

**POSSESSIONS, PRIDE, AND PRIVILEGE:
MARTABAN JAR AND THE VISUAL POWER FROM THREE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM
BORNEO**

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Abstract

Photographs have become important subjects of study since the early nineteenth century, drawing attention from a wide range of disciplines. In cultural anthropology, photographs function as both pictorial representations and cultural artifacts, providing evidence of social practices and material traces of the past. Clothing, objects, gestures, space, and social relations in photographs communicate collective and historical meanings. Additionally, photographs reveal hidden meanings related to cultural constructions, ideology, and power; as Barthes argued, photography is a system of signs in which meaning is never neutral. This study analyzes three late-nineteenth-century photographs from Borneo to clarify their social, cultural, and ideological significance. Furthermore, the study interprets the historical connection between Dayak communities in Borneo and Martaban jars, valued as indispensable objects. The analysis aims for rigor and neutrality by distinguishing between visible elements (denotation), cultural associations (connotation), and underlying ideology (myth). The three photographs, featuring deliberately arranged scenes, focus on ethnic features with the jar as the principal subject. The jar conveys clear ideas of ownership, strong possessions, pride, and privilege, reflecting a persistent social construct. As depicted, the vase is an integrated element of

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the human world, persisting across different times and places and bringing a unique narrative with each appearance.

Keywords: Photography, Roland Barthes, Mythology, Borneo, cultural anthropology, Martaban

Discipline: Anthropology

Absztrakt

BIRTOKOK, BÜSZKESÉG ÉS KIVÁLTSÁGOK:

A MARTABAN-KORSÓ ÉS A BORNEO-I HÁROM FOTÓ VIZUÁLIS HATÁSA

A fényképek a 19. század eleje óta fontos kutatási tárgyakká váltak, és számos tudományág figyelmét felkeltették. A kulturális antropológiában a fényképek egyszerre képalkotó eszközök és kulturális tárgyak, amelyek a társadalmi gyakorlatokról és a múlt anyagi nyomairól tanúskodnak. A fényképeken látható ruhák, tárgyak, gesztusok, terek és társadalmi kapcsolatok kollektív és történelmi jelentéseket közvetítenek. Ezenkívül a fényképek kulturális konstrukciókhoz, ideológiához és hatalomhoz kapcsolódó rejtett jelentéseket is feltárnak; ahogy Barthes állította, a fotográfia egy jelrendszer, amelyben a jelentés soha nem semleges. Ez a tanulmány három 19. század végi borneói fényképet elemzi, hogy tisztázza azok társadalmi, kulturális és ideológiai jelen-tőségét. Ezenkívül a tanulmány értelmezi a borneói dayak közösségek és a Martaban-edények közötti történelmi kapcsolatot, amelyek nélkülözhetetlen tárgyaknak számítanak. Az elemzés a látható elemek (denotáció), a kulturális asszociációk (konnotáció) és az alapul szolgáló ideológia (mítosz) megkülönböztetésével törekszik a szigorúságra és a semlegességre. A három fénykép, amelyeken szándékosan elrendezett jelenetek láthatók, az etnikai jellemzőkre összpontosít, az edényt fő témaként kezelve. A korszak egyértelműen kifejezi a tulajdonjogot, az erős birtoklást, a büszkeséget és a kiváltságokat, tükrözve egy tartós társadalmi konstrukciót. A képen látható váz a emberi világ szerves eleme, amely különböző időkben és helyeken is megmarad, és minden megjelenésével egyedi narratívát hoz magával.

Kulcsszavak: fotográfia, Roland Barthes, mitológia, Borneó, kulturális antropológia, Martaban

Diszciplína: Antropológia

Introduction

Photography reflects more than visual reality; it reveals the influence of culture, history, and politics. Early thinkers considered photography to be neutral, but later scholars demonstrated that photographs are shaped by power structures. Susan Sontag (Sontag, 1990) argues that photographs help shape perceptions, while John Tagg highlights their use by institutions, especially in bureaucratic and colonial contexts (Tagg, 1988).

In historical and anthropological research, photographs are now recognized as vital physical links to the past. Elizabeth Edwards (2001) explains that

photographs, as both images and objects, travel, change meanings, and foster social bonds. This is especially useful for studying archival and colonial photography, where images act as records and instruments of knowledge creation (Edwards, 2001).

