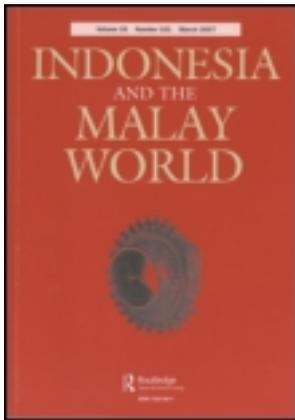


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Nicolas Césard

HEIRLOOMS AND MARRIAGE PAYMENTS*

TRANSMISSION AND CIRCULATION OF PRESTIGE JARS IN BORNEO

*Drawing from literature and ethnography, this article attempts to distinguish the origin, social implications and main uses of prestige jars in Borneo. It suggests that to understand these differences in the societies of Borneo requires an understanding of how these objects are acquired and transmitted between families. The article considers the processes by which an object can become, with time, something other than what it had previously been. The term *pusaka* commonly used to describe these jars does not encompass other significant uses of the jars as it is often used narrowly to refer to heirloom jars, and broadly, to heirloom jars and sacred heirloom jars. These jars are also, and without being *pusaka*, ordinary jars of varying economic value, given and exchanged especially as marriage payments. The relative lack of coherence in the literature about their usage reflects their various and multiple functions as well as their changing role.*

Keywords: Borneo; hunter-gatherers; *pusaka*; jars; marriage; agentivity

Introduction

In Borneo, whether they are used for storage or as heirlooms (*pusaka*), these large earthenware jars that survive the vagaries of time are all passed on to the next generation. Objects of modern style (including those made of plastic) replace jars as containers and an old jar is no longer used as a receptacle except on a secondary basis. Today, it is not rare for ethnic groups from the interior of Borneo to consider jars of recent make as heirlooms; on occasion and with time, even utilitarian jars have become coveted goods. Not all jars are however designated as *pusaka*. Some jars are not 'sacred' or 'magical', or even

*This research is based on several field trips carried out between 2002 and 2005. It has benefited from the financial and logistical support of the IRD, the CIFOR, the EHESS, the French Higher Education and Research Ministry and the JSPS. The author would like to thank Bernard Sellato, Kenneth Sillander and two anonymous reviewers for their comments and to Jane MacAvock and Safitri Widagdo for their help with the translation. He takes sole responsibility for any errors or omissions. The article is dedicated to the memory of Ucan Abi.

transmitted by inheritance. Taking as an example the longstanding presence of jars in Borneo and the cultural diversity of the island, this article considers the processes by which an object can become, with time, something other than what it had previously been. After reviewing the distinction between two kinds of *pusaka* jars, i.e. ordinary heirloom jars and extraordinary heirloom jars, it provides more details about the use of jars in Borneo rarely afforded space in the anthropological literature. More precisely, it will discuss the use of jars given or exchanged for their economic value as part of marriage payments between families.

The article will demonstrate that, beyond the set roles ascribed to them in the literature and depending on the societies in which they are used, jars can serve different purposes such as the transmission of status among individuals of higher or noble rank, in the case of sedentary stratified Dayak groups, and the extension of mutual aid and the maintenance of reciprocity and equivalence within groups of kinsmen – including both kin and affine – among sedentary non-stratified Dayak groups in particular. Indeed, throughout Borneo, exchanges of jars, and other prestige items, are a point of departure for the development of relations of interdependency between families. Farming groups in Borneo are not the only ones carrying out these exchanges. The article will show how the transmission of an object such as a jar can reflect differing intentions among the societies that acquire and use them. It will go on to illustrate with the example of the former Punan nomads of the Tubu river of East Kalimantan, Indonesia, the manner in which jars can change in nature and role over a short period of time. The conclusion will discuss from an agency theory perspective how these jars are bought and transmitted, not for what they ‘are’ but for what they ‘do’, or are likely to ‘do’.

Ordinary and extraordinary heirloom jars in Borneo

In Borneo, earthenware jars, as well as other types of ceramic objects, were formerly bought and traded in great quantities, their price varying according to type and quality. A basic distinction was made between two categories: jars bought primarily for use as containers, which were typically relatively cheap, and more expensive jars bought principally to serve as heirlooms. Extant ethnographic literature often discusses the importance of jars in the prestige economy of sedentary farming groups. Several authors use the term *pusaka* (or *pesaka*) to designate heirlooms in general and heirloom jars in particular. Nevertheless, the use of the term *pusaka* to describe jars in the literature on Borneo is often restricted to heirlooms (see e.g. Ward 1961: 99; B. Harrisson 1986) when the majority of groups on the island make a distinction between utilitarian objects, heirlooms, and what several authors have also depicted as ‘sacred’ heirlooms (or regalia). Since *pusaka* in Borneo are essentially similar to the *pusaka* of the other islands of the Indonesian archipelago,¹ and especially Java, adopting a broader definition

¹Using definitions from reference dictionaries, Soebadio (1998: 15) distinguishes three definitions for the term *pusaka*: (a) something inherited from a deceased person (analogous to inheritance), (b) something that ‘comes down’ from one’s ancestors (analogous to heirloom), and (c) an inheritance of special value to a community (analogous to heritage in the sense of something possessed as a result of one’s natural situation or birth). He also gives the term a more mystical or ‘Javanese’ meaning, that of sacred heirlooms and regalia. On regalia in Southeast Asia, see e.g. Heine-Geldern (1956); Errington (1989). When it appears, I found the use of the term *pusaka* in the literature on Borneo rather vague and

of the notion of *pusaka* to include sacred jars would be necessary when discussing the heirloom jars of Borneo. In fact, like Javanese symbols of power (Anderson 1990), certain jars from Borneo, as it will be discussed, possess as ritual objects an essentially magical, sometimes mystical dimension, which make most of them 'sacred'.² This is especially the case for jars passed on from one generation to another, defined here as sacred heirlooms, which are perceived by the families who own them as possessing a certain power, a spiritual energy, or even a 'soul'.

Jars as economic capital

The majority of the glazed earthenware jars mentioned in the literature³ are, due to their long history in exchanges with the wider world, relatively old jars.⁴ Although very few of these imported jars survive outside private collections and museums, Dayak and non-Dayak groups in the interior of Borneo still make use of comparatively faithful reproductions of models from the 16th and 17th century of Chinese – and sometimes Thai or Vietnamese – manufacture. These last jars were made by several generations of Chinese potters who had emigrated first to west Borneo, then to northern Borneo at the beginning of the 20th century, and more recently to Eastern Java (Surabaya) (Adhyatman & Abu Ridho 1984; B. Harrisson 1986).⁵ Such jars in circulation are today and perhaps more than in the past, cared for attentively by their owner and owner's family.

Indeed, the populations of Borneo no longer own jars for their primary purpose⁶ – or as we will see, for their secondary purpose – but because they principally constitute

confusing, and not always in accordance with the description of the jars' use. Following Soebadio, I use here the term in its widest sense to describe as *pusaka*, both sacred and non-sacred heirlooms.

²Or described as 'sacred' in the literature. The literature does not mention any local generic term to identify a so-called 'sacred' jar. Joining other scholars past and present, I have found the term 'sacred' to be convenient. I do, however, narrow its use here in the context of Borneo to mean 'sacred heirloom jars'.

³Terms used to identify jars (sacred and non-sacred) have changed depending on place and time. The terms *guci* (or *gusi*, *gusih*, *guchi*, *gutshi*), *tajau*, *tempayan* and *blanga* (or *belanga*) have been the subject of specific definitions since at least the early 20th century (Dupoizat 2000: 201 quoting Wilkinson 1959). The term *tempayan* appears in the Malay Annals around 1612 (ibid.).

