



Fig. 3.1: Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden te Leiden, 1888.

## Dayak Shields: Courting and Defying Death

By Steven G. Alpert

Borneo, the world's third largest island, straddles the heart of island Southeast Asia. From the outset of its discovery by Europeans in the sixteenth century, the island's peoples, some of whom were reputed to be fierce warriors and avid head-hunters, together with Borneo's vast equatorial forests, myriad rivers, unknown species of flora and fauna, and animal life that included the orangutan ("the man of the forest"), ignited in the Western imagination an immense interest in this exotic landscape.<sup>1</sup> Facts and fictions were eagerly recorded, and often sensationalized, in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century memoirs and travelogues, as well as being carefully documented by early colonial officials, ethnographers, and expeditions of zoologists and naturalists. These hardy individuals were the first alien collectors of Dayak shields.

The peoples who produced the shields illustrated in this chapter are generically known as "Dyak" or "Diak" in older literature and more recently as Dayak, a word that many believe was derived from the ancient Austronesian word *daya*, meaning "towards the interior". The term was already in use before the arrival of Europeans but was popularized and further codified in the nineteenth century as a colonial convenience. Today, the word Dayak is still generically used to describe the more than 200 groups, most living in the interior of the island, who share similar traits from a common Austronesian heritage. In this essay, we are mostly concerned with the Bidayuh, Iban, Kenyah, Kayan, and related peoples, who often refer to themselves directly by name, or as simply being *orang ulu*, peoples of the upriver or hills.

The high number of shields that survive from Borneo relative to those of other nearby island groups partly reflects an improbable historical adventure and a storybook tale. The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 put Borneo into the Dutch colonial sphere. However, in 1838 an Englishman and adventurer, James Brooke, became embroiled in suppressing a rebellion of the interior tribes of Sarawak on behalf of the Sultan of Brunei. In 1841, as a reward for his services, he was made governor of this territory. Brooke soon began to expand his initial land grant into what would eventually become the independent state of Sarawak, which was ruled by his family for 105 years before being turned over to the British crown in 1946. Since 1963, Borneo has been divided among East Malaysia (Sarawak and Sabah), the oil-rich Sultanate of Brunei, and the Republic of Indonesia, which possesses the largest portion of Borneo's land mass (73%) known as Kalimantan.

John Dalton, an Englishman who visited Borneo for an extended period of time in 1827–28, wrote:

[T]hey have no idea of fear and fight until they are cut to pieces; indeed their astonishing strength, agility, and peculiar method of taking care of themselves, are such that I am firmly of opinion a good European swordsman would stand little chance with them, man to man [...].<sup>2</sup>



SHIELD 1

Of all the shields from island Southeast Asia, arguably the type most readily recognizable by collectors for their artistry and highly varied patterns are from Borneo. Originally of Kenyah or Kayan origin and locally known as a *kliau*, *klebit bok*, *kelempit*, *talawang*, or *terbai*, over time this shield type was adopted by the Iban and other tribes owing to its streamlined ergonomics and martial efficiency (see Shield 1 as an example of this type). It is an oblong fighting shield carved from strong but lightweight jelutong wood “not meant to receive a spear point, but to divert the spear by a twist of the hand.”<sup>3</sup> Referring to swordplay, Dalton, wrote, “The Diaks, in fighting, always strike and seldom thrust.”<sup>4</sup> Each end of this shield type is tapered to an acute point that could be used to stabilize it against the ground, jam it into an opponent, or be offered up in a deadly feint, the latter utilizing the rattan bands that run horizontally across the shield, which while strengthening its general resilience and preventing it from shattering, also allowed a clever combatant to snare an opponent’s sword. According to Bishop McDougall, this martial gesture provided the brief moment necessary to dispatch an enemy’s head from his body.<sup>5</sup>

William Furness, on observing young men being schooled in weaponry, wrote,

In the middle of the room [...] stood an old warrior decked out in war-coat and cap, and brandishing a spear in one hand and a shield in the other; around him in a circle sat eight or ten young men, watching breathlessly his every moment [...] he was instructing the novices how to lunge, guard and parry with spear and shield. [...] He showed how to creep stealthily and at the same time keep the body thoroughly covered by the shield which, considering that this protecting article is four feet long by eighteen inches wide, cannot be called a difficult problem.<sup>6</sup>

Generally, warriors made their own shields, however, Dalton mentions that his friend and protector, Rajah Selgie, commanded a class of artisans who did “nothing but fabricate arms, such as *mandows* [*mandau*: sword], spears, shields, *sumpits* [blowguns], and darts [...]”<sup>7</sup> It is not clear to what extent the production of shields by specialists was exercised after pacification in the late nineteenth century.