Semiotic analysis provides a foundational method for understanding the meaning of photographs. Drawing on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the sign, Roland Barthes developed a two-part framework in *Mythologies* (1957), distinguishing denotation from connotation. Denotation refers to the literal content, while connotation encompasses broader cultural meanings associated with images.

Barthes' concept of myth deepens semiotic analysis by revealing hidden power structures in images (Barthes, 1972).

Myth works to present certain historical beliefs as obvious or universal. In photography, myth transforms political meanings into seemingly neutral facts, enabling researchers to distinguish between visible content and underlying ideas. Visual Anthropology broadens the understanding of photographs by treating them as both cultural artifacts and physical objects. Christopher Pinney recommends considering how photographs are made, circulated, and interpreted within societies (Pinney, 2011). Instead of focusing solely on images as texts, visual Anthropology emphasizes how photographs fit into social traditions and everyday life. Edwards and Hart note that photographs have distinctive social roles, and that their contents such as clothing and gestures illuminate social relationships and cultural values (Edwards & Hart, 2004).

The study of colonial and imperial periods reveals photography's powerful role in representing and managing populations. Allan Sekula and Anne Maxwell show that colonial photography reinforced differences and hierarchies using images that categorized and controlled subjects (Maxwell, 1990; Sekula, 1984). Visual systems in colonial photography have played a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of race and difference. Deborah Pole (1997) points out that repeated visual strategies helped normalize power structures, while semiotic analysis—especially Barthes' concept of myth—demonstrates how images present beliefs which can be questioned (Barthes, 1972). Before conducting more in-depth research, photographs can serve as a starting point for understanding historical facts and various phenomena from a particular perspective. This article specifically examines how three 19th-century photographs of the Dayak people on the island of Borneo (Kalimantan, Indonesia) illustrate the role of jars across varying backgrounds, using Barthes' theory of denotation, connotation, and

myth to reveal underlying cultural meanings that might otherwise seem natural or ordinary.

Problems

In a world that values instant understanding, culture is often simplified and generalized. Yet, culture itself is uniquely complex and contextual a fact frequently overlooked in how groups like the Dayak people are described. (Note: The Dayak are composed of seven major ethnic groups—Dayak Ngaju, Dayak Klemantan (also known as Dayak *Darat* or “Dayak land”), Dayak Ot Danum, Dayak Apo Kayan, Dayak Iban (Dayak laut/Dayak Sea), and Dayak Murut. These major ethnic—together encompassing a total of 405 sub-ethnic groups (Darmadi, 2017). By the 21st century, Dayak people had steadily integrated various Christian traditions, including Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism. These religious landscapes coexist alongside the indigenous belief system known as *Kaharingan*, which in contemporary classifications is often grouped under Hinduism, resulting in the hybrid identity of Hindu-Kaharingan, strongly occupied in the central of Kalimantan - Oktaviani & Kurnia, 2023).

Often labeled 'primitive' by outsiders, the Dayak identity is shaped by these imposed social constructs. This article argues that such labels obscure the true complexity of Dayak culture. By analyzing three 19th-century photographs each featuring Dayak jars in different backgrounds this article challenges the alternate meaning of simplistic interpretations and highlights the need for deeper analysis of visual representations of culture behind the captured pictures.

Drawing on visual anthropology, this article asks: Who created these photographs, for what audience and purpose, and how are they interpreted? Using Roland Barthes' framework, the analysis deconstructs the social constructs behind these images, revealing the layered, complex realities of Dayak culture that are often obscured by surface-level

perceptions. The main argument is that such photographs when carefully examined expose deeper complexities behind societal labels and assumptions.

The land of Borneo

Kalimantan, also known as Borneo, is the largest island in Indonesia. Its northern region shares borders with Malaysia and Brunei (Fig. 1). The indigenous people of Borneo, known as the Dayak, derive their name from a term meaning hinterland people or people who live along the upstream rivers. (Note: Dayak people in the interior who embrace Islam are usually called Malay, as their way of life is similar. In West Kalimantan, they are called Senganan in Sintang Regency and Dayak Kebahan in Melawi Regency).

