

Silver Costume, Ornaments and Coins Accessories

Worn by Iban Women

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Abstract

Silver ornaments, jewellery and other accessories are important components of the traditional attire of the Iban people, especially for the women, both in the past and present day. Most of the components such as headgears, corsets, armlets, bracelets, belts, and earrings were fashioned from imported silver. Trade coins, crown pieces and other silver coins were used for making a variety of belts and as decorative pieces for corsets, armlets, and other accessories.

Historical Background

Ornaments made of silver, gold and other precious metals form an important part of the traditional ceremonial attire of the indigenous people of Sarawak. The greatest users of silver in Sarawak are the Iban. They are fond of jewellery and used ornaments of beads, brass, gold, and silver. Silver costume, ornaments and jewellery were and are still worn by Iban maidens on festive occasions, especially in the longhouses. Iban from different regions of Sarawak have different names (in Iban) for similar accessories as reflected in this article.

Head-dresses, chains of necklaces, bracelets, bangles, and hairpins, for the past few hundred years, have been fashioned from imported silver. One of the most common decorative techniques used for silver is repousse, a technique of embossing the pattern in relief onto a thin sheet of metal (silver) by hammering out the design from the back; the metal sheet is held down on a bed of pitch or resin, using a blunt-nosed tool. The Iban wear a variety of silver belts, some of which are normally worn by female, as well as waist chains and other waist decorations.

Raw materials in the form of silver bars, ingots or European silver coins were imported to the country through foreign trade. In 1871, silver coins were issued in the name of the Straits Settlement by the British government for 5, 10 and 20 cents followed by silver 50 cents in 1886. The Straits Settlement was a former conglomeration of territories in the British East India Company in Southeast Asia which were given collective administration in 1826 as a crown colony. The British began minting silver Trade Dollars (locally known as *duit/wang tungkat*) in the 1890s for general use in Far Eastern trade. They were issued from around 1895 to 1935 and the biggest quantity was produced in 1911. The British Trade Dollar was a silver coin. It is 420 grains in weight, composed of 90% silver and 10% copper. The diameter of the British Trade Dollars was 39.0 millimeters.

The Malohs of West Kalimantan are the best-known silversmiths in Borneo. They were very familiar with Iban decorative motifs. Typical examples of Maloh-made silver apparel were

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the girdle/corset (*rawai tinggi/rawai*) consisting of numerous lengths of narrow rattan hoops threaded with silver rings and joined together at intervals to make one piece. They also made silver belts, buckles, bracelets, earrings, and head-dresses. Silver objects were often exchanged for Iban hand-woven textiles, which are highly prized by the Maloh who do not have a weaving tradition. Traditionally, a Maloh smith would set up his forge in an Iban long-house for some months and produce items such as *sugu tinggi* (head-dress), *rawai* (corset), bracelets, earrings, and belts, with raw materials provided by the customer.

The Iban are also known to purchase some of their elaborate silver belts and buckles from the Chinese bazaar smiths in the larger towns. Sarawak Chinese silversmiths also manufactured silverwares for the Iban. The majority of the silver ornaments made by the Maloh were plain and simple; and were mostly embossed with low relief or incised floral motif. The Sarawak Chinese smiths' silver pieces are normally thicker and heavier. Their works were more in repousse and less in engraving. More distinctively, the Chinese smith usually decorated the surface of objects with Chinese patterns and motifs such as: birds and beasts such as dragons, antelopes, phoenixes, cockerels, peacocks, quails, cranes, storks, bats, butterflies, cicadas, crabs, frogs, snails, and fish. The Chinese craftsmen also copied products made by the Maloh, which they adopted and reworked for the Iban market, such as the silver hooped corset, belts, buckles, bracelets, head-dress, armlets, and anklets.

The Sarawak Chinese silversmiths competed increasingly with Maloh products in the twentieth century and they gradually undermined Maloh manufactures. Malohs' skill in silver-smithing has declined and there has been no support available for the maintenance of Maloh traditions. During the 1930s, the shortage of silver and the importation of cheap commercial products brought about the decline of the silver industry. Today, traditional Chinese repousse work in silver and gold is rarely undertaken.