Shields were usually plain but could be elaborately painted on both sides. The most common decorative design elements consist of a centrally placed mask-like face with fanged teeth, which is sometimes flanked by hornbills, dragons, mythical tiger-dogs, and protective spirit figures. The designs are rendered in a multitude of combinations, which are then united, “strengthened”, and tied together by scrolling vegetal patterns. In former times, “the use of these designs was related to social status of the people, living or dead, for whom the items were carved.”<sup>8</sup>

Rarer patterns applied to this shield shape range from a perfected simplicity to fractured imagery that suggests the flickering shadows of a mythic mind glimpsing a supernatural world beyond our modern imagination. An example of the former, Shield 23 with



SHIELD 23



FIG. 1  
RARE EXAMPLE WITH  
TARGET-LIKE EYE

its compounded rectangular lozenges of three colors and four “eyes” bluntly fixates the viewer. An illustration of the latter type (fig. 3.1) consists of a target-like eye and half of a menacing fanged jaw, enveloped by other floating jaws and a supernatural beast *en profile*. Forms seemingly come together and disintegrate into one another in a disconcerting and profoundly artful way. Visually arresting designs reflected their owner’s identity, skill, and prowess, and when wielded or invoked in ceremonies or dances they reaffirmed a group’s dynamic, courage, and audacity. As a ploy, startling designs are part of a practical approach to achieving dominance, and they add a physical and psychological advantage over an opponent by inflating one’s apparent fierceness.<sup>9</sup>

Also reproduced here are two shields with unusual painted designs from the venerable Sarawak Museum, an important institution founded in 1860 by Charles Brooke, the Second White Raja of Sarawak. The first shield was collected at Loong Tak in 1901 (Shield 22). As different groups were always expropriating designs from one another, it reflects a hybridisation of form and design that seems to have occurred at an early date. This particular example is shaped like a traditional Kenyah shield, but the imagery of repeated

scrolls and feathers most likely relates to Land Dayak (Bidayuh) traditions. The second shield, with a pair of “eyes” and arching foliate designs, is from the Seru people, a group from Saratok that was rendered extinct when absorbed by their more warlike Iban neighbours (Shield 20). Collected by a colonial officer in 1949, it was a trophy that underscores the fragility of tradition and presents us with a combination of motifs that otherwise would not have survived.

Another shield illustrating this classic tapered style is said to be from the Batang Lupar area (Shield 21). Its foliate designs and floating abstract patterns harken back to centuries of Indic and courtly Islamic aesthetics, and reflect the Iban’s (once referred to as “Sea Dayaks”) long history as mercenaries and coastal raiders that afforded them early exposure to a wider world.

A particularly fine and early Dayak oblong shield (Shield 1) was once in the collection of the *Natura Artis Magistra* in Amsterdam. Ironically, it depicts a powerfully rendered simian-like crouching figure surrounded by tufts of hair from dispatched enemies. *Artis* was founded in 1838, becoming a storehouse of such “ethnological” material before the birth of modern anthropology. Much of the institution’s ethnographic material became the foundation of what would become the world-renowned collection of artefacts held by the Royal Tropical Institute, or *Tropenmuseum*. Christian Kaufmann has succinctly noted that zoologists, botanists, geographers, and medical doctors made significant contributions to the current knowledge of ethnographic material by applying zoological methods to collecting artefacts, among which were shields that were deposited in zoos, museums, and in university collections.



SHIELD 22



SHIELD 20



SHIELD 21



FIG. 3.2  
OVOID

In addition to the elongated six-sided shield, there were many other types of shields the construction of which, shape, and weight varied according to strategic concerns, terrain, and battle conditions. For instance, Dayaks used larger, heavier shields to protect their bodies as they attempted to set fire to the pylons of a besieged longhouse.<sup>10</sup> Small round shields<sup>11</sup> and the mobile ovoid shields of the Bidayuh (fig. 3.2), which were made of strips of cane, plaited materials and light wood, primarily served to deflect poison darts and possibly as shamanistic tools.

In an interview with Dr. Peter Kedit, a former director of the Sarawak Museum, and Mr. Janang anak Ensiring, an ethnologist from the Tun Jugah Foundation, regarding shield types and their uses for this essay, Mr. Janang both diagrammed (fig. 3.3) and described in great detail an unusual shield the story of which was handed down to him directly by his grandfather,

Gara anak Kalom, who fought alongside Munan, the son of Minggat anak Lua, at the Ulu Batang Ai, also known in history as the “Cholera Expedition.” The *remang berat*, or “moving cloud,” was a shield of most unusual construction.<sup>12</sup> Fabricated from tightly plaited canes of *temiang*, the “sacred bamboo” of Sarawak, the shield’s height was equal to or slightly above the height of its user. The individual canes were approximately 1–1½ inches in diameter and carefully selected before being tightly bound using additional rattan strips and rounded into a circular shape that was wider in diameter than

a normal siege shield. Rather than being held upright with a looped wooden grip typical of other shields, it was manipulated by a warrior pulling a cord (*kalong*) made of strong twined strips from inner tree bark that were then braided into a stiff or coarse rope. This rope was threaded through the centre part of the shield which was attached to a pole-like circular inner form that served as a pivoting or pulley device to move or spin the outer part of the shield’s shell. This allowed its handler to rotate it in either a clockwise or counter-clockwise direction as required.

