce in beads the male artist's design without altering it in the least (Gill 1971:130; King 1993:254; Whittier 1973:193-194; Whittier and Whittier 1988:52). We will modify this time-honored formula, concluding that in some cases Dayak women beaders exercised considerable artistic agency within ostensibly acceptable norms.

No matter how they were created, all aban display bilateral symmetry along a vertical axis save for rare counterexamples (Capistrano-Baker 1994:35; Sellato 1989:27, Figure 48; Wereldculturen Museum, TM-391-91).[1] By conjoining complementary opposites, aban run counter to pan-Indonesian design preferences for asymmetrical compositions that also characterize other Dayak art forms (Taylor and Aragon 1991:31-32). Yet, aban structured in terms of binary pairs implicitly recapitulate the fundamental duality of the Dayak cosmos as well as the complementary male and female energies that together may make a piece more ritually powerful, assuring both protection and fertility (King 1985:134; Taylor and Aragon 1991:38-39). Moreover, the Dayak may have intuited what Western scientists have been able to prove: that the human visual cortex processes

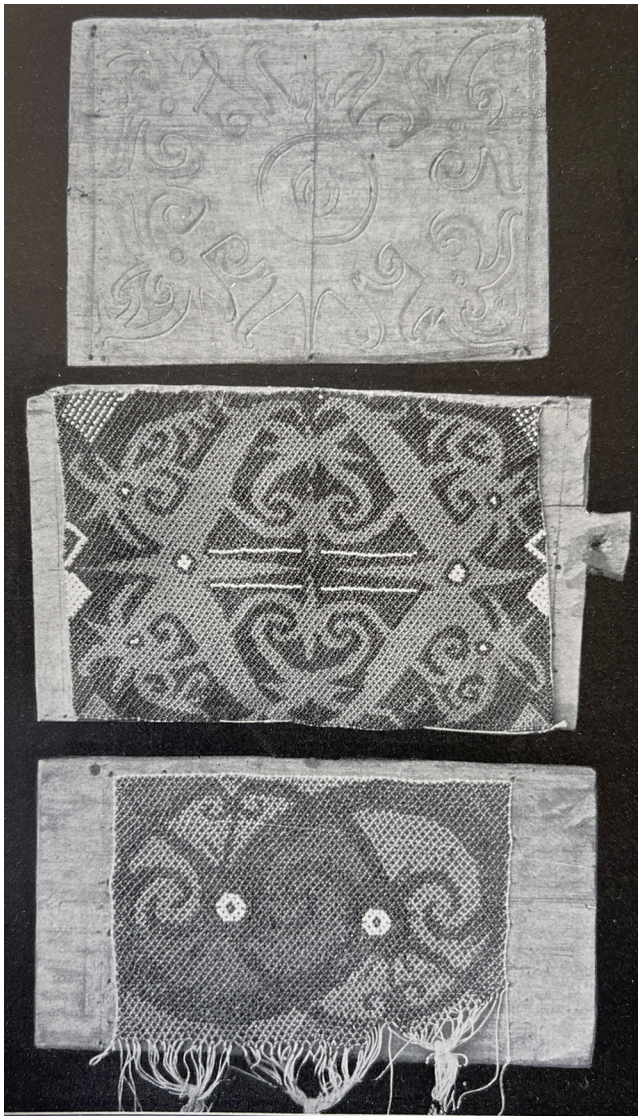

Figure 6. Three Kenyah carved wood template boards and two aban in the Jakarta History Museum, ca. 1913 (Loebèr 1913:Plate VII).

symmetrical images, especially vertically symmetrical ones, far more quickly than asymmetrical ones (Heppell 2015:171-172). Conceivably, the mere sight of an aban on the back of a baby carrier triggered a watchful response from a Dayak mother or father.

Even when not put to use, aban might be preserved as examples of what Westerners would call "works of art" and Dayak, not having words for "beauty" or "beautiful," might call them "good" or "superior" as in "well-made," meaning both "highly skilled" (Sellato 2012a:14) and "refined, well-mannered, polite," or respecting of tradition (Taylor and Aragon 1991:30). Not only did the finest aban inspire admiration (Whittier 1973:218), but the grandmother,

Figure 7. Kenyah woman bead-plaiting an aban over a cut paper template attached to a board, 1932 (courtesy: Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Collectie Tillema, RV-A440-n-122).

mother, or female relative who beaded such an aban could take quiet pride in her work as other members of her village acknowledged her talent, skill, and in some cases, spiritual strength. At least one woman cared so deeply for a beaded hat panel she made that she vowed to take it with her to the afterlife (Nieuwenhuis 1907:275). Relatives took pride too. A Dayak family's most precious possession, a baby carrier was often included in formal photos, presumably as a status marker (Tillema 1989:Figure 24; Whittier 1973:219). On ceremonial occasions, multiple aban might be displayed. In the early 1970s, during a five-couple wedding among the Kenyah, ten aban were attached to the wall nearest a bridal bed, one aban for each bride and groom (Whittier 1973:217-218). Such a display must have made a compelling sight, betokening past and future fertility, the joint work of both genders.

Always the property of the child for whom it was made, an aban could be destroyed for only two reasons: if the child died at some point in time, or the need for beads was dire (Whittier 1973:216). For the Uma Jalan Kenyah of East Kalimantan, other occasions for community display arose during ceremonial masked dances promoting the fertility of the rice crop. In 1977, women dancers were photographed wearing *hudoq kibah* hood masks on their heads incorporating inverted baskets resembling baby carriers embellished with aban (Heppell 2015:154-155, Figure 198; Revel-MacDonald 1988:Figure 84). A desire to foster fertility may also have motivated some Dayak in the 1930s to attach aban-like beaded panels to baskets for carrying rice and other goods (Tillema 1930:Figure 3).

Before glass seed beads, commercial threads, and metal needles were available in large quantities, Dayak people may have preserved aban and other beaded panels as symbols of the effort expended to produce them. Dayak fathers once traveled many miles to obtain beads at great cost before creating the carrier's wooden seat, while women spent weeks or months beading an aban, making substitutions when supplies of a certain bead color did not suffice, a frequent necessity even in the later 20th century (Nieuwenhuis 1907:274; Whittier and Whittier 1988:56). Until at least the 1930s, women also refined vegetal fibers into beading threads through a multi-step process (Tillema 1989:Figures 150-151). Thus, like most heirlooms, aban represented not only an infant's successful rearing but repositories of memory, history, and hope, giving material form to a sequence of personal, familial, and social interactions evidently blessed by the spirits, who in their way, also invested in the baby. Moreover, baby carriers resonated with the family's identity, its particular place in the world (Rodgers 1985:2).

