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Symbolism and material culture; Some footnotes for Penny van Esterik

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SYMBOLISM AND MATERIAL CULTURE: SOME FOOTNOTES FOR PENNY VAN ESTERIK

In a recent article in *BKI*, Penny van Esterik (1984:77-91) has argued convincingly, to my mind, that “objects that are used as symbols have proper or literal meanings of their own, and these literal meanings are the material out of which symbolic significance arises” (p. 80). To substantiate her more specific suggestion that “technological operations must be extensively thought about, and these thoughts may provide analogies for other things which people must think about” (p. 81), she focussed on the archaeological, ethnographic and Buddhist contexts of pottery vessels in South-East Asia, especially Thailand. Her analysis also relied very much on the realization that an important property of symbolic systems is their openness, and that the meanings of symbols are frequently vague, ambiguous and discordant. I should like to make some additional comments on Van Esterik’s article, since it fits admirably with my present research on Borneo material culture in general, and, in particular, that of the Maloh of West Kalimantan, among whom I conducted fieldwork in 1972-73.

What I found of special interest was Van Esterik’s remark that the process of manufacturing and using a pot may be connected to “the process of human development”, and therefore to the broader concept of creation. Elements which come together here are water and earth (clay), which are moulded into shape and “fired to maturity” (p. 85). Air might be a further element to be considered. Van Esterik touched on the connection between jars and fertility, but I think she could have made more of the importance of fire in pot manufacture. Fire is, in one sense, very much linked to notions of fertility in various Borneo cultures. Rodney Needham, for example, has already noted in a Borneo context, and beyond for that matter, that certain symbols such as fire and stone are “archetypal” or “natural” symbols (Needham 1967:281). In a partly complementary study, which is based on psychoanalytic methods, Derek Freeman further remarked that “in mythology, fire and lightning are symbolically identified not only with urine and destructiveness but also with semen and fertility”, and that Sir James Frazer has provided “many examples of the kindling of fires to promote fertility” (Freeman 1968:369). It is also surely relevant that one of the central symbols in Borneo material culture is the dragon (*naga*) (e.g. among the Maloh, Kayan,
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Kenyah, Kajang, Berawan and Ngaju), or, as it is sometimes conceptualized, the watersnake or serpent breathing fire (Gill 1968:109, 182ff.; King 1976:166-8; Schärer 1963:14ff.; Whittier 1973:172). It is usually counterposed to the hornbill. The phallic dragon or serpent is itself a symbol of fertility, and even more so in its association with fire. The multivalence of symbols, with which Van Esterik was also concerned, is clearly expressed here, in that fire is both destructive and fertilizing; and again it is obviously significant that in some Borneo motifs known to me, particularly among the Maloh, fiery dragons are depicted consuming or devouring human beings (Harrison 1965: plate XXXVII, between pp. 240-1, and 1966a: plate VI, opp. p. 160; King 1976:166ff.).

Van Esterik, using contemporary ethnographic evidence, further argued that, in the ritual use of jars, there is a connection between jars and fertility. For example, among various hill peoples of mainland South-East Asia, “jars of rice beer may substitute for an animal sacrifice or a human head” (p. 85; cf. De Josselin de Jong 1965:283ff.). It is of interest that in Borneo there are many examples of jars and other ceramic vessels being used as containers for water, or rice wine and beer, in ritual contexts such as curing and head-hunting ceremonies to promote life and fertility (e.g. among Kelabit, Harrison 1967:1-2, and Melanau, Kaboy and Moore 1967:23). What is more, certain jars are thought by Maloh, for example, to be associated with spirits, which, if properly propitiated, can ensure human well-being. Van Esterik pointed to jars, in a Buddhist context, containing liquid which “is likened to soma or amrita and is a source of fertility and goodness” (pp. 85-6; cf. De Josselin de Jong 1965:288ff.).

As with fire, ritual usage links jars with both life and death. Van Esterik emphasized the importance of jars in a funerary context and their “metaphoric association with death” (p. 84). Borneo data again support her analysis. Jars can serve as containers for corpses, bones or human ashes (e.g. among Berawan, Kajang, Melanau; and cf. Harrison 1962:8ff.; Metcalf 1982:80ff.). They also frequently form part of the funerary property. Van Esterik has referred to De Josselin de Jong’s remark that jars, urns, vases and pots are symbolic of the Underworld in South-East Asia, and to Hans Schärer’s observations that, among the Ngaju of Kalimantan, a water-containing jar represents the Underworld and the primeval waters (pp. 84-5).