As a battle shield used in encounters that were initially dominated by spear throwing, the “moving cloud” would be placed in the front line and at points along the side of a formation. Its rotating action, akin to a movable turret, allowed the Iban to face a foe approaching from multiple directions. The shield’s back-and-forth movement was intended to deflect spears as the formation advanced. It is easy to imagine that if too many spears were to become embedded in the shield it would become increasingly unwieldy and then might impede the forward progress of a group of warriors in battle. In *Ten Years in Sarawak* (1866), Charles Brooke describes a triangular formation that was deployed to surround the White Raja, who as ruler and as a manifestation of Sengalang Burong, the god of war and healing, was protected by the coordinated effort of his Iban warriors.<sup>13</sup>

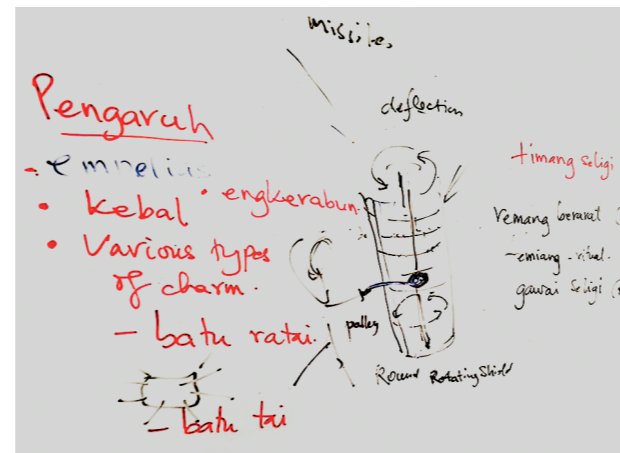


FIG. 3.3  
DIAGRAM BY THE DIRECTOR OF THE SARAWAK MUSEUM,  
MR JANANG ANAK ENSIRING.

The “moving cloud” was a simple but ingenious barrier that, as its name poetically implies, was something that could not be clutched, grasped, penetrated, or conquered. Such an impregnable advancing “human shield” was carried only by a *bujang berani* (a noted warrior) who had been well trained in its mechanics and use. Such warriors were referred to as being *kebal*, meaning that their forearms and indeed their entire bodies were so hardened that not even an enemy’s blade could cut through their skin.

Like many aspects of traditional Iban life, shield-making was dependent on interpretative augury and omens. In this case, the sought-after augury included encountering a *nendak* (a white-rumped shama, *Cospsychus malabaricus Scopoli*), a bird that is considered to be *burung chelap*, or “cool”. It might seem antithetical that such a bird with this quality is an essential augury to an action that reflects violence, but it makes perfect sense in a world of binary qualities that must always be harmonized to produce good outcomes. In shield-making, the *nendak* most likely connoted the desire for success that required just the right cooling component in what would otherwise be a “hot” or dangerous enterprise.

For all of the Dayak groups, the fabrication of something really powerful required perfect execution without incidence. Prior to and after making a shield, there must be propitious offerings, including blood offerings. A smear of chicken’s blood was an indispensable ingredient to ensure that an aggressive move by an opponent would be deflected, whether it involved a shield, a spear, darts, or a sword. Other charms were placed within a fetish bag (*empelias*) that was worn by heralded warriors. An individual’s bag might include a variety of personal charms from small bits of metal to organic materials such as bezoars, crystals, wild boar tusks (*taring babi*), or magic stones (*batu*). These would provide *batu ratai* for stamina, *batu tai* to protect one’s backside, *batu kilat* to run fast, or an *engkerabon* to become invisible.<sup>14</sup>

Benedict Sandin, the first indigenous director of the Sarawak Museum to write about Iban adventurers in Sumatra, noted that after a number of Saribas Iban were killed in an incident, their high chief (*penghulu*) Saang and other leaders “ordered their men to make wooden shields of war.”<sup>15</sup> Shield-making, the ritual cultivation of strength (*bertapa*), and the search for charms (*nampok*) and their utilization were part of a process of total immersion before battle. To ensure victory, invincibility, and the taking of many heads, the Iban and other Dayak groups sought an ecstatically aggressive state of heightened purpose to cultivate their spiritual power and supernatural strength.<sup>16</sup>

For the Iban, this aggressive state of mind was further fostered and ritualized prior to a raid during the *gawai seligi*, or “spear ceremony.” The fortifying of a shield or weapons and the binding of it to its owner involved invoking the spirits with incantations, sacred chants, and voices of call-and-response during the *gawai seligi*, which was led by *lemambang*, or ritual experts. To best receive the gods and to ensure a fortuitous outcome before a raid or battle, bards performed these rituals continuously for two nights and two days. The *gawai seligi* included fiery exhortations to valour, the blessing of weaponry, the collective supercharging of charms, and the raising of a chorus of voices to send a current of death to destroy the spirit of one’s enemies.

