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## MELANAU SICKNESS IMAGES IN THE PITT RIVERS MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Beatrice Clayre and Julia Nicholson<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION: Sarawak Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum

The Pitt Rivers Museum holds some 2,000 artefacts from Sarawak, mostly collected during the rule of Sir Charles Brooke, the Second Rajah of Sarawak from 1868 until his death in 1917. With its emphasis on weapons, headhunting and local beliefs and crafts, the collection could be seen as a reflection of the interests of the English administrators of Sarawak at that time, indeed the largest donation was assembled by Sir Charles Brooke himself. It comprises 550 artefacts which were formerly in a private museum at his English residence, Chesterton House, Cirencester, which the Rajah had purchased in the 1880s, and in which he spent a few months each winter for the hunting season. Rajah Charles' collection came to the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1923 as a gift from his son and heir. Sir Charles Vyner Brooke, the third Rajah of Sarawak and includes musical instruments, baskets, containers of finely decorated bamboo, and weapons. Of particular note, however, are a number of fine bead-worked items including seat mats with beaded panels (worn by men over the buttocks), sleeveless beaded jackets with anthropomorphic designs, Kenyah goatskin war capes and Kayan cane-work caps with beaded decoration. Several of the capes and caps have other elaborate decoration, of meleagrina shell, hornbill tail feathers and even portions of hornbill beaks.

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Bertram Brooke, Charles Vyner Brooke's younger brother, who arranged the transfer of the donation to the Museum, referred to a catalogue of the Chesterton House collection which he could not lay his hands on at the time the material was transferred. This catalogue has never re-appeared and although the Museum's catalogue entries are fairly detailed it is frustrating to consider what information may have been contained in the missing catalogue.

Among the other donors of Sarawak collections are a number of people who were friends or contemporaries of Sir Charles Brooke in Sarawak. A.B. Ward who was in the Sarawak Civil Service from 1899 to 1923 and made a collection of several hundred Sarawak artefacts is of particular note. Ward was based primarily in Simanggang, Limbang and Kuching and his collection

is particularly strong in Iban material with smaller assemblages of Kenyah, Kayan and Melanau artefacts. He made extensive collections of hats, body ornaments and miniature grave items. In common with other significant Sarawak collections at the Museum, Ward's donation includes a war jacket, this example being made of barkcloth with fish-scales attached.

The Museum also holds specimens collected by Charles Hose, whose collections are also found in a number of other museums. The Hose artefacts in the Pitt Rivers Museum are mostly of Kenyah and Kayan origin, and include a bird-call as well as a complete tattooer's kit. Hose first served as a cadet in the Baram District<sup>2</sup> as early as 1884 and was based primarily at Marudi from about 1889 to 1904. He had strong ethnographic interests which are reflected in the breadth of his collections. Items from Hose which are currently on display in the Museum include a striking beaded baby-carrier, and palm leaves which have been woven to record the taking of a head.

Other notable Sarawak collections include an assemblage of clothing, hats and other decorated items acquired by Edward Bartlett, who was Curator of the Sarawak Museum from 1893 to 1897. The Bartlett collection comprises some forty artefacts, amongst which are six ikat jackets and a collection of shields, including a Kayan example which is painted and decorated with hair.

Not all the English contemporaries of Rajah Charles whose collections are in the Pitt Rivers Museum were friends of the second Rajah. A.B. Ward certainly was, and his autobiographical paper entitled 'Rajah's Servant' (Ward 1966) is full of warm admiration for Rajah Charles. The case of A.F. Sharp is quite the reverse. Sharp was Archdeacon of Sarawak from 1900. However, the Rajah found Sharp too full of missionary zeal, and when the Bishop of Sarawak, Labuan and Singapore resigned in 1908 the Rajah would not accept Sharp as his successor (Crisswell 1978: p. 143). By 1911 Sharp had returned to England to become priest in charge of Finchampstead near Reading. Meanwhile in 1908, the Museum had purchased some sixty pieces from a sale of Archdeacon Sharp's property in Oxford. Of particular note in the Sharp collection are three carved wooden figures of rhinoceros hornbill birds, a complete Iban loom and an Iban *pua* cloth with unusual anthropomorphic designs in ikat weave. The *pua* has been published in a recent book on Iban ikat textiles (Gavin 1996: Pls 72-75).

