

THE RETURN OF THE KENYAH BADENG SUNHAT AND THE MAKING OF A REPLICA

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the return of the looted Kenyah Badeng sunhat from the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford to Sarawak in November 2024. It goes onto explain how the Kenyah Badeng Association launched a Hat Challenge competition in 2025 to stimulate interest in the story of the looted sunhat and to remake replicas of this hat. Lastly, the article describes the process of making the replica sunhat and its impact on the community.

Keywords: hat making, indigenous knowledge, looted sunhat, Kenyah Badeng, repatriation.

INTRODUCTION

The Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, UK, had in its collection a looted Kenyah Badeng sunhat. The museum returned this to the Kenyah Badeng community and the Sarawak Museum department in November 2024.¹ In February 2026, Borneo Cultures Museum Curator, Dr. Awangku Shahrir Naquiddin, met with the Kenyah Badeng Association (Kebana) President, Hilary Samah Tet, and committee members. The committee were dressed in batik-style shirts which featured images of the looted sunhat (Plate 1), demonstrating how much the returned sunhat is valued. They presented Dr. Awangku Shahrir Naquiddin, with a replica of the looted sunhat for the museum, in appreciation of the museum's efforts to secure the return of the hat. This article documents the making of the replica

¹ For further information on the story of the Looted Kenyah Badeng Sunhat see Mashman (2019).

of the looted sunhat and considers the method of a hat making competition as a means of disseminating the history of the hat to the community as whole.

BACKGROUND -THE RETURN OF THE SUNHAT

The looted sunhat possessed by the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, was returned to Kenyah Badeng Association (Kebana) President, Hilary Samah Tet, together with the title of ownership, during a ceremony held in Oxford at the museum on 4 November 2024. Deputy Minister of the Ministry Tourism of Creative Industry and Performing Arts, Datuk Sebastian Ting, and the Director of the Sarawak Museum Department, Puan Nancy Jolhi, witnessed the signing of the ownership title. The Sarawak Museum Department was given custody of the hat so that it may be well preserved and displayed for viewing by the people of Sarawak for generations to come (Plate 2).

The looted sunhat was part of a set of six objects comprising another similar hat, two wooden bowls and a set of iron pot-stands, all recorded in the Sarawak Museum registration book as “looted from an expedition formerly sent against the Madangs.”² These were donated to the Sarawak Museum in 1903 by C.A. Bampfylde. One of the two sunhats was given to Rajah Charles Brooke in 1905 and kept at his museum at Chesterton house. After the closure of this museum the hat eventually went to the Pitt-Rivers Museum (Plate 3).

Why would an everyday object like this hat be looted? The Rajah requested his outstation officers to collect for his museum in Kuching objects which reflected local cultures and everyday life. Bampfylde commissioned punitive expeditions in 1895 and 1896 against the up-river Kayan, the Badeng and their allies and it is possible that he requested that artifacts be brought to him (Mashman 2019). Three items from the set of six looted objects are on exhibition on the 4th floor of the Borneo Cultures Museum.

So how did the hat making competition come about? Once the hat had been returned to Sarawak, the challenge that the elders of the community faced was how was the community going to learn about the important history of the looted sunhat, when much of the story was published in the

² The Kenyah Badeng were known as “Madangs”

English language in newspapers and academic journals. Gradually, the idea of a hat making competition came about.

While similar sunhats have been featured in books and articles (Sellato 2012, Mashman 2017) and the Kenyah Badeng crafts have also been described, (Tan Chee Beng 2009, Davy Ball 2009), the making of this particular type of hat has not been documented. So, in May 2025, I set out to Kampong Data Kakus with a film crew from Borneo Demand Productions led by Kenyah Badeng filmmaker Shelly Shirleenna Nadin Tan, who also would join me in the process of documentation and assist me with translation. We had several reasons for going: for us to monitor the impact of the competition; to film the contestants, women hat makers, making the heritage sunhats (*sa'ung among*) and for the processes to be recorded. We sat with the hat makers for several days conducting informal group interviews. Apart from the collecting of dye plants, we were unable to record the collection of other materials, and we have been guided by my previous field experience and secondary sources on botanical identification (Christensen 2002, Mashman 2012).

VISIT TO HAT MAKERS AT DATA KAKUS

The first ever Kenyah Badeng weaving competition, *The Hat Challenge*, was launched in March 2025 to coincide with Pesta Kebana, the annual festival of the Kenyah Badeng in Sarawak. The competition was planned and drawn up by an informal committee who devised competition rules, judging criteria, drafted posters, branding and social media for the event. A great deal of the planning and documentation was done on social media because of the distances between committee members and this worked out reasonably well. The aim of the competition was to stimulate the use of natural products to make replica heirloom sunhats in the same style and materials as the returned looted hat (Plate 4). The competition would give the hat makers an opportunity to use their knowledge inherited from their elders concerning plants and natural dyes. The hat makers had heard about the competition through their village headmen and through their own social media accounts on their mobile phones, or through their children or other family members.

DOCUMENTATION OF THE MAKING OF THE SUNHAT: THE HAT MAKERS