BHUKET MATERIAL CULTURE AND KAYAN STRATIFICATION IN SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

Mats and baskets as instruments of social differentiation
Shanthi Thambiah

ABSTRACT
This article sets out to show that baskets and mats transcend their utilitarian importance and act as social instruments when they are decorated with intricate designs and patterns. The focus is not into the usual areas of aesthetics, style, and history, and emphasis is instead on the artistic objects' social utility as instruments of social differentiation or as rank markers. The users or owners of this material culture, the Kayan people of upper Balui, Sarawak, Malaysia, use them in cultural processes that maintain and enhance stratification, but this does not have the same effect for the producers of the art form, the hunter-gatherer Bhuket, though they may gain in terms of status and fame as recognition for their skill. The article discusses the origin of and beliefs related to plaiting and related processes involved in mat and basket making, and these objects as social instruments for stratification. Some examples of the meaning of patterns on mats and baskets as symbols of social differentiation are also provided.

KEYWORDS
Basketwork and mat making traditions; egalitarian hunter gatherers; material culture; rank markers; social differentiation; stratification

Introduction

Plaiting is the simplest form of weaving, but without a loom and using the hands only (Newman 1977: 119). The raw materials used in plaiting are grass-like plants, pandanus, rumbia (Metroxylon sagu) or nipah (Nypa fruticans) palm leaves, straws of paddy stems, bamboo, bemban (Donax sp.), or rattan (Calamus). They are used for plaiting various kinds of mats, baskets, containers, food covers, hats, winnowing trays (Kayan: tap-an), bamboo walls, and others. Such items have their utilitarian or functional importance. Rattan is the most significant fibre used by indigenous communities for plaiting mats and baskets in Borneo (Andersen et al. 2003; Bléhaut 1997).

Barnes (1993: 83) states that Southeast Asia has developed a particular quality and perfection of plaiting both in the fineness of technique and the mastery of design. She raised the issue that the making of baskets and their function and meaning in Southeast Asian communities have not been given much attention and that ethnographic accounts have only mentioned in passing the importance of baskets as functional and ceremonial objects. Two other major investigations by Mason (1909) and Jasper and Pirngadie (1912) were concerned primarily with the technical rather than the social aspects. Mason (1909) focused on techniques used in Southeast Asian basketry while Jasper...