



Baby Carriers

A Link Between Social and Spiritual Values Among the Kenyah Dayak of Borneo

HERBERT L. WHITTIER
PATRICIA R. WHITTIER

At first glance, the baby carrier (*ba'*) used by the Kenyah Dayak of central Borneo appears to be simply a utilitarian, if highly ornate, object that is functionally analogous to American "Gerry packs" or to the cloth slings used to carry infants by many people around the world. Indeed, the *ba'* is both a useful item and, often, a piece of art (Fig. 1). It can, however, be much more. The Kenyah *ba'* also has spiritual and social functions, as we discovered in the course of four years residence among the Kenyah—a period which included the birth of our first child and, thus, our own need to have a *ba'*. Except as noted, the information in this article refers to the Kenyah, and more specifically to the Lepo Tau Kenyah (Fig. 2).

Construction and Decoration

The Kenyah *ba'* is usually constructed of finely woven rattan, with a heavier rattan frame and a wooden, crescent-shaped seat (see Fig. 9). Woven rattan straps are attached to allow the adult or older



1
Ba' with *aban* made of yellow and black beads. (UM no. P627A, Sebop people, Brunei. H. 26 cm; W. 38.5 cm)

child to carry the baby on his/her back. The baby normally faces the adult's back with its legs wrapped around the adult at about waist level. From this position, the baby can observe the passing scene or sleep with his/her head resting on the adult's shoulder or back.

The *ba'* is used from birth until the child is two years old or more. For a long trip, such as that between village and fields, even a four-year-old may be carried in a *ba'*. When the infant is very tiny, the *ba'* is padded

with a thin pillow or cloth and may have a padded booster seat in it. The tiny infant may also be carried in front rather than on the back, a more convenient position for nursing. If it is carried on the back, the adult ties a sarong or other cloth around the *ba'* and around his/her own waist to better secure the carrier (see Fig. 12).

The complete carrier has several parts. First is the *ba'* itself—the wood and rattan structure. The standards of the craftsman are applied here. Is

the wood seat carefully smoothed? Is the frame strong and well-attached to the seat? Is the rattan back finely woven, with the ends of the rattan turned back? Are the straps strongly attached with good pineapple-fiber cord?

The second part of the ba' is the lining and edging. The edges are covered with a patchwork strip made of colorful bits of cloth. For some children, particularly those of the lowest social ranks, this is the extent of ba' decoration, but for most there is a great deal more. The ba' customarily has beadwork covering the back. This beadwork piece (the *aban*) is made of tiny seed beads woven into a design about 10 by 14 inches that is sewn onto the ba'. The designs that may be used are fairly standardized as are the colors, though this may be subject to the availability of beads. The preferred dominant colors are black, yellow, and white with touches of red, green, blue, and others for highlights (Fig. 3).

The beading of the aban is the most time-consuming part of the ba' construction. A woman working in

her spare time can make one in about three months, depending on the season of the year. The designs have many curlicues and flowing curves, and a good beadworker is one who can make these curves smooth, narrowing down to one bead in width. Around the edge of the aban may be sewn round decorations such as pieces of shell, buttons or, especially on the Indonesian side of the border, old Dutch silver coins (see Fig. 9).

The kinds of designs used on the ba' can be grouped into three broad categories. The first type is one with a full human figure as its central motif. The figure is very stylized, portrayed in a seated position, and executed in typical Kenyah style with curvilinear designs emanating from the head, hands, and feet (Fig. 4.) This design, whether on a ba' or on other objects, may be used only by those of the highest social ranking—the *deta'u*. The second type of design employs only a human head, again executed in stylized form with curved lines emanating from the head. This design may be used by lesser aris-

tocrats (the *deta'u dunit*). A third design, made up of abstract curved forms (Figs. 3,8), may be used by commoners. Other motifs may occasionally be employed by the beadwork along with the central design. Again, these motifs are restricted by social rank. The tiger, for example, would only be used by a *deta'u* person.

