Examining the Form and Function of the Iban War Canoe

Salient aspects of this boat’s construction are suggested by its name: war canoe. Indeed, features of a boat’s construction are highly correlated with its stated purpose, and this parallel certainly holds true in the case of the model of an Iban canoe. The unity of form and function is enhanced by an understanding of the landscape -- cultural and geographic -- of this boat’s use. The Iban people, also known as the Sea Dyak, are native to the island of Borneo, which is surrounded by the South China Sea to the north, the Sulu Sea to the northeast, the Celebes Sea and the Makassar Strait to the east, and the Java Sea and the Karimata Strait to the south (MacDonald: 1958, 3). However, this canoe was more likely used to navigate Borneo’s dense system of rivers, a network that has historically served a central role in the spiritual and practical life of the Iban (Gomes: 1911, 145). Given these contextual details about the Iban war canoe, what judgments can be made about its construction?

According to the British colonial ethnographer Edwin H. Gomes (1911, 50), Iban war canoes were typically about ninety feet long, and would have been able to hold as many as one hundred men.¹ As with all Iban boat types, war canoes were made from the trunk of a single tree; for larger canoes such as the one represented by the model, planks and gunwales were added to the boat’s sides and caulked so as to be rendered watertight (Gomes: 1911, 50). Depicted in Figure 1 is the model’s representation of the Iban’s fastening technique, which involved the use of fibrous cane or rattan to weave planks together (Gomes: 1911, 80). According to Gomes (1911, 80), this mode of fastening allowed the Iban to break down their canoes following a war

¹ For the sake of comparison, the dimensions of the Peabody Museum’s model are as follows: 38.375 in. x 8.4375 in. x 9.25 in.
expedition, which in turn allowed for economical storage of the planks. Also visible in Figure 1 is the canoe’s awning, which, according to Gomes (1911, 50), was pliable enough to be rolled up and stored in the boat’s cargo hold if necessary. The war-time function of the awning is ambiguous; though it would have certainly provided protection from the sun, it is unclear whether or not this awning was robust enough to defend against enemy fire. Speaking of ammunition, the cannon depicted in Figure 2 is a clear indication of the wartime connotation of this boat’s use.

Paddles such as those shown in Figure 3 would have been used to propel the vessel. The fact that the model does not contain a rudder suggests that the large paddles near the canoe’s aft would have been used to steer. This supposition is supported by the historical record (Gomes: 1911, 50). Beyond their practical purpose, the paddles are indicative of the creative aesthetic of the Iban. The model’s stempost, which was unfortunately broken into two pieces, and enclosure in the stern are painted in bright colors, perhaps indicating the tribe to which the boat belonged; Gomes (1911, 79) suggests that the natural pigments used to embellish boats such as this one were ochre and lime.

Now that the features of this boat that render it compatible for warfare have been explored, the boat-building tradition of the Sea Dyak can be discussed more generally. Borneo’s system of rivers shaped Iban spirituality and culture over the course of centuries, and this influence is manifest in boat construction techniques. The war canoe is narrow, which allowed it to clear river bends with ease. The dugout construction of the canoe suggests a shallow draught, although the hull appears more deeply v-shaped in the model, an adjustment likely made in the interest of ease of display. The shallowness of the draught would have allowed this boat to navigate rivers of varying depths without risk of grounding. Especially given that sections of the
rivers of Borneo contain intense rapids, both the speed and stability of this type of vessel were presented with challenges. Indeed, Gomes (1911, 80) writes: “This kind of war-boat is not often seen nowadays. It is clumsy, and does not travel very fast.” Despite its use throughout the long history of the Iban, Gomes’s (1911) observations suggest that this style of boat construction was nearly obsolete by the early 20th century. Further research is required to determine the methods of construction that succeeded this one, as they perhaps reflect the influence of the British colonists who lived amongst the Iban beginning in 1839 (North Borneo, Brunei, Sarawak: 1956, 39).

The paucity of sources on this subject presents methodological challenges to the researcher. Though the war canoe described by Gomes (1911) in Seventeen Years Among the Sea Dyaks of Borneo matches the one depicted in the model in many respects, the question of whether or not Gomes’s observations and analyses should be accepted at face value is a salient one. In any case, I have attempted to establish connections between the features visible in the model and the context -- derived from the historical record -- of this boat’s real-life use.

Appendix:
Figure 1 (photo by author):

Figure 2 (photo by author):

Figure 3 (photo by author):
References