⁴For a history of this trade, see B. Harrisson (1986: 14–20.) From the collections of the Sarawak Museum, Kaboy & Moore (1967) offer a review and a classification of the earthenware of the coastal Melanau (Sarawak), one of the first Dayak groups to trade with the outside. According to Kaboy & Moore, Chinese jars have dominated the trade, in competition with Siamese ones during the 13th and 14th centuries, then others from Japan since the early 18th century and from Europe after 1840.

⁵Chinese potters from Guangdong emigrated to west Borneo (Singkawang) at the end of the 19th century, importing their mounting and firing techniques. Potters from the Chaozhou region settled at the beginning of the 20th century in northern Borneo (now Sarawak and Sabah) (Chambert-Loir & Dupoizat 2003).

⁶Utilitarian jars were used to store water and exported foodstuff such as rice and salted fish during boat journeys.

economic capital, and sometimes savings in case of hard times.⁷ Historically, these jars could be acquired by Borneo populations through purchase from a dealer or at a market, with money obtained from sale of goods such as agricultural surplus and other goods of value, through direct exchange, or through barter of forest products, food or craft items. They could also be acquired as part of an inheritance or of compensation received, fines and marriage payments often being paid in valuable items such as jars or brass gongs.

Imported jars have been sold, traded and exchanged from the coasts to the interior of Borneo for at least five centuries. During the 19th century, trading places such as the one at Sintang on the Kapuas river of west Borneo, were partly dedicated to them; there the Dayak groups met traders of Chinese origin or Malays who had come to the coast to sell both ordinary and high quality jars.⁸ If utilitarian jars could be bought for a few coins, groups came there especially for heirloom jars, such as those with dragon motifs known as *belanga* (Grabowski 1885),⁹ which were much more expensive. It was also common for young Iban men in Sarawak to bring these back on their return from gathering expeditions and from towns along the coast where they worked for a salary (Freeman 1970: 226). Some written sources reported or mentioned the variety of these jars intended for sale (see Grabowski 1885; Chambert-Loir & Dupoizat 2003). Traders, especially Bugis and Suluk, also travelled upstream along the rivers to exchange and sell jars, in addition to other objects such as brassware, glass beads and the usual commodities, to the most isolated populations. The jars were primarily exchanged for various forest products in demand at that time (resin, gum, bird nest, etc.), resources that the Dayak farming groups settled along the rivers in turn often obtained through trade with the non-Dayak groups of the interior, mainly the nomadic Punan and Penan.

Each family head who had the means and capacity could thus obtain jars from a trader or a neighbour, sell them if necessary,¹⁰ and – for some of the most wealthy – assemble an impressive collection.¹¹ It was common for traders to buy and resell jars on the basis of requests from families and groups with whom they traded, and thus to participate in the circulation and the distribution of those models in highest demand. Intra-group¹² and inter-group exchanges accompanied commercial exchanges. The Iban, especially, did not hesitate to travel far from their villages to exchange or buy less costly jars elsewhere (cf. B. Harrisson 1986: 19). Some of the goods obtained through commerce circulated and continue to do so within *adat* (custom) practice. In a time of tribal wars and headhunting expeditions in particular, fines or reparations in

⁷For jars as investments, see, e.g. B. Harrisson (1986: 1); Ward (1961: 99); Freeman (1970: 236). As Jensen (1974: 41) mentioned for the Iban, prestige items like valuable jars, are sold only in the event of serious emergency.

⁸Ordinary jars cost between 8 and 200 Dutch guilders, whereas heirloom jars were more expensive, a *belanga* jar could cost 5,000 guilders (B. Harrisson 1986: 18 quoting Veth 1854: 263–5).

⁹On the dragon or dog image, see Winzeler (2004: 88).

¹⁰During the Japanese occupation, some of the jars owned by the Melanau were either exchanged for rice with the Iban who preferred large jars, or gathered by soldiers to be brought back to Japan (cf. Kaboy & Moore 1967: 16, 28).

¹¹Barbara Harrisson (1986: 15) about the Ngaju of Central Kalimantan.

¹²The Kelabit (Sarawak), for instance, exchanged cattle and jars in specific places and during prestige feasts (see Rousseau 1990: 160; Talla 1979: 92).



FIGURE 1 Peace-making at Simanggang (Sarawak). Exchanges of jars between Iban groups were organised to erase all grief for those killed in previous feuds. Photo by John Phillips Mead, c.1922.

the form of jars (cf. Ward 1961 [Iban]), were regularly demanded between ethnic groups to pay for a conflict (as deaths could be measured in jars) or on the occasion of a political alliance (see St John 1986: 27–8; Pringle 1970: 194 [Iban]). In a similar way, jars that have survived migrations, pillages and house fires continue to circulate between families within the same village to resolve disputes, such as adultery or theft. Today, even though customary law still assesses compensation in the form of jars, a monetary equivalent most often takes their place.

Jars as social and spiritual capital

The accumulation of numerous valuable jars, both old and new, and their acquisition by purchase, compensation or inheritance, confers such prestige on their owners, that they are sometimes willing to incur debts to obtain them.¹³ In the past, jars accompanied their owner's social ascendance and formed the most visible and most exhibited wealth of families (see Elshout 1923: 20 [Kenyah, Central Borneo], Freeman 1970: 3 [Iban], Lumlholtz 1991 [Kayahan Kapuas, Central Kalimantan]).¹⁴ Not all the jars owned gave the same status, however. For the Bidayuh of Sarawak the possession of valuable jars did not confer upon the owner a definitive social position within the group (cf. Geddes 1954: 86); prestige was not limited to a few jars but was maintained by the

¹³Those who wanted to obtain a prestige jar but could not afford it (B. Harrisson 1986: 17), and those who had to borrow them in order to pay fines in jars (Sillander 2004: 268 [Bentian]), sometimes became debt slaves.

¹⁴With the exception perhaps of the Kayan of Central Borneo (cf. Rousseau 1973: 157).

acquisition of new jars or by other objects. For the Kelabit, however, a single valuable jar, old and sacred, was sufficient to consolidate the authority of an aristocratic family (Talla 1979: 79). This capital represented by jars, has changed with time. Today, old jars are almost impossible to find because they are broken or unusable, sold or stolen from graves and houses, and have been replaced by modern objects that are costly and fragile but also better adapted to families' current lifestyles.¹⁵ The place in the main room where jars were kept are now occupied by other items, such as televisions or hi-fi systems, while the last of the jars are hidden in the bedrooms or in the vegetation of the surrounding gardens.

For some old valuable jars, often owned by a family, these have with time, but also as a result of a specific origin, become sacred heirlooms (or *pusaka* in a broad sense). Like other objects,¹⁶ such as gongs, cannons, glass beads, some platters or woven cloths, these sacred jars constitute valuable items that are both ancestral and spiritual and cannot be sold as simple merchandise. These are objects connected to an important family, to their history, even to that of the group as a whole. Apart from being taken out for ceremonies or rituals, they would remain in their owner's house.¹⁷ Among Dayak farming groups, the ownership of a *pusaka* does give its owner prestige, but its sacred status differentiates rank and authority more than the accumulation of wealth that often accompanies it. For the Kelabit, the respect given to the owner of a sacred jar showed simultaneously an industrious character, a warring past, and a prestigious ancestry. As mentioned, no Kelabit family could claim a position of chief in the group without having one (cf. Talla 1979: 79). Solid *gusi* type jars were the most sought after by the Dayak chiefs of Sabah and the sultans of Brunei (see Kaboy & Moore 1967; B. Harrisson 1986: 24).

When they were not transferred by inheritance, *pusaka* from Borneo were valuable items obtained at a very high price through commerce or exchanges. Glass beads for example,¹⁸ and items, such as the teeth of certain animals for the Bention of East Kalimantan, become sacred heirlooms, after having been used by their owners for their benevolent properties in rituals and were excluded from exchanges (Sillander 2004: 220). If a difference in value exists between a utility jar and a quality jar, there is not always one between a valuable heirloom jar and a sacred heirloom jar. The differences are to be found in the character of these sacred objects. Their owners attribute to them qualities that other jars do not possess. For the Rungus Dusun (northern Borneo), as it is for the majority of groups in Borneo, a sacred jar, whether inherited or acquired from outside, is an object that is animated by a

¹⁵For the Bidayuh, although the replacement object may be of a similar nature, its newness does give it the same value: a jar of recent production was less expensive than an older jar (Geddes 1954: 86).