Many Western writers have commented on the striking appearance of Dayak warriors. Edgar Rice Burroughs, the creator of *Tarzan*, described their appearance in one of his short stories as natives bent on intimidating their foes with savage howling and menacing gesticulations accentuated by the “brilliant colors of their war-coats” and the festooning of hornbill and argus pheasant feathers from their caps, and the “strange devices painted upon their gaudy war shields.”<sup>17</sup>

A respected warrior’s armour of a sword, javelin, and shield was often finely accessorised with embellished headgear (fig. 3.6), the most notable being rattan helmets with artfully cast or cut metal frontlets.<sup>18</sup> To appear more menacing, padded war jackets (fig. 3.4) were also carefully constructed or woven and then covered with the pelts and skins of various animals such as the tortoise-shell leopard (*Felis macrocelis*), the thick scaly hide of the pangolin (*manis javanica*), or the sewn-on scales of the scaroid fish (*Pseudoscarus marine*).



FIG. 3.4  
CARL BOCK'S ENGRAVING OF A WARRIOR

The awe-inspiring visual impact of this martial regalia is evident in romanticised early Western depictions, such as Carl Bock’s engraving of a well-appointed warrior with spear and shield in hand gesturing under an emerging full moon (fig. 3.4). In engravings, elegant sepia or black and-white photographs, and in grainy early film clips, shields are commonly the accoutrements of tribesmen who are either depicted in mock combat or swaying in hypnotic dances that invoke the bravery of their ancestors.

Shields were also used in a variety of other ways: “Mr. Dalton describes the funeral ceremonies of the Dyak as follows; [...] they lay the body in a place prepared, without a coffin; by his side are deposited his arms, particularly his shield, spear, and mandau [*mandau*].”<sup>19</sup>

Shields also appear in various binary rituals and ceremonies led by shamans, seers, and women, as described in the harvest festivals of the Land Dyaks (Bidayuh):

The further symbolism of the priestesses’ dress is most curious. For it consists of the men’s insignia of war. Their mantle of red cloth; gay petticoat, hung with hundreds of tinkling hawkbells, is ornamented with the men’s tokens of victory, feathers of sacred birds, and human hair. This is like the Kayan custom, when at their harvest feasts the women wear men’s clothes and go through a war-dance with swords and shields.<sup>20</sup>

Furness writes that among the Kayan he witnessed an “old hag of a Dayong [priestess], chanting in a monotonous minor key, strutted backward and forward with a shield in one hand and a *parang* [blade] in the other.”<sup>21</sup>

Commenting further on fertility magic: “then followed a minute account of the harvest-festival, when women dress like men in nothing but a chawat [loincloth], and parade about the house in a long procession carrying shield, *parang*, and spear.”<sup>22</sup>

It should be noted that Iban women also played a major role in preparing their men for war. Their adaptation of shield imagery (also referred to as *terbai*) became a strong and meaningful design element in their weaving repertoire. They assembled special heirloom plates (*piring*) holding essential sacrificial items and placed them on powerfully imbued blankets. These tasks were the purview of master weavers and the most highly respected women of the house, who were often the descendants of famous war chiefs.<sup>23</sup>

Dressed in their finest and most complete regalia, again the women’s presence served a “binary” — that is to say, complementary — association with their menfolk to attract the attention and the blessings of the spirits. Women still express this ethos today in the ritual festival they perform to spiritually reinforce men departing on a *bejalai*, or long journey. The *betambah bulu* ceremony includes tying a *pua*, or ceremonial blanket, to the *renyai*, the sacred tree, the ladder to heaven, together with a sword or knife, while the ceremony itself is “wrapped” by the guidance of a *lemambang*’s recitations. At this time, young maidens also tie threads onto the men’s jackets to ensure their safety and material success. The imperatives of this ceremony look back to a not-too-distant time when women emboldened warriors with poetic, dexterous, and forceful gestures, psychologically stirring up their martial prowess and cajoling them to return with “baskets full of heads.”<sup>24</sup>

Young weavers also demonstrated the maturing of their technical skills and spiritual development by utilizing imagery of *terbai* to represent a barrier of protection.<sup>25</sup>

In correlation and pursuant to this concept, shields were also protectively placed along the gunwales of war canoes, were used as canopies during a siege, and were placed side by side in an upright position to create a perimeter defence around a war camp. With angular, bold interior designs, blankets with repeated images of interlocked shields created “a kind of mystical armour” that clothed and protected its weaver as she advanced in her knowledge and artistic skills.<sup>26</sup> In ceremonies that required a blood sacrifice, blankets with the shield motif are used when spiritual protection is sought from Iban deities against malevolent spirits.