EXAMPLES OF ABAN WITH ASO' MOTIFS

Like the earliest evidence of beadwork in island Southeast Asia dating to ca. 4500 BC (Langley and O'Connor 2015), aban of centuries past may have been stitched with *Nassarius* or other shell beads (Taylor and Aragon 1991:Figure V.13; Tillema 1989:Figure 169). In contrast, all of the aban discussed below are plaited or woven with glass beads, most of which appear to be European, although one example features a few Chinese glass coil beads (Example 4 below). Aban made largely or wholly of Chinese coil beads and/or Indo-Pacific drawn glass beads have not been published. In some cases, heterogeneous beads sizes, shapes, and colors may encode the difficulties encountered in assembling the desired set of beads (Examples 2 and 9).

All of the aban in our study are square or rectangular in shape, ranging from 25 cm wide x 22 cm high (Example

8) to 39 cm wide x 29.5 cm high (Example 11). Most are worked in a single plaiting technique that deposits beads in a diamond-shaped lattice as parallel vertical threads anchored to a single horizontal thread are united with beads. Open-meshed versions of this technique, where beads are united three at a time (Examples 1, 2, 4, 6-9, 11) (Hector 1995:Figure 11a), are more common than closed-mesh versions where beads are united one at a time (Examples 3 and 5) (Hector 1995:Figure 11b). A second, less common technique weaves warp and weft threads combining beads at 45-degree angles in a herringbone effect (Example 10) (Hector 1995:Figure 16). While the open-diamond lattice plait produces a semi-permeable mesh, both the closed-diamond lattice plait and the herringbone weave produce impermeable meshes reminiscent of armor. All of the aban are beaded with handmade vegetal-fiber threads except for Example 11 which might be worked with commercial cotton threads although this has not been confirmed. The lower edges of an aban can be identified by the presence of knots, tassels, or interlaced fibers. In rare cases, two or three beaded panels were displayed on a single carrier (Rodgers 1985:Figure 98) but most carriers displayed only one. When detached from their carriers, bead-plaited or -woven aban are highly flexible textile structures ranging in weight from light to heavy depending on the size of the beads. Because of the multiple threads used to create them, aban are fairly durable.

As mentioned above, Aban bead colors were selected by women. A particular set of colors recurs in aban containing aso', with yellow beads depicting aso' and full or partial anthropomorphs; red beads generally reserved for eyes, mouths, or other focal points; white for aso', eyes, and accents; and black for backgrounds (King 1993:254; Whittier 1973:194). Apart from bead availability, there are several explanations for this set of colors, which not only corresponds to the colors of the sacred rhinoceros hornbill bird (Munan 1989:57; Sellato 1989:45-46) but implicates the ancient Austronesian color triad of red, white, and black (Maxwell 1990:98). Other aban incorporate shades of blue and green, developing distinct combinations.

As previously noted, in the late 19th century, aban templates consisted of wooden boards designed and carved by male specialists in exchange for a bead or other form of payment (Nieuwenhuis 1907:272, Plate 69c, e). Possibly due to the difficulties of carving perfectly symmetrical patterns in wood, some early aban templates appear to be asymmetrical (Loebèr 1913:Plate VII top; Nieuwenhuis 1907:Plate 69c, e). Not surprisingly, aban beaded over them appear to have preserved the asymmetries. By the 1930s, as newspapers became common, male aban template designers put them to use. After folding a section of newspaper in half or rarely, in quarters, the designer would sketch and cut out the pattern while the paper was still folded. Once unfolded, the aban template would be far more symmetrical (Tillema 1989:Figures 152-153). After pinning or glueing the template to a board, a woman would bead over it (Tillema 1989:Figure 155), distributing bead colors appropriately while carefully rendering motifs. As we shall see, some women exercised their own artistic agency, however, complementing the artistic agency of the male template designer. This conclusion challenges received wisdom which tends to assume that Dayak women beaders always "exactly reproduced in beads" (Gill 1971:130) the designs of men without altering them in the least (King 1993:254; Whittier and Whittier 1988:52). Reserving "template" for the wood or paper guides women followed as they beaded, we will use "pattern" in the sense of "overall composition" and "motif" for the individual design elements making up a pattern.

As we have noted, the aso' is an underwater goddess capable of protecting humans and ensuring fertility. Although aso' means "dog" in the Kenyah language, aso' motifs generally signify aristocratic rank, power, and prestige (King 1985:133, 138). Referring to dragon-like creatures as "dogs" might have mitigated fears of offending the dragon goddess by addressing her too directly (Sellato 1989:44). Both dragons and dogs are underworld creatures capable of protecting mankind; their once-distinct features may have merged over time (King 1985:134). On the aban in this study, the dragon-like nature of the aso' is often emphasized; only one aban in our study incorporates clear dog-like features (Example 10). Although some aso' show affinities with dragon motifs on ancient Chinese trade ceramics or other items, on the aban in this study, there are few, if any, obvious traces of foreign influence (Sellato 1989:44; Taylor and Aragon 1991:169). Aban with aso' recalling Chinese dragons have, however, been documented (pers. obs.). Motifs on aban not in this study include stylized boats, animal teeth, hornbills, tigers, and more, accompanied by aso' or not (Munan 2005:53 top right; Sellato 1989:Figure 242; Taylor and Aragon 1991:155).

Not wanting to reduce the aban in this study to mere products of time and labor, we may nevertheless gauge relative amounts of effort invested by contrasting bead sizes with bead density or the number of beads connected per square centimeter for the approximate total number of beads per aban. While beads per square centimeter ranged on average from 13, 14, or 15 on the low side (Examples 2-5, 10) to 34, 45, or 52 on the high side (Examples 6-8), the approximate total number of beads per aban varied from 7438 (Example 5) to 14,370 (Example 4) to an astonishing 36,495 (Example 7). Some aban likely occupied weeks of a woman's spare time; others surely took months.

Several caveats are in order. First, not all square or rectangular beaded panels are necessarily aban. As mentioned above, the Dayak also affixed beaded panels to hats, baskets, garments, and other items. Thus, we cannot be certain that a particular beaded panel was made for a baby carrier without locating comparable examples still attached to carriers. Second, even when an aban remains attached to a carrier, we may not be able to identify the Dayak group that produced it, an issue complicated by the fact that some Dayak groups produced aban in more than one pattern. Third, we cannot be sure that the motifs we identify as aso' are actually representations of aso' rather than snakes, water serpents, or scorpions (Maxwell 1990:Figure 82). Nevertheless, since the latter are all denizens of the watery underworld, they are symbolically equivalent to aso' (Sellato 1989:44).