It is also worth noting that most of the collectors mentioned above acquired ikat textiles, as a result of which the Pitt Rivers Museum now has some thirty examples. The collection of skirt pieces which came from the Rajah's museum at Chesterton House are of particular interest, as are two frames showing the technique of tie-dyeing threads, one collected by



Archdeacon Sharp and the other from the Chesterton House Museum. There is also a Sarawak 'cotton cloth, black, brown and white' collected by Sir James Brooke, First Rajah of Sarawak, which came to the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1886 as part of the transfer of ethnographic specimens from the Ashmolean Museum but was originally part of the Christy collection. It appears to be the earliest Sarawak textile in the Museum's collections and was acquired in or before 1854 (accession number 1886.1.259).

Robert Shelford, who collected most of the Melanau sickness images now in the Museum, was Curator of the Sarawak Museum from 1897 to 1905. Between 1901 and his death in 1912, Shelford donated more than two hundred Sarawak artefacts to the Pitt Rivers Museum. In 1929 and 1934 Shelford's widow gave the Museum further pieces collected by her husband in Sarawak. His collections manifest his interest in indigenous and Malay material culture, and range from toy pop-guns and model kites to model game-traps, a 'Murut' (Lun Bawang) pigeon call and noose, Ukit tattoo pattern blocks and an Iban bird scarer. The particular strengths of the Shelford collection are musical instruments, basketry, tobacco pipes and other decorated bamboo artefacts. He also made a collection of weapons. Some of these are on permanent display in the Museum, including a spear with an elaborate kris-like head and densely carved shaft.

Shelford may have had a particular interest in medicine and religion as his collection not only includes the Melanau sickness images but also a significant collection of medicines and charms from an Iban *manang* (shaman or healer) still contained in their original basket, and an Iban carved ceremonial bamboo staff.

In addition to the main Sarawak collections there are also outstanding individual artefacts. Among these are a superbly painted Kenyah shield with tufts of human hair, and a fine Iban cane shield incorporating portions of mirror (accession numbers 1911.43.9 and 1923.86.28). The Museum continues to collect and although it concentrates on the acquisition of well-documented contemporary material it is still offered older items. In 1997 the Museum purchased a small bead-work Kayan pouch collected in Sarawak in the 1950s but probably made some years earlier (accession number 1997.36.1). As an active research institution the Museum welcomes study visits from Sarawak anthropologists and ethnographers.

The Pitt Rivers Museum has dense displays with a high proportion of the collections on view, arranged by type of object rather than by geographical origin. The Sarawak material on display is thus dispersed around the Museum. There are, however, some focal points, such as the small display of Iban swords in the Upper Gallery, including some fine *parang ilang* with



carved bone or antler on the hilts and sheaths, tufts of hair and elaborate bead-work tassels; an indication of the strength of the Museum's Sarawak weaponry collections. There is a display of decorative bamboo lime and tobacco containers and other artefacts on the staircase and a number of baskets, both in the 'Basket' showcase and in the 'Geometric Form in Art' display. The latter includes a Kanowit basket (*tepoko*) with a finely woven pattern based on *pedadah* fruit between bamboo shoots. As well as examples of ikat, the textile display feature a finely made Iban cloth with woven designs of humans and animals given by the Raneé of Sarawak in 1911 (accession number 1911.31.1).