Like any other islands in the Indonesian archipelago, the people of Borneo are predominantly Austronesian speakers, who are believed to have originated from southern China and Taiwan around 4,000 years ago. Over time, they began to adopt external cultural and religious influences, including Hinduism and Buddhism (5 CE), Islam 15 CE), and Christianity

(17 CE). Scholar K. Alexander Adelaar even argue that the land of Dayak people may have played a significant role in the very origins and the dispersals of the main Austronesian languages (Bellwood et al., 2006).

In the past, the Dayak people of Kalimantan practiced complex indigenous belief systems that involved reverence for local spirits and animal sacrifices. Intertribal warfare was a frequent occurrence, and headhunting (*kayau*) became one of the most well-known practices associated with the region, often instilling fear among outsiders, including the Dutch (Darmadi, 2017).

Like other parts of Southeast Asia and Indonesia, Borneo (Kalimantan) began experiencing colonial influence in the 16th century. Initially, its extensive river system supported many local kingdoms. The Dutch East India Company or Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) and later the Dutch government (Nederlandsch Indische) exploited forest products such as rattan, resin, and timber, as well as minerals like gold, while suppressing kingdoms controlling interior trade routes.

Figure 1. Borneo Island



During this time, the term 'Dayak' emerged through ethnic and administrative categorization. Development of mining and plantations also occurred, alongside local resistance such as the Banjar War from 1859 to 1905. Dutch power weakened in 1942 with the arrival of the Japanese, and it ended entirely in 1945.

Unlike Indonesia, the history of the Borneo region in Malaysia (Sarawak) was influenced by the British royal family. Sarawak's colonial era began in 1841 when James Brooke became Rajah after assisting the Sultan of Brunei. The Brooke family's paternalistic rule, known as the White Rajahs, lasted until 1941. Subsequently, Japan occupied Sarawak during the Second World War. After the war, the territory became a British Crown Colony in 1946. Eventually, Sarawak gained self-government and, in 1963, joined to form Malaysia (Cleary, 1996).

The Three Photographs from Borneo

The three photographs analyzed in this article are all from Borneo. Two are from Kalimantan, and one

is from Sarawak, Malaysia. All three will be analysed using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, which involves revealing denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and uncovering social constructs known as myths. These photos have a photo label (anchorage). In this analysis, the anchorage function i.e., the role of a label or caption in guiding the viewer's interpretation of the image, continues to be used to deepen the contextual analysis without disregarding the critical issues arising from several descriptions that need further exploration and clarification with additional relevant data.

Picture 1. Jar as the valuable thing belongs to Dayak People (Ownership, possession)

Picture 1 shows a group of mature men, women, and teenagers gathered in an open space or courtyard, with trees in the background. Two adult men stand at the front, flanked by two women on one side and three on the other. One man wears a cap (peci) commonly worn by Muslim men; the other does not.

Picture 1. Tajau (jar) used as a dowry by the people of West Kalimantan Sintang – West Borneo, 1900 1938. Source: Tropenmuseum. This picture also displays at Museum Kapuas Raya, Sintang, West Kalimantan, Indonesia.



Both men wear koko shirts, which are long-sleeved and like Chinese men's clothing. These shirts became known as Muslim men's clothing and are commonly worn by Malay men. The man on the left wears a dark-coloured koko shirt. The other man wears a white koko shirt. Three men stand behind them, apparently as escorts. Two men, one on each side, wear white koko shirts. The third man appears to wear a white shirt with a checkered pattern on the chest.

Seven women appear in this photograph. At the front, one woman is seated, dressed in a cloth that covers her chest and wearing a distinctive necklace (usually adorned from boar tusks). She holds a tuma a traditional percussion instrument from Kalimantan, made of bamboo and cowhide (membrane-*phone*) (Note: See *tuma* picture at [Link](#)). Behind her, two women flank a man wearing a black cap and holding a large black jar adorned with dragons and ropes. Of the two women, one wears a chest-length cloth patterned with white florals, while the other sports a dark-coloured cloth adorned with geometric designs. Both resemble batik cloth from Java. Behind them, another woman's face is partially visible.