Example 1: An Aso' Head with a Prominent Eye

The baby carrier in Figure 8 was collected in 1896 from Kayan peoples in Sarawak (Whittier and Whittier 1988:Figure 3). Plaited in tiny European glass seed beads, the aban is stitched to a panel of red trade cloth secured to the finely plaited rattan back. Ornaments include snail shells suspended from a doubled length of cord and conus shell disks stitched through glass beads and small cloth washers to the cloth background. Although the ornaments partially obscure the aban, the circular motif it depicts likely represents the head of an aso' with a single, large, star-like eye enlivened with a red pupil watching for predators. Spiraling limbs, tentacles, or horns radiating from the head increase its size and reach while creating a sense of the aso' as a net for trapping malevolent spirits (Heppell 2015:56). Although similar circular aso' head motifs appear in other examples of Dayak art including paintings and tattoos (Revel-MacDonald 1988:Figure 87; Sellato 1989:22-23, Figures 32-37), among published aban, the motif is rare.

Figure 8. Kayan baby carrier from the Baram District, Sarawak, bearing an aban depicting a yellow aso' head with a central eye, ca. 1896; 28.6 cm high (courtesy: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, P628).

While the overall composition is bilaterally symmetrical, slight asymmetries in the motifs lend a sense of vibrant immediacy, as do the Venetian glass white-heart beads for the pupil, the only red beads in the aban. White hearts were produced in Venice from the 1830s on (Billeck 2008). How long they took to reach Borneo is not known. In this case, the asymmetries in motif may be due to the type of template guiding the beading as it progressed. In all likelihood, given the early date of this aban, it was beaded over a wood template board. In the lower half of the aban, motifs overlap, with diagonally intersecting yellow lines broken by small expanses of black implying three-dimensionality and distinctions between foreground and background. Granted, the effect might be more successful on the right side rather than the left. Overall, this aban is masterfully beaded, with smooth curves tapering down to a single bead (Whittier 1973:194), an admirable feat in a rectilinear bead-plaiting technique that disposes beads in an open-meshed diagonal grid (Hector 1995:Figures 9, 11a). Not only aban makers, but Dayak beadworkers in general have long favored this technique which recurs in the following examples. Although such a technique may look difficult to us, to the Dayak, many of whom were accomplished plaiters of rattan and other materials, it likely seemed very straightforward (Dunsmore 2012).

Example 2: Two Aso' Flanking a Large Central Eye

Like all the remaining examples in our study, the aban in Figure 9 has been detached from its carrier. No comparable example has been published. An enormous eye formed by eight concentric rings of color dominates the center of the composition, commanding attention with a "relentless, unchanging stare… disconcerting in its intensity and non-humanness" (Heppell 2015:54). This might be the eye of an aso' (Sellato 1989:44). Similar concentric-eye motifs stare out from Dayak shields, tomb paintings, masks, and longhouse wall murals or wherever a watchful presence is needed (Heppell 2015:33, 45, 94-96, Figures 16, 88, 90-92; Sellato 1989:26-27, Figures 37-39, 41-48, 104-105). Two yellow aso' flank the concentric eye, reinforcing its stare with eyes of their own as their limbs or tentacles arch around the concentric eye, sheltering it within a larger circle. On this aban, as well as the previous example, where limbs or tentacles intersect, thin black lines convey overlapping, with one member in front of the other, and white-heart beads are positioned for maximum impact. On a Kenyah carved aban template published in 1913, four aso' heads emerge from a single torso enclosing a large circular motif that might be an eye (Loebèr 1913:Plate VII top).

Figure 9. Aban featuring two yellow aso' flanking a large central eye, origin unknown, ca. late 19th-early 20th centuries; 31 x 25.5 cm (private collection) (photo: Larry Sanders).

Figure 10. Aban depicting two yellow aso' in profile above a central mask-like face, possibly Sebop peoples, Brunei, late 19th-early 20th centuries; 32.5 x 25.5 cm (private collection) (photo: Larry Sanders).

The glass beads composing this aban vary in shape and size, ranging from 2.5-3.5 mm in diameter by 1.5-3 mm in length. The yellow beads also vary with respect to hue and surface wear, possible signs they came from multiple sources. Irregular patches of red, green, blue, and white beads along the perimeters, as well as aso' tentacles ending in white, may be idiosyncratic design elements introduced by the beader or reflect a need to substitute colors. On this aban too, asymmetries within and between motifs interrupt a bilaterally symmetrical composition probably beaded over an imperfectly symmetrical, carved template board. It is also possible that the asymmetries are a byproduct of the beader's level of skill or her motley set of beads. In any case, she appears to have been less adept at tapering curves to a point than the beader of Example 1, although she too uses the conventional open-diamond plaiting technique.

Example 3: Two Aso' in Yellow Above a Mask-Like *Hudoq* Motif

Our third example depicts motifs from two points of view, adopting a profile view for the two aso' in the upper register and a frontal view for the mask-like face in the lower register, which is probably also an aso' abbreviated to a monster-like head (Figure 10) (Sellato 1989:25, 44, Figures 40-41). Common in other forms of Dayak art, mask-like motifs are often referred to as *hudoq* in the Kayan language; their purpose is to frighten (Heppell 2015:124; Sellato 1989:Figures 40-41). Juxtaposing frontal and profile modes of representation is a common design strategy among some Dayak groups, seldom if ever adopted in the beadwork of other Indonesian cultures, calling to mind an omnipotent presence watching from all directions at once. In the center of the composition, a geometric motif recalling an upside-down, footed heart or stylized hooked rhomb floats between the two aso's' open jaws, testing our sense of figure-ground relations as we try to decide whether the motif is merely outlined in yellow against a black inner ground, or composed of both yellow and black. Similar hooked rhomb-like motifs appear on other examples of Dayak aban depicting aso' (Loebèr 1913:Plate VIII, Figure 2) and on carved template boards (Nieuwenhuis 1907:Plate 69e). While it is tempting to liken this motif to a sprouting plant or other new life form, the Dayak artist who designed the composition may have inserted it as an offering to appease the aso' lest it turn on those who depict it (Maxwell 1990:6, Figure 82; Sellato 1989:44). As we shall see, differently shaped motifs float between aso' jaws on other aban as well and on Dayak carved wood tattoo blocks that also depict aso' (Sellato 1989:13,16, 24, 34, Figures 7, 15-17, 38, 67).