¹⁶If the same object can be found, others can be added to the list depending on ethnic groups: various charms (stones, animal parts, etc.) which protect their owner from injuries, poisoning and illness (cf. Rousseau 1973: 113 [Kayan]), but also ancestral possessions, such as orchards, rice grains for planting, etc. (cf. Freeman 1970 [Iban]).

¹⁷To be allowed to take a picture of a sacred jar kept inside a house, Lumholtz (1991) had to pay its owner for a sacrificial chicken.

¹⁸For the price of the Iban's very valuable and sacred jars of *gusi*, *rusa* and *naga* type, see Roth (1896: 284, 286). For prices of similar jars in Dutch Borneo, see Roth (1896: 288). On very valuable jars (*tajau*) exchanged by the Iban for similar ones as tokens of amity with other groups, see Roth (1896: 284).

spirit specific to it, by a 'soul' (Lebar 1972: 129),¹⁹ which its great age and high value tend to confirm.²⁰ Among the Iban, when a man has the opportunity to buy an old valuable jar, festivities are organised and offerings thus made to its spirit (*samengat*) (Richards 1963: 92). Generally, if Dayak families expect from the oldest jars that these manifest themselves by various noises²¹ and commonly grant them latent powers, benevolent or malevolent, it is only with time that some of them become entities in their own right: extraordinary jars.

Generally, the majority of Borneo groups maintain a clear distinction between valuable objects such as ordinary old jars, and sacred objects, such as extraordinary jars. For example, for the Ngaju, only people of high status possessed true 'wealth', 'the *pusaka*, in other words, the sacred jars and gongs essential for maintaining the cosmic order' (Schärer 1963: 33, 41, 43). In the same way, aristocratic Kelabit families made themselves distinct from the others by the number and quality of their possessions, mainly of sacred jars and slaves (Talla 1979: 79).²² How then does a jar pass from having the status of a valuable object to that of an extraordinary jar? By what process does a valuable jar become distinct from others to become an object animated by mysterious powers? Most often, an extraordinary jar is distinguished by its great age, to which is added its specific history, often known and passed on by its various owners. In Borneo, the origin of a sacred jar is often mythical; before being passed to humans, it could have been 'conceived by dragons, have fallen from the sky or be born as a Man at the heart of the forest' (Rutter 1922: 297 on Dusun *gusi* jars).²³ It could be associated with a broader history and find its origin in a distant past, such as the jar that came from the Javanese kingdom of Majapahit (B. Harrison 1986: 23). Having become an ancestral item, its journey is melded with that of its owners or of the residential group in which it is passed on. In this situation, it is common for the jar to share its history with the owners or group, through a political event, such as an alliance, or the assassination of enemies.²⁴ Often designated as a collective item, a sacred heirloom jar can from then on belong to several owners and represent a descent group, a rank, or the whole village.²⁵ Like other groups of Borneo, the Iban respect the jars, and often group

¹⁹The Dusun (here, a group related to the Ngaju) of the Ulu Sungai Utara, South Kalimantan, for instance, distinguished the souls of humans from those of living things (*jiwa*) and those of inanimate objects (*ganan*) such as *gusi* jars (Kertodipoero 1963). The Abai Berusu of East Kalimantan use the same term (*lingu*) to refer to the in-dwelling spirits of both inanimate objects (jars, trees, etc.) and animate objects such as animals and plants (Appell & Appell 1993: 64).

²⁰According to Dupoizat (2000), there is no jar older than the Chinese jar known in northern Borneo as *Dusun* produced since the 9th century, whose presence is attested as far as the Persian Gulf (cf. T. Harrison 1965; Pierre-Yves Manguin, pers. com).

²¹According to Roth (1896: 286), the Sultan of Brunei was the owner of a *gusi* jar, which was even able to speak.

²²The best jars were worth a man's life (T. Harrison 1965: 72 [Dusun-Kadazan, Northern Borneo]); Chin 1977: 68 [Kelabit].

²³On dragon jars, see B. Harrison (1986: 28).

²⁴Evans (1953: 152) gave the example of a jar used in a treaty between the Kahung villagers (Dusun) and the spirits of the smallpox. For the Kayan, see Rousseau (1973: 113).

²⁵There are many examples. A *pusaka* jar could mark kinship ties between Kenyah aristocratic families (Whittier 1973: 160, 202, 228–9). For the Dusun of North Borneo, they could be the emblems of a



FIGURE 2 A sacred heirloom jar (Abai Berusu) in Sekatak, East Kalimantan. It is said that the mark on the surface is lowered slightly each time an elder dies in the family. Photo by Nicolas Césard, 2009.

them together to honour them (Harrisson & Sandin 1966).²⁶ Some consult *pusaka* jars for omens or for divination (Roth 1896: 287 note 4; B. Harrisson 1986: 19, note 46 below). Sacred jars appear also in the cosmologies of several societies, like the Ngaju (Schärer 1963: 33) for whom the Tree of Life comprise different *pusaka* (spears, swords, gongs, etc.), and within its trunk a sacred jar contains the Water of Life.²⁷ As the foundation of the Tree of Life, the jar motif is widely carved as the base figure on sacrificial and even longhouse posts, and on statues, but also painted or carved into Tree of Life designs (Winzeler 2004: 90). According to Bernard Sellato (1989: 45), the jar is a symbol of the female sexual organs and the body buried in the foetal position in a jar is said to await rebirth. The Water of Life can be equated with *mana* and it is the gods who bestow it on humans (Sellato 1989: 45). Among the Dusun Tuaran (northern Borneo), the Buluhon jar (a kind of *gusi* jar) was lowered from heaven to earth using a rope by Kenharingen, the Creator of the World (Evans 1912: 382).

If, as the Iban claim, all valuable jars are endowed with a spirit (Freeman 1970: 226), or likely to possess one (as did trophy heads in the past), not all old jars are

lineage (White 1955: 307–9), see the story of the Apui-apui jar (Evans 1953: 465–7). Or for the Bidayuh of Serian (Sarawak), the story of the Tajau Ringkung jar full of gold (Nyandoh 1955).

²⁶Among the Undup Dayak (Iban), to make a newly purchased jar ‘lucky’ [benevolent], men invoked a blessing and some chicken blood was smeared on the jar (Roth 1896: 285–6).

²⁷See also the Iban story of Pulang Gana, in which the hero meets a dead tree supported by a *tajau* jar (Jensen 1974: 83). Jars are often used in fertility rituals. For the Iban and the *minta panas* ritual, see Jensen (1974: 173–4). The Melanau, in particular, gave them healing properties – a piece of the upper part could be removed and ground down as medicine (Kaboy & Moore 1967: 23–4; note 46 below).



FIGURE 3 Five jars described as sacred from the district head of Pangkoh, a Ngaju village on the Kahayan River (South Borneo, Dutch East Indies), c.1915. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. Coll. no. 10001019.

considered to be sacred heirloom jars. Certain old jars host spirits and are considered to be haunted jars or spirit jars without being sacred heirlooms [as the example of the Punan of the river Tubu shows, see note 66 below]. There again, myths and stories of jars with supernatural (or magical) properties found in the ground, a forest, or a river, are common. Akin to their provenance, some details of their appearance can also recall a non-human origin. Stories describe an animal or a fruit which, when captured or found, killed or broken, transforms into a jar,²⁸ and its spirit manifests itself through the dreams of its owner to give him instructions for its use. Yet, unlike sacred jars, their abilities may be more harmful than beneficial. Some spirit jars are described flying above rapids but also devouring men. It is only once their potential has been spent or the keen interest in these jars has passed that they again become simple objects and can be sold (B. Harrison 1986: 25).

