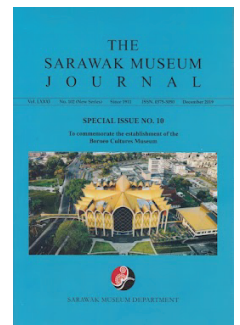




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PERSPECTIVES ON CARVING TRADITIONS, LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN SARAWAK

Antonio J. Guerreiro

ABSTRACT

The article presents an approach of woodcarving traditions in Sarawak. It addresses different issues in the development of carvings skills and local knowledge, from the timber species used to the ritual practices and beliefs surrounding the carving of sculptures and architectonic pieces in buildings and burial structures. The research stemmed from a general approach of woodcarving (and bone carving) made by the various ethnic groups in the State known as 'Orang Ulu', i.e. 'Upriver people' and the Melanau Likou of the coastal areas, mostly based on the Sarawak Museum's collection. It focuses on the carved ironwood belian poles (kelirieng, jerunay, kelidèng) and other large burial structures, the salong and lijèng mausoleums, erected in the coastal and interior areas of Sarawak. The use of the burial poles is related to secondary burial practices, i.e. the 'secondary treatment of the bones' (nulang) inserted in ceramic jars or wooden coffins within the pole, while the salong are mausoleums used mostly in primary burial; log coffins being put inside the monuments. Most burial poles and mausoleums are still found in remote upriver locations, the most recent poles having been made in the first decade of the 20th century. The agency of these monumental structures reflects social and ritual features peculiar to these peoples. In short, the burial poles and related monuments are unique creations that articulate both the tangible and intangible aspects of cultural heritage. They can be seen also as the State's pesaka – inherited sacred goods – reflecting the socio-cosmic relationships of Sarawak's peoples with the rainforest environment. The four burial poles presently in the Sarawak Museum collection are documented and contextualised. Finally, the article outlines community efforts related to in situ conservation, and participative museography approaches that can be useful in preserving the heritage and developing new insights about woodcarving in the State.

Keywords:

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JABATAN MUZIUM SARAWAK

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Antonio J. Guerreiro

Abstract

The article presents an approach of woodcarving traditions in Sarawak. It addresses different issues in the development of carvings skills and local knowledge, from the timber species used to the ritual practices and beliefs surrounding the carving of sculptures and architectonic pieces in buildings and burial structures. The research stemmed from a general approach of woodcarving (and bone carving) made by the various ethnic groups in the State known as 'Orang Ulu', i.e. 'Upriver people' and the Melanau Likou of the coastal areas, mostly based on the Sarawak Museum's collection. It focuses on the carved ironwood *belian* poles (*kelirieng*, *jerunay*, *kelidèng*) and other large burial structures, the *salong* and *lijèng* mausoleums, erected in the coastal and interior areas of Sarawak. The use of the burial poles is related to secondary burial practices, i.e. the 'secondary treatment of the bones' (*nulang*) inserted in ceramic jars or wooden coffins within the pole, while the *salong* are mausoleums used mostly in primary burial; log coffins being put inside the monuments. Most burial poles and mausoleums are still found in remote upriver locations, the most recent poles having been made in the first decade of the 20th century. The agency of these monumental structures reflects social and ritual features peculiar to these peoples. In short, the burial poles and related monuments are unique creations that articulate both the tangible and intangible aspects of cultural heritage. They can be seen also as the State's *pesaka* – inherited sacred goods – reflecting the socio-cosmic relationships of Sarawak's peoples with the rainforest environment. The four burial poles presently in the Sarawak Museum collection are documented and contextualised. Finally, the article outlines community efforts related to *in situ* conservation, and participative museography approaches that can be useful in preserving the heritage and developing new insights about woodcarving in the State.

INTRODUCTION

The oldest pieces of woodcarving found in Sarawak are probably the ironwood coffin boats, also known as 'death-ships', located in Gua Kain Hitam

(‘Painted cave’) in Niah. The shape of the coffins was characteristic and each showed a carved ‘animal’ figure head on the bowsprit: crocodile, leopard or even a dragon. Obviously, the coffins’ shape was related to mythical beliefs. They were placed on the ground of the cave and surrounded by scattered pieces of ceramics, human bones, shells and pottery sherds.¹

By definition, ‘carving’ includes figures, ornaments and other objects made in various materials such as bone, wood and stone of different sizes, ranging from very small to very large items, from small figures to house posts and burial poles. Traditionally, architectonic pieces used in buildings – longhouses, meeting houses (*balai*), houses, and granaries – comprised doors, posts, lintels beams and house notched ladder heads. These were carved or engraved with designs and sometimes also painted. In the course of this research, I focused mostly on woodcarvings, though this included related items made of bone or hornbill ivory. I also investigated the classification of common iconographic themes as illustrated by simple patterns and more complex designs, painted and/or incised on wood and other materials (bead panels, incised bamboo containers).

Among the various peoples known generically as ‘Orang Ulu’ – Kayan, Kenyah, Kajang, Punan Ba and Berawan to name a few – and the Melanau local groups, there is a large range of items showing carved ornamentation on wood and bone. I am not considering stone sculpture, e.g. engraved megaliths and petroglyphs/reliefs because they belong to another cultural and conceptual framework.² This preliminary study summarises the main themes of my research during 2017–2018, focusing on Orang Ulu carving traditions and the Sarawak Museum’s collections.

