Hands On Learning
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Sarawak G119

Smoked sheet rubber



Smell the object. Its very distinctive.

In Sarawak, rubber is produced and sold. A rubber tree is tapped to start the process. Doing this requires a special knife to shear off a thin layer of the tree's bark. Cutting too deep injures the tree. The sap oozes from the cut into a cup attached to the tree. Once they have collected the sap they pour it into a mould and acid is added to form a solid block. Putting this through a mangle squeezes out the water, making it thinner and letting it dry quicker. The rubber is finally taken to a smokehouse where it dries and gets the unique smell.





Woven purse



Weaving and basketry are the most widespread activities among the different tribes. Rattan, nipah, pandanus, bemban reed, bamboo and tree barks are found on the land and turned into materials that can be weaved into all kinds of items. This purse is an example. It was woven from bemban reeds by the Melanau tribe. The reeds they used to produce baskets grow on the wet ground beside the river.



What does the image on the purse look like? Although weaving is still an important traditional skill it is mixed with modern images to show these groups don't live in isolation.

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Tobacco water pipe



Bamboo is used to make many Sarawak objects such as the tobacco water pipe. Shredded tobacco is placed on the end of the smaller pipe and connected to the main tube. The larger tube is half-filled with water. When the smoker sucks in from the open end the smoke is filtered through the water. This is designed to help cool the smoke.



In many countries the water pipe is important for hospitality and is offered to guests as a greeting. By the end of the twentieth century it had become clear the damage smoking cigarettes and water pipes caused to people's health.

Bidang skirt



The bidang skirt is worn by Iban tribeswomen during rituals and ceremonies.

The traditional Sarawak style of making textiles is called tie and dye. It is a highly complex process. Up to 250,000 dried strips of a leaf called lemba can be used for tying the textile. This protects the covered area when it is dipped into the dye. The uncovered threads change colour but the rest stay the background colour, usually a reddish-brown.



Above: Making textiles

Once dried the process is repeated on the dyed areas. This way the pattern builds up. After the final drying, the leaves are cut off and the whole piece is unfolded to show the design.



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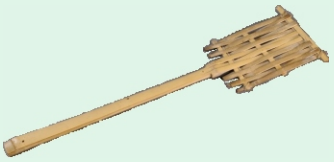
Bamboo spatula

Sarawak tribes made cooking utensils such as this spatula from bamboo before they had plastic or metal. People used the material it was easiest to get and that could make simple cooking equipment. If it broke they could replace it with other natural wood.





Festivals are celebrated throughout Sarawak. As with any party the food is very important. A favourite is penganan which is a cake delicacy made from rice flour, sugar and coconut milk. A picture of the penganan is on the left.

Headband

A young girl would wear this plaited rattan headband. Rattan is a palm leaf that, when split into thin strips, can be weaved to make baskets or decorative pieces. As it is strong and flexible it is used for tying. You might also be able to see it on the bamboo spatula.



Headbands are only worn when dressing up in the tribal costume and celebrating festivals.

Beadwork headdress

A woman from the Kayan tribe of Sarawak designed this beautiful but scary looking beadwork. Beadwork is used to decorate headbands, baskets and baby carriers.



The figure in the beadwork protects the owner and their community by scaring off evil spirits. Around the neck it wears an amulet. This is a special bead that is said to bring luck to the wearer. Many members of the tribe are Christian but combine this with traditional beliefs.

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Bead necklace



Bright and colourful beads are common in Sarawak tribes. A tooth is attached to this one.

The beads are to protect the wearer from any harm. Items, such as a wild boar's tooth are added to give it more meaning. The tooth represents the strength and responsibility the owner is expected to show.

Basket



This is a model of an ajat. It is a type of basket that tribes known as the Orang Ulu use to carry different objects. The straps are worn over the shoulder making a type of rucksack. A full size rajat could hold a baby or even transport bamboo back to the village.



They have become very popular objects for tourists and model versions are now made. Instead of transporting bamboo they are fashioned to hold pencils. Tribes such as the Orang Ulu sell their craftmanship to visitors.

Rattan scoop



Do you know what this scoop would be used for?

It's made from rattan and just the right size for holding in one hand. There are no strong, sharp parts attached so it couldn't be used for digging.

Instead, the scoop would have been used to serve portions of rice before tribes began to use spoons made from plastic or metal .

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Food dish



If you didn't have a plate or bowl how would you eat dinner?

In many Southeast Asian countries it was once common for groups to use leaves as plates. In Sarawak a palm leaf could be quickly turned into a dish.

It could be cleaned or discarded when finished and another one quickly made to replace it. Have you ever used a paper plate at a party? This is similar except it is biodegradable. This means bugs and insects eat it, instead of becoming litter, it's a meal for the wildlife.

Earrings



The kenyalang bird, also known as the hornbill, has had its bill carved into earrings by the Danyak tribe. It is very important to the region, Sarawak means 'the hornbill country'. The bird even features on the state crest.

Danyak warriors once had a reputation for being fearsome head-hunters and the number of skulls reflected each warriors success. Earrings were presented to the best fighters when they had returned from battle. The tribes now live peacefully together and no longer collect heads as trophies.

Shield



Can you see the scary face on this shield? It has been carved from belian wood and sold to tourists. Similar shields are used in tribal ceremonies.

A warrior would go into battle with his shield. He would have had the outside carved with a ferocious face to scare his enemy. On the inside he would have had an image of figures that represented his family and ancestors.

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Hat



Look at all the different designs on this hat! Sarawak skills in arts and crafts are all combined in this object. It has beads, coloured thread, rattan weaving and even a hornbill feather.

Men in Sarawak tribes wore hats like these. Their status dictated how complicated the hat was. One feather meant the wearer was a warrior. Being able to wear the hat or the earrings was a source of pride for tribesmen. It made them more attractive to women. If they were excellent warriors then it was felt they would be better providers.