Originating in the Southeast Asian country of Borneo, this war canoe is believed to be associated with the Dayak people of Sarawak, one of Borneo’s two states. Many indigenous tribes inherited, and still today inherit, the country’s lush lands. The Dayak are the indigenous tribe to whom the war canoe belongs. More specifically, it belongs to a subgroup called the Sea Dayak, as opposed to the Land Dayak. As the name suggests, the Sea Dayak typically live along the sea and large rivers whereas the Land Dayak live closer inland. Iban is another name by which the Sea Dayak people are known. Based on the flag provided with the war canoe model, it can be assumed that the war canoe was most likely used in the late 19th century to mid 20th century. This particular flag pattern, a black and red cross situated on a golden background, was used in Sarawak between the years 1870 and 1941.

The name of the model is actually somewhat misleading. War canoe suggests that this boat might have served a militaristic role for the Dayak and could have been used for security purposes against threatening water attacks. However, this boat was fighting a different kind of war. There is reason to believe that the war canoe is in fact a pirate ship. More appropriate would be the name war prahu, or sometimes war prau. Documented stories about attacks from boats such as this one point to the fact that they were used to overpower small merchant ships sailing to Asian ports. During the attack, the men of the war prahus would invade a merchant ship sailing along the popular trade route and steal valuable foreign items on board. Many times they would kill the crew of the merchant ships as well. For those crew members who were spared death, they were instead captured and often faced slavery as the alternative. The merchant ships were burned on the water to hide any obvious traces of their attacks and stealing.
War prahus usually traveled in groups of ten to thirty boats to maximize their scouting range and attack abilities. One war prau would scout the area for incoming vessels while the rest of the fleet remained out of sight. Once signaled, the fleet would advance on the merchant vessel and overpower it with their numbers and force. The Sea Dayak pirate activity followed the seasonal changes in monsoon activity. Northeast monsoons discouraged the passage of merchant vessels, so war prahus and their crew retired to the land during this time. When the monsoons moved southwest, the merchant vessels returned to the trade route as did the stalking Dayak predators on the waters of Borneo.

The effect of Dayak piracy on Bornean culture extended to the social and economic relationships of the indigenous tribes, both coastal and inland. Southeast Asia around this time was reliant upon foreign items acquired from sea trade. The Dayak pirates created a monopoly on foreign items, restricting the accessibility of these items to other groups. These groups then began seeking alternative trade partners from whom they could still obtain foreign goods, thereby extending their relationships and contacts with other people. At the same time, some inland groups became more dependent on the Sea Dayak groups because of the monopoly on foreign objects. Even though Borneo was not necessarily a major trade site, it did provide unique items to international trade such as special woods, fibers, and gems. These natural products were cultivated inland. This created a precarious situation between the tribes of Borneo and between Borneo and other countries. Inland tribes had control over exports while coastal tribes had control over imports. Both types of tribes were reliant on the other in order to maintain Borneo’s international trade. Hostility later developed between Borneo and other countries when word of the pirate attacks along trading routes in the area spread.
This model of a war canoe, or more appropriately termed a war prahu, potentially represents the hostile sea activity of the Dayak people in the waters surrounding Borneo. Its possible connection to pirate activity alters the approach to the model and points down an alternative path not originally anticipated. If it is in fact a war prahu, this beautiful model acted as a formidable opponent on the water and impacted trade and culture in Borneo and on an international scale.

A picture of the Sarawak flag accompanying the war canoe model. The characteristic gold, red, and black colors in the shape of a cross verify its Sarawak origin. The objects below the flag are canoe paddles which are also not directly attached to the model.