I. Woodcarving traditions in Sarawak

In order to introduce the topic, I am quoting a short passage about the Iban carving tradition, probably the best known in Sarawak, that covers the scope of traditional carving:

Carving is a favourite pastime as well as an important form of expressive culture. Both Iban boys and girls learn early to handle knives (q.v.) of all sizes and functions, from multi-purpose bushknives (*duku*) to the smaller blades (*lungga*) used for fine work. As with all crafts, some men are better carvers than others, and are sought for their skills in producing figures needed for ritual events, e.g. the Festival of the Hornbill (*Gawai Kenyalang*, q.v.).

Longhouses have contained scores of carved objects, from very practical paddles for boats to elaborately decorated work over doors. Intricately carved figures (*udu*) on their bows guide racing boats. The mnemonic aids of the bards or chanters (*lemambang*) are carved with figures and other symbols that aid the performer as he moves through various sections of the chant.

Among the most significant carvings are the figures of the Rhinoceros hornbill and the cross-piece (*ensuga*) at the top of the pillar on which the figure stands. More creative carvers, familiar with the life history and adventures of the sponsor, attempt to represent the most significant events as part of the carving". [i.e. on the *Kenyalang* figure AJG] (...) ('Carving' in Sutlive and Sutlive (eds.)

The Encyclopaedia of Iban Studies 2001: 347-348).

Not surprisingly, the entry stresses the position of the iconic *Kenyalang* deity figure, which has a crucial ritual function for the Iban (Heppell 1991, 2005). In regard to the widespread uses of carving in Sarawak, especially woodcarving, I note that there has been relatively little systematic research into the various dimensions of carving according to social, historical and cultural perspectives.³ My aim is to provide information that lends itself to a framework or morphology for approaching the most significant carved items of related Orang Ulu/Melanau Likou cultures based on stylistic analysis of these groups' artistic canon, their oral histories, and recorded traditions. It can be remarked that the meanings and uses of many types of carvings have remained obscure until the present time.

The classification of timber

The most common timber used in sculpture to make various *patung* statues and generally in architecture (ridge purlin, posts, beams, tie-beams, plates, rafters, floors) is ironwood (*Eusideroxylon zwageri* T. de B.), named *belian* or *kayu besi* in Malay. The wood is very dense, showing a tight grain. It is also the hardest to work with. *Tapang* and *menggeris* (*Koompassia spp.*), on the other hand, are used for making spinning tops and ceremonial seats (*ladung*, *padung*) from its buttresses, cut in slab form and polished. Ironwood grows mostly in the lowlands, as in the Bintulu Tubau area and the Niah area. Ironwood grows very slowly, taking up to a century to achieve its full height of over 40 metres and a diameter of up to 150 cm, while the buttresses are up to four metres high on the trunk. The straight section of the trunk, free of branches, is between 6 and 20 metres. That is why it has been preferred for

making posts, burial poles and flooring of the best quality timber. When cut, its timber is of a reddish-brown colour and, to make it harder, it is attached to a raft and submerged in water, after which it takes on a grey colour when dried in the sunshine. Carved *belian* wood is slightly eroded by rain, then taking on a grey-black hue. The bigger the piece, the longer it stands in the open. In conditions where it is not covered by vegetation or mud, it can stand between two and three hundred years at the most, after which it would start to decay due to growing humidity. Exposure to sunshine helps to conserve large ironwood structures in the open: houses, *salong* or burial poles.

The main timber species used by Orang Ulu peoples can be classified as ‘hard’, ‘semi-hard’ and ‘light’ (Sarawak Forest Department 1999). In the first category lie *belian* timber, then *menggeris or tapang*, *selangan batu* (*Shorea* spp.) and *merang*. The timber from these trees is used in building for making posts, framework and structural parts of the longhouse, including floors. The semi-hard timbers include *kapur* (*Dryobalanops* spp.), *keruing* (*Dipterocarpus* spp.) and *durian* (*Durio zibethinus*) which serve for various uses, mostly in buildings, partitions and flooring (while *durian* wood is reserved mostly for making coffins). The lighter timbers, such as the *meranti* species (red, white, yellow *Shorea* spp.), *bengkirai* (*Hopea mangarawan*), the *pulai/plaie* (*Alstonia* spp.) and *jelutung* (*Dyera* spp.), are made into masks, shields, small sculptures, boards and wall partitions. Boats are usually made in *arau* and other lighter species.⁴ The distinction between the wood species in use implies sometimes a notion of rank or status according to the communities, hard timber being preferentially reserved for chiefs, aristocrats and influential (wealthy) individuals, especially in regard to longhouse (apartment/gallery sections) posts or coffins (compare Kelbling 1983: 158). Generally, among the Kayan, Kajang and the Kenyah, the sizes and ornamentation of some carved objects, such as sitting/sleeping platforms made of *tapang* wood or coffins (among the Kayan and Kajang), were connected to social status.

One must add that once a tree has been selected and felled, i.e. cut to size and shape, it should be worked out according to the ancient Austronesian principle of the ‘base and tip’ (*pangkal kayu/hujung kayu*; Fox 1993: 18-19). This corresponds to the direction in which the timber should be used in the building or in which the object has grown. The idea applies in architectonic pieces, but also in statues or boats. The carvers/carpenters should follow this rule to avert accidents or curses happening when they are working or later when the piece or building has been completed. It is the tip of the wood (*hujung kayu*) that will form the upper section of the timber, on a vertical or