The Centrality of the River in the Cultures of the Sarawak

This model of a war canoe is likely a version of a boat that would have been used by the Sea Dyak people of Borneo, also called the Iban. Now divided between the governments of Malaysia and Indonesia, Borneo is an island that sits in the Java Sea.\(^1\) Prior to its conquest by Sir James Brooke on behalf of the British in 1839, Borneo was inhabited exclusively by autonomous ethnic groups, notably the Sea Dyak, the Land Dyak, the Malays, and the Kayan.\(^2\) The Dyak groups, with whom we are particularly concerned, dominated the Sarawak region, the part of Borneo now occupied by Malaysia. Benedict Sandin, a 20\(^{th}\)-century Iban ethnologist and historian, suggested that his people migrated to the Sarawak region roughly fifteen generations before his birth.\(^3\) Though all written scholarship on the indigenous peoples of Borneo dates after European intervention, there is evidence to suggest that these cultures developed complex social and political structures over the course of this history. Furthermore, it can also be assumed that the style of boat construction modeled here predates the British conquest, as oral histories have suggested that the Dyak have a very long history of seafaring.

The indigenous peoples of Sarawak used the territory’s system of rivers as their mode of transportation almost exclusively; the land itself was devoid of road construction until after the British conquest.\(^4\) If indeed this boat belonged to the Iban people, it would have likely been used on the Rejang River and the system of smaller rivers that stem from it. The Rejang traverses Sarawak and possesses both practical and spiritual importance to those who live around it. Fittingly, the Iban live quite literally around the Rejang. Their homes, called long-houses by the British, flank the banks of the River, and, depending on their size, were able to be occupied by
anywhere from five to fifty families. Dyak long-houses rather resemble the kind of boat seen in the model, suggesting a unity in construction techniques. Given that the primary construction material for both the long-houses and the war canoe appears to be wood, the Dyak likely made use of the prodigious and otherwise untouched forests surrounding the Rejang.

Because the model is explicitly classified as a war canoe, it is worth investigating the types of conflict that the Iban have engaged in throughout their history. Sandin, the Iban historian, has claimed that a clear pattern of intertribal warfare existed amongst the Iban by the time of the British intervention. According to Sandin, disputes of rather personal nature, such as those involving family or marriage, would frequently develop into full-blown intertribal conflicts. These battles took place almost exclusively on Sarawak’s system of rivers; in fact, there is even an Iban myth that claims that a treacherous warrior once jumped into the Lingga river to avoid being beheaded and was turned into a crocodile. Given the Iban’s dependence on water in all areas of life – but especially in waging war – it’s easy to imagine how a boat such as the one modeled here would have been used. The brightly colored sections of the boat as well as its flag were likely distinctive markers of the tribe to which it belonged. Its covering, which extends the entire length of the boat, was likely there to protect against incoming fire. It’s clear that the Iban developed a number of styles of ship construction, but this canoe’s wartime connotation rendered it unique and highly functional.

Despite the relative abundance of information available about the Iban and other indigenous Bornean groups, a few historical gaps remain. Because the native peoples of Sarawak did not develop a written record of their own, their histories have largely been published by those who “discovered” them: the colonial Brits. Sandin, an Iban historian, therefore provides through his scholarship a valuable opportunity for the public to learn about this dynamic culture from the
perspective of one of its own. In any case, the Dyak groups are a useful case study in the general analysis of maritime culture, as their livelihood was completely dependent on their seafaring practices.

4 *North Borneo, Brunei, Sarawak*, 195.
5 Henry Ling Roth, *The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo* (London: Truslove and Hanson, 1896), 85.
7 Ibid, 65-71.
8 Ibid, 68.