The final aspect of ba' decoration is the attachment of objects that hang by short strings from the back and sides of the carrier. Some are essential, some are dictated by the infant's sex and class, and others are individual. Every ba' has at least one shell of a large snail (see Fig. 3), and preferably two for the noise they make clacking together. When the infant's umbilical cord falls off, it is placed in one of these shells. Animal teeth are an addition mediated by the infant's sex and class. Tiger teeth can be used only for aristocratic infants, the number varying with the degree of social status and sex (Fig. 9). It should be noted that tigers are not indigenous to Borneo, and tiger teeth are extremely valuable goods owned only by *deta'u* families. Leopard teeth are also used by the *deta'u*. Old heirloom beads may be attached to the ba', too. Some old beads are considered so valuable that in the days before European rule, they could be used to purchase a human being (war captives). Many of these beads have individual names of their own and are venerated by all (see Chin, this issue).

Thus, the type of design on the aban and the associated objects hung on the ba' together signal social ranking. The symbols used by the higher-ranking people are considered to be most powerful. For a lower-ranking person to use them would be to invite illness or even death. It is interesting that, although these symbols of social ranking are disappearing in other contexts, especially among the Christian Kenyah, they continue to appear on the ba' and on coffins (Fig. 11), perhaps because the souls of both infants and the newly deceased are in dangerous transition. The danger is not only to the individual and his/her soul, but also to families and neighbors should evil forces tamper with a soul in transition.

Other groups living in central Borneo use the ba', including the Kayan, Sebop, Kanowit, Berawan, Punan, and Kajang. Only the Kenyah, however, seem to have elaborated its decoration into a demonstration of social ranking. While the other groups use similar designs, they do not necessarily associate particular designs with social classes. This is, of course, true not only of the use of these designs on the aban ba', but also of their more general use.

Ba': Objects of Ceremony, Comfort, and Protection

The first major event in the new infant's life is an event called the *petakau anak* (literally "free the child") or *chut tana* ("to touch the earth"). This ceremony serves several purposes for both the mother and the infant. It takes place from two to four weeks after the birth, the exact day depending on the appropriate phase of the moon.

The *petakau anak* frees the mother from the postpartum prohibitions on certain foods, on bathing, and on leaving the house. The baby receives his/her name and is formally introduced and brought into the Kenyah community. Spirits that might do the baby harm are enjoined to stay away, while good spirits are encouraged to hover near. This event is also the first time that the baby leaves the house, and he/she does so in a ba'. For this first journey the ba' is decorated only with a snail shell containing the dried stump of the umbilical cord and pieces of certain plants gathered earlier that day from the forest.

The baby, in the ba' on the mother's back, is carried down from the house to the ground in a small procession with his/her father, one or two of the elderly women who are usually in charge of such ceremonies, and a young sibling (or cousin) of the opposite sex (Fig. 12). On the ground, the child is introduced to some of the implements and activities of his/her later life. If the child is a boy, there is a mock hunt in which the adults place his hand on a spear and "kill" a pig



3 Ba' with abstract beaded design, snail shell charms, and shell disc ornaments. (UM no. P628, Kayan people, Baram District, Sarawak, Malaysia. Collected in 1896. H. 28.6 cm)



4 Beaded aban design with full-body motif for a high aristocrat (*deta'u bio*). (Lepo Tau Kenyah people, Kalimantan Timur, Indonesia, 1971. Photograph by H. and P. Whittier)

(made of a banana with twig legs). A baby girl uses a net to "catch" a dried fish. After the group returns to the house, everyone gets a tiny bite of the pig or fish and praises the child's skill in feeding the family.