Three women are also visible in the photograph, standing to the right of the man in the white koko shirt. One arm of the man in white is draped over the woman next to him. She wears a checkered cloth covering her chest, resembling a sarong (a traditional Malay and Southeast Asia cloth) has presence here since 19 CE, and a bracelet on her wrist. (Note: Traded commodities along the Kapuas River included tobacco, salt, gambier, head coverings, cotton fabrics (white and colored), *sarongs*, copper tools, earthenware produced by the Banjar people, and foreign ceramics from China and Europe - Kiss et al., 2025; Schwaner, 1983).

Unlike the other women, she appears to wear no necklace. Beside her are two women, dressed in checkered cloth (*sarongs*) and floral patterns, each adorned with boar tusks necklaces and bracelets.

The three women, using their right hands, hold jars decorated with dragons and feathers. Denotatively, the core of the photo shows a group of Dayak-Malay people posing with the jars.

The faces in the picture show flat expressions. Most subjects look straight ahead at a single object, likely the camera, except for the woman beside the man in the white koko shirt, who bows her head slightly. The photograph's atmosphere appears directed, with the subjects neatly posed and lined up behind two very prominent jars. The inclusion of the woman holding the tuma musical instrument also seems intentional, with her presence appearing supplementary. Similarly, those in the front row seem to fill the empty space, giving the photograph a compact, dense appearance. Cameras were expensive at the time, introduced by newcomers, and were not widely owned by the public. Only a few people had access to them. It is likely that a foreigner or perhaps a Dutch newcomer deliberately took this photo, possibly intending to show it to other Dutch people or to those outside the Dayak community for a specific purpose.

The caption on the photo reads, 'Tajau (jar) used as a dowry by the people of West Kalimantan.' Although this is acceptable, there seems to be some doubt. Who is the bride? There are two men in the centre of the photo and five women standing close to them. In terms of clothing, there are no wedding outfits, which are usually seen in pairs. The women's clothing and accessories are also almost identical, with nothing more striking to indicate that she is the bride. There is also a significant age gap. The man in the photo appears to be older than the woman. Likewise, the man's arm around the woman does not resemble the gesture of a bride and groom, which is usually seen in an equal, balanced, and proportional pose. The man's hand seems to show subordination. In this context, the woman standing closest to him does not appear to be his wife but rather a child, sibling, or relative (who was deliberately invited to the photo).

The same goes for the other four women. Their presence seems to serve as a backdrop, supporting the photo's theme or topic. The connotation of this photograph suggests that the man and woman are photographed with the vase as a valuable possession (ownership). The woman's hands touching the vase give the impression of something owned and to be protected (the jars).

The photograph appears intentionally staged to evoke a wedding scene, yet the people depicted do not seem to be an actual bride and groom, but rather an unrelated group assembled for a group photo. The clothing suggests a mix of Malay (Muslim) men wearing koko shirts and Dayak women, likely Muslim, whose attire differs from that of traditional, non-Muslim Dayaks, who typically wear loincloths, bark vests, hornbill-feather headbands, and carry traditional weapons (See video documenter of Dayak Kenyah (West Kalimantan and Sarawak area) in the early 19th CE [Link](#)). Notably, distinctive motifs are evident in wood carvings, tattoos, and weaving, whereas batik-like fabrics were uncommon among Dayaks until after the 15th century, likely introduced via trade.

The narrative constructed by the photograph thus appears artificial, yet it has become widely accepted, shaping perceptions of authenticity. Jars, now symbolically linked with Dayak identity (including Muslim Dayaks), have been imbued with a narrative of necessity in sacred ceremonies, paralleling their stated role as wedding dowries. This is the narration of myth (naturalized ideological meaning).

This narrative elevates jars to a central and sacred status in perceived Dayak marital tradition, even if it does not reflect historical reality.

Picture 2. Jar as the representation of pride

Picture 2 shows four Dayak men standing in a row, with five jars in front of them, neatly arranged and tied to a long bamboo pole (possibly to lift them), and a boy sitting next to the jar on the far

right. At first glance, he is inconspicuous and resembles a sixth jar with his bald head. The four men are well-built, wearing waist-length cloth, with or without patterns, and with their chests exposed. They wear traditional headbands except for the seated boy, who appears not to be wearing one. The man in the center is holding a spear (lonjo/bujak) and a shield (Talawang)(See Bujak and Talawang: [Link](#)), traditional Dayak weapons with iron spearheads (usually coated with poison for battle), while the other three are not holding any weapons. The photo's background shows the area around a stilt house, with coconut trees, sugar palms, and shrubs. Denotatively, the core of the photo shows a group of the native Dayak people posing with the jars.

