



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XLVII No. 68

December 1994



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Mashman, V. (1994). Woodcarving in Sarawak: Memory, Meaning and Mementoes. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XLVII (68): 117-126

WOODCARVING IN SARAWAK: MEMORY, MEANING AND MEMENTOES

Valerie Mashman

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I would like to consider recent woodcarvings which have been commissioned over the past few years and set them against the traditions of their historical antecedents. A case is made for the importance of recording the shared memories of the older generation who can remember the making, the design, the context, and the traditions of our heritage of wood sculpture. This comprises a range of artefacts from the hilts of parang and kris to intricate ceremonial walking sticks and everyday objects such as spoons, bowls, tables and weaving sticks. Some objects may be associated with aristocracy such as carved doors, wedding gifts such as boats, or funerary monuments and coffins. Other items which possess the charisma to attract pigs, such as Iban pig stick and Bidayuh spirit images used to protect crops and Melanau spirit images used to cure sickness, are imbued with spiritual power.

However, traditional life up-river is changing: old belief systems are being replaced by world religions, the prestige system focusses less on traditional aristocracy than on newly acquired wealth and educational achievement. In these transitional societies the craftsman is of diminishing status and his skills of limited economic value, and unless he has help in promoting himself, his work is little valued outside his community.

WOODCARVING IN SARAWAK: MEMORY, MEANING AND MEMENTOES

by

Valerie Mashman

INTRODUCTION: THE TRADITIONAL HERITAGE

In this paper I would like to consider recent woodcarvings which have been commissioned over the past few years and set them against the traditions of their historical antecedents. A case is made for the importance of recording the shared memories of the older generation who can remember the making, the design, the context, and the traditions of our heritage of wood sculpture. This comprises a range of artefacts from the hilts of *parang* and *kris* to intricate ceremonial walking sticks and everyday objects such as spoons, bowls, tables and weaving sticks. Some objects may be associated with aristocracy such as carved doors, wedding gifts such as boats, or funerary monuments and coffins. Other items which possess the charisma to attract pigs, such as Iban pig stick and Bidayuh spirit images used to protect crops and Melanau spirit images used to cure sickness, are imbued with spiritual power.

However, traditional life up-river is changing: old belief systems are being replaced by world religions, the prestige system focusses less on traditional aristocracy than on newly acquired wealth and educational achievement. In these transitional societies the craftsman is of diminishing status and his skills of limited economic value, and unless he has help in promoting himself, his work is little valued outside his community.

However, sometimes prominent citizens commission woodcarving for their own life rituals, be they weddings, new houses, or funerals. On all these occasions the memory, meaning and the origin of the design, and context of the facts are of importance. The concept of memory and history is crucial to the future identity of woodcarving in Sarawak's culture. In increasingly depopulating rural and coastal areas there remain occasions when legends are sung, and old people reminisce and recall their heritage. For example, Iban oral literature emphasizes beliefs about the divine power and origin of designs (Anggat Ganjing 1988: 1 ff) and the Iban believe that the making of powerful charms like the *tuntun* was decreed by the spirit world (Heppell and Limbang anak Melaka 1988: 64). Their chants, *timang*, celebrate intricately carved weaving sticks with designs "of ravenous dogs eating their own heads waiting to slip indoors" (Masing 1981: 351).

In the next section of this paper memory, meaning and the current trend for the reproduction of woodcarving will be considered. After that examples

of the use of woodcarving in the interior design industry will be discussed. This will be followed by an analysis of the influence of Indonesia and the market for mementoes and reproduction antiques. I will finally consider the work of a few contemporary sculptors and discuss the future.

MEMORY AND THE REPRODUCTION OF WOODCARVING

It is shared public memory that has prompted something of a revival of the use of woodcarving. In 1992 a traditional wedding ceremony was staged for the Rulers' Conference in Kuching and a rare intricately carved Melanau bed was brought to Kuching from Kampung Telian, Mukah (Plate I).

The presence of this bed in 1992 in an urban setting is important to the memory of our present generation who will pass the news around town, discuss and remember it. However the bed has been returned to Mukah and it is difficult to obtain information regarding this rare item. We do not know who made it, for what purpose or when. Upon enquiry, an urban Melanau remembered with delight his mother telling him about their own family heirloom bed, used only for weddings. However, for such a precious heirloom to have meaning to the wider community we must know its history through the sharing of public and personal memory.

I would like to consider at this point the use of the term "memory". First, there is personal memory. At one level personal memory works for the short term, recalling the immediate past. For example, the presence of the Melanau wedding bed at the staged wedding at the Rulers' Conference is remembered by those who attended. Next, there is long term memory, that of the urban Melanau recalling the bed of his childhood memory. It is a memory that might be passed down from parent to child over generations. At a wider level, such memory may be shared and be considered public memory, recalled through public performances of oral literature, the informal telling of stories, public rituals and ceremonies. There is an onus today on the wider plural society to facilitate the transfer of sharing cultural knowledge, memories, from the smaller component communities.

Another example of this theme of the power of public memory and oral tradition was the revival at the 1990 State Gawai Celebration in Kuching of the Bidayuh altar, the *sanggar*, hitherto little known to other Dayak groups. This particular *sanggar* consisted of a square arch supported by four carved posts about eight feet high. The carving of the posts with Bidayuh motifs was a new departure, specially commissioned for the occasion. One *sanggar* was ceremonially erected at the downstairs lobby area, the main entrance to the Kuching Civic Centre where the Gawai was being held, and the other on the main stage, setting a natural frame for the celebrations. Traditionally, one *sanggar* would be at the entrance to the longhouse compound, and the