

Kelirieng

THE VANISHING MONUMENTAL HERITAGE OF SARAWAK

Among the most outstanding buildings which have been made in Sarawak, the burial poles have no direct parallels elsewhere in Borneo. Their importance is such that several lie in the collection of the Sarawak Museum. They have become an official Sarawak State gift to West Malaysia. Two poles, one Punan Ba and one Sekapan kelirieng, are now standing on the Muzium Negara grounds in Kuala Lumpur, while another one found its way to Brunei.

Among the various peoples known as 'Orang Ulu' – Kayan, Kenyah, Kajang, Punan Ba and Berawan to name a few – and the Melanau local groups in the coastal areas, there is a wide range of wooden items showing carved ornamentation. The most common timber used for large monuments, kelirieng burial poles or salong mausoleums, is ironwood (*Eusideroxylon zwageri* T. de B.), named belian or kayu besi in Malay. The wood is very dense, showing a tight grain. Ironwood grows mostly in the lowlands as in the Bintulu-Tubau and the Niah areas. The straight section of the trunk, free of branches, is between 6 and 20 metres and it might weigh several tons. That is why it has been preferred for making large posts and burial poles. The carver's traditional

¹ A Punan Ba klirieng was even smuggled to the US via Kapit and Sibul in the 1980s. It was formerly located at Lo'o Ba in the upstream area of the village.

² Peter Metcalf, 'Berawan Mausoleums', *Sarawak Museum Journal* vol. XXIV (45) 1976: 122-135, especially plate VI, VII, XIII, XIV.

³ Actually, after Dr. Ida Nicolaisen mentioned to the Museum in the late 1970s the presence of rare, old burial poles, on the upper Ba River; see Nicolaisen 1984 article published in the *Sarawak Gazette* at the time.



Punan Ba – Sama Klirieng at Long Beleti' during the 1981 Sarawak Museum's survey of burial posts in Belaga District. It shows the ancient designs such as the 'net'(mata jalo). The man in the middle is the Museum's team survey leader Encik Joseph Ingai Gasing with his Punan Ba assistants Sagit Sapua' (Ake Nyuan) on his left and Encik Anye' Mibau (Ake Leduang) and his right.

tools are simple: the adze-axe beliung, which changes function according to the blade's position on the shaft, and then the bush knife (parang) serves for cutting the wood down to size. The carved ornamentation in high or low relief is added to the piece later, using gouges and knives of different sizes. Usually, the larger pieces such as longhouse posts or burial poles are lying on the ground during these phases.

They are capped either by a heavy flat stone slab, a wooden

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The Punan Ba burial post from Lo'o Pilah (upper Rejang) was moved to the Sarawak Museum as early as 1925. Detail of gibbon/anthropomorphic figures of various sizes are carved in open work on the top of the Punan Ba kelirieng where the burial jar was placed.



Detail of the double trunk kelirieng built by Aman Tipong Tuluy, the great Kejaman chief at Long Segaham in the 1870s. However, the salong chamber, also from the Kejaman Lasah community, has no historical connection to kelirieng; it has been added later. The double trunk kelirieng was donated to the State of Sarawak and moved to Kuching in 1972, first in the reservoir Park then on the grounds of the Sarawak Museum



Detail of heart shaped spirit faces with bulging eyes on the double trunk kelirieng

KINO PHOTO: KELVIN CHAN



A combined kelirieng salong for Sawieng at Levu Ado on the Kakus River of the Punan Ba - Tetau people

upper framework or, more rarely, by a burial chamber - especially among Berawan and related peoples in the Baram area. These poles, which were used at the occasion of a secondary burial (nulang) as a prestige funerary rite provided for aristocrats and leaders in the community, including their family members, are made of a whole belian tree trunk. The bones of the dead were cleaned and placed in ceramic jars (tajau, gusi) as part of a lavish ritual. Metcalf noted that some lijèng mausoleums were supported by two carved posts instead of one. The Seping people in the Belaga River have their own version of this latter type built on two thin and high posts.

Burial poles, variously named kelirieng klirieng, kirieng ke-ling, keliriang, were made among the Punan Ba in Belaga, the Tetau/Punan Ba people in Kakus, the Punan Pedan and the Punan Minah, on a tributary of the Kemena, besides the Kajang (Kejaman, Sekapan) on the banks of the Baluy River (Belaga). These poles show a high/low relief ornamentation



Detail of the upper section of a kelirieng standing near the clinic at Lo'o Ba. The carved anthropomorphic figure seems to be holding a trophy human head on his shoulder, a very rare occurrence of kelirieng decoration



Detail of the characteristic spirit face of a Sekapan kelirieng, now on the grounds of the Muzium Negara in Kuala Lumpur

1996, 2016, 2017 PHOTOS: A. J. GUERREIRO

on most of their surface. Smaller poles, called keludan by the Punan Ba, were used for the remains of wealthy commoners of good standing (panyin jiàà) placed on top in a burial jar. These latter poles, about 2.5 to 3 metres high, present only a few carved markings or notches on their surface. In contrast, the tall and massive jerunay of the Melanau Likau in Mukah (many are found in Kampung Tellian) show a little carved decoration on the upper part, around the opening used to hold the burial jar. In Dalat and along the Oya River, the poles named kelidéng, are much less numerous, numerous, famous for their intricate carvings of 'net' designs.

