High Status Markers in Low Relief: Carved Doors and Panels of Borneo

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The rich and powerful, in Borneo and elsewhere, do not content themselves with ordinary dwellings. Their residences, a most appropriate medium for their desire to display their wealth and status, are outfitted with distinctive decorative elements that are quite necessary to the structure of the building, but are nevertheless architectural features. Wealth and status, everywhere and at all times, have allowed for the arts and crafts to thrive, as the wealthy commissioned artists and craftspersons to heighten the resplendence of their houses and their possessions or, being themselves somewhat idle, they indulged in the arts and crafts.

Status and Decoration in Borneo

Status in interior Borneo basically took two forms. Among most ethnic groups, individuals acquired prominence in their community and beyond through either wealth, derived from their success in agricultural and other economic pursuits, or prestige, derived from their experience and wisdom or success in war (fig. 1) and headhunting. Wealth generally entailed prestige, and vice versa; an individual with status was then able to draw other individuals and families into a client-patron relationship.

Achieving prominence was not sufficient, however, as that prominence had to be upheld through time by the founding of a new village or lavish feasts of prestige, for example. Through the generations, thus, status could be gained or lost following a family's fortunes. Among these competitive societies are the Ngaju and Ot Danum of southern Borneo, the Iban and Bidayuh of western Borneo, and the Kadazan and Murut of Sabah.

Other ethnic groups–numerically a minority–displayed social stratification. They were organized in three social strata: the noble folk, the common people, and the slaves. Status was based on an essential distinction, as the noble folk were believed to be of divine descent. Determined by birth, status was inalterable and never questioned. There was no need for extravagant feasts and, indeed, whether or not the noble folk were rich was somehow irrelevant. Competition for formal leadership was between various aristocratic lines. The noble folk owned slaves, who worked for them, and imposed corvée on their commoners. If status did not need to be fought for, it had nevertheless to be marked by specific symbols and motifs reserved for the noble folk. The stratified societies include the Kayan, Kenyah, and Modang, as well as scores of related minor groups, all principally in East Kalimantan and eastern Sarawak, and the Taman (a.k.a. Maloh, Embaloh, etc.) of West Kalimantan.

Thus, in both types of societies, prominent individuals or families were able to commandeer their fellow villagers' manpower–through slavery, the client-patron bond, or the corvée system. Moreover, high-status people often were themselves masterful artists, with some leisure time to devote to the *beaux arts*. Not only their residences but also all their locally crafted belongings, down to the most trivial kitchen utensil, could and often did carry fine decoration.

Fig. 1. *Bahau Warriors. Their weapons and ornaments reveal their headhunting activities. The hornbill, whose white and black feathers compose the headdresses, is symbolically linked to this ritual activity.*
(Photo by A. Nieuwenhuis, before 1903) Barbier-Mueller Archives

Among the stratified groups which constitute the main focus of this article, this decoration consisted of a given assortment of motifs that were all ritually and socially meaningful and subject to prescriptive and proscriptive practices. For example, a baby carrier had to have certain ritual motifs so that the baby's soul was protected by the spirit of the motif against roving evil spirits. But not any motif was suitable for just anyone. Among the Kenyah, only noble folk of the highest status could use the squatting anthropomorph motif (*kalung kelunan*), while lower-status people could only use the head motif (*kalung ulu*) or the dragon motif (*kalung aso'* [dog] or *kalung kabo'* [monitor lizard]). Indeed, motifs contain spirits or, rather, motifs are spirits. While these spirits are benevolent and meant to protect the motif bearers, they

are very powerful and thus potentially harmful if mishandled. This is why only mature individuals with "strong souls" may create or use powerful motifs without incurring supernatural punishment. For the same reason, a Kenyah commoner would never dare use a motif reserved for high aristocrats. This would amount to both an unacceptable social transgression and a serious ritual hazard. It should be noted that it is totally inappropriate to consider any of those motifs as "ancestor figures," as is so often found in the extant literature on the ethnic arts of Borneo. These ethnic groups have no ancestor cult, nor do they manufacture images of deified ancestors.