Although this aban is worked in the same bead-plaiting technique noted above, fewer beads were added per stitch, producing a closed-mesh diamond grid, in its way, impenetrable as armor. The European glass beads average 3-3.75 mm in diameter by 2-3 mm in length. Once again, white-heart beads depict the four eyes of the aso'. Looking more closely, we notice other white hearts dotting the two halves of the frontal mask in the lower register. These minor red design elements were arguably not present on the carved board over which the aban was probably beaded; they were likely installed by the beader. Why did she arrange the red

beads asymmetrically, contrasting a row of four beads on the mask's left perimeter with two red triangles on the right? What do these random red beads add to the whole if not spontaneity and a sense of the beader's personal aesthetic? Such a tendency to make bilaterally symmetrical designs more asymmetric has been noted among Indonesian women weavers as well, who forsake "absolute symmetry in order to achieve balance based upon complementarity" (Taylor and Aragon 1991:33) – exactly what male aban template carvers did too. In so doing, it can be argued that both women and men implicated higher levels of order capable of integrating both types of design. Yet, if beaders added their own touches to aban, then received wisdom must be revised. More than simply rendering designs drawn by men, women could assert their own artistic agency, however limited.

No hints of the beader's persona appear on a parallel aban still attached to a carrier collected in 1896 from the Sebop peoples of Brunei (Whittier and Whittier 1988:Figure 1). In contrast to the closed-diamond plait of Example 3, the beader of the Sebop aban opted for an open-diamond plait leaving small negative spaces between beads, producing a semi-permeable mesh. Although she rendered the same set of motifs on her aban, they are inverted, with the hudoq' motif situated above the two aso'. It follows that male artists could rearrange established patterns at will, combining the same set of motifs in different configurations. In other words, aban motifs and patterns were adjustable (Taylor and Aragon 1991:31), which might help explain why some endured for generations.

Example 4: Two Aso in White Above a Hudoq Motif

Like Example 3, the aban in Figure 11 presents two mirror-image aso' motifs depicted in profile above a mask-like face depicted frontally. While the aso' and hudoq' are rendered in white, the spiky, scrolling motif situated between them is rendered in butterscotch yellow. Once again, the background is black and most of the beads are European, averaging 2-4 mm in diameter and length. The blue beads at the center of the upper perimeter are coil beads typical of those made in China or by Chinese glass workers in Southeast Asia (Francis 2002:76-78). Although some coil beads date to the 8th century, they were not exported in quantity until about 1200, when Indo-Pacific drawn glass beads began to disappear (Francis 2002:76). The aban's blue coil beads are irregular: 4 mm in diameter by 2-4 mm in length. A few centimeters below the blue coil beads, three more Chinese coil beads appear, one yellow and two in the striated orange-red color known to Indonesians as *mutiraja* (Francis 2002:76, Plate 48). That the beader situated Chinese coil beads in focal positions suggests she regarded them highly, possibly as family heirlooms.

Figure 11. Aban featuring two white aso' above a mask-like face, possibly Kenyah; 35.5 x 27 cm (private collection) (photo: Larry Sanders).

Yet, unlike the previous aban, this one exhibits near-perfect symmetry of motif, placement, and overall pattern, introducing the possibility that it was beaded over a paper template instead of a carved board. Not especially significant on its own, the achievement of near-perfect symmetry via newsprint may have better fulfilled the Dayaks' desire to maintain cosmic balance and order, especially where children were concerned. If so, the irony of using a modern import such as newspaper for such an important project would likely not be lost on the Dayak. On the contrary, the Dayak embraced new materials and invented new methods for incorporating them into existing practices.

Compared with Example 2, which imparts a sense of three-dimensionality by overlapping aso' limbs or tentacles, those in Examples 3-4 are devoid of such gestures; the motifs remain two-dimensional. Nor does the spiky scrolling motif in the center of the aban in Figure 11 confuse our sense of figure-ground relations. As mentioned above, the motif may represent a spirit offering to the aso' or something else. Spiky, cilia-like projections also appear on Example 7, animating the scrolling horns, tentacles, and torsos of aso' and mask motifs.

Example 5: An Arching Single Aso' with Two Heads

Portraying a single black aso' on a yellow ground, the aban in Figure 12 reverses the color schemes of the three previous aban. Arching its back sharply between its two heads, the aso' seems to balance atop the vertical black motif below which resembles a stylized bamboo shoot, symbol of vital force or mana (Sellato 1989:48). Or, the

Figure 12. Aban exhibiting a single black aso' with an arched back and two heads, probably Kenyah; 29 x 19 cm (private collection) (photo: Larry Sanders).

motif might represent a rice plant, fern, tree of life, or a ceremonial carved post (Sellato 1989:35, 45, Figures 70-73, 97-98, 2012c:413, Figure 16). While the vertical black motif may represent an offering to the aso', it is not located between aso' jaws but rather serves as a fulcrum for the entire composition. Together, the arching aso' and stylized vertical motif seem to form a single sentinel blocking access to the child they protect. The beader's use of a closed-mesh diamond plait contributes to the angular shapes of the aso's horns, tentacles, or limbs, making the creature look both iconic and archaic, encapsulating the gravitas of many generations.

Enough asymmetries are present between the halves of the aban for us to surmise that it was beaded over a carved template instead of a paper cutout. All of the beads are European, 3-5 mm in diameter and 2-4 mm in length. The yellow beads appear to have come from different color batches, perhaps collected over time. While some are lemon yellow and opaque, others are pale yellow and translucent; still others exhibit faint yellow stripes.

A parallel aban attributed to the Kenyah manifests another horizontal, black aso' with two heads on what is probably a yellow ground (Munan 1989:Figure 29). Reproduced in black and white, probably mid-20th century in date, the aban is difficult to see clearly, but seems to be lacking the eyes that are so prominently rendered in the aban in Figure 12, where the presence of one white eye unsettles the viewer. The beader could have distributed the white beads evenly between both eyes. By concentrating them in one eye, she not only accentuates the aso's otherworldly, watchful nature, but establishes an asymmetrical focal point in an otherwise largely symmetrical composition, generating another kind of complementarity.

Example 6: A Two-Headed Aso' Supporting a Third, Aso-Like Motif

Like Example 5, this one (Figure 13) also endows a single horizontal aso' torso with two heads, each marked by a prominent eye. A third eye-like motif occupies the center of the aso's torso, where it sits between two bands of vertical stripes whose significance, if any, is unknown. Rendered in green, a second large motif is supported by the horns or tentacles spiraling up from the aso' heads. The presence of a large concentric eye imbues the green motif with life and an allied guardian function. In fact, the overall shape of the green motif approximates an aso.' More research is needed to determine whether and how often spirit offerings depicted on aban closely resemble aso' or whether such motifs are better understood as young aso' being nurtured by their elders – the underworld counterpart of the human parent-child paradigm, possibly a new development in aban design.