By the 20th Century, the Iban preferred to wear belts comprising traded silver coins and crown pieces, as well as smaller denominations of coins issued between the reigns of Queen Victoria to Elizabeth II. Locally known as '*Ringgit Bertongkat*', this Trade Dollar was never circulated in Britain, but was made for use in the area of the Straits Settlements, Singapore and Malaya. It was declared legal tender in Straits Settlements on 2nd February 1895. The British Trade Dollar was demonetized on 1st August 1937.



On one side of the British trade dollars is Britannia standing on shore, holding a trident in one hand and a British shield in the other, with a merchant ship under full sail in the background. On the reverse of the dollar is an arabesque design with the Chinese symbol for longevity in the centre, and the denomination in Chinese and Jawi Malay language. The British Trade Dollars had different marks depending on the mint centre. Those with the mint mark "B" were produced at the Bombay Mint; others, marked "C" in Calcutta. Those with no mint mark were produced in London. The mint mark "C" can be found in the ground between

the left foot of Britannia and the base of the shield, while the mint mark "B" is located in the center prong of the trident.

Silver coins bearing the Portrait of Queen Wilhemina of the Netherlands (reigning period: 1890-1948), in dollar size and in smaller denominations were also used for making belts. These are dollar size silver coins and smaller coins in smaller denominations. The wording on the coin is the country's name KONDINGRIJK DER NEDERLANDEN (Kingdom of The Netherlands). The Dutch monetary unit has various names. In the Netherlands, it is known as a gulden or florin, but the English refer to it as a guilder, such as 1 G, ½ G, ¼ G or 1/10 G.



Sugu Tinggi/Sugu Pirak/ Sugu Ganggang

These are tall, curved silver headgear/hair-comb with decorative silverworks. A typical headgear comprises a crescent-shaped thin metal (silver) sheet, fitted at the base with a plastic comb. It is shaped into curved, and branched points on its upper edge, and comes to a tall, branched point at its apex. From each of the shaped upper points stem thin upright metal rods for inserting the detachable decorative silverwork consisting of a hollow rod made of pieces of silver sheet, from which are suspended diamond-shaped silver pieces, joined to the main hollow rods using small fragile metal springs. At both outer edges of the comb are suspended, on linked chains, small diamond-shaped and leaf-shaped pieces of silver.

Silver coin belts (Sengkiling/Sementing Ringgit) (Nyawir/Senawir /Bungai Murun)

These are belts made up of silver coins in different sizes linked together using tiny silver chains. The main part of the belt is normally made of dollar size silver coins and from these are attached smaller coins and silver bells or other decorative pieces. Dollar size silver coins are the *duit/wang tungkat* which are British Trade Dollars issued from around 1895 to 1935. *Sengkiling/Sementing Ringgit* are silver belts of one-dollar coins (*duit/wang tungkat*) linked with silver chains or with a single row of one-dollar coins suspended from the main belt. *Nyawir/Senawir/Bungai Murun* are belts of one dollar silver coins (*duit/wang tungkat*) linked by small silver chains, with rows of silver coins in smaller sizes and denominations suspended from the main belt with alternating rows of smaller coins and silver bells. They are usually fastened using a detachable decorative oval-shaped silver buckle.

Baju Ringgit/Ngepan Ringgit

The silver coin dress, *baju ringgit*, is a traditional costume worn by Iban maidens from the Skrang region during festivals. This coin dress is made up of several rows one-dollar silver

coins (*duit/wang tungkat*) and several smaller denominations silver coins. Each one-dollar token coins are joined together by three tiny chains vertically and horizontally, comprising several rows. Towards the bottom row are attached smaller coins and also small silver bells suspended on silver chains. The coin dress is normally worn together with other silver accessories to make it a complete set of (*ngepan ringgit*) costume. A complete set can weigh up to twenty-five kilogrammes or more.

Broad silver belts (*Lampit pirak*)

These are broad silver belt with detachable decorative buckle/clasp. In some regions of Sarawak these are called *lampit bebungai chingkei*. The body of the belt is made up of flat overlapping rectangular links which are neatly fastened together by hidden silver wires running vertically across the width of the belt. The links are made from long strips of thin silver sheet, which are folded over and soldered into a rectangle, leaving the inside hollow. Rows are linked together. The top and bottom edges of the belt are made of silver wires which are twisted and braided to form two cord-like borders along the length of the belt. Both ends of the belt are enclosed with pieces of silver sheets with silver wire clasps soldered on to them which in turn, interlock with the two clasps which can be fixed to the back of a detachable decorative belt buckle. In some areas, the decorative buckles are described as *pala lampit kerubung kekura* because some are huge and shaped like tortoise shells.

