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SA'UNG SELING SUN-HATS IN THE SARAWAK MUSEUM: VEHICLES FOR SA'BAN, LEPO KEH AND BADENG HISTORIES

Valerie Mashman

ABSTRACT

The Sarawak Museum Registration Book describes sun-hat no. 90/62 as "one old Sa'ban rare sun-hat". It was acquired by the Sarawak Museum in 1990. The sun-hat is unusual and rare, because it is not from the Sa'ban settlement of Long Banga, near the border with Kalimantan, but comes from the upper Bahau river in Kalimantan. Sun-hats like this one are made in that area by Kenyah Lepo Keh and Kenyah Lepo Maut and are known as sa'ung seling. A similar sun-hat from the early 20th century, no. 1233 in the Sarawak Museum collection, is said in the Registration Book to have been 'looted' from the Madang (Badeng) and then donated to the museum. One of the keys to unravelling the biographical history of these two hats lies in analysing the notes on provenance in the Sarawak Museum Ethnology Registration Book, in order to track down the circumstances of each acquisition; but another is to investigate what those who made and used such hats have to say about them. This case-study illustrates the fact that different examples of the same object may have very different biographies; an exploration of their trajectories that goes beyond the limited field of their assumed provenance reveals ways in which they have significance beyond their immediate usage.

Keywords: Borneo sun-hats, sa'ung seling, classification of objects, provenance, Sa'ban, Kenyah Lepo Keh and Kenyah Badeng histories



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INTRODUCTION

In the Sarawak Museum collections there are two sun-hats, both made of bamboo and very similar in shape and size, obtained by the Museum some ninety years apart. This article demonstrates how they can both be classified, using local nomenclature, as *sa'ung seling*.¹ This term refers to a specific Kenyah bamboo sun-hat with certain motifs on the crown. However, the descriptions of the two hats attribute different origins to them. This gives

rise to a conundrum, as the expectation would normally be that similar objects would have a similar origin. According to the Sarawak Museum Ethnology Registration Book, No. 1233 was donated in 1903 as a 'Madang woman's sun-hat of plaited rattan, in black and white' (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: No. 1233 Madang hat. (Photo: Valerie Mashman)

On the other hand, no. 90/62 is documented as 'one old rare Sa'ban sun-hat' and as having been acquired in 1990 from Tawing Bilong,² also known as Tama Jan Lawing (Fig. 2).

In this article, these different entries in the Registration Book serve as a starting point to investigate the origin of these hats. Although hat no. 90/62 is documented as a 'Sa'ban sun-hat', hats like this are not made or used by the Sa'ban, either as a hat or as a ritual object. However, they are occasionally found as decorations on the walls of houses. They are still in use, however, by the Kenyah Lepo Keh³ communities in Long Pulong, in the predominantly Sa'ban area of Long Banga in Sarawak, and are still made by their counterpart communities, the Lepo Keh and Lepo Maut in the Apau Ping and Malinau areas in Kalimantan. The Lepo Keh themselves also state that these communities are now the only producers of this hat. Investigation into the story of how the sun-hat came to be labelled as Sa'ban reveals how objects are dynamic and move

between cultures. At the same time, it demonstrates that the documentation of the sun-hat in the Sarawak Museum Registration Book is limited to a single narrative.



Fig. 2: No. 90/62 Sa'ban sun-hat. (Photo: Courtesy of Sarawak Museum)

Turning to hat no. 1233, the documentation states that it is a Madang sun-hat. It is difficult to confirm this as there are no documented counterpart examples, except for no. 1234, which is identical, acquired at the same time and is now in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, United Kingdom.⁴ These hats have a different trajectory of procurement, as the Museum Registration Book states they were 'looted' in an expedition against the Madang. This article demonstrates that an in-depth analysis of the documentation in the Museum Registration Book is worth pursuing. An investigation of the means through which they were acquired, the stories of their donors, and their trajectories takes us beyond the limited field of their assumed provenance to reveal a significance beyond their immediate usage.

Returning to sun-hat no. 90/62, the fact that it was acquired from a Kenyah Lepo Keh, Tama Jan Lawing, yet was labelled Sa'ban, is an example of something that is not unusual in museums worldwide, despite the fact that museums pride themselves historically as being the authorities on the

classification of ethnic groups and of objects. The fact that there is limited knowledge about objects in collections can be attributed to the arbitrary systems through which collections were curated in the past. This has been identified as a common problem in museological practice:

...[T]he museological inheritance, then, is too human, and in its conflicts, confusions and absences, it plays its own part in limiting interpretation and defining ways in which meaning can be created ... curatorial understanding of meaning in collections is coloured by inherited museological procedures and customs. (Pearce 1992: 122).

As Pearce points out, this is a consequence of the haphazard way in which artefacts are acquired, through donations, field collections, purchases, exchanges and bequests. As a consequence of this, background information and details about acquisitions are very variable. It is also worth noting that local communities were not historically recognised as authorities on their own cultures and were not involved as a matter of course in the documentation of their own heritage. This was the case in Sarawak during the Brooke administration, and it played a very significant role in the documentation procedures used at the Sarawak Museum. At that time, in keeping with contemporary practice, the museum focussed on the collection of objects rather than the way people interacted with them. Collections were object-centred rather than people-centred. Objects were classified and displayed without consideration for the voices, perspectives, and values of the source community.

In this case, the nomenclature in the Registration Book is in English and both artefacts are described as sun-hats, according to their everyday use. One hat is associated with the Madang and the other with the Sa'ban, in line with the information given to the curator documenting the acquisitions at the time. Using Brooke records and oral histories, this article will look at the significance of sun-hat no. 90/62, 'old Sa'ban rare sun-hat' for members of the source community in Long Banga; and that of the looted sun-hat no. 1233, 'Madang woman's sun-hat of plaited rattan, for the Badeng community. This article will also review the classification of the Sa'ban hat according to the source community, the Lepo Keh, who produce the hat known as *sa'ung seling*. It will be demonstrated that this hat has a social significance that is not present in its classification as a Sa'ban hat. With regard to the Madang hat, the Registration Book indicates that it was looted in warfare. Identifying this hat as a *sa'ung seling* hat, used to ritually protect women and infants,