As in the first photo, the pose in this photo also appears deliberate or staged. Their gaze is flat and straight ahead, fixed on a single point (the camera). The jars are neatly arranged in front of them. The photo's powerful aura comes from the central male figure, who holds a spear in his right hand and shield on his left. He gives the impression of being an important person or a prominent figure.

He also appears older than the others, giving the impression of someone strong and respected. The spear in the photo adds an aura of "courage," which is supported by the presence of other men on his right and left who appear to be his bodyguards, companion, or supporters. Overall, the pose in the photo shows a more open and challenging exposure.

The jar in the foreground looks very beautiful and perfect. It signifies an association with pride in owning it. Unlike the first photo, where the jar is placed with the Dayak Melayu community (believed to be Muslim), this time it is placed with its supporters from the indigenous Dayak community.

The presence of the jar in the center, the tribal leader with his spear and shield, and his bodyguards, standing tall and defiant, reinforces the jar's connotation as a source of Dayak pride. As a source of pride, it is an integral part of their identity.

Picture 2. Five jars described as sacred from the district head of Pangkoh, a Ngaju village on the Kabayan River (South Borneo, Dutch East Indies), c.1915. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. Coll. no. 10001019 (Photo credit: Sunarningsih, 2024).



The Dayak tribe fiercely defends its territory, resulting in frequent inter-group wars (Note: Communities living along river systems in Borneo often experienced conflicts and rivalries between groups, primarily due to territorial control (Sjamsuddin, 2014). The presence of the jar, placed alongside men who are “ready to fight and wage war,” conveys its value as a new myth: a very valuable object that must be owned and risked, and is “non-negotiable.

Picture 3. Jar as an honor and privilege notions

Photo 3 shows a man standing, talking to another man seated. In front of them, two tall vases decorated with flora and dragons are visible. The standing man wears a cloth, a headband, and shoulder decorations typical of the Dayak people. The seated man wears a similar cloth but has a head covering shaped like a full hat, which is unlike the Dayak headbands and somewhat resembles a traditional

Chinese hat (cheongsam) without a tail. The background appears to be a wide expanse of white cloth. As with the previous two photographs, it appears this background was deliberately set up. Naturally, buying and selling usually occur in open spaces or crowded markets. However, this may not always be the case. Here, the background looks very neat. Denotatively, the photo centers on two men with two jars.

The expressions in the photograph are very contrasting. The man standing (a Dayak) appears to be speaking, his eyes fixed on the man sitting, his hand outstretched (empty). Meanwhile, the man sitting seems oblivious, his gaze fixed on the jar and the Dayak man, as if waiting for a response. Given this pose and the photo caption, ‘Iban bargaining over old jar,’ it appears the man sitting may be a pottery merchant with whom the Iban man is trying to negotiate. The seated man's expression also appears calm and not overly enthusiastic.

Picture 3. taken from Plate 48. Ibans (Saravak, Malaysia) bargaining over old jars. Charles Hose & William McDougall (1912). *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo: A Description of Their Physical, Moral and Intellectual Condition, with Some Discussion of Their Ethnic Relations & The home-life of Borneo head-hunters: Its festivals and folk-lore.* William Henry Furness (1902). Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company. Pic. 126. See also at [Link](#)