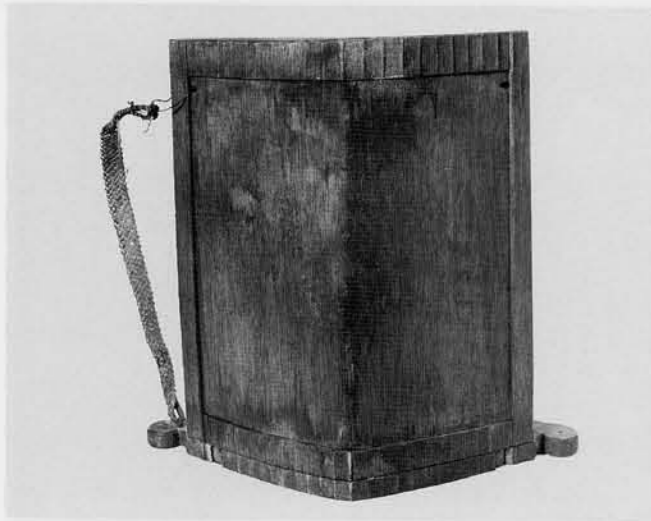
There are several other parts to the ceremony, but this is the only one in which the ba' plays a major role (P. Whittier 1981:61-62).

The ba' itself and the act of being carried in it become sources of

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2 Map showing where the Lepo Tau Kenyah live.



5 Back view of a baby carrier carved from wood, probably a Kayan havat (*ba'*) from Kalimantan Timur, Indonesia. (UM no. P623. H. 30.5 cm; W. 32.5 cm)

security for very young children. A frightened or tired toddler often climbs onto an adult's back, saying, "*Ba' me*" ("carry me"). Such behavior is encouraged by adults: we have often heard adults, in situations they perceive to be frightening or threatening, call to a child "*Ba', ba',*" either to remove a child from danger or just to bring it closer. In either case, the small child develops a sense that the *ba'* and the adult's

back are safe havens. The *ba'* is not only the place of safety, it is also a source of comfort. The major method of soothing a tired or cranky infant or young child is to walk with him/her in the *ba'* up and down the veranda of the longhouse, usually with a rhythmic gait punctuated with snatches of song or chant. A mother who is trying to prepare a meal with a crying infant or whining toddler on her hands will order an older child

The *Ba'* in Historical Perspective

The *ba'* is frequently pictured or mentioned in 19th and early 20th century writings on central Borneo. Some of the baby carriers in early photos and museum collections are carved entirely of wood, as in the examples in the collections of The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania (Fig. 5,6). This type of *ba'* is not used today. The woven rattan carrier that one commonly sees now, however, is not necessarily a later type, since it is also pictured and mentioned in the earlier writings.

The references to *ba'* in these early accounts rarely go much beyond a description of their obvious use for carrying infants.

Spenser St. John (1862) remarks that, on a visit to a Kayan village in the Baram River area, he saw a high-ranking woman carrying her baby in ". . . a rattan seat covered with fine beadwork. . . [W]hen women go out, the child is placed in this, which is slung over the back" (1862, I:130). In Ling Roth (1896) there is a rather formal portrait, captioned "*Kanowits (?)*," in which two *ba'* appear. One has a baby in it but is being worn on the front rather than on the back of the mother, perhaps to display the *ba'* to better advantage. The second *ba'* is simply set at the feet of the group, facing the camera. It is impossible to tell much about the decoration of these *ba'* other than that they seem to be made of rattan and are hung with beads and animal teeth, but clearly their owners thought them worthy of conspicuous display in their family portrait.

"*Ba' sadinkol!*" ("Carry your younger sibling!").

The protection afforded by the *ba'* goes beyond that of simply being close to an adult. The Kenyah, like many people throughout the world, traditionally believed that infants' souls were not very well attached to their bodies, and that the failure of the soul to stay close was a cause of illness and perhaps death. Even among those now professing Chris-

