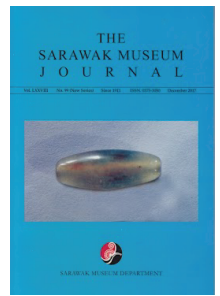




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DEALING WITH THE SPIRITS IN THE MUSEUM COLLECTION

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ABSTRACT

The culture and beliefs of the peoples of Sarawak, as represented in their arts and crafts, continue to intrigue many scholars who come to study them. These arts and crafts are interwoven deeply with past beliefs - spirit worship. Until not long ago, none of the native people in Sarawak belonged to a world religion; they had their own old religious system. Their lives were controlled by the spirits. Many aspects of the lives of communities and individuals were under the influence of the spirit world and the will of the spirits was interpreted through a complicated system of omens. Many of these beliefs were interpreted through art, such as in the motifs of the dragon, the dog or dragon-dog (aso), the human figure and the human face. These were placed on their beadwork, on wooden carvings, wooden figures, doors, shields, weapons, the handles of war swords, parang (jungle knives) and so on. These indigenous arts are vital carriers expressing ethnic identity and carry evidence of old beliefs, animism and spirit worship.

This article will explore, through my own personal experience, the way in which Sarawak Museum Department staff handle and care for objects that were produced in the context of the old animistic, shamanistic and spirit beliefs. It will also discuss the significance of some of the powerful spirits that have been translated artistically into objects in Sarawak Museum's collection store today.

Keywords:

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Animism and the Sarawak Museum Collection

Since its opening in 1891, the Sarawak Museum has accumulated an interesting collection of objects expressing the material culture of various groups in Sarawak and from various places in Sarawak. Most of the objects in the Sarawak Museum were collected prior to the arrival of Christianity or Islam. They were made and used when local people were still animists. The Sarawak Museum has many objects and images that are related to beliefs about the divine and the spiritual. Although the collection is not related as much to gods and goddesses as are the collections of many other museums around the