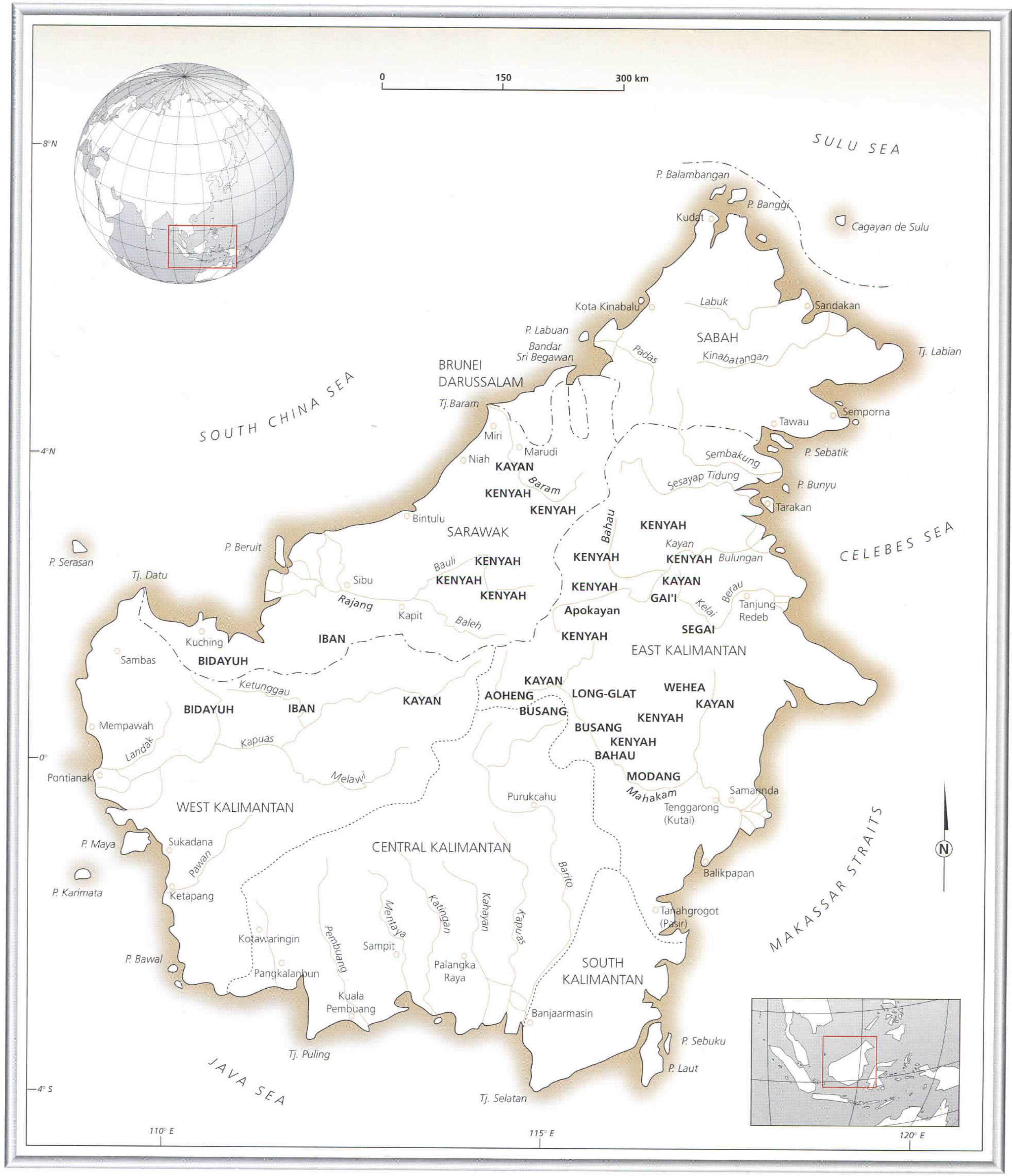
The Kayan and Related Groups

We can now dwell more in depth on the ethnic entities under consideration. The Kayan, Kenyah, and Modang are part of the same linguistic group and are also culturally related. The Kayan (see map) are believed to have scattered away from the high plateaus of Apo Kayan in East Kalimantan to neighboring regions: the Balui and Baram rivers (Sarawak); the Mendalam River in the upper Kapuas basin (West Kalimantan); the upper Mahakam River, the Muara Wahau region (on a northern tributary of the lower Mahakam), and the lower Kayan River, all in East Kalimantan. Only one Kayan village now remains in Apo Kayan. Related groups–the Bahau, Busang, and Aoheng (or Penihing)–live on the middle and upper course of the Mahakam River.