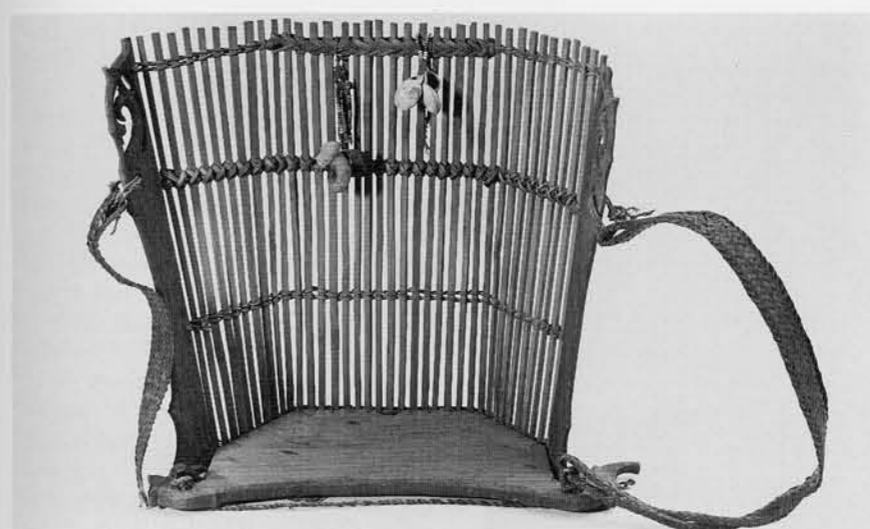
Hose and McDougall (1912) say that none of a child's possessions, including the *ba'*, should ever be sold or lent, although they may be used by a younger sibling if the elder has thrived. Lumholtz is particularly impressed by the wealth displayed on the *ba'*:

When children are small, they are carried on the backs of their mothers in a kind of cradle, the outside of which is often elaborately adorned with beads. The chief in Long Pelban had one, the value of which I computed to be two thousand florins. (1920, I:77)

Elshout (1923) offers the most complete discussion of the baby carrier in this early literature, noting especially the importance of the *ba'* in establishing a firm connection between the infant and its soul. He says that the soul, by means of certain charms, is encouraged to



6 Back view of a carved wooden *ba'* with snail shell charms. This *ba'* from the Apoh River area in Sarawak is probably Kayan. (UM no. P624, H. 30.5 cm; W. 43 cm)



7 Inside view of a slatted *ba'*. (UM no. P625A. Baram River Area. H. 38.2 cm; W. 33 cm)

tianity, this belief persists. The *ba'* works in two ways to keep the infant healthy. First, its decoration is attractive to the infant soul, and the soul will stay nearby. Second, the various objects hung on the *ba'* and the noises they make will repel evil spirits that might want to entice the soul away. We often observed young, inexperienced mothers being encouraged by their mothers and other older women to carry their

remain with the *ba'* and, if it does wander, to return there. Elshout also describes the first items hung on the *ba'*—a snail shell for the umbilical cord and pieces of the root of a certain plant, the number of pieces indicating the infant's sex and social ranking. He then goes on to describe in some detail the decorations added to the *ba'* later, including the beaded *aban*, animal teeth, beads, and buttons, and the social implication of the decorations: ". . . for radja's [children] tiger teeth are permitted. . . Others use instead of tiger's teeth, the teeth of the leopard (*djipen kole*, *oedang kole*) and in the lower ranks one encounters bears' or dogs' teeth" (1923:195).

Elshout mentions specifically the hornbill and the stylized full human figure designs as being the province of the highest aristocrats (*det'au*), whereas those of mixed heritage may use only stylized human heads

small babies in the *ba'* almost constantly, particularly if the infant seemed weak or sickly. If a sick baby is not actually being carried in the *ba'*, the *ba'* will be close by. Thus, the *ba'* is the child's refuge from both visible and invisible hazards.

In addition to being a practical item for carrying a baby, an essential guardian of the baby's health, and a display of status, the *ba'* is also

as motifs in the beaded design. Til- lema, in his volume on the Apo Kayan, shows a photograph of a *ba'* accompanied by the following commentary:

Wicker Baby Carrier: the baby carrier can be thought of as protecting the baby against angry spirits, for that purpose the magical baby carrier is prepared with coins; old trifles, etc. You can see the coins at the top. Left and right in the center of a flat ground shell is a large bead. The bead is very old, perhaps centuries old. The wicker basket makes a particular sound and in the beadwork a complete human figure is portrayed. This sort of magical adornment can only be permitted a mother of high birth. She is strong enough to resist the magic of such a figure. A mother of rank would put aside the carrier in which she carries her baby for no money in the world. In

regarded as a beautiful object, a work of art. Like most fieldworkers, we were often asked to make family portrait photographs for which the family would dress in its finest clothes and pose very formally. The family usually arranged to have the smallest child's *ba'* included in the picture, either by having the mother turn to make the carrier at least partially visible or by simply placing it on the ground in the front of the group—much as an American society matron might be photographed in her home with a valuable painting in the background.

