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### TWO CURATORS, A CLASSIFICATION OF BORNEO SWORDS AND SOME SWORDS IN THE SARAWAK MUSEUM COLLECTION

Michael Heppell<sup>1</sup>

#### INTRODUCTION

The Sarawak Museum collection of Dayak swords is central to the accepted classification of Borneo swords. Information in the Museum enabled two Museum curators, Robert Walter Campell Shelford and Edward H. Banks to write articles on the classification of swords in use in Sarawak. Shelford, an entomologist by training and interest, became Curator of the Sarawak Museum at the young age of 25 in 1897. His choice as curator might well have been influenced by the Second Rajah, Charles Brooke's regard for the work of the great biologist and evolutionist Alfred Russell Wallace who had done his pioneering research in Sarawak in the period 1854 to 1856. Shelford held the post of curator until 1905, when he returned to England to take up a position as an assistant curator at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, housed in the same general building as the Pitt Rivers Museum.

## TWO CURATORS, A CLASSIFICATION OF BORNEO SWORDS AND SOME SWORDS IN THE SARAWAK MUSEUM COLLECTION

by

Michael Heppell<sup>1</sup>

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As an entomologist, Shelford's particular interest was cockroaches. Shelford must have developed an interest in Borneo swords as well because he assembled an excellent private collection during his time as curator of the Museum. It is not clear what swords he acquired for the Sarawak Museum during his tenure. His own collection, however, was destined to be split and donated to the Pitt Rivers and British Museums in the United Kingdom. In 1901, he publicly sallied forth into the world of weapons with an article published in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* entitled

“A Provisional Classification of the Swords of the Sarawak Tribes”.<sup>2</sup> In this article, he identified 10 sword-types as well as six distinctive ‘*parang ilang*’ blades of the Kejaman of the Belaga District. He observed that the Sarawak Museum had fine examples of all of these blades in its own collection.

Shelford’s decision to produce a classification was based on his observation that the ‘great majority of Bornean swords found in the ethnographical collections of European museums bear on their labels merely the vaguest and most insufficient data as to place of origin, nature, function, etc., a matter of little surprise seeing that practically no literature relating to these weapons exists’.<sup>3</sup> Little has changed in this regard other than that some museums have taken regard of Shelford’s classification and identified some of their swords accordingly. Scholars too read Shelford’s work with the result that his terminology has been endorsed universally, being followed by authoritative works like George Cameron Stone’s ‘*A Glossary of the Construction, Decoration and Use of Arms and Armour in All Countries and in All Times together with some Closely Related Subjects*’<sup>4</sup>, G.B. Gardner’s ‘*Keris and Other Malay Weapons*’<sup>5</sup> and the more recent ‘*Traditional Weapons of the Indonesian Archipelago*’ by Albert G. van Zonnefeld.<sup>6</sup>

Shelford’s interest in swords was followed by Banks who, in 1935, published a paper in *The Sarawak Museum Journal*, curiously titled ‘Hoplology in Sarawak’.<sup>7</sup> This paper seemed to set out to correct some of the misinformation contained in Shelford’s earlier article. The title was more than a little erudite as the word ‘hoplology’ was hardly on the tip of most people’s tongues. Hoplology refers to the study of weapons, but more recently has come to refer to the study of combat in general. The title was probably too obscure to attract an informed readership and the paper has not been referenced in texts on weapons. This state of affairs was in marked contrast to a later article Banks wrote entitled “The Keris Sulok or Sundang” in the *Journal of the Malay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* which has been frequently referenced.<sup>8</sup>

Shelford mentioned that his classification was based on three years’ research. His confidence in his classification was profound as

he had 'no reason to believe that the classification that I have adopted will be altered in any important detail' though he did acknowledge that it was capable of extension. In the period 1898-1901, Shelford had access to an unequalled pool of knowledge which no longer exists, as much of the knowledge of Sarawakians living at that time has not been retained by their heirs.

The loss of knowledge means that the early Sarawak Museum Accession Books are an invaluable source of information. Museum policy encouraged the collection of information about acquisitions as it usually acquired objects directly from their owners. Acquisitions were often made by district officers who obtained as much information as they could from the sellers. An alternative source was gifts from owners of objects or from public spirited citizens, especially indigenous and, again, information was obtained from the person making the gift. Once these sources dried up and the Museum became reliant on purchases from local dealers, the reliability of the information in the Accession Books declined dramatically.

### Shelford's List

There were ten sword-types in Shelford's classification. They were: the Kayanic *parang ilang*, four Ibanic swords, *nyabur*, *langgai tinggang*, *jimpul* and *bayu*; a Murutic sword, *pakayun*; two Malay/Melanau swords, *parang pedang* and *latok*; and two Bidayuh swords, *buko* and *pandat*.