The Modang groups include the Long-Glat of the upper Mahakam, the Long-Bleh, Long-Wai, and Wehea of the northern tributaries of the middle Mahakam, the Ga'ai of the lower Kayan River, and the Segai of the Berau River. These powerful, warlike groups also moved a great deal, conquering vast territories and subjugating many minor groups.

As for the Kenyah, many of whom were probably nomadic hunter-gatherers on the watershed between eastern Sarawak and East Kalimantan three centuries ago, they now form a widely heterogeneous group of some forty named entities. Groups considered as Kenyah proper–the Leppo' Timai, Leppo' Tau, Bakung, and Badeng, to name just a few–are found in Apo Kayan, in the upper Balui, along the middle Mahakam and its tributaries (the Belayan and the Kelinjau), and along the lower Kayan River. Related groups live in the Bahau River and the upper Baram and, since the 1960s, along the Malinau River. And a number of groups of dubious origins, but nevertheless often collectively called Kenyah (or Leppo' Pu'un), are scattered in the middle Baram region of Sarawak.

Fig. 2. *The noble section, all that remains of a dismantled Bahau longhouse; it now serves as a meeting hall. Anthropomorphic figure, interlocked dragons, and spirals. Middle Mahakam.* (Photo by the author, 1990)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SABAH
Padas
Kinabatangan
Tj. Labian
BRUNEI DARUSSALAM
Tj. Baram
SOUTH CHINA SEA
Tawau
Semporna
Miri
Marudi
Niah
KAYAN
Sembakung
P. Sebatik
Baram
Sesayap
Tidung
P. Bunyu
KENYAH
Tarakan
Bahau
Bintulu
SARAWAK
P. Serasan
P. Beruit
Tj. Datu
Bauli
Kayan
Bulungan
CELEBES SEA
Sibu
Rajang
Kapit
Baleh
KAYAN
GAI'I
Berau
Kelai
Tanjung Redeb
Apokayan
SEGAI
IBAN
Kuching
Sambas
BIDAYUH
EAST KALIMANTAN
Ketunggau
AOHENG
BUSANG
LONG-GLAT
WEHEA
Mempawah
Landak
Kapuas
BAHAU
MODANG
Pontianak
Melawi
Mahakam
Samarinda
Purukcahu
Tenggarong (Kutai)
WEST KALIMANTAN
P. Maya
Sukadana
Pawan
CENTRAL KALIMANTAN
Barito
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Balikpapan
MAKASSAR STRAITS
P. Karimata
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Mentaya
Katingan
Kahayan
Kapuas
Tanahgrogot (Pasir)
Kotawaringin
Pembuang
Sampit
P. Bawal
Pangkalanbun
Palangka Raya
SOUTH KALIMANTAN
Kuala Pembuang
Banjaarmasin
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P. Laut
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115° E
120° E

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Fig. 3 *Wicket door, barring the entrance to the veranda; single door panel made of boards, painted with the "face" motif, locally called* irap aran *(lightning face). Aoheng from the upper Mahakam (group linked to Kayan).*
(Photo by the author, c. 1980)

Fig. 4. *Rafters and beam carved in* ajour *with one "dragon" motif and scrolls. Roof frame of the veranda of a new longhouse under construction. Aoheng from the upper Mahakam.*
(Photo by the author, 1980)

Although they are few in number, these groups have been artistically very creative, a fact that certainly can be attributed, *pro parte* at least, to the system of social stratification. Their production, however, has been quite varied in focus and style, to the extent that it is relatively irrelevant to speak of a "Kayan-Kenyah" art tradition or style. Each group, or cluster of groups, had its own tradition, and mainstream "Kayan" and "Kenyah" traditions are quite distinctive. As examples, we could just mention the fact that the Apo Kayan Kenyah used to carve stupendous large statues out of softwood, which accounts for the fact that virtually no such statue has survived, even in museums, whereas the Bahau, now famous on the art market worldwide for their statues, used hardwood; likewise, the Kenyah developed a peculiar style, marked by an extravagant profusion of intertwined spirals (fig. 2), scrolls, curlicues, and tendrils, and used both in mural painting and roof finial *ajour* carving, which is not found among other groups (fig. 3 and 4).