Under the capping stone, the Punan Ba poles present an open work section which was meant to hold the burial jar. This upper section is usually carved in the shape of gibbons (kelavet) or anthropomorphic figures, sometimes done as janus heads, symmetrically on both sides. Smaller figures emerging from the larger ones may have other symbolic meanings, such as rebirth.

The Melanau Likou burial poles, such as those standing in Kampung Tellian and some of the older Punan Ba poles, have four prongs where the main jar was placed, as the one in Lo'ó Beliti' on the upper Rejang. In the middle section, separated by rope patterns (talé, taléy), representing a wild creeper, two vertical cavities were hollowed at the back of the pole. These served to insert either other burial jars and/or smaller coffins (lungun), especially those made for children or elderly people, whose bones were placed vertically with the skull on the top near the opening. Eventually, the lower section of the poles might have included other cavities or not. The different sections of the Kajang and Punan Ba posts are carved in deep relief with the faces of protecting spirits (hudo', udo', otu) and geometric or curvilinear ornaments in both high relief and low relief, i.e. spirals (ikang, ikéang, kelikuang), aso', human and animal bodies, and other smaller figures, some looking like birds. On older poles (Punan Ba, Melanau Likau in Oya area), the refined 'net design' (mata jalo', jala') executed with variations of shapes, is noticeable.

Significantly, the sacred dimension of these monuments and the taboos surrounding them were also linked to the practice of human sacrifice. This was actually a similar practice to that of the Kayan who built instead the aristocratic salong.



A Punan Ba kelirieng being literally 'eaten up' by the forest on banks of the Rejang, Belaga District

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The blood-letting accomplished by human sacrifice – for which the Melanau slaves were slaughtered, crushed in the pole pit or even attached to the pole until they died of hunger – was deemed necessary to achieve the ritual efficacy of the pole. Perhaps, the origin of the practice derived from eschatological ideas of 'rebirth' and that of the compensation involved in the sacrifice. In short, the intangible cultural heritage connected to the poles (tales, myths, beliefs, technical knowledge...) needs to be recorded as much as possible.

The conservation of this monumental heritage has been carried out by the Sarawak Museum Department. A pilot survey took place in Belaga in 1981 under the direction of Joseph Ingai Gasing, the Museum's technical officer, followed by others, before the Bakun hydro project was implemented. The four burial poles presently in the Museum's collection came from different periods and they were moved to various places on the Museum grounds between 1925 and the 1980s. Interestingly, each one of the poles came in from a different place: Long Pila, Belaga; Sungei Ud, Dalat; Long Segaham, Belaga (the latter being the unique double kelirieng) Sungai Ba or upper Rejang. These poles range from about 4.78 metres high, for the smallest, to above 11 metres for the tallest. Now conservation work is also needed on these poles, especially if they are to stay in the open. Probably, it would better for the most fragile ones to be moved inside the new Sarawak Museum building.

The protection of the burial poles still standing or lying on their original sites in Sarawak raises many concerns. Until now, there has been no conservation plan to keep them in good condition. However, some have been registered under the first Sarawak Heritage Ordinance drafted by the Sarawak Museum (1993). At community level, individual initiatives have taken place to protect endangered poles. For instance, the Punan Ba people have consolidated and re-erected the sheds built by the Museum team where the oldest poles have been found on sites in the upper Ba River (L. Sematay, L. Ayo, L. Punan). These poles have an impor-

tant cultural and historical value for the community. The two oldest ones found at Lo'ó Sematay might be as old as the mid-17th century. They mark the identity of the Punan people in the area and connect them with their past and first known leaders, the rival brothers – or perhaps cousins – Kavú' Oko and Kavú' Oka. Later, between the 1840s and 1880s, many burial poles were built on the banks of the Rejang and upriver in Belaga, among the Kajang (Sekapan, Kejaman). The Punan poles erected in Tatau at Rantau Belak seem to date from the same period, when James Brooke's rule was being established in the interior of Sarawak. The related lijëng found on the Tinjar and Tutoh Rivers of the lower Baram area in the Berawan's territory are even more endangered.

If nothing is done to save them, these masterpieces of woodcarving that are still in the open will have vanished by the 2030s. Many have already crumbled in the forest and on river banks. Standing under the elements, the huge belian trunks used to make them cannot last for eternity. When covered by the vegetation growth, they start to decay, the moisture being harmful to the timber. Since 2017, during field surveys in Belaga district, Baram, and Tinjar, I came upon many damaged and ruined burial poles and mausoleums that are vanishing, literally disintegrating into the ground. Even the Pandan's klirieng (Punan Ba), on the banks of the Kemena River, whose lower section is sealed in a cemented base, is currently slanting and the risks of its collapsing are growing everyday. Hopefully, a comprehensive salvage plan can be developed with the help of the State government, NGOs and Dayak cultural foundations. There is actually an urgency to it, this important cultural heritage being unique to Sarawak.

KINO

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