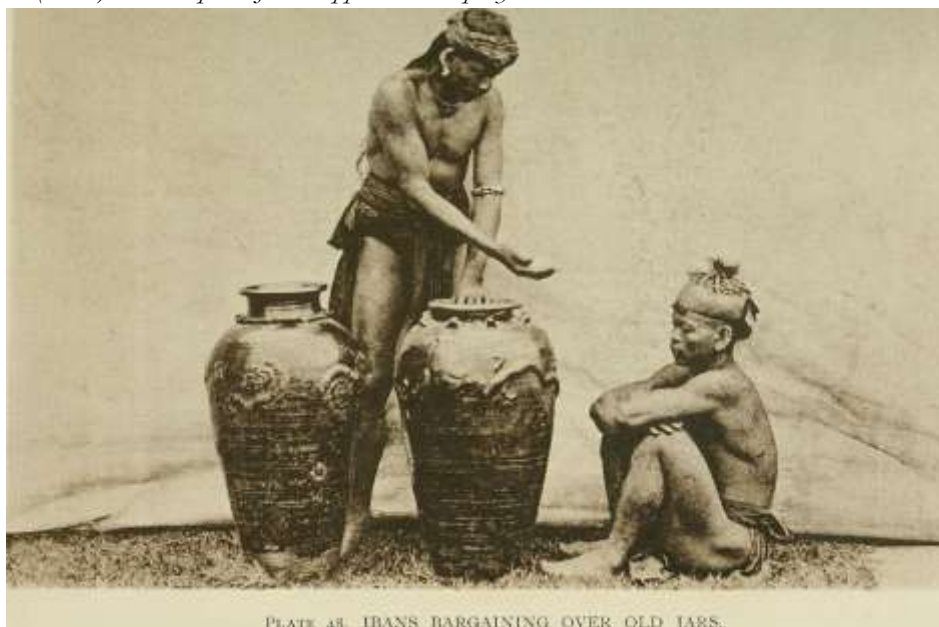


PLATE 48. IBANS BARGAINING OVER OLD JARS.

He seems confident that his price is already reasonable and will not be lowered easily.

During the spice trade along the spice route up to the Dutch era (7–20 CE), the Dayak people indeed, began acquiring and using Martaban jars, a large stoneware vessel produced in southern China. These jars were traded through the important transit port of Martaban (in present-day Myanmar). Initially, Chinese traders transported these massive, thick stoneware jars often adorned with motifs of dragons, waves, and clouds across Kalimantan. Based on historical data, Chinese traders were the original agents who introduced these goods.

However, the hat worn by the seated man is confusing. If the context is the sale of jars (traditionally traded by ethnic Chinese traders) then it is notable that photographs of Chinese traders do not

show them wearing Dayak clothing like that of the seated man, who appears to be Dayak. Does this support the assumption that the seller is also Dayak? Yes, it is possible; he could be a second, third, or another seller. In Sarawak, starting from the early 1840s, James Brooke, the British White Rajah and supreme governor of Sarawak, welcomed Malays, Dayaks, and Chinese from elsewhere in Borneo to trade within his ‘quasi-kingdom’ (Ji, 2018). This meant interactions among these three ethnic groups Malays, Dayaks, and Chinese were already well established, so anyone, regardless of ethnicity, could sell Chinese jars. The connotation that emerges from this photograph is that the jar is sought after and desired by the Dayaks.

The person in the photograph, who appears to be bargaining, gives rise to another connotation: the jar

is not a cheap item but could be very expensive. Thus, the purchase of it is associated with the honour and privilege attached to the jar. Eva Strober observed that among the Dayak Iban of Borneo, including those in Sarawak and Brunei, the most valuable jars were considered equivalent in worth to a male slave (Strober, 2014).

Renowned for their status and cultural significance, these jars were prized not only as antiques by Europeans (Note: i.e Nanne Ottema, Tjibben van der Meulen, Hendrik Freerk Tillema, Egbert Willem van Orsoy de Flines have the Jars from Kalimantan and Barbara and Tom Harrison had the jar from Dayak Kenyah, Sarawak (Malaysia) -Strober, 2014, but also highly valued in Sarawak, as described in an engaging report by János Xánthus, a Hungarian naturalist. Similarly, to Eva Strober, Xánthus wrote that these jars held a high status. He described two types of large, porcelain jars: one was grey-glazed, over 4 feet tall with a capacity equivalent to 2 akós (a Hungarian unit similar to 53.72 litres), and the other was 6 feet tall, red-glazed, with a capacity of 4 akos. Both types were decorated with dragon motifs and had cylindrical rings called ears.

