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# handcraft <sup>IN</sup> sabah

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KOLEKSI SABAH

**HANDCRAFT IN SABAH**

by

**Elizabeth and John Alman**



BORNEO LITERATURE BUREAU

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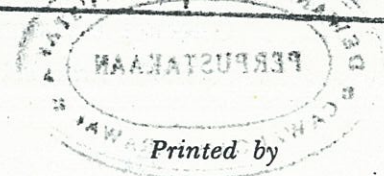
PERPUSTAKAAN  
DEWAN BAHASA DAN PUSTAKA

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## Foreword

This is a simple introduction to handcraft as it is still carried on by the Native Peoples of Sabah. It is written for those people who, being unable to travel to these villages to see this for themselves, nevertheless appreciate the skill and tradition evident in such craftwork and want to know more about it. It is written, too, for those who want to know more about our original peoples and who realize that some knowledge of the art those people have been applying for centuries to the things they use everyday, is necessary if one is to appreciate them adequately.

The Chinese, we realize, have been here a long time, too, but the commonly seen cane furniture, pottery, gold rings, bracelets, necklaces and jacket fastenings that are made by their artisans are made in or near coastal towns and since the crafts show no signs of dying out, and anyone can examine the work easily, we have not discussed them here.

The emphasis on areas is uneven and this is due to the fact that the elements and the exigencies of daily work have made it possible to visit some areas often, and some only briefly. In spite of checking and cross-

## Foreword

checking our information, inaccuracies may have crept in. People with jobs like the Residents' or the District Officers', or a planter's have an enviable, longer acquaintance with the peoples of an area than we. They will no doubt notice these discrepancies.

We have not written a multiple-footnoted paper presenting technical and sociological data. For students who would like more detailed information, however, we have included a bibliography.

Many people have been very kind to us, giving both suggestions and unstinted time when asked for help. To the members of Kent College who gave up their holidays and went with us to *kampongs*, or carried our questionnaires to them when we were not free to go, and with great patience coaxed accurate information from shy and modest craftsmen, we are especially grateful. Mr. T. J. Evans, of the College staff, has shared with us his specialized knowledge in other areas as well as his findings on field trips. Mohamed Mokhtar bin Md. Ali, Angindi bin Kumpong, John Dagul, Joe Chin Sang, Liew Fui En, Kinawa bin Tunlingan and Eugenie Chen have helped greatly with interviews. Without their fluency in Dusun, Murut and Chinese we would

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probably represents the best of the material available  
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have missed much of the information we wanted. We  
are also indebted to Mr. M. J. Smith, of the Agriculture  
Department, for answering endless botanical questions,  
and to Mr. James Comber, manager of Sapong Estate,  
for his material on the preparation of bark cloth among  
the Lun Daya. Whatever errors there may be in the  
text, we have made in spite of them—and they are  
our responsibility alone.

E. L. A.

J. H. A.

## Part I

### The People and Their Villages

Hidden by the encircling foothills of the Crocker Range, protected both by swift rivers dashing precipitously to the sea and slow rivers with wide estuaries blocked by sandbars and monsoon-tossed waves, the original peoples of Sabah lived undisturbed in their mountain valleys for centuries.

In these villages there is still a tangible aura of peace and relaxation. Many are truly beautiful even to eyes schooled to life in great cities. The jungle trail suddenly opens onto a view of level rice fields, attractive at any time of the year, breathtakingly beautiful during the rice-growing season. Near the rice, on knolls and low hills, are the *kampongs* with their soft brown bamboo and atap houses gathered under the coconut palms and occasional soaring jungle tree left for shade. The grass between the houses is close-cropped and as neat as any city garden. To sit in a cool bamboo house, shaded by trees, to look across the green grass and rice to the surrounding hills is to understand why artists with pen and brush have so often been ensnared by tropical islands.

It is in these isolated villages that Sabah's fine handwork is carried on. Old craftsmen carve wood to decorate a home, their horses' saddles, their sword handles



or to mark a newly-dug grave. They cast betel boxes and their horses' cheek-disks in brass decorated with traditional designs. The women weave brilliant head-dresses and ceremonial *sarongs*, some still spinning their own thread and colouring it with dyes used over two thousand years ago. They weave soft-as-silk *pandanus* mats and devise finely woven baskets for a hundred uses.

High above, however, the Pioneer plane drones from Kota Kinabalu to points in the Interior, the D.C.3 wings its way to Sandakan, the Comet screams off to the great ports of Singapore and Hong Kong. Working from the coast inland, are scores of P.W.D. personnel, building roads across the hills to centres near the once-isolated villages.