On the other hand, while families protect their most precious jars (sacred and non-sacred) from breakage or theft by attaching them to a pole in the house, they are also wary of the jars' unpredictability and take care to protect themselves²⁹ by closing their opening and by forbidding children to approach them. If several groups, such as the Bentian or the Padju Epat Maanyan of South Kalimantan, use heirloom jars for their purifying and protective properties (Lebar 1972: 189), others perform rituals to appease

²⁸Examples of jars which were first wild boar, snake or fish (cf. Kaboy & Moore 1967). According to B. Harrison (1986: 24), the name *rusa* (deer) was related to a certain category of old jars found accidentally after escaping from the enclosure in which they were kept captive. Stories of jars turning into animals to escape are also common (cf. Winzeler 2004: 91).

²⁹For the Dusun (Rutter 1922: 304), if a close kin of the deceased has a persistent illness, he will conclude that the jar which contains his relative's remains is not at ease, and will move it.

them, going as far³⁰ as do the North Borneo Dusun to surround them with golden clothes and bead necklaces (cf. Rutter 1922: 297),³¹ or offer sacrifices to them in the case of the Dusun and the Kayan of Central Borneo (cf. Rousseau 1973: 113). As Geddes (1954: 86) suggests for the Bidayuh, however, if an extraordinary jar, irrespective of its history, possesses a mystical power or sometimes a spiritual energy, one can see in its current scarcity the fact that families use them less in their daily routines, as these are intended more for ancestors or their descendants, than for exchanges.³²

Heirloom jars

Jars still circulate today, acquired and retained for a time by families, before being handed to the next generation. A large proportion of the jars are passed on through inheritance,³³ upon the death of the family head and owner but also during his lifetime. They constitute an essential share of the capital passed on to children. Thus, to avoid any conflict, the inheritance is generally decided before the owner's death.³⁴ There again, it is necessary to distinguish in the transmission of heirloom jars, objects of ordinary value from sacred items.

Heirloom jars of recognised economic value (non-sacred) are generally inherited by the older members of a family, while objects of lesser value are shared among the younger offspring, both sons and daughters.³⁵ In obtaining valuable jars, a new owner inherits capital and not a permanent position in society. Valuable inherited jars allow an economic status to be reinforced without transmitting the social position of the previous owner. Among the Murut groups for example, a new owner cannot take over the labour of his kinsman in accumulating wealth and obtaining the social

³⁰Evans (1912: 382) mentioned an annual ritual among the Dusun Tuaran (northern Borneo) during which an old woman gave an offering of food to a *gusi* jar (probably a Dusun jar) to prevent its spirit from being upset.

³¹Beads and cloths can serve as energy or spirit containers, such as the Iban *pua* and the bundle of *isang* leaves used in the past for wrapping human heads (Sellato 1989: 45).

³²An observation made by several authors. Through time, the Melanau have kept only their most important jars (Kaboy & Moore 1967: 10). Among the Dusun A Kadamaian (northern Borneo), the custom of jar burials was no longer practised because of the lack of large jars (Evans 1953: 128). Several groups, Punan Tubu included, continue to assess fines in terms of jars, but pay equivalent in goods or money.

³³Note that heirlooms and *pusaka* in particular must often adapt to two inheritance systems. This is the case of the Melanau who use both customary and Islamic law (see Morris 1953).

³⁴For the Bisaya (Sarawak), see Peranio (1972).

³⁵Among the Kenyah Lepo' Tau (East Kalimantan), heirlooms are divided among the children of the couple (Whittier 1973: 62). For the Kenyah Bahau (East Borneo), only the elders make use of them (cf. Nieuwenhuis 1904-1907: 89). Among the Rungus Dusun, the eldest son and the eldest daughter inherit the properties of their father and of their mother respectively (Appell 1972: 18). The same applies to the Kelabit Murut (Talla 1979) and the Iban (Hose & McDougall 1912: 84). If a father dies without naming an heir, a valuable jar could however be given to the eldest child, provided he or she sells it and shares its price with his or her younger siblings (Ward 1961: 99 [Iban]). Among the Tagal Murut of Sabah, an offspring, who is usually the eldest son, is the custodian of heirlooms, but has to co-ordinate with his brothers and sisters regarding their use (cf. Harris 1990: 48).

benefit that derives from it.³⁶ The passing on of sacred objects, in particular jars, is associated with the transmission of a position within the social group. Unlike jars whose value is solely monetary, sacred objects give authority to the heirs and reinforce their ritual and spiritual position. Intended primarily for men, sacred jars are mainly passed on through the masculine line.³⁷ This distinction in the manner in which both sacred and non-sacred jars are passed on through inheritance refers more specifically (but not exclusively) to two social configurations of the farming groups of Borneo with on one side, strongly hierarchical societies and on the other, those societies whose social stratification is flexible, progressive, and merit-based (cf. Sellato 1997). As heritage that is often controlled by a small number, however, old objects remain difficult to obtain for those who cannot inherit them due to their social status.³⁸

Thus it is possible to distinguish the various items considered to be prestigious by the Dayak groups, between ordinary and extraordinary objects inherited by kinsmen, but also between objects such as old and recent jars, which were acquired individually, including by marriage.³⁹ Accordingly, farming groups record both the origin and ownership of prestige goods. Bisaya families (Sarawak), among others, differentiate between several categories of goods they own: '*pusaka*' (here, sacred heirloom jars), ordinary inherited objects, personal items, property common to the couple, and objects belonging to the household (including certain jars) (cf. Peranio 1972: 71). Although certain goods obtained through the kinship group seem to be inalienable and cannot be sold without difficulty, relationships with ordinary valuable objects also evolve from one owner to another. Just as an object acquired through commerce is passed on, a jar obtained from a family member in exchange for another of its kind or an entirely different object, can be sold. In the same way, once they are acquired, objects are intended for different uses.

Some old jars are still used as containers, individually or collectively, for consuming rice beer during frequent village celebrations and ceremonies, and in funeral burials. In Borneo especially, the manner in which a deceased person is buried depends on his status.⁴⁰ The use as ossuaries, mainly during secondary treatment, of ordinary jars that have usually been inherited, also informs us about the differences between prestige jars. While during the funeral of a chief a very valuable jar is still frequently used as first

³⁶For the Kelabit, personal achievements influence rank (Talla 1979: 77). Among the Rungus Dusun, the accumulation of objects provides evidence of the abilities and qualities of the male founder of the descent group in farming activities and exchanges (cf. Appell 1972).

³⁷For the Kayan, see Rousseau 1973: 41, for the Kelabit, see Talla 1979: 80. Other *pusaka*, such as beads, can also be passed through the female line.

³⁸Ngaju and Kayan slaves, for instance, could possess ordinary value goods and talismans, but Ngaju slaves could not join the upper group without buying a sacred jar (Schärer 1963: 50 [Ngaju]). See also Talla (1979: 79 [Kelabit]).

³⁹For the Idahan Murut (North Borneo), see Woolley (1953: 1–2, 15).

