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Anthro 1218

Museum Project Reflection

In reflecting on this project, I realize how lucky I am that the Peabody already had quite a bit of information about the provenance of my boat. The first time I went to the museum to view the model, we were given a few key terms related to the boat's origin: "Borneo"; "Sea Dyak"; and "Rejang." Armed with these hints, my research proceeded fairly swiftly. My boat -- a war canoe -- was constructed by the Sea Dyak, a group native to the island of Borneo. One unexpected challenge to emerge out of my research had to do with sources. Because Borneo was colonized by the British in the mid-19th century, most of the texts I drew from were written by colonial ethnographers. Bracketing the question of authenticity, exclusive or excessive reliance on colonial texts can lead to the construction of primitivist narratives. In other words, I had hoped to find texts written by members of the Sea Dyak, thereby allowing them to describe their culture in their own terms.

Though I was given a lot of initial guidance by the Peabody, I definitely struggled to find sources that stood up under academic scrutiny. I addressed this issue in my both of papers, as I always prefer to confront the unavoidable shortcomings of my work explicitly.