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**Vessels of Life and Death: Heirloom Jars of Borneo**

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VESSELS OF LIFE AND DEATH: HEIRLOOM JARS OF BORNEO
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Introduction

Endowed with deep cultural meaning and important socio-economic implications, martaban jars, also called peska, or heirloom jars, came to Borneo from Burma, Thailand, and China. As early as the 3rd and 4th century CE (common era) the island of Borneo was an important destination of ceramics, however, it wasn't until after the Chinese Yuan dynasty that the volume of trade to South East Asia was accelerated.¹

While it is true that many Asian countries imported heirloom jars to satisfy the commercial, utilitarian and aesthetic needs of their people, it seems that various indigenous cultures on the island of Borneo held them in the highest esteem as treasured status symbols and even magical artifacts. How these jars served their owners, from holding foods and oils, to providing a final resting place for the bodies and bones of family members will be discussed in this paper. Additionally, the mythology that stemmed from the prestigious porcelain jars themselves, such as their ability to affect the well being of hunted-heads (skulls) hanging in indigenous tribal longhouses, will be presented. A short overview of how early stoneware Martaban jars, and later Chinese porcelain vessels were traded along the oceanic trade routes of Southeast Asia will set the background for discourse about the many ways in which the indigenous people of Borneo incorporated prized heirloom jars into their societies.

The Conversion of Conventional Martaban Jars to Heirloom Treasures

Long used by Asiatic and European nations, the term "martaban" is a conventional name that is most likely derived from the port of Martaban, which was located on the mouth of the Irrawaddy river on the Irawadi Delta. After a short war in 1827, this region became known as "British Burma" and is today referred to as Myanmar. The port of Martaban has changed its name as well, and is now known as Mottama.

Pamela Gutman (2002) explains in her in depth study about the trade of Martaban jars as presented in literature from the Seventh century until the Eighteenth century, that:

Until recently, the few Burmese writers on the subject claimed that all pots known as 'martabans' originated at that port (Than Tun 1972-73). Western scholars on the other hand went so far as to assume that 'the nomenclature arose from the fact that the port was important trans-shipment centre for Chinese products to the West, especially in the examination of epigraphic and literary sources proves beyond doubt that the area around Martaban was renowned for its pottery from at least the seventh century A.D. (p. 108).

The term "martaban" has become synonymous with the many kinds of large jars from various sources, which in the past found their way into use as primarily prestige items that were greatly valued by many indigenous cultures throughout Southeast Asia to include the regions we now know today as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei.² Further subdivisions of these countries include the regions of Malaysian Sarawak, and
Indonesian Sabah, both of which surround the Sultanate of Borneo. However, among archeologists, cultural anthropologists, and historians, to name just a few of the academic fields under whose prevue the study of martaban jars fall, the assigning of categories for old jars of ceramic origin allows for them to be known by different "name" divisions. Generally speaking, these various "type" names have been assigned or recognized from their use in the past and from their links to certain regions. This is due to the fact that under the umbrella category of martaban or heirloom jars there exists an unbelievable array of jar types that differ from one another according to the kind of clay or porcelain that they were fashioned from, to the size, shape, decoration, glaze and date and location of where they originated. The caveat to this statement is that there does exist a generic description of true martaban (sometimes spelled "martavan") jars, shown in Figure 1, that can be described as large, brown to almost black, glazed jars that were potted for storage purposes. Typically, martaban pots that were produced in the old seaport of the same namesake have a wide shoulder that tapers into a smaller base. These handsome vessels also sport rather thick-lipped narrow mouths and often they have simple applique decorations. The whole form of the jar is offset with the already mentioned glossy dark chocolate glaze, which has been poured onto the form prior to firing. This poured effect allows for the natural clay to remain exposed near the base of the pot where some areas have not been completely covered by the flowing glaze. The entire affect of the jar is such that the ceramic vessel looks bold and adeptly potted in a rustic sort of way. The method of having been made by turning or throwing on the potters wheel is evident in the potter's throwing marks, which add a nice sense of rhythm and a feeling of humanness and warmth to the final hard fired surface of the high-fired water tight vessel.