In this connection some attention must be paid to motifs on jars in Borneo, especially Chinese and other imported ware, highly prized by the natives. Van Esterik did not deal with designs in her recent paper, though she has also had some interesting things to say about their symbolic significance in past work (e.g. 1979:495-508). Yet these motifs too demonstrate linkages with the Underworld and death, in particular, but also with fertility and rebirth. I have already mentioned the dragon or serpent, which is a prominent design on jars collected in Borneo. Innovations in symbolic usage, another of Van Esterik’s concerns, are found in the context of dragon motifs. Among such central Borneo peoples as the Kayan, Kenyah, Kajang and Maloh the naga motif is called by the indigenous term(s) for “dog” (i.e. aso, aso’, asau, asu) and...
some observers have remarked on the close resemblance between the
dragon on jars and “dog motifs” used in other Borneo artistic forms (e.g. Gill 1968:109; Gittinger 1979:222; Haddon 1905:115-16). In many examples of Borneo designs, in carving and painting, especially among the central Borneo groups, there seems to be a merging of elements of dog and dragon forms. Some particularly good examples carved in wood and collected in the upper Mahakam area of Kalimantan can be found in an article by A. W. Nieuwenhuis (1925:88-9). I would maintain that dogs, like dragons, at least in some Borneo cultures, are identified with the Underworld, since they serve as guardians of the Land of the Dead, or they may be associated with evil spirits (cf. Kruyt 1937:585ff.). Hose and McDougall (1966:45, pt. 2) and Gill (1968:93) indicated for the Melanau that a “two-headed dog” or “two fierce dogs” guard(s) the River of the Dead. Nieuwenhuis labelled the upper Mahakam wooden carvings as “watch-dogs”, which are placed by the tombs of the dead (Nieuwenhuis 1925:87-8). It may not be out of place to suggest that the imported dragon motif has been merged with or superimposed on ancient Borneo symbols such as the dog, and indeed the serpent (cf. Ellis 1981:204; Gittinger 1979:222). “Dragon-dogs”, as well as being symbolic of the Underworld, are protective symbols, which serve to maintain or enhance human well-being. Their aggressive, powerful characteristics can be harnessed for human purposes, and other creatures important in Borneo symbolism, too, may be part of this protective syndrome, such as crocodiles, leopards, tigers and eagles/hawks. Dogs, like dragons or serpents, may symbolize fertility as well. Freeman has already pointed out that dogs are frequently “looked upon as lecherous because of their overt sexuality” (Freeman 1968:386). However, despite their use as protective symbols, these creatures, if offended, or if not controlled, can just as well harm humans. Tigers and crocodiles, for example, are often seen as punishment-animals in Borneo (cf. Needham 1967:282-3).

There are other prominent designs on imported and Brunei-made jars which support the association of these vessels with the Underworld. Note Tom Harrisson’s description of a bronze jar from Kanowit in Sarawak: he said of the motifs that “[t]he dogs (if dogs) shown here have a bit of the deer in them, in another characteristic Bornean art-treatment, where under certain visual or ritual conditions asu can ‘become’ a crocodile, or a dragon a prawn” (Harrisson 1966b:154). Comparing this jar with one from the settlement of Dalat, Harrisson further speculated that dragons on the Dalat jar “look a bit like a crayfish where the Kanowit dragons look more like crocodiles. Between the Dalat dragons are at three points small roughly executed fish, and two crabs near the fish” (p. 154).