Figure 13. Aban depicting a single yellow aso' with two heads supporting a green aso'-like motif, origin unknown; 28.75 x 25.75 cm (private collection) (photo: Larry Sanders).

The brightly colored European glass beads likely hail from the second or third quarter of the 20th century. Highly uniform in size and shape, they are 1.5-2 mm in diameter, 1-1.75 mm in length, and connected in the Dayak's typical open-diamond plait. On the whole, the beading is accomplished, though some motifs have irregular outlines. The careful, crisp symmetries of the aban's two halves suggest beading was done over a paper template. The 20 small white and orange star-like motifs dotting the upper background of the aban were probably not present on the template, but added by the beader herself in an

asymmetrical alignment countering the overall symmetry of the composition while imbuing it with spontaneity and lightheartedness.

A row of interlocking triangular motifs borders the lower perimeter of the aban. Among scholars of Indonesian textiles, such triangles are known as *tumpal* motifs (Taylor and Aragon 1991:39). When positioned along the borders of woven textiles with the upward-pointing triangles assuming one color and the downward-pointing ones another, tumpal motifs may be associated with a union of male and female elements engendering both fertility and protection achieved through complementarity and balance (Taylor and Aragon 1991:39). Tumpal motifs appear on other aban as well, constituting the upper border of one collected in the late 19th century among the Mahakam Kayan (Nieuwenhuis 1907:Plate 70b); two horizontal borders in the lowest register of a 20th-century aban still attached to a carrier attributed to the Kenyah or Kayan (Taylor and Aragon 1991:Figure V14); and two columns that border the left and right edges of an aban attributed to the Kayan (Munan 2005:52 top right). Both tumpal and other triangular motifs frame borders on various pieces of Dayak beadwork, including shell- or glass-beaded ceremonial skirts and vests of the Iban and Biadju (Murray 2021:Figures 3.38, 3.56-58) and beaded garments made by the Maloh (Munan 2005:104, 106-109).

Example 7: Impeccable Quadrilateral Symmetry

The aban in Figure 14 embodies a near-flawless union of pattern and technique rendered more impressive by the minuscule size (1.5-2 mm in diameter by 1-1.5 mm long) of the European glass beads. They are connected in the usual open-diamond plait. Yet, judging by small tears in the aban, beading progressed with threads flowing diagonally instead of vertically; the former demands far greater mental concentration without leaving a visible trace on the surface. Why did some Dayak beaders opt for this extra layer of difficulty (Hector 1995:Figure 9, 2005:56, bottom right)? Were beaders compelled by tradition? Or did they believe that diagonal threads made a piece less susceptible to time and wear, which is probably true?

No parallel to this aban has been published. Like the female beader, the male artist who conceived the design also possessed advanced expertise. After folding a piece of newspapers in quarters, he drew one quarter of the entire design. He likely cut out the design as well. Once unfolded, the cut paper template expressed his original vision: to create a quadrilaterally symmetrical composition featuring four aso' heads in profile emerging from a single body flanked by two frontal hudoq' motifs. Eyes energize motifs

Figure 14. Quadrilaterally symmetrical aban displaying a single white aso' with four bodies and heads plus two yellow mask-like motifs, origin unknown; 29.5 x 27.5 cm (private collection) (photo: Larry Sanders).

in all quarters, including the two motifs suspended between paired aso' jaws. Again, we wonder: if such motifs depict spirit offerings for appeasing the aso', why do they echo the aso' in shape to the point of having aso'-like eyes?

A single large eye inscribed in the center of the aso' body monopolizes the center of the aban with an 8-pointed star for a pupil, not unlike the 10-pointed star observed in Example 2. Other eyes may also be present: in the two columns of small concentric circles running up the necks of the hudoq' motifs; in the pairs of tiny black circles studding the chests of the aso'; and in two small aso'-like motifs truncated by the upper border. If one major theme of this aban is watchfulness, another is harmonious enmeshment or intertwinement. Almost all motifs interlink, overlap, or otherwise closely relate to neighboring motifs, resulting in a well-balanced organism for repelling negative entities. The spiky cilia-like projections from the hudoq' and aso' motifs add notes of dynamic, aggressive tension.

The beader seems to have limited her personal contributions to the long narrow bands framing the aban's perimeter which are unobtrusive in the extreme. Perhaps, knowing herself to be in the presence of a masterful template, she realized that merely rendering the pre-drawn motifs to the best of her ability would be contribution enough. Then again, the bands of color around the necks of the aso' may derive from her input alone, as may the eye-like motifs lining the necks of the hudoq.

Only three other quadrilaterally symmetrical aban have been published, both featuring aso' motifs (Hector 2005:7 upper left; Loebèr 1913:PlateVII middle; Munan 2005:53 lower right). A third aban, apparently informed by quadrilateral symmetry, eschews it (Wereldculturen Museum, TM-391-91; *see* Endnote 1). Quadrilateral symmetry is rare in Indonesian beadwork, but the inner register of a *tampan maju* (ceremonial mat) created by the Paminggir peoples of Lampung, Sumatra, displays near-quadrilateral symmetry by structuring stupa-like motifs and angular lines in a manner reminiscent of architectural mandalas in the Indianized Southeast Asian world (Maxwell 1990:202-203, Figure 290). Rather than a mandala per se, the aban in Figure 14 might be likened to a cosmic map, an expression of complementarity, balance, and order.

Example 8: An Idiosyncratic Approach

Comparatively speaking, if the aban in Figure 14 emanates composure, order, and balance, the one in Figure 15 exudes hectic disarray. Who beaded it, under what circumstances, and over what kind of template, we cannot say. As the two main motifs, two aso' bodies in loose mirror image sprout three distinct heads. Near the top of the aban, the two largest heads call to mind human faces with wide open eyes and mouths that seem to be screaming. To the left and right of the large heads are smaller aso' heads with single eyes. Near the bottom of the composition, two more one-eyed aso' heads appear, this time resembling open-jawed aso'. Below them, a seventh head with two tiny eyes hangs upside-down as if issuing from the union of the two aso' bodies beneath a large concentric eye. We have the sense of a drama unfolding and of forms writhing in flux as their horns, tentacles, or limbs overlap or intersect, raising the remote possibility that this is a birth-giving scene. Or, does the upside-down head represent a slave being sacrificed to the aso' (Sellato 1989:47)? Alternatively, are Dayak notions of the otherworld in play, where the things of this world are reversed?

