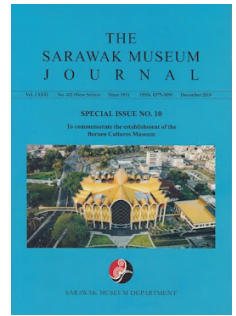




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### **PERSPECTIVES ON CARVING TRADITIONS, LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN SARAWAK**

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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## 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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