⁴⁰For instance, to retrieve body fluids, the Maanyan use a jar during the first funeral of important local figures (cf. Lebar 1972: 191). The day after death, the Murut (North Borneo) place the body of the deceased in a large jar the neck of which is sealed with dammar resin. After several months or even years, the jar is opened and disposed, the bones are cleaned and placed in a new jar (cf. Pollard 1933: 154). For a description of jars used in funerals, see Winzeler 2004: 40–42).

and second repository,⁴¹ a sacred jar, as far as the literature mentions it, is never used for keeping remains.⁴² Often the secondary stage involves the placement of a jar of remains (bones or ashes) in an above ground or raised mortuary structure. Some grave posts such as the *salong* (Kenyah, Kayan and Berawan, among other groups) are monuments placed on prominent locations with the intention of impressing those who see them, thereby displaying the wealth and importance of the deceased (Winzeler 2004: 41). Jars or gongs, buried or left broken on collapsed graves mainly to prevent their re-use,⁴³ are equally personal objects⁴⁴ connected to the deceased's personal history and whose quality marks his status or wealth.⁴⁵ In the same way, an extraordinary jar will not be used for the consumption of rice beer: families use either old or recent ordinary jars for this, but protect themselves from their potential power by polishing them (see e.g. Evans 1953: 468 [northern Borneo Dusun]) or by circling them with a bead necklace (pers. obs. [Abai, East Kalimantan]).⁴⁶

Jars as marriage payments

Not all jars are inherited by kinsmen, as in the case of Iban families. Several groups in Borneo use marriage payments in the organisation of their alliances where jars and gongs are among the most valued goods. The majority of jars whether old or recent which are given or exchanged on the occasion of marriages are ordinary ones and valuable. They are passed on through inheritance, generally among aristocratic families, but do not include sacred jars.⁴⁷

Matrimonial payments and alliance

Even if the distinction between jars given in inheritance and those given as payments, both before and after a wedding, is not always clear in the literature, it seems that the Dayak farming groups that own jars and practice a bride price distinguish two transmission

⁴¹ Common people use jars of lesser value. When a jar is of high value, all the owners can be buried in it (cf. Appell 1983: 40 [Idahan Murut and Tenganan of East Kalimantan]).

⁴² For the Dusun and the Murut in general, see Rutter 1922: 304.

⁴³ For various examples, see Talla (1979: 254 [Kelabit]), Knappert 1905: 624 and Sillander 2004: 275 [Bentian], Pollard 1933: 154 [Murut], Ward 1961: 89, 100 [Iban]. As a grave item, a jar is often 'killed', that is broken, (Sellato 1989: 45), before being put in the coffin. With its high value, a jar is worth as much as a slave. It is also a well known substitute for a head or a human sacrifice (Sellato *ibid.*).

⁴⁴ Such as a sword, a cooking pot, clothes, etc. These are buried objects that the spirit of the deceased will use in the other world. For the Kejaman in Sarawak, see Thomas (1971: 316).

⁴⁵ For the Dusun, see Evans (1953: 132), for the Bidayuh, see Geddes (1954). Also for the Abai Tebilun and Punan Tubu of East Kalimantan (pers. obs.).

⁴⁶ An extraordinary jar can also be used by its owner to dispense water to the people who come to consult it as an oracle. B. Harrisson (1986: 19) gave the example of two *gusi* jars, one owned by an Iban chief (Pringle 1970: 170), the other by the Sultan of Brunei (St John 1986: 301; Roth 1896: 286) and used by him to bestow fertility on his subjects (cf. Sellato 1989: 45).

⁴⁷ Among the Kayan, for instance, the out-marrying person brought his (or her) share of the family inheritance (including the *daven pesaka*) when he leaves home. He (or she) has then no more rights on the property of his kin group (cf. Rousseau 1973: 41).

methods for jars from father to son. Generally, sacred jars, but also (and often) the most prized jars acquired over time, remain in the home and are passed on by inheritance.⁴⁸ High quality jars and other valuable objects acquired recently by purchase or exchange, meanwhile, are given as marriage payments.⁴⁹ The various, mainly economic goods given to the bride's father on the occasion of a marriage, are given by the man's father for his son and cannot be considered to be an advance on his inheritance because in going to the bride's family, they leave the natal household.⁵⁰ So as not to lose their capital, some Dayak groups such as the Kayan (cf. Rousseau 1973: 66) prefer to give old jars which comprise the inheritance after a marriage or when a wife becomes pregnant. They then follow the defined affiliation: jars inherited from the father are kept by the son but are intended for the grandchildren. As for a wife who marries outside her descent group and her village, if the payments allow the husband's family (as we will see) to obtain certain rights over her residence and that of her offspring, in order to obtain the portion of the family inheritance that is due to her or to make a claim for it, she must waive her rights to the household and over the lands of her group of origin.⁵¹ The material goods she inherits will go to her children, in particular to her daughters.

Jars given as payments retain an economic value that is recognised and known. Families buy and exchange them in view of future marriages. Kept preciously for the occasion, they constitute capital, but unlike heirloom jars, or even sacred jars, which are often more ancient and less common, families procure them not for the purpose of leaving them to their heirs but for using them as payments. The payments of an alliance are taken care of by custom and, in this way their function is similar to customary fines.⁵² They act as economic counterparts that aim to repair a fault or find a balance. Like fines, local authorities claim them when law is not respected. Jars used as payments, from their function and sometimes their nature, are objects that circulate between families. The frequency with which they are passed on depends not only on the insistence of families that request them and how the families in possession use them, but also on the number of families among whom they are likely to

⁴⁸Part of the inheritance can be given on marriage. This was (or is) the case of the Iban who did not make use of marriage payments but received a part of the inheritance during the marriage (Richards 1963: 184) and acquired a full inheritance with their new kin group (cf. Freeman 1970: 68-69).

⁴⁹Some groups do not give jars as payments, either because they do not have jars, or because they, the Kayan for example, prefer to give other goods such as gongs (cf. Rousseau 1973: 52, 60). This was also – and may still be – the case of the Iban, Kenyah, Taman and Ot Danum (Central Kalimantan), in particular.

⁵⁰For the Malays and the Melanau of Sarawak, daughters were a blessing to their parents. Unlike sons who look to their parents to help them with the marriage payments (*brian*) and leave their home to live in the house of their father-in-law and work for him (Roth 1896: 125), parents of daughters obtained many objects (here gongs) at the same time that they had a number of young men coming to live in their house and work for them (*ibid.*).

⁵¹For the Taman, see Bernstein (1997: 23).

⁵²Among the Iban, fines could be given either by the man or the woman's family when the alliance is broken (Roth 1896:112). Roth gives several examples of standardised fines in jars. Jars being not always available, the Iban knew their value relative to each other and also in relation to plates and cash. For adultery, the lover has to pay the husband a fine of a *tajau* jar, a large jar equal to twelve small jars, valued at twelve rupees (Roth 1896: 112, 127).

circulate.⁵³ Certain family heads are tempted to keep them to make them heirloom jars and pass them on to their sons, who will be able, in turn, either to retain them and pass them on, or use them as payment.

Valuable jars given as payment compensate for the residence of the woman with the man and justify certain rights of the family-in-law over herself and the children, especially at the time of future marriages (cf. Testart et al. 2002). It is therefore a general rule that payments are negotiated by families at the same time as the couple's place of residence. Established before a union, the amount of the compensation, especially the number of jars, governs the periods of residence and any payments that may (or may not) follow the marriage. For a man's family, these payments ultimately allow virilocality to be ensured.⁵⁴ Indeed, after a period during which the future husband lives with his parents-in-law, the wife comes to live in the man's village, first in her parents-in-law's house, then later in her own house with her husband. The residency of the woman is then more or less established depending on the groups and on families.

Once the couple has settled in, the parents continue to exchange payments or services with every visit; the husband or his close kin is expected especially to make new payments upon each service rendered by his in-laws, and also each time his in-laws ask. Small ordinary objects are often given, but high quality goods are either donated to the closest kinsmen, or exchanged for other objects with distant in-laws. Due to their widely ranging values, jars are among the most prized objects for these exchanges. Among the Abai (Berusu, Tebilun), like the former Punan nomads of the Tubu river, it is common for the amount of the payments to be measured in jars (from one or several standard jars) before being converted into different objects if jars are not available (pers. obs.).⁵⁵

In the past, the separation of status was maintained by differentiated payments within each village, or by payments for aristocratic families only. Among the Idahan Murut in particular, and unlike the other Murut groups, aristocratic families distinguished themselves from each other by high payments and an accumulation of jars of different types (Prentice 1972: 161). Today, even though the payments are more homogenised with the arrival of money, compensation from the man's family varies depending on the social status of the family-in-law. Since rank depends on the nature of the property owned, it is still common for the father of the suitor to gauge the wealth of his future ally before initiating marriage negotiations. It is thus expected that a wealthy high ranking family would request more valuable jars for their daughter.⁵⁶ The type of payments, such as cash, depends however on the relations the families want to establish in the alliance. Between individuals of high rank, numerous payments mark respect while also contributing to maintaining status. This is the case for both

⁵³ Among the Punan Tubu, depending on several factors such as the number of alliances contracted, family relationships, and the distance between the groups, their size and geographical remoteness, an ordinary jar can be exchanged between family heads once or twice a year, and if it is not already sold or broken, return to its previous owner several times.