Arts of the Longhouse

Since we are dealing with artifacts that have survived to reach museums and the art market, we must principally focus on hardwood carving, as practiced by the Kayan, Modang, and Kenyah groups. These groups, and particularly the Kayan groups, have excelled in the low-relief carving of flat surfaces–hence the title of this article. Those flat surfaces include architectural elements, such as doors and various types of frame and wall boards, as well as diverse household objects, such as chest lids, burden basket (*dosser*) boards, and working tables or boards. In fact, they also include other elements, for example, the walls of mausoleums or the sides and lids of hardwood coffins, but this would better be left aside.

The usual type of dwelling, the longhouse, often on high stilts and under the same roof (fig. 5), consists of a row of family apartments, each opening onto a broad, common veranda. Although some groups, like the Modang, tended to build a separate house for their chief's family, most often the chief's apartment was located in the middle of the row. To mark status, that apartment was notably larger–and sometimes, as among the Kenyah, the roof was higher–and the corresponding section of the veranda, used to entertain guests and for village councils, was broader and decorated with status-marking carvings and paintings, not to mention ritual and prestige objects, such as old ceramic jars and bronze gongs.

Fig. 5. *Kenyah longhouse at the beginning of the 20th century.* (Photo by A. Nieuwenhuis, before 1903) Barbier-Mueller Archives

Early colonial photographs (fig. 6) of chiefs' verandas show that house posts, partition walls, beams and rafters, apartment doors and veranda wickets, railings, and even the notched log leading to the house, were often carved and painted. Handsomely carved collective rice mortars, fashioned in canoe shape out of softwood–since they had to be made anew for each new harvest–were placed along the partition walls.

The few old longhouses still standing today no longer feature such displays of status, but the art, particularly painting, is still well alive. Rather than a status marker reserved for aristocrats, it has become a collective ethnic identity marker for the whole community and is now displayed in new village meeting halls and other public edifices and structures.

Old photographs also show, in certain architectural elements, an interesting continuity from high-relief to low-relief carving, to simple shallow incising (engraving), with the very same decorative design continuing uninterrupted. The entire carved and engraved sections were painted in several colors, and the design itself was further extended, on the flat surface beyond them, by simple painting. Moreover, separate pieces carved in *ronde-bosse* (in the round) could also be attached to those elements.