Another treatment of this design, appropriated by the Iban from either their Kenyah or Kayan neighbors, can be seen in a blanket in the collection of the Fowler Museum at UCLA (fig. 3.5), wherein the repeated bands of shields are quite literal. A similar notion of the transcendental protection offered by shields is also projected in C. T. Bertling’s famous photograph of a large Apo-Kayan wooden statue in a stalwart stance bearing a shield<sup>27</sup> and in the illustration of a figure tightly clutching a shield with a *nampok* (charm) in the form of a natural root affixed to his back now in the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris.<sup>28</sup> Collected in Betong, Sarawak, it was said that the latter figure “walked” the veranda of a longhouse at night to protect the structure’s inhabitants.<sup>29</sup>



FIG. 3.5  
DETAIL OF IBAN BLANKET FROM FOWLER MUSEUM



SHIELD 19

By the late nineteenth century, the White Rajahs of Sarawak and the Dutch colonial authorities had largely succeeded in suppressing headhunting. As a result, the richness of the language with which a warrior from an earlier era might have described a motif and the interactions of those motifs on his shield — and indeed even deeper narratives — has been lost to us. In contradistinction, it was still possible in the 1970s to handle in situ heirloom textiles that were more than a hundred years old and to listen to the vivid disquisitions of aged weavers with a primary or close secondary connection to the era of head hunting. Similar to other oral traditions that valued ritualised oratory, the Iban were exceptionally adept at word play, alliterations and puns, a talent that Dayak groups occasionally applied to their artistic motifs and designs. A good illustration of this is revealed by the elegantly painted design surrounding the hand grip on the back of an Iban war shield representing an *anak lelakak*, a wild frog (Shield 19), a motif that is generally reserved for throat tattoos.<sup>30</sup> Placed around the shield’s convex handle, in this context, it can perhaps be thought of as a decorative wish, desire, or prayer to garner courage to metaphorically “choke” the life out of an adversary.

### The Dayak and Their Shields as Objects of Western Fascination

Aside from the many descriptions of their martial skills and savagery, often coupled with the horrendous bias and omnipresent racial prejudices of the period, one does find expressions of respect and camaraderie by Europeans for some of their indigenous counterparts. Adjectives such as “industrious,” “sober,” “cheerful,” “clean,” “thrifty,” “honest,” “hospitable,” and “comparatively moral” stand out in the prose of knowledgeable Victorian and Edwardian observers. While Raja Charles Brooke considered leading persons of the native community to be “gentlemen,” he did not think Irishmen, Americans, or Australians “as good gentleman material” for his administration.<sup>31</sup> Further, he had this to say about the Iban: “Their hearts were as true as steel.” “I felt my health fast becoming recruited while living here among the people, with whom I always felt happy and comfortable.” And “a more plucky and sterling set of bulldogs there is not to be found.”<sup>32</sup>

In the early years of the Raj, while the piratical Sea Dayaks (Iban) of James and later Charles Brooke’s rule were being pacified and transformed into the allies and warriors of their administration, they were tacitly permitted to continue to take the heads of still-recalcitrant tribes. This gradually changed. In 1862, the Iban were first recruited into the Sarawak Rangers, who manned the White Raja’s forts, acted as local police, and with their jungle craft and fighting skills were used to combat native rebels. The colonial government’s high regard for the Dayaks was repatriated with its officers. Dayak mannequins in war dress (including shields) were on display at London’s Crystal Palace in 1851. Almost a half of century later, in 1897, Dayak members of the Sarawak Rangers honoured Queen Victoria in London by marching in her Diamond Jubilee celebrations. The British public’s fascination with tales from Sarawak can be seen in period tabloids such as the one reproduced here from 1871 that depicts an array of Dayak warriors from the Batang Lupar River that appeared as a large supplemental page in the *Illustrated London News* (fig. 3.6).



FIG. 3.6  
ENGRAVING FROM *THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS*, 1871

The most informative book in the colonial literature regarding shields is Henry Ling Roth’s classic two-volume *The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo*.<sup>33</sup> The book was first published in 1896 at a time when pacification and the renunciation of headhunting was the norm not the exception. As the reforms of the new order were established, a sort of nostalgia set in such that classically educated authors like Roth.<sup>34</sup> equated Dayak warriors and their mode of combat with Homeric models. The most sought-after painted shields with their monstrous central image were compared to the Medusa-like bosses on shields from Greek antiquity, or their curvilinear tendrils to the designs on Iron Age Celtic shields such as the famous Battersea Shield found in the Thames River in London in 1857.