According to Xánthus, these jars were used to store grains and were easy to carry when war approached, which made them highly valued. The demand for these jars always exceeded the supply. In the 19th century, grey-glazed jars were valued at \$50, while red-glazed jars were valued at \$1,000. These jars were widely circulated throughout the country, functioning as cash payments, and being accepted as penalty fees in court. Xánthus remarked that he only saw two red-glazed jars, both owned by the Malay Prince. If a defendant could not pay, they had to provide a guarantor and could settle a fine with a grey-glazed jar of equivalent value or with other items such as swallow's nests and copper plates. Thus, Xánthus stated that the confiscated goods warehouse at the Sarawak court resembled a museum or warehouse, highlighting the cultural significance of these jars (Kiss et al., 2025).

From Object to Ideology: The Hidden Narrative of the Jar

Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead (1942) is a groundbreaking ethnographic work that explores the intersection of photography and sociology. The authors view photographs not merely as images or documentation, but as anthropological tools capturing details of life often overlooked. Photographs also serve as tools for intercultural communication. Later, visual anthropology drew on the interpretive school, viewing photographs as texts to be reread, revealing symbolic meanings and cultural constructs, including gestures and expressions.

Using Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis, we can see how signs are formed and function to create meaning. To analyze denotation, connotation, and myth, we begin by examining the photo, its expressions, and the broader context, which includes history and ethnography. This investigation leads to identifying the denotative meanings, which all depict a jar surrounded by a group of subjects or people. At first glance, this denotative meaning provides a factual description corresponding to the image in the photo. These general details are readily apparent, as no in-depth analysis is required to uncover their meaning at this stage.

At the connotation stage, new meanings emerge from the presented images. Each photo evokes different interpretations of the jars, as atmosphere, people, and situations combine to create unified meanings. In Photo 1, a group of Malay people holds the jar together, indicating collective ownership. In Photo 2, the jar is placed in a heroic context, the group's posture and weapons suggest strength and pride. In the third photo, the jar is calm and undisturbed as a Dayak man gestures in a bargaining stance, while the seller remains silent. This suggests the jar is a coveted luxury, and in all three cases, jar ownership represents receiving a valued gift or privilege. In the final stage, finding myths is the hardest part.

We must deconstruct the social construction behind the photo. The analysis also examines the expressions in the photograph. The Dutch colonial context makes Barthes' analysis in *Mythologies* especially relevant, as it reveals power relations between indigenous peoples and colonists. (Note: In contrast, *Camera Lucida* by Barthes is more personal and subjective, focusing less on ideology).

The three photographs, taken in the 19th century, document a period when Borneo was governed by the Dutch in Kalimantan and the British in Sarawak. Colonial powers introduced photography as a tool for documentation. They used it not only to record events but also to construct them. When these photographs are examined collectively, the deliberate arrangement becomes evident. Individuals appear to have been selected and posed alongside jars, suggesting intentional composition. This configuration is reflected in the narrative that emerges from the analysis of the integration of the three images. The images depict a vase accompanied by three ethnic groups: Malay (Muslim Dayak), indigenous Dayak, and Chinese. These groups have historically interacted in Borneo. Their presence can be traced back to the 15th-century maritime spice trade. The narrative and existence of these photographs may represent an initial step that fostered the idea that Borneo is inhabited by three different ethnic groups, all of whom hold jars in high regard. Jars have always accompanied these ethnic groups. However, the photo may not have been taken spontaneously, as photos of this type are usually more natural, authentic, and factual than staged photos.

In Kalimantan nowadays, especially West Kalimantan, there is a slogan called *Tidayu/Cidayu* that represents the Chinese (Tionghoa/China), Dayak, and Malay communities. This symbol, commemorated in central Pontianak, stands for harmony (Note: Each province of Kalimantan expresses its own unique cultural identity. Despite the dominance of religions Islam in the eastern and southern provinces, Christianity in the northern and central

provinces the western region showcases its pluralist character through the slogan *Tidayu*, an acronym for *Tionghoa* (Chinese), *Dayak* (indigenous peoples), and *Melayu* (Malay). This slogan has become a symbol of interethnic tolerance and harmony in the region. Over time, the Dayak have also transformed their identity, evolving from a generalized category of hinterland natives into a more distinct and dynamic cultural group.)

The key question remains: did the perception of the jar's value arise before the arrival of the colonists, or was this image deliberately reinforced (for example, through this photo) as a myth created by the colonists (Fig.2), perhaps by the Dutch at that time? If so, what was their intention?

