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The Sea Dayak War Canoe: A Symbol of the Iban Culture in the late 19th Century

When a long, wooden, and elaborately carved ship model was placed before me, there was hardly any indication of the warring tribesmen adorned in loincloths that once lined the massive hull from stem to stern, the rough and choppy waters of the Bornean rivers that this boat would have likely traversed, or even the gruesome act of "headhunting" that such tribesmen would have likely practiced. Indeed, since my initial observation, subsequent research would reveal a cultural and historical backdrop teeming with fascinating, if not violent, descriptions of an indigenous group of people that still persists to this day in the Malaysian region of Sarawak. Thus, although the ship model initially appeared quite primitive and un-suggestive, various notes included with the model, as well as a crucial flag that once was connected to the boat enabled me to confidently classify the model as a war canoe from Sarawak used by the Iban people between a time period estimate of 1870 to 1941.

I first set out to explore the geographic origin of the boat and any potential cultural or historical implications in relation to the boat itself. Along with the model, the Peabody Museum also received notes from the donator of the model, which designated the model as a war canoe and Sarawak, Borneo, Malaysia as the boat's origin, as well as Iban and Sea Dayak as specific terms associated with the boat. Sarawak is a state located in the Malaysian island of Borneo, situated on the northwest border of the island facing the South China Sea. Among its many rivers, there are the Sarawak River and the Rajang River - the longest river in all of Malaysia, which has enabled various ethnic groups
existing throughout the Bornean island - primarily Malaysian, Chinese, Mongolian, and Indonesian populations, as well as native tribes - to interact over the years.

Having established somewhat conclusively a geographic context for the model, I then set out to pinpoint a specific time period to obtain a deeper understanding of the type of people who might have used the canoe. Based on the included flag and secondary sources documenting the history of the Sarawak region, I was able to conclude that the model dates to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Using Sarawak as a reference point, I was able to find the exact same flag (see attached photo 1) that matched the one provided in the model. Known as the "Second Sarawak Flag," with its red, black, and white colors, this particular design was enacted by Sir Charles Brooke, the Second White Rajah of Sarawak, and held from May of 1870 through December of 1941 (Deri 1).

With a late 19th century framework in mind, I was then able to more directly analyze the significance of Iban in association with the model, as mentioned in donor's notes. Currently the largest indigenous group of native peoples within Sarawak, the Iban constitute approximately 30% of the region's population, and some believe that "a large number of the ancestors of the present Ibans were probably brought to Borneo from Sumatra" (Haddon 1). Yet during the specific time period that the model dates to, the Iban were also known as the Sea Dayak, for local British authorities had prescribed such a moniker to these people beginning in the 1840s "in order to describe them differently from the Biyayuh, whom the Europeans called Land Dayaks because they were found living in the interior hills, so the Iban were called Sea Dayaks" (Hutton 104). Moreover, the seafaring culture of the Iban formed a critical part of their daily lives, as boats served as a primary mode of transportation and subsistence via fishing. More relevant to the
model, Iban boats were integral for battle, which was commonplace throughout the 19th century, as intratribal warfare plagued the many tribes and sub-groups among the Dayaks, which was compounded by frequent piracy and the customary practice of parading around the decapitated heads of one's victims, otherwise known as headhunting. Boats in general played such a significant role for the Iban, and even to this day, as a "skill in boat-building is a positive male virtue and an important male task requiring a significant investment of labour" (King 2). Specifically, the war-boat was "sufficiently capacious to hold from seventy to eighty men" and also "has a roof to fight from" (Marryat 63). Such a description aptly fits the model, which features several cannons, a wooden thatched roof, and a long, narrow build. A rendering of what a typical Iban war canoe would have looked like next to a picture I took of the model underscore such similarities (see attached photo 2).

Indeed, a significant piece of understanding the boat's context is the British involvement with the Iban during the late 19th century. The classic British brand of colonial imperialism with its authoritarian and extractive regimes was not the case, however, for Sarawak. Charles Brooke was the second of three English "white rajahs" who served as sovereign rulers of Sarawak - that is, they ruled independently from British auspice. Brooke viewed the Iban as "different but not inferior... an alternative viewpoint to the social Darwinism employed by the colonials" (Ting 2). Yet such a governing style fostered mixed reaction, as the Iban were divided in support and rejection of the British presence, resulting in even further violence among Iban tribes and between the foreigners and natives. This tumultuous relationship, I believe, thus provides a clearer context for the presence of war canoes like the model during the late 19th century.
Bibliography


Photo 1

Official Sarawak Flag from 1870-1946 (crwflags.com)

Photo taken by me from ship model

Photo 2
Photo taken by me of ship model

Photo rendering from Marryat (Borneo and the Indian Archipelago: With Drawings of Costume and Scenery)