The redoubtable district officer Charles Hose wrote several primary textual classics about the Dayak peoples and also collected numerous shields, which he carefully tagged and labeled before being sold to numerous institutions or private collectors (Shield 5). Under the tutelage of Hose, between 1896–1898 William Furness, Alfred Harrison, and Hiram Hiller made extensive collections during their expedition above Belaga to the Baram River for the University of Pennsylvania. Excerpts from Hiller’s journal convey the commerce of the day while describing a buying frenzy at the longhouse of the famous Kenyah great chief Taman Bulan Wang, when the adventurers found themselves “in the midst of a regular bargain day at Wanamakers [sic].’ The chief and some of his men contributed shields, spears, and blowpipes, ‘but we bought right & left and feeling under obligations to the men for bringing us up we did not haggle with our old friends on the prices.’”<sup>35</sup>

They found a very different collecting environment when they followed in the footsteps of the Dutch explorer Anton Willem Nieuwenhuis, who travelled from Putussibau on the Kapuas River to the Mendalam and Mahakam Rivers in 1896–97. “Prices are awful and we are compelled to bargain like a Chinese trader to get anything at a decent price. When Nieuwenhuis was here he spoiled these people paying any price they demanded evidently.”<sup>36</sup>

During the negotiations and the establishment of peace (1893) between the Madangs, Kayan, and Kenyah “big gongs, shields, and weapons of all kinds changed hands as blood money.”<sup>37</sup> Did trade goods, Chinese ceramic trade jars, and, at some point, money, serve as the impetus to fuel a shield-making industry at a time when traditional culture still existed but a more Western-styled commerce had begun to flourish? It is an interesting question, as the number of classic Dayak shields extant and in perfect condition are far greater than those from any other indigenous Indonesian / Malaysian culture.<sup>38</sup>

“I shall not make an exaggerated assertion when I say that among the Dyaks the best headhunters are in nearly all cases the best traders; possessing the energy for one work, they are always ready to turn it to account in the other” (Raja Charles Brooke in a letter to the *Sarawak Gazette*: 20, July 1, 1870).<sup>39</sup>

The lasting emblematic power and aesthetic appeal of Dayak shields and the concomitant collecting of curios from Borneo has a long history. On the European side of commerce, enterprising merchants and showmen like John Burton, who founded the Old Curiosity Shop in 1891 in Falmouth, England, had a lively business in multicultural curiosities purchased from sailors. This is also the period when legendary collector / dealers such as James Hooper, Harry Beasley, W. D. Webster, and W. O. Oldman were beginning to sell ethnographic specimens. Oldman, for example, in his April 25, 1905, sales catalogue lists several classic Kayan shields.<sup>40</sup> The collecting of exotic weapons by administrators had become a fashionable pastime that reflected the colonial order. Indeed, many huntsmen past and present have displayed shields and exotic weapons from recently conquered peoples with their animal trophies. It became a trope of interior design that is still being played out today.

The market for curios and ethnographic artefacts was also stoked by early engravings and later by an appetite for photographs. Numerous studio photographs from the nineteenth century and later depict warriors proudly holding or brandishing shields, but whether these were studio props or the artistic products of the sitters is unknown. Photography certainly encouraged the growth of early travel in search of the “exotic” and “picturesque,” as evidenced by the studio output of G. R. Lambert & Co. in Singapore, which by 1900 carried in their catalogue more than 3,000 images from all over Asia, including Borneo.

While the cultural imprints of an “earlier” Borneo remain indelible, the supply of genuine Dayak shields and other artefacts has been diminishing over time. By the 1970s, one rarely encountered an intact old shield even in remote river systems. Even then, they were usually plain, soot blackened, and in bad condition. On one occasion, an old fighting shield that

was ceremoniously brought down from an attic was so friable as to crumble to dust while being handled. In another instance, a shield was skillfully repurposed as a makeshift shelf for offerings.

The desire of contemporary collectors to acquire antique Dayak cultural artefacts, including shields, is still palpable. To meet this demand, in the last twenty years or so a very sophisticated industry has evolved in Indonesia and Sarawak.<sup>41</sup> Much of what is produced is no longer crafted solely by Dayaks themselves but rather by peoples of mixed heritage, such as Buginese and even Chinese carvers. They produce items that range from newly minted archaic-looking wooden statues, doors, and panels — in essence, fantasy pieces — to the transformation of old shields through the application of newly painted designs to make them appear more desirable to collectors.