⁵⁴ Rousseau (1973: 60) is categorical: 'the bride price is only a tool to assert the residency rule'.

⁵⁵ For the Berusu, the use of the term 'jar' does not necessarily refer to the nature of the payment. By 'jar', they refer to other items, such as gongs, canons, bracelets, as well as jars (Appell 1985: 189)

⁵⁶ Among the Melanau, traditionally jars, today money or land (cf. Morris 1953). Within a stratified group like the Maloh of West Kalimantan, a result of the growing use of money in marriage payments is a reduction in rank differences (King 1988: 245).

stratified and non-stratified groups, for which jars, like other prestige goods, accompany the reputation of family heads who give and receive them.

Among the Kelabit, while a lower ranking husband offsets a union with a higher class by the payment of compensation (and not a higher bride price), certain families of the same level could refuse payments from their affine (see e.g. T. Harrisson 1959: 65, 121; Talla 1979: 156, 158), or as we will see for other non-stratified Dayak groups and the Punan Tubu, decide to return a portion quickly.⁵⁷ In another permutation, two family heads can decide to reduce the couple's uxorial period by agreeing on rapid payments, or by giving a large number of jars together, a request that can be similar in custom law to the payment of a fine.⁵⁸ Among aristocratic families generally, it is more common not to insist on receiving payments.

Other factors also come into play in the amount of payments for the wife: the number of her kin, her age and beauty, her status (widowed or separated) and that of her children (legitimate or illegitimate), as well as payments made in the past for her mother.⁵⁹ More broadly, the religion or the ethnic group of origin of the in-laws determines marriage payments and the amount.

Jars as distributed capital

Often in matrimonial payments, there is an adjustment to the other party, to his or her situation and to what is owned. An object or a jar can replace or be replaced by another one that is more readily available, in the same way that a family can wait patiently for several years for a payment or to receive an item. Among the Idahan Murut and Dusun groups (see e.g. Prentice 1972: 157), as we have seen earlier, certain families were better supplied with jars or other prestige items and their wealth tended to be maintained through significant inheritance and marriage payments. In large societies, exchanges of payments contribute to the distribution of goods. In the same way, although endogamous alliances of high ranking families ensure authority and wealth, they also allow better co-operation between villages that are sometimes geographically far apart. Being owners of lesser prestige goods, ordinary families give fewer objects or ones of lesser quality when making payments. Thus, for these families, as for those of higher rank, payments made, as much as services rendered, maintain a system of social and economic relations between kin and affine, and also among kinsmen, in payment for marriage.

This interdependence of individuals and different kinship groups is highlighted in the exchanges of payments among the Berusu (Abai) of distributed (or redistributed) types, briefly described by Georges Appell (1983; Appell and Appell 1993), but reported in relatively more or less complex ways among other non-stratified groups of farmers. Appell thus notes that unlike the Rungus, for example, among whom payments were

⁵⁷To compensate for the groom's payments, it is often agreed that the preparations for the union and the feast accompanying it are paid for by the bride's family. For the Ot Danum, see e.g. Avé (1972: 193).

⁵⁸On the Maanyan, see Hudson (1967).

⁵⁹The criteria vary depending on social groups. For example, if payments given by the Berusu were to follow those received by a wife's mother, they would not take into account the bride's beauty and wealth of her parents unlike the Rungus Dusun (Appell 1985: 189).

patiently accumulated by the man's family before being given to the bride's, the father of a Berusu boy was obligated to return to members of his own family, a portion – in value or services – of the payments that have allowed a rapid marriage.⁶⁰ For the Berusu, these redistributive exchanges of marriage payments within a family compensate for objects given to the family-in-law during a marriage while at the same time ensuring good relations between kin. In Borneo, however, these marriage payments can be transferred in different ways. Although certain services are given back by each of the family members to the kin group, as we will see, the families of both spouses frequently exchange objects directly and indirectly to each other, both before and after marriage.

These exchanges of payments that are often numerous and sometimes unlimited between kinship groups concern mainly two cultural and linguistic Dayak groups related to the Southern Murut and who have in common a non-stratified, open and fluid social organisation. The first is related to the Abai (Berusu, Tebilun, Tagal, Tenganlan) and the second to the Lun Dayeh (Lun Dayeh, Lun Bawang, Putuk, Milau, Saban, Tabun). These Dayak groups own sacred and non-sacred heirlooms jars (*pusaka*) that they distinguish from marriage payments. However, unlike in other Borneo societies practising marriage payments, jars that are of economic value are exchanged more frequently, especially between rich families, and are better distributed, especially among families that are less well off. For the Abai and Lun Dayeh groups, payments for the wife are also accompanied by payments (or counter-payments) to the husband and his relatives; these material exchanges between families do not only concern marriage payments but also the alliance more broadly. A marriage union establishes a series of obligations that go beyond the payment of rights over the wife, the simple 'bride price', to build up durable relations between kinship groups. Thus if, without expecting a return, a man's father gives jars to the father-in-law as payments for his daughter, other jars can be given or requested in exchange for other goods generally different in nature to those requested (or received).⁶¹

Another characteristic of these exchanges is to reverse temporarily the direction of the 'bride price' payments (without actually constituting a 'groom price'). To obtain a high quality jar, a relative of the wife will have to initiate the transaction by giving to his affine an object or several objects which, depending on the groups, can be of equal value⁶² or half the amount of the expected payment.⁶³ In reality, the majority of these exchanges concern distant relatives wishing to participate in the exchanges relating to the alliance more than they do immediate kin. For the Tagal, who have the reputation of having the highest matrimonial payments in Sabah, these relations a man has with his kin and affines are themselves essential to finding the objects necessary for celebrations

⁶⁰By giving objects or provisions for the wedding feast. The return payments can be made directly by the father or on demand by a kin (cf. Appell 1983).

⁶¹Harris (1990: 55) gives the example of a bride price of two very expensive jars. Given after the bride settled in, the second one was compensated for, either by a war sword or by a water buffalo.

⁶²Sitsen (1932: 153) gives two examples for the Lun Dayeh of the Upper Kerayan: a polychrome jar exchanged for a pig and a porcelain jar in exchange for a water buffalo. Along the Tenganlan [Tinggalan], counter-payments were equivalent to payments; their non-payment led to the loss of the parents' rights over their daughter (Sitsen 1932: 154).

⁶³Rutter (1922: 212) describes among the Murut a payment halfway between 'bride price' and 'dowry' (*sic*) and represented a half or a third of the amount of the 'bride price', i.e. a jar or two.

that will give him power and prestige (Harris 1990: 50). Thus marriage payments exchanged should be seen as forming a system of interdependent relations where each person contracts debts towards the other, from a father-in-law to his son-in-law's family through the payments requested, but also of a father over his son and his son's affines through payments rendered (Harris 1990). For the Lun Dayeh of Sabah and of East Kalimantan, for example, the amount of the payments given (*furut*) in the past generally depended on payments (or counter-payments; *sulang*) that the family-in-law was willing to pay (cf. Crain 1970: 184–5).

