

Burial Poles

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(photo by Audrey Low. Detail, burial poles on the grounds of the Sarawak Museum, Borneo)

I came across Hedda Morrison's books on Borneo, and saw a photo of these exact burial poles in their original location in a Kayan area in Sarawak. It was incredibly evocative seeing the poles, called kelirieng, surrounded by mature trees in the forest. Morrison noted that because the poles were situated in such a densely forested area, it was really difficult to photograph. Today, the poles are situated in the grounds of the Sarawak Museum in Kuching.

Material World

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(photo by Audrey Low. Burial Poles (kelirieng) and hut (salong))
<http://www.materialworldblog.com>
These burial poles have had a very interesting biography.

Lucas Chin, the previous director of the museum, told me that he was involved in the negotiations with the original owners, the Kayans, to bring this object downriver to Kuching.

The story behind this object is that a renowned warrior in Sarawak's Belaga district, grief stricken by the sudden death of his young daughter, commissioned elaborate burial poles and a hut to be constructed in her honor.

The funerary objects were carved and erected in the forest as a proper resting place for her. Five years of skilled labor, from the time the selected tropical hardwood trees were felled, to the final sanding of the intricate carvings, resulted in the magnificently carved kelirieng and salong (burial poles and hut) . The kelirieng consists of two logs hollowed out and joined together to form the burial poles. The salong or hut is also made of wood and is placed above the two poles. The bones of the child would have been placed in the hut. I refer to the three elements (two poles and the burial hut) as one consolidated ethnographic burial object.

(photo by Audrey Low. detail burial poles)

In the 1970s, there was a surge of interest in ethnographic objects in the West, and the burial poles became the focus of negotiations with overseas collectors. The condition of the sale required that the object be dismantled and removed from its original location in the forest in Long Segaham and shipped overseas.

The death of the young daughter and the associated grief that occasioned the creation of this object, the skill and inspiration of the artists in designing and crafting these poles and the erection of the kelirieng in a favored place in the rainforest in Long Segaham, all made this an object of emotional, cultural and historical significance to the people of the Belaga district.

When negotiations proceeded with overseas buyers for the sale and removal of the object from the

country, then many more people from the wider Sarawak community became involved, and the status of this object was raised from that of local and marginal cultural importance to one of value to the state of Sarawak. The threat of losing the object forever effectively made it part of the cultural heritage of Sarawak, and a symbol of state-wide pride.

When the object was located in the middle of the jungle in the Upper Rajang River, it was surveyed by government agencies, but there was no great importance attached to the object. There was intention, but no urgency on the part of the government, to salvage it before the construction of hydroelectric dams. The threat of losing these poles to overseas buyers however changed everything.

Museum staff were suddenly mobilized and intense negotiations began, with the aim of salvaging the object. Lucas Chin, the director of the Sarawak Museum at the time, was personally very concerned about the imminent loss of this object of cultural heritage. The Sarawak Museum however, could not match the prices offered by overseas collectors. Fortunately for the museum, after long and delicate negotiations with the elders and customary owners of the burial poles, the tribal elders decided to relinquish the poles, and present the composite object as a gift to the museum and the people of Sarawak.

As it was a sacred burial object, several ceremonies had to be carefully performed in accordance with customary law, by all involved, even the Christian and Muslim staff. Chin relates that non-tribal museum employees were involved in animist ceremonies in elaborate processes of ritual prohibitions, taboos, or pemalis, to propitiate spirits.

This biography of the burial poles has effectively made it a contact zone, bringing together multiple players in the wider community. The present director, Sanib Said, who is Muslim, told me that the animist and non-Islamic rituals performed to obtain this object are now the cause of friction for the Sarawak Museum today.

In this object, many people and government agencies that would not normally have any contact, had to work together. These included the customary owners, the carvers and artists, the aristocratic family that commissioned the poles, together with the Malaysian public and the local government, Islamic leaders, shamans, the museum staff involved in shamanism as part of the bequest ceremony, and even the museum grounds as the venue for a non-Islamic funerary object. After complex culturally sensitive negotiations, came the logistic difficulties of transporting overland, what is effectively two hollowed out tropical hardwood trees with intricate carving along the whole length. The journey was over rough terrain and down rapids-strewn rivers. Lucas Chin, now retired, still remembers the adventures of its acquisition in 1972 as one of the most exhilarating adventures he had as part of his job as director of the museum.

When the gift was finalized, there was celebration. Acquiring the poles was a symbolic coup. In this case, individuals from a newly independent nation had mobilized to prevent an object of significant cultural heritage from being shipped over to the west. Lucas Chin and the museum staff overcame obstacles, and in so doing, wrested a prized heritage from the international market in ethnographic objects. The museum staff had in effect managed to retain physical ownership of the object in Sarawak and maintain control over the representation of its meaning, thereby creating a new story for the newly formed state.