We have witnessed the evolution of shields from defensive weaponry to martial curiosities of conquered peoples to becoming “art.” Their acquisition of contemporary relevance is part of an unfolding saga. Somerset Maugham in one of his most famous stories, *The Force of Circumstance* (1924), uses Dayak shields and other native artefacts as a metaphor for being estranged from contemporary European norms of the time. The story’s protagonist decides to take a wife while on leave in England. Upon their return to his remote upriver station “where the jungle was wrapped in the mystery of the approaching night,” she is intent on transforming his “intolerably pathetic” tropical bungalow into a more recognizably “civilised” abode. To do so, the shields are abruptly removed and replaced with her wedding gifts and other European knick-knacks. In contrast, today’s curators, collectors, and connoisseurs greatly appreciate these same Dayak shields.

Images of shields are now ubiquitous in connection with a thriving tourist industry. However, in addition to their application in popular culture, the symbolic use of Dayak shields and their designs continue to psychologically and philosophically project meaning in a post-European colonial world. Just as Dayak shields were once reproduced on the stamps and coins of a former time, the outline of the island’s classic six-sided shield continues as the central medallion for the heraldic crest of the Indonesian military unit responsible for protection of Kalimantan.<sup>42</sup> When Queen Elizabeth II visited Sarawak in 1972, the backdrop for her meeting with representatives of the population also included distinctive shields<sup>43</sup> (fig. 3.7). While writing this essay, I was introduced to Mr. Joseph Tawie at an Iban Dayak festival. His books employ the term “Broken Shield” in their titles and deal with the concerns of Dayaks living within a modern multi-party, multi-racial society.<sup>44</sup> As a cultural emblem and as a symbol of indigenous pride and aspiration, the shield is once again re-emerging — if it ever truly went away — as a richly laden symbol lying between the exigencies of power and protection.