The *Ba'* and Community Solidarity

For the anthropologist, the social relations engendered and strengthened by the assembly and construction of the *ba'* are one of its more interesting aspects. The construction of the basic wooden seat with the woven rattan back and straps is generally a household enterprise. Women usually do the fine rattan work and men the carving of the seat and the attaching of the woven part to the seat with a heavier rattan frame. These are skills well within the range of any adult of the

that wicker shelter is a part of the "soul" of her infant. With feces and urine the baby dissents, but to yield would mean sickness or death for her baby. (1938:168)

In this commentary, besides the references to magical powers and the soul, we have the second reference to the class connotations of the *ba'* and *aban* motif. Only women of high rank could use the full human figure.

These early observers, of course, vary greatly in the depth of their commentaries on the *ba'*. A few see it only as a device for carrying a baby; many comment on its function in protecting the infant from illness by discouraging evil spirits and encouraging good ones; a few mention the association of *ba'* decorations with social ranking; but none explores the nature of the network of social relations generated and reinforced by the *ba'*.



8 Back view of a *ba'* woven from rattan, with beaded *aban*. (UM no. P627B, Sebop people, Brunei. H. 32.5 cm; W. 42.5 cm)

appropriate sex. Thus, the work may be done by the child's parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles. Alternately, the *ba'* may be one previously used by a sibling or cousin.

In this case, if the sibling or cousin is old enough to have given up the *ba'*, the decorations will have been removed, and the *ba'* will be redecorated for the new baby.

The initial *ba'* decorations, the snail shells and pieces of root used for the *petakau* ceremony, are usually gathered by elderly women, the grandmothers or great-aunts of the baby. It is for the later, more elaborate decorations that the network must expand beyond the household. The first items to be obtained are the small "seed" beads for the *aban*. Since the beading is a lengthy task, it begins before the birth of the child. In areas near bazaars, the beads may be simply purchased for relatively small sums. In more remote areas, however, the accumulation of sufficient beads is more problematic and their trade value rises enormously. Traders from other areas, being without kin ties in the village, feel free to demand in goods whatever the market will bear—often equivalent to twenty times or more the price of the beads in the bazaar. Women in the village may also trade among themselves, often exchanging beads in an attempt to gather the appropriate mix of colors. Some colors are in



9 Two highly decorated Lepo Tau Kenyah *ba'*, with full human body motifs, at least six tiger teeth, and a large number of leopard teeth. The edges of both *ba'* are trimmed with old Dutch coins. (Kalimantan Timur, Indonesia, 1970. Photograph by H. Whittier)

higher demand than others so this trade often takes the form of, "I'll trade you one-and-a-half strings of red for one of black." Within the village, one is restrained, of course, from driving the kinds of bargains that outside traders can.

After the beads are obtained, the decoration of the *aban* begins. This work is usually done by older women, partly because they are more skilled in beadwork and partly because they are more free of the daily demands of domestic and agricultural work. Commonly, it is a grandmother of the expected child who does the beading (Fig. 13). In recent years, a few people have begun to bead *aban* for outright sale, but this is still rare.