Figure 1: Three brown glazed martaban jars placed next to the woman cooking traditional food inside a recreated Bidayuh Longhouse of Sarawak Cultural Village in Sarawak, Malaysia. (Photo: Dr. Martie Geiger-Ho)

Production of Heirloom Jars in Borneo
While many sources along the trade routes taken by importers of heirloom jars to Borneo and especially Brunei from important ceramic producing regions such as Guangdong and Fujian provinces in China, along with many other provinces in Vietnam and Thailand to name a few, have been thoroughly researched and established through numerous publications, the subject of pottery jars and other forms of ceramics produced in Borneo seems to have been less studied. But this does not mean that this topic has not been given its due entirely, and one researcher and author who did a thorough job of documenting the entire production process of pots by established Chinese immigrant potters of the vicinity of Singkawan in West Kalimantan, Indonesia during the late 1970s and early 1980s is Barbabra Harrisson. Her book, Puska: Heirloom Jars of Borneo, published in 1986, (now out of print) contains not only detailed descriptions of how newer pots were, and perhaps still are produced using clays and materials found in and around Singkawan.

The most important material in any ceramic endeavor is a source of clay or materials for such as kaolin for producing porcelain. Next come the kiln where the ware is to be fired and of course available fuel. After that, potters look for a means of transportation so that they can sell their ware, and in the past this has usually been a river. Labour is also an important consideration and of course there must be a demand for the items produced. If pots are to be glazed, glaze materials like minerals and stones that can be ground into pasts must be located or traded for. Three different colour glazed martaban jars are found in a recreated Iban Longhouse in Sarawak Cultural Village, shown in Figure 2. Once a kiln is established and has built up a clientele and a reputation for producing a specific type of ware, a loss of important materials or even the loss of the kiln can prove disastrous for the potters and their families who depend on the production and sale of work for their income. According to Harrisson (1986), the Lau family in Singkawan lost the lease to the land where their ten year-old kiln was located and they had to find a new location and rebuild their kiln. Just as distressing was the need to find a new source of local clay because the source of white-firing clay had been exhausted. These changes both took place in 1982. Luckily, the Lau's were able to rebuild their kiln and to find two types of clay that could be used, but that it had to be trucked in. Although Harrison does not go into further detail about the yellow burning and purple burning clays, they must have been adequate substitutes for the white clay because she then goes on to write about the production of heirloom jars.
Harrisson (1982) gives a full explanation complete with a series of photos documenting how the Lau's created their large heirloom jars after setting up their new kiln. Briefly, the highlights of her research state that the large vessels were fashioned either by throwing on the potters-wheel or sometimes shaped from molds using the jigger-machine. Either way, large jars were produced from two parts that were joined together to form one finished shape. Women create the handles and decorative elements for the vessels, which are attached while the forms are still wet. The most popular designs were sprigged dragons. The raised medium-relief dragons were highly detailed, but were easily formed by pressing soft clay into molds. The molds could be used over and over to produce identical dragons. The finished decorative and rugged looking stoneware jars also sported lids and raised dragon handles. A similar martaban jar with medium-relief dragons and six-raised dragon handles is found in Sarawak, shown in Figure 3. The completed jars were fired in a hill-climbing dragon kiln fueled with wood.
Another pottery producing area in Borneo that Harrisson (1982) listed from among the five that she noted as having been built on the island since 1900 was the region around the city of Miri in Sarawak, Malaysia. In 2012, this author visited an earthenware producing pottery, Ng Sian Hap Pottery Factory, that employed a jigger-machine to turn out uniform large flowerpots. Finding the location of the pottery in the busy city of Miri was a bit difficult because the factory and its kiln were located behind a one level grocery and it did not have an entrance of its own. The reason for this was because the pots were sold in the grocery area and there was no reason for anyone to visit the pottery unless they wanted to purchase pugged local clay.