Figure 15. Idiosyncratic aban displaying two aso' with multiple heads, origin unknown; 25 x 27 cm (private collection) (photo: Larry Sanders).

This aban abounds with the beader's personal touches. She not only studs the background with tiny dot-like motifs akin to stars in a night sky, but she colors outside of the lines so to speak, edging the two aso' bodies with irregular bands of contrasting colors while inserting green lines inside some motifs, in effect, drawing upon them. The overall result is electric; her work pulses with life. While she may not have conformed to traditional Dayak canons of representation, she achieved an aban's most important purpose: to frighten away evil spirits. Her achievements seem greater when considered in light of the European glass beads she used. Among the smallest on record for aban, they average 1-1.5 mm in diameter and length. Further, while her ability to render smooth curving lines rarely makes itself felt, in general, she expertly executes the open-diamond plait she is using, especially in the lower register of the piece where the beads average a scant 1 mm by 1 mm. The very fact that this aban was preserved leads us to believe that the Dayak respected its point of view and regarded it a success. Parallels may well exist in private collections.

Example 9: Aso' Serving as Anthropomorph Hands and Feet

The aban in Figure 16 situates aso' motifs in subsidiary positions as the hands and feet of a yellow squatting anthropomorph. Similar pairings appear on other aban; one Kenyah example gives aso' paws to a tiger (Sellato 2019:Figure 27). While the aso' that serve as hands are clearly defined and given single eyes, as feet, the aso' are eyeless and smaller; perhaps they are not aso' per se but stylized feet. Two partial aso' with eyes seem to extend right and left from the figure's oversized head; their connection is underscored by horizontal blue lines. Concentric rings of color form the figure's wide, staring eyes, while its mouth opens in a tooth-baring grimace or growl reminiscent of the open mouths on the aban in Figure 15. Four irregular star-like motifs call attention to the figure's shoulders and thighs. We have encountered this eye-like motif before in Figures

Figure 16. Aban with yellow anthropomorph having aso' for hands and feet, origin unknown; 7.5 x 25.5 cm (private collection) (photo: Sanders Visual Images).

8 and 14 where it also occupies focal positions. In Figure 16, however, the star-like motifs might also be interpreted as tattoos (Tillema 1989:Figure 146). In stratified Dayak societies such as the Kenyah, as we noted, only aristocrats could depict full-bodied anthropomorphs which might represent helpful slaves or godly beings (Munan 2005:52 top; Sellato 1989:43-44; Tillema 1989:Figure 158).

The many asymmetries between the two halves of this aban may be traced to the template board over which it was probably beaded in the usual open-diamond plait. The beader's personal touches likely include the tiny white motifs peppering the background, possibly intended as stars. Numerous and asymmetrical as the dots in the previous aban, they contribute a sense of life and spontaneity. Another personal touch is not readily apparent. The beader has finely graded the European glass beads, reserving the largest yellow beads, averaging 2 mm x 2 mm, for the figure's torso, thighs, and two ovals flanking the torso. Slightly swelling this part of the composition, the larger beads strengthen the figure, enhancing its muscle mass, even as the smaller yellow beads (0 .75-1.75 mm in diameter x 0.5-1.5 mm in length) impart refinement to the shoulders, head, and other areas. Not just the sizes but the shades of the beads are expertly orchestrated, with darker shades of yellow defining the upper contours of the figure's head and lighter shades for the torso and limbs, even as the white-heart beads call attention to the figure's eyes, mouth, earrings, neckbands, armbands, and wristbands.

Example 10: Aso' with Dragon-Like Heads and Dog-Like Bodies

The aban in Figure 17 departs from the previous aban in two ways: by portraying aso' with dragon-like heads and dog-like bodies and by using a bead-weaving technique that disposes beads at 45-degree angles. We will approach these issues in sequence.

In this aban, four yellow aso' rendered in profile face one another on either side of a black, front-facing, squatting anthropomorph with pronounced horns, shield-like arms or wings, and what might be an upturned snout above an open mouth (Hector 2021b:511, Figures 13-14). Large black mask-like faces appear without bodies in focal position on other aban worked in this technique (Nieuwenhuis 1907:Plate 70b; Sellato 1989:Figures 239, 246). Variously identified as hudoq, monster faces, lightning faces, or *kohong ledjo* tiger faces, they tend to be flanked by squatting anthropomorphs on aban attributed to the Mahakam River region or to the Aoheng. The aban in Figure 17 is unique for introducing aso' motifs whose bodies interlock with the perimeters of the black anthropomorph.

Yet, we have not seen this kind of aso' before, with dragon-like heads, jaws, and horns but dog-like torsos, paws, and tails. Represented in profile, the four aso' squat on their haunches as if at attention, watching with single eyes. Similar dragon-dog motifs have been observed in other Dayak art forms too (King 1985:134-135). Both were viewed as underworld creatures, with the dog's ferocious bark and ability to guard a paramount consideration (King 1985:135). Yet, instead of guarding the black anthropomorph, the aso' in Figure 17 seem to be guarding two large green figures with headdresses, bat-like wings, and single eyes. Whether the artist who designed the cut-paper template for this piece intended the green figures to be present, or whether they were an accidental artifact of pattern production, we cannot say. By depicting them largely in green, however, the beader seems to have recognized their potential, materializing them into being and challenging our sense of figure-ground relations (Hector 2021a). Blue concentric diamond motifs in the heads of the green figures link them to the diamond made of white hearts in the black figure. A parallel aban in the Yale University Art Gallery displays neither ambiguous green motifs nor aso' (ILE2019.12.456).[2]

Example 10 was woven with a relatively rare beading technique that creates a mesh as dense as the meshes on closed-diamond bead plaits; as mentioned, both conjure armor. The same bead-weaving technique also appears on a ca. 1875 vest made largely of Chinese glass coil beads and

Figure 17. Aban featuring four yellow aso' flanking green and black anthropomorphs, possibly Aoheng; 42 x 18 cm (collection of Thomas Murray, no. 15027).

attributed to the Iban or Maloh (Hector 1995:Figure 16) and on headbands, necklaces, and other pieces of Dayak beadwork (Hector 1995:29-30; Westerkamp 2002:223 bottom).