To obtain the other decorative elements for the *ba'* one must have recourse not to traders but to kinsmen. The coins, animal teeth, large beads, and other items used are heirloom goods that are not available for sale but must be borrowed from their current custodians. It should be noted that these items have uses other than *ba'* decoration and may, therefore, be in demand for other purposes. We have stated that certain items and the numbers of these items that may be used are associated with degrees of social rank. Only a *deta'u* person, for example, can possess tiger teeth. Therefore, one must have recourse to other *deta'u* to obtain the tiger teeth necessary for the *ba'* of a baby



10 Hat with dragon motif. This would be worn by an aristocrat. (Lepo Tau Kenyah, Kalimantan Timur, Indonesia, 1971. Photograph by H. and P. Whittier)



11 The coffin of an aristocrat made from a hollowed log and decorated with carvings and paintings in the designs appropriate to the deceased's social ranking. (Lepo Tau Kenyah, Kalimantan Timur, Indonesia, 1971. Photograph by H. and P. Whittier)

of *deta'u* rank. Likewise, fine heirloom beads are owned only by *deta'u*. To have such beads displayed on the *ba'* is an indication of the baby's rank and also the validation of that rank by other *deta'u* in that they have loaned the beads for the purpose.

Thus, the *ba'* not only visually displays the status of its occupant, it also organizes a group of kinsmen around a new member of the group.

People will point out their individual contributions to a *ba'*; by saying, "I gave this bead and those two tiger teeth," a person is saying indirectly, "I am a person of high social rank." A Kenyah would never say this directly, presumption being dangerous behavior, but he wants the fact known. Through their use on the *ba'* items of heirloom wealth are recombined and redistributed for each new member of the group, con-



12 Part of a child's naming ceremony (*petakau anak*) in which the mother and the child step upon the ground for the first time since the birth. The child is carried in his/her *ba'*, which is decorated with snail shells and pieces of the roots and leaves of plants with ritual significance. (Lepo Tau Kenyah, Sarawak, Malaysia, 1974. Photograph by H. and P. Whittier)

firming him/her as a group member and revalidating the positions of those who contribute the goods and their ties to the ancestors.

One unusual aspect of the ties of reciprocity that are generated by the *ba'* is that, unlike the ties established and reconfirmed by such activities as the distribution of wild animal meat after a hunt, a joint travel venture, or joint labor on a new house, these ties are among women. The mother and grandmothers of the child will most likely approach other women to obtain the goods. They may ultimately come from men (for example, a woman may request a pair of tiger teeth from her female cousin who may actually get them from her own father), but they pass through women and, thus, reinforce and establish relationships among women.

The ties between pairs of men and women, and especially between *deta'u* individuals, lessen a tendency towards village schism. In modern Kenyah society, there are

many forces that might encourage schism and migration, including religious differences and the desire to be nearer to markets, schools, and health care. It is the social relationships established among the *deta'u* that moderate these forces. The use of heirloom goods on the *ba'* does more than simply identify *deta'u* by the use of symbols; it draws them into interaction and reinforces a consciousness of kin ties and common heritage. Even for those men who entertain ideas about schism and migration, the ties among their mothers, wives, and daughters may be powerful countervailing forces.

Thus, what might appear to be a utilitarian item of material culture, a seat for carrying an infant, has multiple ramifications in Kenyah society. The *ba'* is a baby carrier, a work of art, a device for protecting a child's health, a display and confirmation of social rank, and a mechanism for creating and strengthening social relations. 21



13
A grandmother beading the *aban* for a *ba'*. (Lepo Tau Kenyah, Kalimantan Timur, Indonesia, 1971. Photograph by H. and P. Whittier)

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Herbert L. Whittier is Associate Professor in the Department of Family Practice, College of Human Medicine, Michigan State University. He is also Associate Director of Michigan State University's Institute of International Health, and Associate Director of the Kellogg International Fellowship Program in Health. His fieldwork among the Kenyah focused on social organization and socioeconomic change. He earned his Ph.D. de-

gree in Anthropology at Michigan State University in 1973. Dr. Whittier is a development oriented anthropologist and has worked with higher education development projects in Indonesia and Nepal.

Patricia R. Whittier focused her fieldwork among the Kenyah (1973-1975) on linguistics and on Kenyah naming practices. She earned her Ph.D. in Anthropology from Michigan State University in 1981.

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