The factory area was organized into an open industrial space that contained a warehouse space with rows of wooden shelves for holding floor to ceiling stacks of pots, a small central area with two modern jiggering-machines, a clay preparation and storage area, and finally, a very large walk-in gas fired kiln.

**Myth and Magic in the Life of Heirloom Jars**

It is this researchers opinion that, after visiting museums showcasing heirloom jars in Kuching, and Labuan, Malaysia, and several museums in Brunei Darussalam that the elegance and variety of surfaces of these vessels on display far exceeds the limitations that books and other visual documentation can offer about these fascinating clay and porcelain vessels. When viewing jars such as a dragon jar fired with a glossy transparent honey colored glaze that varies in its depth of richness where it catches
and pools more deeply around handles and appliqued, or incised decorations, it is easy to understand why there exists numerous historical accounts relating to the mythology of heirloom jars as having anthropomorphic, or human-like characteristics and even supernatural powers. It is easy to imagine how the sparkle of the glaze in the daylight would have delighted the eye of its owner, or how, at night the fire pit in a longhouse would allow for flickering shadows to dance across its surface and possibly make the patterns of the dragons seem to move.

In his seminal book, "The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History" Robert Finlay (2010), lists many of the beliefs that cultures around the share when it comes to their folk myths surrounding the magic associated with the transmutable powers of clay and porcelain. Under his subtitle "God Had Kneaded Some Clay": The Divinities of Pottery," Finlay states:

> Ancient Chinese myths portray demiurges molding human beings from loess, the yellow earth of the northern highlands. Tang Ying records the belief that the belief that the five basic elements identified by Confucian and Daoist scholars—earth, fire, water, wood, and metal—obey enigmatic decrees established by the 'the Great Potter. (p. 39).

By pointing out that Chinese potters felt that supernatural forces were at work in the production of things made from earth materials such as clay and porcelain, Finlay sets the tone for their feeling of reverence for pottery and its little understood transmutable power. The mystery of how soft clay could be transformed into a permanent form that could endure for generations to come is one its most outstanding features. It is not inconceivable that the ability of stoneware and porcelain, which have been fired to temperatures high enough to vitrify, or fuse their own substances together to form water-tight containers even without the aid of glaze, is also the same feature that allows pots to last for centuries.

Citing still another mythical concept germane to pottery, clay and the pottery jars of Borneo, Finaly notes, "The Dayaks of Borneo believe that Kadjank, the moon god, taught humans to mold jars from clay, the same substance from which other deities fashioned the sun and planets" (p. 40).

Finaly (2010) again picks up his theme of transmutation and heirloom, or peska jars in a later section of his book, but before he does so he discusses the importance of trade between from the Song period where huge quantities of pots were brought in through the port of Santubong on the Sarawak River and exchanged for over fifty tons of iron for a pagoda in Hebei province. Also, the Melanau people traded for chinaware from Santubong as well. According to Finaly (2010) the coastal people of Borneo were always the major consumers of Chinese porcelain ware from various kiln sites, however, by the end of the late Song period the inland areas of Borneo were also purchasing more of this precious Chinese commodity. In describing the tastes of the Kelabit tribe Finaly writes:

> By the Ming period, the Kelabit of Borneo, living twelve hundred meters above sea level, had access to Chinese, Vietnamese, and Thai pottery. They had a penchant for offbeat and colorful items, such as porcelain pots shaped like ducks, crayfish, and parrots. Coastal residents preferred an assortment of
small wares—bowls, plates, jarlets, cups, saucers—but hefty jars and other large pieces were the principal articles in interior communities.

Many martaban jars, also called dragon jars or peska (heirloom jars), came from Burma, Thailand, and China. Tall, conical-shaped, and brown-glazed, the stoneware jars stood in the longhouse of warring clans in the Kalimantan region deep in Borneo, sometimes with porcelain plates suspended from vines above them. (p. 224-225).

