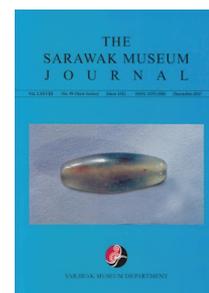




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DEALING WITH THE SPIRITS IN THE MUSEUM COLLECTION

Dora Jok

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

world, the Sarawak Museum collection has many objects that are perceived to have soul, power, spirit or life force, objects believed able to provide protection for their owners. The collections are extremely interesting in that the objects stored/exhibited in the museum express the beliefs of different ethnic groups in Sarawak through artistic expression and heirlooms. In these objects, traces of old religion and practices – the idea that objects possess a soul or are ‘alive’ and have life force – are evident. These objects both illustrate past beliefs and display incredible craftsmanship.

Almost all Dayak natives have embraced Christianity but they continue to believe that objects such as those kept in the Sarawak Museum store need to be handled and respected as they were under the old belief system. The collection includes human skulls and dragon jars that are still believed to harbour spirits that need to be cared for. At the museum, we follow rituals ensuring that these beliefs are respected. For example, an Iban *miring* ritual to appease the spirits is believed to be necessary whenever the skulls are removed from one exhibition gallery to another or to the store, and such a ritual is carried out.

The reason for adhering to these beliefs and rituals is not only that we respect the beliefs of those people from whom the objects come. It is also because the staff at the museum themselves believe that they are essential. I am myself a Kayan and I work at the Sarawak Museum in charge of the ethnography store. I am a Christian and I have experienced how free life is in the new religion (Christianity), and have always been told how difficult life was in the old religion. However, I have always had two somewhat conflicting thoughts in my mind whenever I handle ethnographic objects that express the old beliefs. As a Christian, I believe in the greatest Spirit of all (Southwell 1999: 31), who will protect me from any harm from the old spirits whenever I enter the Museum store to do my work. However, at the same time I believe that the old spirits may still dwell in these objects; and I recognise their great significance in the lives of the communities from which they come.

Spirits in the Museum

There are many stories about spirits in the Sarawak Museum. Staff at the museum have often felt that there were unseen spirits sitting next to them; they have dropped something but there was nothing broken; they have seen spirits sitting or standing on the staircase; they have felt themselves pushed; or they have felt their ears being tickled while they were alone in the office during lunch hour. People have heard noises from the store. People have felt