FIG. 3.7  
QUEEN ELIZABETH WITH CEREMONIAL SHIELDS

## Endnotes

1. Sensationalized as pirates and head-hunters, the persona of the Dayak warrior was strangely conflated with the discovery of the orangutan. “The Wild Man of Borneo” that struck such a deep chord in Western popular culture, circuses, popular literature, and films in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, playing on the timeless and recurrent theme of the divide between man and beast, humans and the primeval forest. This topic deserves an entire article, and can best be referenced in Victor King, *The Peoples of Borneo*, Blackwell, Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA, USA, 1993, pp.7–17 and in Robert Crib, Helen Gilbert, & Helen Tiffin, *Wild Man from Borneo: A Cultural History of the Orangutan*, University of Hawai‘i Press, Honolulu, 2014.
2. Dalton in J. H. Moor, *Notices of the Indian Archipelago*, Singapore, 1837, p. 50.
3. Hugh Low, *Mammals of Borneo*, 1848 (reprinted Singapore/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 212.
4. Moor *op. cit.*, p. 50.
5. McDougall, 1863, vol. II, p. 32.
6. William Furness, *The Home-Life of the Borneo Head-Hunters*, J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia, 1902, pp.75–76.
7. Dalton in Henry Ling Roth, *The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo*, Truslove & Hanson, London, 1896, p. 225.
8. Antonio Guerreiro, personal communication, 2015.
9. Reimar Schefold & Steven G. Alpert, *The Eyes of the Ancestors: The Arts of Island Southeast Asia at the Dallas Museum of Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2013, p. 125.
10. Rodney Mundy, *Narrative of Events in Borneo and Celebes [...] from the Journals of James Brooke, Esq.*, J. Murray. London, 1848, vol. II, p.69.
11. Andrew Tavarelli, *Protection, Power, and Display: Shields of Island Southeast Asia and Melanesia*, Boston College Museum of Art, Chestnut Hill, MA, 1995, p. 29, n° 3.
12. Dr. Peter Kedit & J. A. Ensiring, personal communication, Tun Jugah Foundation, 2016.
13. Charles Brooke, *Ten Years in Sarawak*, Tinsley, London, 1866.
14. Dr. Peter Kedit & J. A. Ensiring, personal communication, Tun Jugah Foundation, 2016.
15. B. Sandin, *Sources of Iban Traditional History: The Sarawak Museum Journal*, vol. 46, n° 67, special monograph n° 7, Sarawak Museum, Kuching, Sarawak, 1994, pp. 297–298.
16. Schefold & Alpert, *op. cit.*, p. 121.
17. Edgar Rice Burroughs, *The Monster Men: Into Savage Borneo*, Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 1929, p. 2.
18. Schefold & Alpert, *op. cit.*, pp. 128–129.
19. John Craufurd, 1853, “A Sketch of the Geography of Borneo,” *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, vol. 23, pp. 69–86.
20. Samuel Bryan Scott, “Harvest Festivals of the Land Dyaks,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 29, 1908, p. 279.
21. Furness, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
22. Furness, *op. cit.*, p. 82.
23. In this case, it is the celebrant’s first miring, and, as such, unlike other past participants who have previously conducted this ritual, he has to place his plate of offerings on a shield. As in most ceremonial undertakings there is a hierarchy of ritual protocols, and this is one of them that must be observed. Dr. Peter Kedit: personal communication, 2016.
24. Schefold & Alpert, *op. cit.*, pp. 126, 310.
25. Kedit in Schefold & Alpert, *op. cit.*, pp. 156–157.
26. *Ibid.*
27. C. T. Bertling, “‘Hampatongs’ of ‘Tempatongs’ van Borneo,” *Nederlandsch- Indië, Oud and Nieuw*, n° 12, 1927–28, p. II.
28. Jean-Paul Barbier (ed.), *Indonesian Primitive Art: Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines: from the Collection of the Barbier-Mueller Museum, Geneva*, Dallas Museum of Art, 1984, pp. 94–95.
29. S. Alpert, field collection notes, 1981.
30. The most highly regarded tattoos for Iban head-hunters are those placed on the throat and individual finger digits. The latter signified that the warrior had taken a head. These areas are reputedly the most painful place for receiving traditional tattoos.
31. Brooke, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 82, 89.
32. Brooke, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 16, 71, and 82.
33. *The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo* (see pp. 96–139)
34. Henry Ling Roth, *The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo*, Truslove & Hanson, London, 1896, pp. 121–124.
35. A. Katz, “Borneo to Philadelphia: The Furness-Hiller-Harrison Collections,” *Expedition*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archeology and Anthropology), vol. 30, issue 1, 1988, p. 67.
36. Katz, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
37. Charles Hose & William McDougall, *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo*, Macmillan and Co., Limited, London, 1912, vol. II, p. 291.
38. The only other shield that exists in great numbers from Indonesia are variants of the thin hourglass *salawaka* types from the Moluccas. For a previous publication, the earliest collection date I could find for an Indonesian shield was 1710. It’s a *salawaka* that is now in the Danish Royal Museum. For comparative purposes, the British Museum lists 127 Indonesian and Malaysian shields in its records. The earliest entry was made in 1855. Of their shields, 44 were received by the museum in the nineteenth century, 62 arrived in the twentieth century, and the dates for 21 specimens are unknown. For example, the oldest shields in the museum in Amsterdam date to the late nineteenth century, see Brakel, David van Duuren, & I. C. van Hout, *A Passion for Indonesian Art: The Georg Tillmann (1882–1941) Collection at the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam*, Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, 1996. Oblong shields and circular ones occur both in the Moluccas and in Borneo, and can be seen depicted together on basaltic friezes from Borobudur, an eighth century Buddhist temple in central Java.
39. Also attributed to an 1871 letter by from H. Skelton, Resident of Sarawak, published in the *Government Gazette*, Kuching, Sarawak, n° 20, p. 1. See Andrew P. Vayda, “The Study of the Causes for War, with Special Reference to Head-Hunting Raids in Borneo,” *Ethnohistory* (Duke University Press), vol. 16, n° 3 (summer, 1969), pp. 211–24.
40. W. O. Oldman, *Catalogue of Ethnographical Specimens*, London, 1905 (reprinted by Hales, Wilburg, 1976), n° 25.
41. Such items can routinely be found online, on websites, and in recent catalogues. Regarding C14 dating regimes, “a wood carving may be done many years after a tree has been felled, or may reuse

material from a different context. The date will reflect the period of growth of the material, which may be different from the time of turning it into an artefact. To put it bluntly, radiocarbon-dating a wood sculpture is useless unless the context of its discovery is otherwise well documented” (Ruth Barnes & Mary Kahlenberg (eds.), *Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles*, Prestel, New York, 2010).

42. Insignia of TNI Kodam VI/Tanjungpura. Hubert de Vries, *Borneo/ Kalimantan*. Kalimantan/ Borneo Arms, 2011.
43. This photograph was taken of Mrs. Winnie Kedit on the Central Padang (Padang Merdeka) on the occasion of Queen Elizabeth II’s visit to Kuching, Sarawak in 1972.
44. In fact, the political pioneers of the Sarawak National Party (SNAP) utilized both traditional and modern shields in their logos and badges. The inner design on these shields was a double pointed spear (*sangkoh aduh anang*) that signals that an action may inherently be positive or present a vicissitude of fortune. The shield is a potent symbol for Dayak organizations as it conveys deeper meanings such as “te terbai kitai” to serve as our protector, or that “our leader is our *terbai*. He is our protector.” Personal Communication: Peter Kedit, 2016.

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