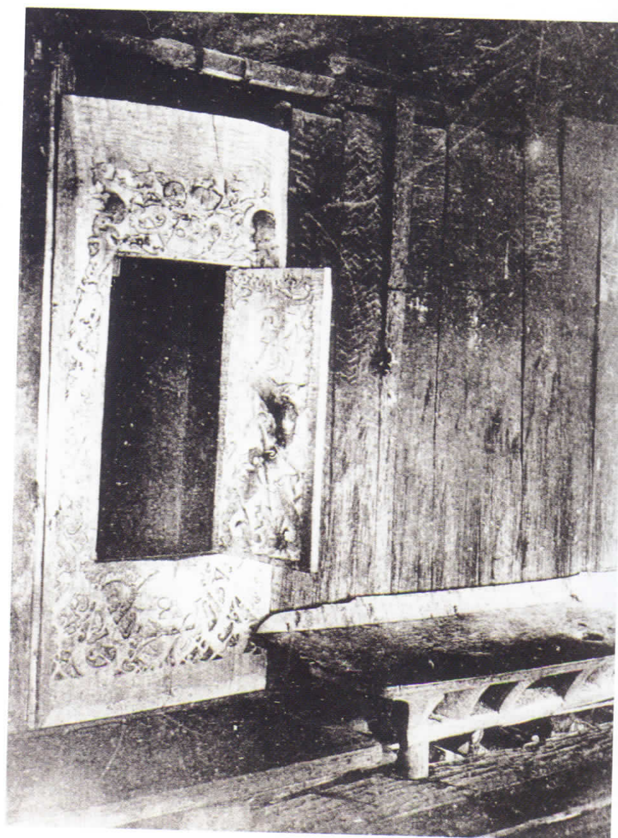

Fig. 7. *Door to a Kayan-Mendalam chief's apartment. The door sill is carved with a "face," while the door panel and frame sides bear the "dragon" motif. Note the long mortar on the right. West Kalimantan, c. 1900.*
(Photo by Nieuwenhuis, before 1903) Barbier-Mueller Archives

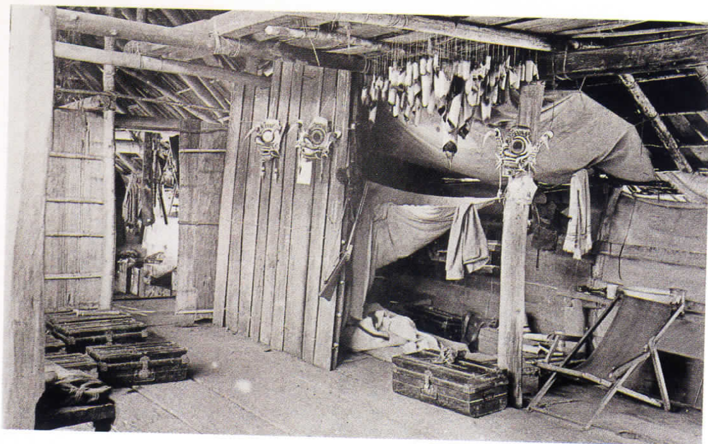

Fig. 6. *Interior of longhouse belonging to a group from the Kenyah-Kayan, in which three udoq masks are suspended from the ceiling.*
(Photo VIDOC, Amsterdam)

Apartment Doors

Doors are one of the very few architectural elements that are of interest to collectors, simply because door panels could easily be removed without risking the building's collapse. All the giant carved house posts and immense carved beams have disappeared with the longhouses and can now only be known from old photos. Other removable longhouse elements are carved boards from the partition walls, between the chief's apartment and his section of the veranda, and carved notched logs serving as stairs to the longhouse. Most often, however, those objects, much too long, were sawn down to transportable size.

So, door panels were removed and traveled to the West, whereas, judging from archive photographs, their frames, which were just as beautifully carved, if not more so, generally remained. Those frames included a rather high sill at the threshold, to prevent little children from climbing out to the veranda. Sometimes the sill was so high that even adults needed an extra step, or a stepping block (such as a gong), to climb into the apartment.

Door panels (fig. 7 and 8), often made of a huge buttress root of the honeybee tree (*Koompassia excelsa*) or else of a large ironwood board (*Eusideroxylon zwageri*), were generally high (140-170 cm.) and narrow (60-80 cm.), meant to let only one person through at a time. Probably for security reasons, they apparently were pulled open from the veranda side, so that they could be barred from inside the apartment with a heavy cross-bar. Tenons protruding from either end of the door axis, functioning as hinges, revolved in shallow cavities hollowed out from the top and bottom of the frame, and the top of the panel was sometimes further secured by rattan lashing.

The door handle usually was outside, since from the inside it was enough to push the panel, but sometimes a handle is found inside, too. The handle was either carved, as part of the door's decorative motif, out of the bulk of the thick wooden board that would be thinned down to become the door panel; or it was a separate, *ronde-bosse* carved piece that was attached to the panel. Among many groups, an ingenious system of balance weight, made with a rattan rope and a big stone, allowed for the door to close back by itself.

Fig. 8. *Door panel showing a single dragon with two heads and a profusion of horns and claws, together with secondary dragon heads on either side of the raised handle. This piece, which begs comparison with that shown in fig. 7, was brought back in 1929 by Jacques Viot. Formerly Pierre Loeb Collection. Light brown wood highlighted with lime. Height: 140 cm.* Barbier-Mueller Museum, inv. 3410.