#### i. *Parang ilang*

The term *parang ilang* was based on a Ga'ay word for a fighting sword '*ilang layab*' (they also called swords *gay*). Mika Okushima, for example argues that the *ilang* was introduced to inland regions by the Ga'ay (who later split into groups like the Long Glat in the upper Mahakam and the Long Wai in the upper Telen in East Kalimantan).<sup>9</sup> The Ga'ay were the most successful Kayanic group in terms of their fighting prowess which enabled them to bring other Kayanic groups under their sway. The Iban made an almost identical short sword which they called a *parang ilang*. Many other Borneo groups also



replicated the design of this sword. It is therefore not a given that a blade with a concave inner section and convex outer section would have been manufactured by a member of a Kayanic group.

*Ilang* was what the Iban and other non-Kayanic groups in Sarawak and Sabah called a short sword with a straight concave/convex blade. As Shelford noted, Kayanic peoples did not call the sword an *ilang*. The Kenyah in Sarawak called a sword of any kind *baiñg*, the Kayan in Sarawak *malat*, the Kayan in the upper Mahakam *besu*, and the Kayanic peoples in the rest of East Kalimantan, *mandau*. In fact, *mandau* has become a generic term for a Dayak sword in Kalimantan. *Ilang* is therefore a Sarawak-centric term for a sword of this type. Given that *mandau* refers to all kinds of Dayak swords, there is a strong argument for favouring *ilang* in a classification of Borneo swords.

Shelford also noted a number of motifs which could be found on the blades: *budo' asu'*, a dragon design; *ulai nipa*, a continuous scroll design; *karan*, short incised lines in groups of two or three; and *lukut* which is a stud surrounded by a circle in the same metal. *Lukut* also refers to a black based bead with floral designs on its surface, the rarer designs of which had a high value with the Kayan.<sup>10</sup> The distinctive *ilang* blade types will be discussed later.

## ii. *Nyabur*<sup>11</sup>

The Iban *nyabur* was a long sword with an upwardly curving blade bellying up to its tip. Usually held in one hand, it must occasionally have been heavy enough to require two hands as the Sarawak Museum Acquisitions Book mentioned a Saribas *nyabur* which "belonged to an old Saribas pirate and was held with both hands".<sup>12</sup> The *nyabur* was the preferred combat sword of the Iban and a number of Dayak groups living along the Kapuas River and its tributaries in West Kalimantan.

A *nyabur* blade was distinguished by a kind of finger guard just below the neck which Shelford called a *kunding*. It was correctly called *bulu kunding*, but came to be called *butob kunding* in many

Iban river systems. As Shelford described, the *nyabur* blade was very occasionally grooved and never had any other embellishment.<sup>13</sup> Hilts were shaped in a hook profile and usually decorated with floriate scrolls or geometric motifs. Shelford gave three common hilt motifs: *kantok resam*, 'old world forked fern shoots'; *telingai* which one would imagine referred to the generic term for a motif on a hilt but which Shelford incorrectly translated as 'scorpion' (*kala* in Iban); and *entadu' kaul*, interlocking caterpillars.

Banks recorded that by 1935 *nyabur* had ceased being forged and occupied a 'place of honour' on a rack called a *lengkiang* on which Iban stored their swords. *Nyabur* always were heirlooms (*pesaka*) and once warfare declined, joined the other heirloom pieces like jars and gongs which were used mainly for display on ritual occasions. Neither author mentioned that the really old *nyabur* were called *nyabur rantong*, referring to the damascened process of smelting their blades using seven different kinds of iron to enhance the strength of the blade, including iron locally smelted.

The *nyabur* was a distinctive Borneo sword and should be included in any classification.

### iii. *Langgai tinggang*

The second Iban sword in Shelford's typology was the *langgai tinggang*. This was a more recent design than the *nyabur*. A deep groove along the back of the blade which descended abruptly to the shoulder by the finger guard provided the inspiration for the name of this sword. It recalled the long tail feathers of the casqued hornbill (*Rhinoplax vigil*). Shelford incorrectly stated that the finger guard on the *langgai tinggang* was called a *kerawit*, which in form resembled the slender wing-shaped spikelet found on many Kayanic *ilang*. A *langgai tinggang* had a *bulu kunding*, though one that was stumper than the elongated fleur de lys-shaped protruberance normally found on a *nyabur*. The blade of the *langgai tinggang* differed from the blade of a *nyabur* with a deeper belly to the curve up to the tip, thus locating the weight of the blade towards the distal end. Hilts were always shaped and decorated like Kayanic sword hilts.