Nomadism and marriage payments: the example of the Punan of the Tubu River

The groups of former hunter-gatherers of Borneo's interior, which are called Punan or Penan, exchange few or no payments in their marriages. If a form of marriage payment exists (or used to exist) in several nomadic or recently settled groups it is often minimal, optional, and is similar to material assistance. The Punan of the Tubu River in East Kalimantan, with whom I work, are distinguished from other groups of former nomads, but also from the Dayak sedentary groups, by a system of exchanging marriage payments that is both singular and complex. The adoption of this system by the Punan Tubu depends closely on the history of trade in forest products in the region for the supply of jars and other goods and staples (salt, tobacco, etc.), and on Punan families' relationships with the various protagonists of these exchanges, traders, but also their Dayak neighbours, the Abai Tebilun. The presence of jars in this region itself goes back a long time. They first appeared upstream of the Tubu River before the arrival of the first traders, and like other newly introduced items, they were obtained by the then nomadic Punan families from their farming neighbours, either in exchange for forest products and objects they had made (mats, blowpipes, etc.), or presented as gifts on the occasion of political and commercial alliances. These guaranteed protection to the Dayaks against outside intrusions – the Punan families that are dispersed in the forest monitor borders – and a regular supply of forest products. Endogenous and exogenous factors are the reason for the progressive strengthening of links between the Punan and the Abai on the Tubu River and for the progressive settling of the nomads in small hamlets.

The intense involvement of nomads in trade ultimately benefited Punan families materially. In their trading with those downstream, the Abai negotiate orders for forest products directly with the leaders of the Punan groups, who in return obtain goods for themselves and for their collectors. In parallel, certain military successes during tribal wars have made the most courageous Punan leaders (*lakin*) great men (*lakin paren*). Since the 1930s, Abai and Punan families have been inter-marrying, Abai men marry Punan women – daughters of Punan leaders – offering their Punan family-in-law one or two jars as payment. Progressively, the Punan who were richest in objects have begun to use valuable goods obtained in exchange for forest products as payments in their marriages and to supplement their original 'bride price' (*tiyu' oroh*, literally, 'the value of the woman') with a system of marriage payments (known in the region as *purut*) strongly inspired by the Abai and since the 1980s by the Lun Dayeh. The custom is also better adapted to their new economic situation. These marriage payments were at first modest for the majority of families. Subsequently, Punan

group leaders, in search of socially advantageous unions, increased the number of payments (about 30 jars in the 1960s) among themselves, extending in time the organisation of marriages to allow families to find among their close and distant kin and allies the numerous payments necessary: those that go from a man's parents to the woman's, such as jars, and those that circulate from a woman's parents to the man's.⁶⁴

Jars obtained by the Punan Tubu families more than a century ago are not dispersed in the same way, nor do they have the same origin. Today, the Punan Tubu distinguishes two major categories of jars: those that are called 'old' and those that have commercial value. Each category shares various models, which are unique or have survived in several examples, mainly distinguished by different histories that are also ways for the Punan to associate the items with individuals who own or have owned them.⁶⁵ None of these jars is considered sacred, but some are feared as spirit jars.⁶⁶ The *kelu'* ('old') jars include a variety of often unique specimens. They are identified as the first jars. Although their owners are known, it is difficult, often impossible even, to attribute a precise origin to them beyond the fourth or fifth generation. These *kelu'* jars are considered by family heads to be inherited pieces, goods associated with a reputation. They belong to men, the family heads, who pass them through the paternal line. Only a few Punan families, those that possess a 'name', own them.⁶⁷ In the past, a *kelu'* jar has been exchanged for a man (a prisoner of war who had been enslaved) between Punan and Dayak group leaders or on the occasion of an alliance with another ethnic group. Jars acquired generally remain in the house of their owner and are described as objects that do not circulate much or at all. In addition to these *kelu'* jars (and most of them are relatively old), the Punan own jars which 'possess a price'. These ordinary jars, mainly acquired through trade in forest products or transactions of marriage payments, are by far the most common and the most exchanged. They are not considered exceptional, even if on occasion, their relative rarity can give them a very high price. Unlike jars of the first category, these jars are described as being goods that circulate and do not remain in homes.⁶⁸ They are above all described by the Punan as having an influence on situations that involve them, whether these are commercial exchanges (cf. Césard 2007: 462–3), or the construction of matrimonial alliances.

Thus, the various jars owned by the Punan Tubu reflect both their past exchange value, that was set over various periods by traders and which served primarily as

⁶⁴For a more detailed description, see Césard (2007).

⁶⁵Other imported goods are exchanged between families. Jars, however, have been an item since the beginning of the trade in forest products unlike glass beads, for instance, which are more recent. There are a wider range of jars compared for example to gongs which are only known by the Punan Tubu in three sizes.

⁶⁶A valuable jar with an unknown history or of its last owner may be dangerous. It may be discovered in the forest and considered to belong to its former owner, for whom it was used as a jar of remains. Its ghost (*roh*) can manifest itself and sometimes harm its new owner. Less frequently, this is also the case of jars owned by harmful spirits (*otu'*) which remind the Punan Tubu of the period of epidemics (*layu*).

⁶⁷If families recognise that these jars may have been traded a long time ago, they avoid selling them once they own them.

⁶⁸A visitor to a Punan house from one year to another, is unlikely to find an item seen previously, with the exception of *kelu'* jars.

units of account in the negotiation of forest products, and their present monetary value, based on demand for old objects, the increasing financial needs of families and particularly the social and economic position of these objects in marriage payments. The value of a jar that has been traded in the past is assessed by comparing with other jars and items, both old and recent, and of different production. In its quality as merchandise and almost a form of currency, it can be bartered against other goods. For the Punan Tubu, a jar constitutes economic capital that is likely to change value with time. If families distinguish more or less similar jars according to their form (more than 50 models in the late 1970s), to exchange or sell them when the situation warrants it, they also give the jars an approximate price and rank them through relative values as 'most expensive', 'expensive', 'moderately expensive', etc.

Marriage payments among the Punan Tubu mark the alliance between groups of more or less distant relatives who have been separated by geographical remoteness, internal conflicts or wars. Unlike payments made by their Abai and Lun Dayeh neighbours which have extensively influenced the actual transfers of the Punan Tubu, the latter appear to partake in redistribution – sharing of objects and services among families that are socially connected but also economically interdependent. If families buy or exchange jars against other goods, in particular through trading in forest products, they obtain most of their objects as payments from other marriage alliances.

Thus, except for a small number of families who keep jars that are designated as old and are influenced by their farming neighbours, most Punan families do not make a distinction between objects for payments and those that are inherited. Prestige objects circulate and on the death of a father are inherited by his children to serve as payments to the next generation. What interpretations should be given then to these exchanges of objects that can be either ordinary or valuable? For the Punan who were former nomads, as it is for other societies of 'immediate return' (Woodburn 1980) and 'collective appropriation' (Ingold 1987), the variability of reserves, in particular of food as well as of objects, is reduced by sharing and distribution. As with natural resources, the items are not, however, given freely. Most of the time, a transfer takes place after a request⁶⁹ from a family member or an affine in return for something else.

If families tirelessly give objects and keep nothing, or almost nothing, one wonders how they receive their due in an exchange. In reality, relations of debt in the exchange system imply that the circulation of goods (*pelawai taan*) keeps payments balanced between families. These emphasise that payments work because objects, irrespective of their quality, constantly enter and exit in new exchanges. This circulation is based on compliance with a contracted debt, the two parties unable to receive objects without giving in turn. An alliance must satisfy both families, immediately following a request, on a daily basis or in difficult situations, for example, when it is necessary to give for a marriage, or when any type of economic assistance becomes necessary. These transfers of goods, although they are marked by the influence of Dayak farming groups, remain no less, especially initially, profoundly Punan. They are part of the continuity of alliances between fathers-in-law and complete the original matrimonial compensation of *tiyu' oroh*. Respect to parents-in-law and the obligation to help them, continually emphasised by the Punan, refers especially to the notion of *taang*

⁶⁹A request is rarely rejected. The only way to refuse without putting one party or the other in an awkward position is to hide the desired object.