The Dragon and the Face

Doors were generally decorated on the outside only, but sometimes the inside face of the door panel was decorated, too. Decoration on door panels (and their frames) vary in styles and media, but two motifs dominate: the "dragon" and the "face." They are both representations of powerful spirits and are meant for protection. They are also found on war shields and baby carriers. Moreover, they are also markers of status, since only certain categories of people were allowed to use these images.

Fig. 9. *Small hardwood door (one tenon is extant, top right) bearing a high-relief "dragon" motif sculpted to form a handle in the mass of the wood. The eye is a cone-shell (probably restored). On the back, there is a very stylized "dragon" motif with a non-restored cone-shell eye and an unobtrusive handle through which to pass a supple, woven strap. Kayan origin, region unknown. Height: 58 cm.* Barbier-Mueller Museum, inv. 2443.

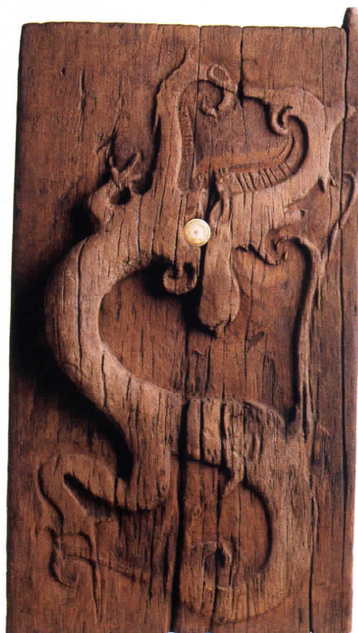

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

The "dragon" motif, variously referred to as "dog" or "monitor lizard" because of taboos associated with the name of the powerful dragon, is always presented from the side (fig. 9 and 10). It features a prominent head with one large eye, horns, and stretched jaws with rows of teeth, fangs, and a tongue; a curvaceous body, often reduced in relative size, or just stylized, or even absent (sometimes, the motif only consists of a large eye surrounded with scrolls); four small legs with claws, and a tail, which itself could be amplified to resemble a head, complete with horns and an eye. Either the body or one limb of the dragon can be raised in *ronde-bosse* carving from the door panel's surface to form a handle (fig. 9).

The "face" motif, really referred to as a "mask" (*hudo', edo'*) among most Kayan and Modang groups, also represents the dragon, presented from the front, with emphasis on its scary face. Indeed, the face is generally broad, round or heart-shaped, with huge round eyes, flaring nostrils, a mouth with two rows of teeth, an additional two or four fangs, and the tongue often visible in the middle. It is flanked by two tiny arms, half raised, and ending in claws (fig. 11). The Bornean "face" motif, for the people who create it, is often associated with lightning, rain, fertility, and divine protection.

Fig. 10. *Section of a carved board, showing a "dragon" motif in high relief, with scaly body, horns, and fangs. The eye is highlighted by the top of a cone-shell. Probably Kayan, region unknown. Light brown wood. Traces of colored repainting in red oil. Height: 141 cm.* Barbier-Mueller Museum, inv. 3446.

Fig.11. *Wooden panel with low relief carving of "face" motif with short arms. Note the rectangular hole on the side to the right, missing on the left, where it was cut out by breakage which did not damage the carving. The tenon and the lower attachment hole were also broken off on the left side. The next photo shows a complete panel. Probably from Upper Mahakam. Buseng or Aoheng. Height: 133 cm.* Barbier-Mueller Museum, inv. 3442.

Fig. 11

Fig. 12

Much has been previously written on the stylistic relation of Bornean "dragon" motifs to early Chinese dragons, and I shall not elaborate on this here. As for the "face" motif, again stylistic relations have been noted, this time, with the Indian *kala makara*, widely found on Javanese temples. Whatever the influences and the ultimate, possibly diverse, origins of these motifs, the "dragon" and the "face," for Borneans, are two inseparable aspects of the same religious and cosmogonic thought (fig. 12 and 13). Indeed, the "face" motif may be created by combining two "dragon" motifs facing each other and joined at their mouths, which then form the face's mouth.