Fig. 2 *The semiosis of the Jars* (Author scheme, 2026).



During the Dutch colonial period, many of these jars were transported to the Netherlands by collectors of antiquities and art enthusiasts. The widespread distribution of Martaban jars during the spice trade is remarkable, as they reached nearly every part of the so-called “land below the winds” (Southeast Asia). Yet, determining their true origins remains challenging for archaeologists. While many were produced in southern China, additional production

sites in Burma (Gutman, 2002), Vietnam, Sabah, Sarawak, and Singkawang in West Kalimantan have also contributed to the complexity and confusion surrounding their provenance (Strober, 2014; Toshihiko, 2018).

Eva Strober examined the Martaban collections at the Princessehof Museum in the Netherlands and noted the challenges of accurately dating and naming these vessels. She preferred to use the neutral term “jar” rather than “Martaban (Martavanen-Dutch),” since these objects carry various names, forms, and functions across different contexts. Strober further observed that among the Dayak Iban of Borneo (also reside in Sarawak and Brunei), the most valuable jars were considered equivalent in worth to a male slave, while other Dayak sub-ethnic groups valued them as marriage payments or heirlooms deserving of respect (Cesard, 2013; Strober, 2014) as it also seen in Malaysia and Brunei (Geiger-Ho, 2014).

The most sacred used of these jars probably as burial urns by the Dayak Murut community in Nunukan, North Kalimantan. This is a region where research remains limited, particularly concerning Martaban jars (Sunarningsih, et al, 2017).

These jars became widely recognized and valued across the Borneo Island (Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam). The most striking cultural landscape associated with them is found in Central Kalimantan, where the jars are prominently displayed at local gateways and public spaces, welcoming visitors to the region. The Balanga Museum in Palangka Raya further illustrates this legacy, showcasing how the Dayak Ngaju people have maintained a deep and enduring connection with these vessels. These connections are also evident in the preservation of jars within traditional longhouses (*rumah betang*) in West Kalimantan, including in the homes of community leaders as well as in private and communal spaces.

Another interesting observation is that the use of these jars, both physically and symbolically, extends

to other forms and functions. They can be seen as a display at the funeral home where there is a death in central Kalimantan, wooden carved Jar was made for the gravestone in Islamic cemeteries in west Kalimantan, and placed as a decorative element at the top of the mosques in south Kalimantan.

Beyond Kalimantan, fragments of this type of stoneware have been widely discovered across regions such as Sumatra, Java, and Sulawesi. However, Kalimantan (Borneo) remains the only place where these jars are still actively preserved and maintained as part of living tradition.

Given the widespread use of these jars at that time, what drove this phenomenon? Did their popularity emerge naturally, or was it shaped by an ideological construct or myth, possibly created and/or reinforced by Dutch or Chinese actors (such as Chinese traders as producers)? Why were Dayak groups, including Malay Dayak (Muslims), the main consumers? Was the myth surrounding these jars deliberately constructed for economic motives? If the jars' high value in Dayak culture was not due to a deliberately created social construct or myth, what alternative consensus elevated their status? Can such a consensus be changed or renegotiated, and how does this dynamic manifest today?

Beyond the questions that have arisen, analysis of three photographs from Borneo using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach has produced an interpretation of the formation of myths (ideologies) as social constructs. The jar is not merely a decorative object that appears in the photograph, but rather a subject that has been deliberately constructed by agents to have its own meaning.

Summary

An analysis of three photographs from Borneo reveals the existence of conditioning. The photographs were deliberately created and reveal deeper semiotic meanings. A cultural construct has emerged where the jar is the result of a deliberately created narrative. This narrative increases its value

within the social structure of Dayak society. This phenomenon persists to this day, with varying degrees of practice among the region's Dayak ethnic groups. Ethnographic research is needed to deepen the assumption of construction (this myth). This is important because the scientific paradigm has evolved. The perception of objects has changed accordingly. Objects are no longer seen as “extra-somatic” means of production, or as the result of “generative grammar.” Instead, they are seen as produced by and productive of existing relationships, meanings, and contingencies. These as Victor Buchi (2007) said, are contested, open-ended, and socially negotiated.

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