Example 11: Introducing the Christian Cross

The final example (Figure 18) superimposes a large red cross on an ambiguous yellow motif that might be an aso' or godly being. While the ambiguous motif is given small black eyes, they look out from a subsidiary position below the cross, as if they are no longer needed; now, the cross will do the protecting. On the right and left sides of the aban, broad yellow scrolling motifs align without intersecting. In places, their curves seem somewhat angular, almost as if molded by a machine. Ten concentric diamond motifs dot the expansive background while two small white dots near the bottom corners might be eyes or decorative elements. Although the motifs are nicely contoured and the beading is masterful, the composition appears rigid, stark, and static. Beaded over a cut-paper template using glass beads averaging 1.75-2 mm in diameter x 1-1.75 mm in length connected in an open diamond plait, it exhibits perfect bilateral symmetry. Apart from color selection, the beader has left no traces of herself. Visually and technically impressive, this aban succeeds in balancing two different world views and ways of life, the indigenous and the Christian. As mentioned above, Christian missionaries began working in Borneo in the 19th century. By the early 20th century, Dayak peoples began converting, in some cases, abandoning their native traditions (Avé and King 1986:39, 58; King 1993:142-143, 271-272). By the mid-20th century, cross motifs became more common in Dayak daily lives, an accepted aspect of a new visual, material, and spiritual culture.

Figure 18. Aban juxtaposing Christian cross and aso'-like motifs, origin unknown; 39.5 x 28.5 cm (private collection) (photo: Sanders Visual Images).

While it must have been challenging to integrate such different aesthetics – one curvilinear, the other rectilinear – the Dayak blend them well, combining crosses with indigenous motifs not just in beadwork but in paintings and sculptures (Sellato 1989:351-352, 408). In so doing, the Dayak demonstrate remarkable resourcefulness, skill, and assimilation of foreign deities – just like they assimilated foreign glass beads. We do not know who first inserted a cross motif into an aban. Chances are she was an elderly

beader whose work was widely respected (Buckley 2023). Following her example, other beaders in her community may have done likewise. That said, no other aban bearing a cross has been published. Nor have Islamic motifs been recorded in aban, despite the number of Dayak peoples who have converted to that major world religion (King 1993:125 ff.). By far the largest of the aban studied (40 cm wide x 29 cm high), it would have covered most of the front of the carrier with a scale as bold as its iconography.

CONCLUSION

The eleven aban discussed above tell a particular story. Another set of aban featuring other aso' motifs might have generated a different narrative. Nevertheless, the shape-shifting nature of the aso' might still be clear. Whether shown frontally or in profile, alone or with other motifs, in the minds and hands of Dayak artists aso' are metamorphic, enigmatic, watchful beings, mindful of human needs and desires. Analyzing the eleven examples we have concluded that, instead of copying pre-existing aban, Dayak women may have used them as guidelines; that the type of pattern template (wood or paper) can sometimes be discerned from the finished aban; that Dayak women beaders could exercise far more artistic agency than received wisdom indicates; and that more research is needed to identify the motifs poised between aso' jaws and in other parts of aban. Additional research may also reveal a correlation between the bilateral symmetry characterizing aban and that of certain Dayak tattoos and painted war shields. We might also question why so many newly produced aban appear to depict tigers, hornbills, and full-bodied anthropomorphs, the very motifs formerly off-limits to Dayak of lower social orders.

Future researchers might begin by cataloging aban in global museum and private collections, tying motifs, patterns, and styles to the real-world Dayak who made them. Only then might we glimpse the true magnitude of the Dayak's capacity for rendering artworks in beads – and for loving their children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the Dayak women and men who created the phenomenal works of art in this study; Geoffrey Welles Morse of Northwestern University Library and Bridgette Geiger of Evanston Public Library for sourcing bibliographic materials; Dennis Lau for providing field photos of Dayak baby carriers in use; Heidi Munan for providing contacts, information, and the Hedda Morrison photo; Thomas Murray for lending the aban in Figure 14; Bernard Sellato, Heidi Munan, Karlis Karklins, and an anonymous reviewer for reading and commenting on drafts of this paper; the anonymous collector who lent nine aban for this study; Larry Sanders for beautiful photography; and Karklis Karklins for ever-meticulous editing.

ENDNOTES

1. The counterexample may be seen at: https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/#/query/2a6b9233-6bec-4770-a0bb-3a0d1e7ec02c, accessed 5 September 2022.

2. The baby carrier with the green background in the Yale University Art Gallery collection may be seen at https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/275650, accessed 20 July 2022.

REFERENCES CITED

Alpert, Steven G.
2016 Borneo - The Island, Its Peoples. In *Eyes of the Ancestors: The Arts of Island Southeast Asia at The Dallas Museum of Art*, edited by Reimer Schefold with Stephen G. Alpert, pp. 117-171. Tuttle Publishing, North Clarendon, VT.

Avé, Jan. B. and Victor T. King
1986 *Borneo: The People of the Weeping Forest. Tradition and Change in Borneo*. National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden.

Billeck, William T.
2008 "Red-on-White" Drawn or Cornelian Beads: A 19th-Century Temporal Marker for the Plains. *Beads: Journal of the Society of Bead Researchers* 20:49-61.

Buckley, Christopher
2023 Craft Traditions. In *Oxford Handbook of Cultural Evolution*, edited by Jeremy Kendal, Rachel Kendal, and Jamshid Tehrani. Oxford University Press (forthcoming).

Capistrano-Baker, Florina H.
1994 *Art of Island Southeast Asia: The Fred and Rita Richman Collection in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Chin, Lucas
1988 Trade Objects: Their Impact on the Cultures of the Indigenous Peoples of Sarawak, Borneo. *Expedition* 30(1):59-64.

Dunsmore, Susi
2012 Traditional Basketwork Techniques in Borneo. In *Plaited Arts of the Borneo Rainforest*, edited by Bernard Sellato, pp. 54-79. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.

Francis, Peter, Jr.
2002 *Asia's Maritime Bead Trade 300 B.C. to the Present*. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.

Gill, Sarah Hall Sharples
1971 Selected Aspects of Sarawak Art. Ph.D. dissertation. Columbia University, New York.

Hector, Valerie
1995 Prosperity, Reverence and Protection: An Introduction to Asian Beadwork. *Beads: Journal of the Society of Bead Researchers* 7:3-36.
2005 *The Art of Beadwork: Historic Inspiration, Contemporary Design*. Watson-Guptill, New York.
2016 Bead Netting and Plaiting Techniques in the Peranakan World. *Beads: Journal of the Society of Bead Researchers* 28:66-91.
2021a Beadwork Baby Carrier Panel. In Feature: Indonesian Textiles. *Hali* 64 (Autumn):109-122.
2021b Indonesian Beadwork in The Thomas Murray Collection. In *Textiles of Indonesia: The Thomas Murray Collection*, by Thomas Murray, pp. 504-511. Prestel, Munich.