Other motifs are found, such as the monkey, among the Kayan groups, and anthropomorphic figures, as well as the hornbill or its head, among the Kenyah. The Kenyah also often feature the tree of life but, so far as I am aware, not on doors. One Kenyah motif, sometimes carved on a door sill, is the "heavenly face," a serene human visage, generally triangular, and very different from the scary dragon face.

A particular type of door was the wicket door that closed the veranda where the notched log reached (fig. 3). It was meant to keep little children in and dogs out–for the latter, with little effect, I must say. It consisted of either one or two panels, carved and painted, or only painted, and revolving like apartment doors or, more simply, on rattan-lash rings. A common motif here is the scary "face," also commonly found carved at the head of the notched log.

The "face" motif, which is widely found among the groups of Borneo's southern half (Ngaju, etc.), albeit in a different ritual context, apparently is not much in use among western Borneo groups–e.g. Iban and Bidayuh–which, however, represent the dragon or serpent (*nabau*, *naga*) in a very different manner, and make much use of foliage (fig. 14) and floral decorative motifs, sometimes as a background to representations of the dragon or serpent.

Fig. 13

Fig. 14

Fig.12. *Particularly thick and heavy hardwood panel, carved in low-relief with four "dragons" and one "face." Note tenons and holes. It might have been the door to a chief's mausoleum or the lid to a rice storage chest. Possibly Busang. Middle Mahakam. Height: 124 cm.* Barbier-Mueller Museum, inv. 3490.

Fig. 13. *Hardwood panel (possibly door with the top sawn off) with a high-relief "face" motif and a low-relief "dragon." Modang or Kayan group. Published in the exhibition catalogue* Kalimantan Mythe en Kunst *(Delft 1973). Height: 109 cm.* Barbier-Mueller Museum, inv. 3412.

Fig. 14. *Door panel showing the* nabau *of the Iban, which is also a "dragon." Low-relief foliage, symbolic of fertility, spreads from the dragon's mouth and covers the entire panel. A "bamboo shoot" motif decorates the frame. Note the tenons at the bottom and top of the left side of the door. One angle had been broken and (indigenously) restored. In Western Sarawak style. Height: 156 cm.* Barbier-Mueller Museum, inv. 3499. Unpublished.

Decorated Boards

In Kayan, Modang, and Kenyah longhouses, carved boards could be found in a variety of places: running along the bottom of the wall between the noble folk's apartment and the veranda; anywhere in that same partition wall, and positioned either horizontally (fig.15) or vertically; on the veranda, along beams connecting the top of two main house posts; along the veranda railing; and even along the bottom of an outside wall, at floor level. Furthermore, rafters above the veranda could be carved in *ajour* along their whole length. All these carved doors were at conspicuous places for all, villagers and outsiders alike, to see at all times; I have no knowledge of such displays of status inside the noble folk's apartment.

The board could be carved along its whole length (fig. 15), or comprise only one or several carved sections, each of a length varying from a couple of feet to over one meter, the rest being planed flat. The carved sections are in low relief, or in combined low and high relief. They generally were painted–mainly with lime for white and soot and pig fat for black, but also sometimes with vegetable dyes for red. As mentioned above, they could be removed without threatening the structure of the longhouse, and so they were, and they often were cut in order to carry off only the carved sections (fig. 11).

The motifs found on those boards are mostly, as on door panels, the "dragon" and the "face," but other motifs occur, such as the hornbill (among Kenyah groups)–or, locally, a wild pig's head, standing in for the "face" (among the Kayan).

Fig. 15. *Long and narrow panel made from semi-hardwood, destined to be placed horizontally (like a frieze) to decorate a longhouse. Two dragons confront each other, and to the left, a "face" motif completes the design. Polychrome remains. Possibly Kayan, Upper Mahakam. Length: 232 cm.* Barbier-Mueller Museum, inv. 3445. Unpublished.