FIGURE 4 Marriage payments in jars (Punan Tubu) in Respen Tubu, East Kalimantan. Photo by Nicolas Césard, 2002.

(‘between’). Currently extended to all the ‘duties’ between allied kinsmen or affines and to the material exchanges of an alliance, *taang* above all characterises exchange as a social relationship. Following a request from a woman’s father, the object of the compensation is placed, both literally and figuratively, ‘between’ the two kinships. Initially, common objects such as tools relating to the preparation of sago starch, a blowpipe or metal, the elements of this compensation evolve progressively to include the first items obtained from trading forest products, which with the accumulated years ultimately constitute the majority of objects exchanged between families in marriages.

In contrast to the Abai and Lun Dayeh families whose relatively stable exchanges have evolved less quickly, the Punan have not limited the number of objects necessary for an alliance or the participation of members of the two kin groups in exchanges. Thus the families remain the only judges of the quantity and quality of payments requested and received, each agreeing to say that to give objects to a family-in-law is not a constraint. A woman’s father and her family can establish the value of payments by setting out their requests directly or by being the first to give objects, but they cannot impose a payment or an immediate return. However, a family-in-law is often no longer content, as in the past, with the objects available. The items requested and exchanged are now more numerous and harder to find for families though often unrestricted to a specific time for fulfilment. This flexibility of exchanges to the advantage of ordinary families is feared by the more prosperous families, who are often solicited by their relatives to give objects.

Conclusion

This article shows the evolution of objects by and in their uses. It takes jars from Borneo as an example to show that an object can become something other than what it had previously been, e.g. a merchandise, an heirloom or a payment, according

to the manner in which it is transmitted and by whom it is acquired. Beyond the different uses of jars, owners and how they contribute to the lives of objects when they keep them and give them away are examined. Examples taken from literature and ethnography show that *pusaka*, the term regularly used to discuss these jars in the context of Borneo, does not fully do them justice. Jars encountered in Borneo are more than the ordinary heirloom goods described in the literature, some are sacred heirloom jars. These jars, are not all *pusaka* as they remain, in the majority, goods of economic value, used as marriage payments and for many other purposes. To identify the jars of Borneo as simple heirloom goods is to forget that prestige jars, whether they are ordinary or extraordinary, have effects on situations in which they are used by their owners. To understand then the place they occupy in the various societies of Borneo is to take into consideration the true nature of each jar owned and, from an agency theory-based perspective, what it 'does' to men by virtue of its presence and its circulation.

These jars cannot be studied without envisioning what an owner sees and looks for in them. Understanding their acquisition, requires knowing about their specific cultural and historical context. In Borneo, ceramics have a long history and a wide range of forms where jars are concerned.⁷⁰ Each ethnic group has several ways of associating objects with the people who own or have owned them which relate mainly social and economic concerns, connected to the specific history of individuals, families or groups. The case of the Punan of the Tubu River is especially telling. Although they have been influenced broadly by their Dayak neighbours, through trading, alliances and settlement, they still have a 'foraging mode of thought' (Barnard 2002). Thus from one group of people or family to another, the same jar may not hold the same value with successive owners as each jar acquired, even if a mass-produced one, remains unique through their ownership history.

With the exception of certain objects which have their own life, such as jars identified as being magical or supernatural, thus raising doubts about their past (human) trajectory, the existence of most of these jars remains associated with their owners, both past and present. For them, the perception of a specific jar refers more broadly to how it was acquired: whether they have an attributed mythical or commercial origin or have been considered as a rarity for a reason. However, if owners must work with objects which they receive or choose, they also confer their role on them and thus transform them. Only a new owner can thus change the status of an object such as by making a recently acquired jar an heirloom jar or a payment jar. These different ways of transmission, from one owner to another, make a jar, irrespective of its nature or its state at the time, an object undergoing constant mutation. Not all jars, however, can return to being what they were in the past because certain objects charged with a history remain inalienable. For example a sacred jar, cannot be an ordinary jar again, except in an improbable situation where its previous relations with the extraordinary are forgotten.⁷¹

⁷⁰See Chin (1988) about the Sarawak Museum collection and Valdes et al. (1992) for the Philippines.

⁷¹Gell (1992: 144–5) mentioned that 'gifts' such as sacred jars, as opposed to 'commodities' like ordinary jars could be alienable for the recipient who gains access and the power to donate, whereas the donor loses both. In the case of a sacred jar, I show here that the new owner's intention takes into account the history of the jar.

While the economic value of a jar is relevant, both in purchase and exchange, it is not fundamental. In the eyes of a new owner, aside from its price, it is necessary to understand what a jar does and why, to give the object its value. A careful examination shows that for most societies in Borneo, jars possess much more than just trading value as they retain a trace of their passage in the memory of men. The true value ascribed to an object, which gives it its 'force' (in a Maussian sense, i.e. the power of the object given), is first its own history, that of a specific origin, but also that which links it to its various past owners, and the new owner is aware of its genealogy or memory. A jar such as an heirloom jar can be the property of several people. It can also be the medium of circulation between rich and well known families, such as jars given on the occasion of a political alliance or a marriage. The value of a jar, whether in direct transmission or exchange, reflects the status of the giver, his experience, his reputation, and his merit. In the case of *pusaka*, this value is transmitted from one generation to another and to a new owner.

What makes or can make a jar a specific kind of jar – that is, what enables a jar to change type or status, from being ordinary to being extraordinary, for example – varies from one ethnic group to another and may depend on the availability of similar objects. This is the case for certain ancient jars acquired by the Punan Tubu from their Abai neighbours. These jars, considered by the Punan to be *kelu'*, are not seen in the same way by the Abai who, having several identical versions, consider them to be ordinary jars. While the Punan take great care of these jars, the Abai still use similar jars as items for payments. For the Punan families, the value lies in the fact that these jars have been kept for a long time by their owners, and that they have been inherited through one lineage. They are not objects mishandled through many exchanges. Unusually for former nomads these objects are valued and retained because they last.

If it is true that a jar withstands the passage of time and is acquired for passing on, then the various examples show that groups in Borneo refer less to any essential and inherent qualities of the object such as its solidity, appearance or potential abilities, than to how it is treated and considered by its successive owners. What gives a jar its value and makes it an ordinary or extraordinary object, is certainly its past, but also for its new owner, what it is likely to accomplish once it has been given or exchanged. As Liana Chua (2009) has shown recently about the Bidayuh of Sarawak and the notion of (political) power, there is an intentional element linked to exchange and transmission. In Borneo, each jar is accompanied by the intention given to the object by its various owners. Sometimes this intentionality animates and guides it. We have seen this 'force' can be latent and passive, as is the case for ordinary heirloom jars, or obvious and active, for extraordinary heirloom jars. Even though the intentions of the most recent owners are better retained than those of earlier ones, this explains why the manner in which a particular jar is given often prefigures the way it will be given again. This is the case for the Punan families of the Tubu River, who, as we have seen, have two ways of passing on their jars.

Although certain families today give their children jars that they have inherited from an ancestor who obtained the jars through trading or war, their focus remains on the exchange of jars as a richly intentional act. Heirlooms rely on past actions to produce status, but the contemporary exchange of objects and services creates an alliance and builds on it daily. These exchanges of property establish debt relations that for the Punan, extend over several generations and foster numerous kin relationships in various villages. For them, and as it is for other social groups in Borneo, there

remains something of the affine in a jar that is given or exchanged. A jar creates a new social relationship while also remaining attached to previous relationships. For the Punan Tubu, jars and other objects accompany the reputation of the family head giving them, but while the person who accumulates them possesses a 'great' name, the person who exchanges them is likely to have a 'good' name.

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