Perhaps one of the most intriguing stories that Finlay (2010) has added to his collection of mythical heirloom jar stories comes from the Kelabit of Borneo who are reported to have

. . . suspended Chinese pots along with the heads of their enemies from the rafters of their longhouses so that the spiritual force of the latter would be siphoned off into the containers. Sealed with a wooden stopper to retain the magical energy, the pots had such substantial value that an owner could exchange one for a slave or sacrificial victim. Warriors used Kangxi porcelain pots in the form of ducks and crayfish to offer libations to enemy heads, always careful that women and outsiders did not pollute the precious vessels by touching them. Among the Iban of Sarawak, the possessions of a dead warrior were tied to the top of a dragon jar, and only a comrade who had taken a head in combat could remove them. The Iban placed Chinese pottery at the base of ornamental poles from which the heads of enemies dangled. The Punan Ba numbered among their foes, and they too adorned their funerary columns with porcelains to commemorate the loss of valiant warriors. At the foot of the poles, they set out blue-and-white dishes with offerings of food for the spirits of the men they mourned. (p. 232-233).

**Uses for Heirloom Jars from Containers for Food to Ossuaries**

Even during their journeys from their homeports to far-flung places like the coastal cities of Borneo, water-tight heirloom jars were made use of. While they were in transit on-board ships they were often packed with a wide range of products. Among these items were honey, sugared citrons, salt pork, ginger and wine. Even small ceramics were sometimes packed inside large jars because the weight of a shipment of massive packed jars could help to stabilize the ship when they were used for ballast. However, as Finlay (2010) notes, martabans were not just used to transport items to Borneo, or as storage and heirloom jars of great prestige, they were also used as ossuary jars and coffins in the Philippines and by some groups in Borneo too.

In the summer of 2012, this author visited the special exhibition "Depart in Style: Rituals and Customs of Death" at the Sarawak Museum in Kuching, Malaysia. This very engaging exhibition about the burial customs of many diverse cultures from around the globe from the Egyptians to Malaysians also included the fascinating customs of three indigenous tribes from Borneo. Of the three tribes listed, only two incorporated heirloom jars as part of their burial rites. The small catalog that was published as a guide to the exhibition lists these indigenous people as the Melanau and certain groups that fall under the collective title of the Orang Ulu.
Conclusion

This short paper has endeavored to provide an over-view of the many issues surrounding the topic of martaban or heirloom jars that have been a cultural touchstone for many cultures including the makers of these impressive jars. One of the major factors surrounding the loss of these jars as valued heirlooms and cultural artifacts has been their value to outside collectors who are interested in authentic artifacts that were once part of a world that is in fast decline because of development and a shift away from the past that is sometimes perceived as antiquated by those who set to inherit it. Perhaps one of the best places to still see a large number of heirloom jars in settings that are as close to being authentic is at the Sarawak Cultural Village in Panti Damai, Sarawak, Malaysia. This living heritage museum was opened in 1991 and features a large number of accurately recreated indigenous longhouses and communal living houses that represent the life styles of seven distinct cultures that collectively comprise most of the various groups of people that form much of Borneo's population. Visitors are encouraged to explore the various structures to learn more about how the Orang Ulu, Penan, Iban, Bidayhu, Malay, and Chinese immigrants lived in Sarawak and neighboring regions. Except for the Penan who were and still are hunter gatherers, all of these cultures incorporated pottery and, or heritage jars into the fabric of their daily lives. Placing magnificent heritage jars in a setting that is brought to life by ethnic reenactment actors who are participating in their own heritage by going about such activities as weaving and carving musical instruments, gives them a context that shows how they came to be so valued as part of their communities. Like everything else from their ancestral past, the indigenous people of Borneo have come to realize that if that past is sold off it can no longer be a part of a living tradition. It is at this point that an artifact stops being an heirloom and becomes and artifact.
References


2 Martaban jars have been traded across greater regions of Southeast Asia, however, for the purposes of this study, the focus of this type of pottery will be centered around their trade and customary uses in Borneo.