Other Carved Boards

Beyond architectural elements, a few household implements also qualify for treatment in this article, as they, too, display low-relief carving on flat surfaces. They, too, were aristocratic objects. Foremost among them are the wooden backpieces of burden baskets or *dossers*. Those baskets, made of plaited rattan, were used to carry personal belongings when traveling. The backpiece, a board of about 60-65 cm. in height, was most often made of softwood, for reasons of weight, so, rather few have survived and those are not very old. Some, however, were made of hardwood, and may therefore be a bit older.

Of those backpieces, only the top quarter or top third is decorated, partly carved in low-relief and partly incised. The decorated section faces the bearer's neck, protecting him by scaring off evil spirits coming his way. Indeed, the only motif known to be carved on those objects is the "face," such as described above–a big face and tiny arms. Its huge eyes are emphasized by added white circles, made of either the top of a cone-shell or a large marine gastropod's operculum, traditionally glued with *damar* resin to their sockets.

The backpiece is generally pierced along its side and bottom rims with holes, through which it was tied with rattan strands to the basket's wickerwork. Nevertheless, mostly in hardwood backpieces, low ridges were left at the back, along the side and bottom rims, in which holes were pierced to attach the wickerwork. These holes were thus not visible from the front. In collection pieces, such ridges with holes sometimes appear to have been scraped off.

Finally, there are various types of working boards of slightly smaller size (generally less than 60 cm. in length), made of softwood or hardwood, which display low-relief carving or incised motifs (fig. 16). Most

Fig. 16. *Small hardwood working board with black patina, showing a large "face"* (nang berang) *with little arms and four intertwined dragons. There is a hole at the top. Old photos show women doing bead-work using various types of boards or tables. Possibly Busang or Long-Glat. Upper Mahakam region. Length: 59 cm.* Barbier-Mueller Museum, inv. 3444.

of these were for beadwork. Some are rectangular, to be used leaning on a block, facing the bead weaver. They usually feature a hole at the top end, so that they could be hung from a wall when not in use. They are carved with the "face" motif at the top end, and the carving may extend down to half the board, or even to the whole board, with any number of interlocked "dragon" motifs.

Another type of working board, especially meant for beadwork weaving, rests horizontally on four feet, as a small table. It displays "face" motifs at both ends, the working area being the middle part of the board. Shallow grooves or low ridges may outline the sides of the board. Along the edges of the end motifs, small nicks allowed the bead weaver to set her threads (made of fibers from pineapple leaves).

Epilogue

Much still remains of Borneo's ethnic arts and crafts to be investigated, especially if we consider the broad variety of ethnic groups, types of artifacts, and styles found on this big island. Although the enduring interest expressed for some of its best known productions is certainly comforting, it would be very heartening to witness a hardier endorsement by museums and collectors of a historic switch of status, from crafts to arts, of ethnic productions in "lowly" materials. The art market's long-standing obsession with noble materials–bronze, stone, ceramic, hardwood and, more recently (and auspiciously), textiles–as well as with the question of an artifact's "age," constitutes both a critical intellectual bias and a plain hindrance to a better knowledge and understanding of ethnic cultures.

Fig. 17. *Vertical board to which a wickerwork baby-holder was attached, using the holes on the sides. Height: 62 cm.* Barbier-Mueller Museum, inv. 3419. Unpublished.

BIOGRAPHY

Bernard Sellato has been working in and on Borneo since 1973, when he first went there as a geologist. Consequently, he became an anthropologist, taking his Ph. D. from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Sorbonne) in Paris. A specialist of Borneo's nomadic forest peoples and of the island's material culture, he is the author of *Nomades et sédentarisation à Borneo* (Paris, 1989), *Hornbill and Dragon. Arts and Culture of Borneo* (1989 and 1992), *Nomads of the Borneo Rainforest* (Honolulu, 1994), *Borneo. People of the Rainforest* (a cd-rom; Singapore, 1998), and scores of articles in journals and books, and the editor of *Crafts from the Rainforest: Basketwork of Borneo* and *Borneo Nomads Today* (both in press). He now heads the Institute for Research on Southeast Asia (National Science Research Center and Université de Provence) in Marseilles, France.

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