I would suggest that deer too are linked with the mystical dragon-dog, in terms of their functions of both protection and promotion of fertility, and clearly other creatures such as crocodiles, prawns, crayfish, fish and crabs, and one could add to these frogs and toads, lizards, turtles and scorpions, form a symbolic assemblage associated with the Underworld. Some of the creatures are also notably ambiguous in that they are amphibians crossing the divide between water and land. As well as being Underworld symbols linked to death, especially, for example, the scor-
pion, many of these creatures are fertility symbols like fish, lizards and turtles (cf. Freeman 1968:385-6). Among the Maloh, scorpions, possibly as death symbols, are also noted for their ability to “sting like fire” with their tails. The symbolism of fire I have already emphasized; and Freeman has indicated the phallic significance of tails. Interestingly Niclaisen, in her work on the Punan Bah people of interior Sarawak, referred to their custom of taking oaths “on the tail of a dog”, since “swearing on dogs...[is]...the most powerful of all oaths of the Punan Bah” (Niclaisen 1976:66). Furthermore, there are many Borneo stories about creatures such as snakes, crocodiles and fish actually turning themselves into jars (Kaboy and Moore 1967:10-29). How appropriate, then, that in funeral rites, objects and their motifs should symbolize the Underworld and death, but also, through their connection with fertility, reaffirm life and the continuity of life. We might note as well that not all motifs on jars are Underworld symbols, since birds and other creatures of the Upperworld are also depicted on them, so that notions of cosmic totality are crystallized in one decorative object.

Perhaps I might push this analysis a little further. I do not think that it is too far-fetched to point to a symbolic linkage between jars, stones, beads, and metals, especially iron. There is evidence from Borneo that stones are linked to death, since they are used as containers for human remains and as memorials for the dead, particularly among the Kelabit of central Sarawak (e.g. Harrisson 1958a:394-401, 1958b:694-702). In one sense stone is seen as “lifeless”, and this is dramatically demonstrated in the belief in petrifaction as punishment for human unnatural behaviour (King 1975a:115ff.; Needham 1967). Harrisson has given some detail on Kelabit ritual use of stone, and beliefs concerning stone, particularly the phenomenon of petrifaction (Harrisson 1959:108ff.). Among Maloh, special stones, very often “lightning-stones” – again the symbolic link with fire – are also used in curing and marriage rites to promote life; they are placed in rice storage bins to protect rice and rice-spirits, and they were worn by Maloh headhunters as protective amulets. Symbolically important creatures can also endow stones for human use so that specific stones may be referred to by Maloh as “crocodile-stones”, “snake-stones”, “tiger-stones”, “hawk-stones”, “turtle-stones” and so on (cf. King 1975a:104-19).

Beads, as hard objects, like jars and stone (indeed some beads are made of stone), also have this multivalent quality. Among Maloh, beads were buried in the earth for ritual purposes, especially on the erection of the main support posts of a new longhouse (p. 115), and beads are used as adornments for the dead too. But they are important as well to ensure health and long life in curing and marriage ceremonies. Maloh have mythical stories of culture-heroes embarking on journeys of adventure in search of valuable beads, some of which were thought to grow on trees (Harrisson 1965:329; King 1975b:171). “Trees-of-life” are obvious fertility symbols. Finally, iron, in the shape of weapons, can destroy. One Maloh deity of the Upperworld, Ambo, is described as possessing a sword, forged from fire, which flashes like lightning, and can be awesomely destructive (King 1975c:144). But iron too can be employed in Maloh rituals in which there is a need to focus on the reaffirmation
of life and the enhancement of human procreative powers.

Van Esterik has opened up an interesting field of research in South-East Asia, but in the light of my remarks above, I would suggest that much more can be done in exploring the links between symbolism, ritual, natural elements, items of material culture and their motifs, and technology.

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COMMENTARY

I would like to thank Dr. King for providing additional supporting cases for my argument on Continuities and Transformations in Southeast Asian Symbolism (BKI 140-I, pp. 77-91). Dr. King's demonstration of a set of expanded meanings for jars based on his Borneo research confirms the value of viewing Southeast Asia as a single arena of interacting symbols, mutually intelligible to some degree.

It may be possible to begin to identify general characteristics of Southeast Asian symbols. Below I suggest a few possible directions.

1. To use Ortner's distinctions (1973) in Southeast Asian symbolism, there appears to be a preponderance of summarizing symbols as opposed to elaborating symbols, which sum up in an undifferentiated way a number of complex life processes.
2. Natural and technological processes are very salient antecedent objects for symbolic elaboration. King discusses fire as an antecedent object communicating ideas of both destruction and fertility. In this