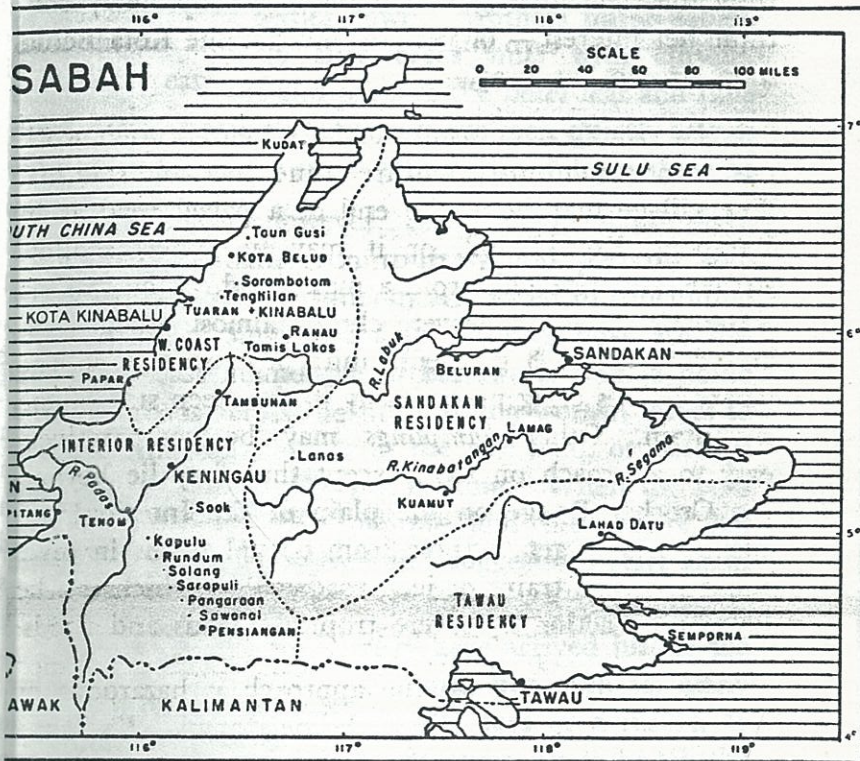
International travel is bringing cheap and gaily coloured cotton goods, aluminium cooking pots, aniline dyes and a steady stream of plastic twine, cloth and bags to Sabah's seaports: jeeps and lorries carry them from the dockside into the Interior, making it no longer necessary for the villager to spin, mould, carve, brew vegetable dyes or to weave in order to equip his house for living.

At the moment, in many of these villages a few older craftsmen remain — but the younger members

are not preparing to carry on. The lone potter in Kampong Taun Gusi says, no, her sons and daughters are not interested in learning her skills. She adds hopefully that her little granddaughter, perhaps, may continue her interest — or perhaps not, for the Kota Belud shops are not far away.

To visit these craftsmen and see them at their work one needs a combination of free time, luck and stamina. The village may be at the end of a paved road as in Kampong Kota Belud, or it may lie a few shallow streams and ricefields from a main road. The trail to Kampong Lokos, however, climbs almost straight up and down 1 in 3 gradients until it reaches a village where houses cling precariously to the steep side of the mountain. Other *kampongs* may be comparatively easy to approach on foot, except that they lie beyond the Crocker Range on the plain of the Interior Residency and to get to these from coastal towns involves using airstrips, trains or jeep roads, all of which can be put out of action by severe tropical storms and floods.

No matter whether the approach is hazardous or easy, the arrival is certain to be delightful. *Kampong* people in Sabah are uniformly gentle, courteous and greatly interested in helping the visitor. Particularly if he speaks Malay, as he walks along he finds himself the centre of a growing crowd. Everyone asks questions.



*The People and Their Villages*

Everyone suggests ways to be helpful. Everyone surges into the house after the stranger.

More and more villagers arrive and join the crowd inside. Everyone settles down. Mothers nurse babies, grandmothers neatly slice areca nuts with curious, ecateur-like scissors and prepare the betel leaf and lime mixture that they enjoy chewing, the men quietly discuss ways to help the visitor gather the information he wants.

This is the East and courtesy and pleasant conversation come before efficiency and speed in concluding business. The hour drifts by. Young boys are dispatched to bring a sample of handwork from a house at the far end of the village. A young woman leaves to summon an expert who is in the rice field, or perhaps gathering special clay for pot making. When the boys have returned with the sample and the expert has joined the group, questions and suggestions start again with renewed enthusiasm.

With luck, the visitor may have arrived just as the craftsman was ready to start work, but even so, many of the processes used take several days or a month to complete. Thus one makes arrangements to watch the collection of special clay one day but the clay must dry for three or four days before it is workable. Returning on the next appointed day, the visitor may watch Damun

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