Silver belts (*Lampit Kubur Anyam, Sementing Pirak Bebungai and Lampit Bubuk*)

Lampit kubur anyam is another type of silver belt comprising of several thick cords of silver. Each cord is made up of numerous thin wires which are twisted, braided, and woven together. The cords are held together by square panels which run at intervals along the belt. The square panels are mostly decorated with floral and other Chinese motifs. It is normally fastened with an ovoid or s-shaped buckle decorated with motifs. The size of the belts varies according to the number of cords each one has. *Sementing Pirak Bebungai* are silver chain belts consisting of flattened silver pieces in leaves shape and incised leaf motifs, joined together using silver chains. *Lampit Bubuk* are silver chain belts consisting of flattened diamond-shaped and flower-shaped silver pieces joined together. They are usually fastened together by a buckle in cut-out design with incised motifs.

Silver Corsets (*Rawai/Lumit*)

The corset is made of several bands/hoops of rattan with thousands of tiny silver rings threaded onto the strips of rattan. The bands are joined together at various intervals to make it into one piece, with an opening at the front. The height of the corset depends on the number of hoops/bands and the tall ones are called *rawai tinggi* and these are tall enough to cover the chest. The buckle is made from a flat piece of silver attached to both sides of the opening, with simple incised motifs. These corsets are sometimes decorated with silver coins of different sizes attached to it (*Rawai Beburai Ringgit*).

Bracelets, armllets and bangles (*Tumpa'/Simpai /Gelang*)

Tumpa' pirak are silver armllets of beaten silver sheet fastened at two ends; one is folded inwards and the other outwards so that they slot together. The bracelets are convex,

decorated in repousse diamonds, semi-circle, and other geometric shapes. Maidens wear these in rows up the arm from the wrist to just below the elbow. *Simpai pirak* are silver armlets of beaten silver decorated in relief with diamonds, semi-circles, rosettes, spirals, ovals, and lines. They are larger than *tumpa' pirak* and are worn on the upper arm by both Iban men and women. Decorative female rope-twist, spirals, or barley twist bracelets (*gelang rakit/sapit*) are commonly made of beaten silver with overlapping ends, or with etched, spiralled knobs or citrons containing a small screw-fastening device. *Pala' tumpa'* are broad silver cuffs with fine floral motifs, with fastenings on each side.

Silver Anklets (*Gelang Kaki*)

Comes in varieties of plain, rope-twist and patterned anklets (*gelang kaki*) and sometimes decorated with bells. *Gelang kaki berasuk* are silver anklets made from coiled silver wire, overlapping at both ends and usually decorated with silver bells. *Gelang kaki bebungai* are silver anklets with tiny screw fastening, decorated with simple embossed designs. *Gelang kaki peling* are large hollow silver anklets with rope-twist designs and has fastenings. *Gelang kaki alus* are plain and smooth hollow silver anklets with fastening, worn by young girls.

Other Ornaments and Accessories

Lebai engkerimuk are silver hoops worn around the waist, comprising of tiny silver rings threaded onto rattan hoops. *Buah pauh/Chelapa bebungai*, round silver boxes with lid and chain, are decorated with very fine floral, fish and bird motifs. *Marik/kungkung igi' peria'* are silver chain necklaces with a four-petal floral patterned pieces (each piece resembling bitter-gourd seeds), linked together using silver chains. *Marik/kungkung/tenggak bebungai*, silver chain necklace with six-petal floral patterned pieces, linked together using silver chains. *Marik/kungkung leka empusut*, silver chain necklace with seed pattern (resembling gourd/loofah seed), linked together using silver chains. *Sugu lengkap*, a small comb partially encased in silver frame with embossed floral motifs. *Sumping/pin sanggul*, silver hair-pins, usually has a decorated top end and with fine floral engravings towards the middle part.

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