There are about sixty Melanau artefacts in the Pitt Rivers Museum collections donated by Ward, Hose, Sharp, Brooke, Shelford and others. The Melanau collection is small and it is difficult to single out major sub-groups of material. Apart from the sickness images which form the focus of this paper, other Melanau artefacts worth noting are nine sun hats, boards for flattening the foreheads of female infants, and several bamboo nose-flutes. Given the coastal and riverain focus of the Melanau it is not suprising that fishing and river objects are well represented: A cane-work fish-trap collected in 1924, nine fish hooks made from thorns and several carved paddles used by women reflect this. There are also artefacts related to the chief crop of the area, sago. Among these are a chopping knife for splitting sago stems collected in 1901, as well as a woman's sun hat of palm-spathe overlaid with particularly fine coloured wicker work (accession number 1934.25.21), and several sickness images carved from sago pith.

A central feature of the Melanau indigenous religion is a direct association between a spirit and specific illnesses. This is represented in the Museum by a group of carved representations of spirit which are used in healing ceremonies. It is these spirit healing images (sickness images) which are described in this paper.

## THE MELANAU AND SICKNESS IMAGES

For many centuries the coastal plain between Bintulu and the River Rejang has been the home of the Melanau. The communities on each of the many slow-flowing and meandering rivers which cross the coastal plain speak their own dialect of Melanau, but today the dialect of Mukah is more widely known since it is the administrative centre for the region. The most important local cottage industry and source of revenue was based on the sago palm which flourished in the swampy conditions. Until the 1950s sago flour was exported to Singapore for use as industrial starch.<sup>3</sup> Originally the Melanau followed an indigenous belief system, but many are now followers of Islam,

and others of Christianity. Traditional beliefs continued longest in the upriver communities, but even there, old beliefs and customs are being lost.

The sickness images were a central feature of the Melanau belief system, and many features of their use are unique to the Melanau. The images are made by certain members of the community who have the approval of the spirits to do so, and they receive a purely nominal fee for their work. The carvings are made by men, and the woven images (of which there are none in the Pitt Rivers Museum) are made by women. The carved sickness images, which are called *dakan* in the Mukah dialect of Melanau and *belum* in the Oya dialect, are representations of spirits which are thought to cause certain illnesses. Their form depends upon the type of spirit they represent: some are anthropomorphic, others are animal-like, others are *naga* (a great serpent often represented as dragon-like). Air spirits usually have wings or a 'cloud' head-dress, water spirits often have a swimming tail, but all have been inspired by the spirit through dreams. Details of the carving are also important. The position of the hands for example (as in *Dohig asam* below) often indicates the location of the pain; while chevron or diamond patterns (*nyipen jin* or jin's teeth and *betek tiem* respectively) may be used for biting the victim of their attack, and patterns of parallel short lines (*siret* or hair) may 'make men sore'.

The images are carved from the soft pith of the sago palm, a process which takes less than an hour (Chong 1987: 52), then the image will be taken to the sick person for whom it has been made, and a spell will be said over it and the image will be spat upon with the juice of chewed betel nut. This causes the spirit to inhabit the image for a period of three days, after which the image is deposited in a place appropriate for the particular class of spirit. Water spirits tend to be pegged to a stick in the river or floated away on the current, forest spirits are often deposited in the forest, and air spirits may be tied to the branch of a tree. Once an image has been quickened by being spat on with betel juice it is regarded as alive and dangerous and must be handled with caution.

Melanau customary law or '*adet*' imposes fines on people who disturb or remove such images (Adet Melanau 1996: clauses 57-58). This fact, and the ephemeral nature of the carvings has meant that relatively few have found their way into the world's museums. Their survival has also been affected by the soft nature of the sago pith used, so that they are vulnerable to attack by insects, or liable to be damaged by rough handling. Carvings in museum collections have usually been commissioned by a collector, and have not been used for ritual purposes. This is the case, for example, with the Morris collection of seventy or more *belum* in the British Museum (Morris 1997: Pt.II.1). Not all carvers were prepared to carve for non-ritual purposes, and