

Bakul

everyday baskets from sabah

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Tadang, Buan, Barabat, Raga, Likahan, Buyuung, Kanayang, Sulupi, Kapa In speaking of the baskets, innumerable terms are coined. The list is as long as the variety of baskets that there are. Apparently they don't have a direct meaning. Perhaps it is like the way names are attached to pets. An endearing of relationships. Uttering them extends them further into our worlds.

Jennifer P. Linggi, a Sabahan of diverse descents, asks the owners of the baskets the name, and generally if more than one person uses the same term, she lists it as such. These with her notes and sketches form an act of recording and also a bringing forth of the baskets to other worlds, which she transmits with a book titled *A Journal of North Borneo Traditional Baskets*. The book in size is smaller than a 12inch laptop but thicker. Its compactness unfolds with stories of each basket. She also collects the baskets where possible and this book and her collection form the beginning of the Bakul exhibition. In developing this exhibition, an excursion was also made to a Murut village called Kampung Bakuku in Sabah, to briefly be part of a *life* world. A story composed of gatherings and images from this trip is also shared as part of the exhibition.

The world that the baskets are part of is very much apart from the city world where this exhibition of the baskets is being held. Yet the various bakul have long made their way from the place of origin, much like how the humans have travelled far from their original birth worlds. Apart as we are, to know these baskets is to go into their world. And this world springs from the rattan, bamboo, bemban, mengkuang and other plants from the jungle. It is also from the sun, the rain, the mud, the leeches, the insects, the microbes, the things that make up the fierce forest. Each basket is a kind of fresh wonder, a transformation, from a plant, cut, carried back to a village, shaved, peeled, woven, filled with rice, strapped on the human back, trapping fish, carrying a mountainfull of bananas, storing medicine, working, carrying a baby. In action, the makers' bodies, hands and feet are a rhythmic yet gentle flow, focus and strength. Some are made on the spot, after a fresh kill of a wild boar, big rough woven back packs bursting with the dead meat. Involved in all are the same hands, same parangs, same bodies. There is no division of labour, so to speak. It is part of the work. These same bodies, plant, harvest, cook, live.

Whichever, no two baskets are the same, as no two plants or two persons are the same. To encounter this world is to encounter a way of life. Then as it is now, it always was a daily remaking and lively reimagining. At some point, the baskets will go limp, so aged that it will become dust and return back to the earth. Shopkeepers who keep and sell these precious pieces to collectors in their air conditioned shops say that the dry air does not help, instead hastening its brittleness. The baskets prefer to breathe as part of the natural environment where they come from, aging, changing, darkening, softening, growing old together with us.

by Ling Hao

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