Heppell, Michael
2015 *Communing with the Dark Side: Borneo's Masks and Masquerades*. Borneo Research Council Material Culture Series 2.
2020 Cultural History in Focus: Iban Beaded Costume. https://www.artoftheancestors.com/blog/iban-beaded-costume-michael-heppell, accessed 11 August 2022.

Hose, Charles and William McDougall
1912 *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo*. 2 vols. McMillan, London.

Jessup, Timothy C. and Andrew P. Vayda
1988 Dayaks and Forests of Interior Borneo. *Expedition* 30(1): 5-17.

King, Victor T.
1985 Symbols of Social Differentiation: a Comparative Investigation of Signs, the Signified and Symbolic Meanings in Borneo. *Anthropos* 80:125-152.
1991 Collectionneurs et Objects. In *Bornéo. Des "Chasseurs de Têtes" aux Écologistes*, edited by Antonio Guerreiro and Pascal Couderc, pp. 104-117. Autrement, Paris.
1993 *The Peoples of Borneo*. Blackwell, Oxford.

Langley, Michelle C. and Sue O'Connor
2015 6500-Year-Old *Nassarius* Shell Appliqués in Timor-Leste: Technological and Use-Wear Analyses. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 62:1-18.

Lau, Dennis
1999 *Borneo: A Photographic Journey*. Travelcom Asia, Kuching.

Loebèr, J.A., Jr.
1913 Het Schelpen- en Kralenwerk in Nederlandsch-Indie. *Bulletin van Het Koloniaal Museum te Haarlem* 51.

Maxwell, John
1980 Textiles of the Kapuas Basin – with Special Reference to Maloh Beadwork. In *Indonesian Textiles: The Irene Emery Roundtable on Museum Textiles, 1979 Proceedings*, edited by Mattiebelle Gittinger, Nina W. Gwatkin, and Patricia L. Fiskepp, pp. 127-140. The Textile Museum, Washington, DC.

Maxwell, Robyn
1990 *Textiles of Southeast Asia: Tradition, Trade and Transformation*. Australian National Gallery and Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
2010 *Life, Death and Magic: 2000 Years of Southeast Asian Ancestral Art*. Australian National Gallery, Canberra.

Munan, Heidi
1989 *Sarawak Crafts: Methods, Materials, and Motifs*. Oxford University Press, Singapore.
1995 Social Status Gradations Expressed in the Beadwork Patterns of Sarawak's Orang Ulu. *Beads: Journal of the Society of Bead Researchers* 7:55-64.
2005 *Beads of Borneo*. Editions Didier Millet, Singapore.

Murray, Thomas
2021 Borneo: Jackets and Vests. In *Textiles of Indonesia: The Thomas Murray Collection*, by Thomas Murray, pp. 242-255. Prestel, Munich.

Nieuwenhuis, A.W.
1904 *Quer Durch Borneo: Ergebnisse seiner Reisen in den Jahren 1894, 1896-7, und 1898-1900*. Part 1. Brill, Leiden.
1907 *Quer Durch Borneo: Ergebnisse seiner Reisen in den Jahren 1894, 1896-7, und 1898-1900*. Part 2. Brill, Leiden.

Padoch, Christine
1988 Agriculture in Borneo: Shifting Cultivation and Alternatives. *Expedition* 30(1):18-28.

Revel-MacDonald, Nicole
1988 The Dayak of Borneo: On the Ancestors, the Dead and the Living. In *Islands and Ancestors: Indigenous Styles of*

Southeast Asia, edited by Douglas Newton and Jean Paul Barbier, pp. 66-85. Prestel-Verlag, Munich,

Rodgers, Susan

1985 *Power and Gold: Jewelry from Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines from the Collection of the Barbier-Müller Museum, Geneva*. Barbier-Müller Museum, Geneva.

Rousseau, Jérôme

1990 *Central Borneo: Ethnic Identity and Social Life in a Stratified Society*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Sellato, Bernard

1989 *Hornbill and Dragon: Kalimantan, Sarawak, Sabah, Brunei*. Elf Aquitaine Indonésie, Jakarta.

1993 A.W. Nieuwenhuis across Borneo (1894-1994). *Borneo Research Bulletin* 25:14-30.

2012a Art and Identity in the Plaited Arts of Borneo: An Introduction. In *Plaited Arts of the Borneo Rainforest*, edited by Bernard Sellato, pp. 2-38. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.

2012b The Baby Carrier: A Central Borneo Specialty. In *Plaited Arts of the Borneo Rainforest*, edited by Bernard Sellato, pp. 262-271. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.

2012c The Seat Mat: For Jungle Travel and for Prestige. In *Plaited Arts of the Borneo Rainforest*, edited by Bernard Sellato, pp. 407-416. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.

2019 The Other Tiger. History, Beliefs, and Rituals in Borneo. *Temasek Working Paper Series* 1.

Sheppard, Mubin

1978 *Living Crafts of Malaysia*. Times International Books, Singapore.

Taylor, Paul Michael and Lorraine V. Aragon

1991 *Beyond the Java Sea: Art of Indonesia's Outer Islands*. National Museum of Natural History, Washington, DC.

Tillema, H.F.

1989 *A Journey among the Peoples of Central Borneo in Word and Picture*, edited by Victor T. King. Oxford University Press, New York.

1930 Plaiting: a Cottage Industry in Borneo. In *Plaited Arts of*
[2012] *the Borneo Rainforest*, edited by Bernard Sellato, pp. 459-464. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.

Westerkamp, Pim

2002 Beadwork in Central Kalimantan: An Introduction to the Colors and Motifs Used by the Dayak. In *Ethnic Jewellery from Africa, Asia and Pacific Islands: The René van der Star Collection*, edited by René van der Star, pp. 215-244. The Pepin Press, Amsterdam.

Whittier, Herbert L.

1973 Social Organization and Symbols of Social Differentiation: An Ethnographic Study of the Kenyah (Dayak) of East Kalimantan. Ph.D. thesis. Department of Anthropology, Michigan State University, East Lansing.

Whittier, Herbert L. and Patricia R. Whittier

1988 Baby Carriers: A Link between Social and Spiritual Values among the Kenyah Dayak of Borneo. *Expedition* 30(1): 51-58.

Valerie Hector
Independent Researcher
Evanston, IL
valeriehector@sbcglobal.net