

## THE TRADITION OF HEAD-HUNTING

When the first Europeans came into contact with the inhabitants of Borneo at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they wrote about "much dreaded Dayak warriors, the frightful head-hunters". Head-hunting was a living tradition encountered among all Dayak groups. Although a male affair, women played an important role, too, as a report delivered by M.H. Halewijn (see below) proves.

There were several motives for hunting heads.

- The Dayak held the view that when you cut off someone's head, the life energy of the deceased passes on to the body of the head-hunter. The victor therefore acquired more vitality and simultaneously received all the magical powers the victim had obtained during his life. The more heads you had managed to take, the more vitality and magical powers you acquired.

- Furthermore, the victim's soul was to become the victor's property. If the latter was later to die a natural death, this soul would serve him as a slave in the hereafter.

- A man's virility and potency were measured by the number of heads he had hunted.

- He thereby also increased his sexual attraction towards women.

- The skulls served as trophies and as evidence of the warrior's heroic deeds.

- A human head was the ultimate gift of the gods, a sign that they favoured the village and would provide prosperity as well as a good rice harvest.

- As a dowry, often one or more hunted heads were demanded, in addition to other gifts. The higher the status and the more beautiful the future bride, the more heads could be asked.

There were thus sufficient reasons to maintain this tradition for centuries. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch and the English made several attempts to abolish head-hunting, but these proved by and large to be in vain, because the tradition was deeply rooted and the power resources of the Westerners limited. It was not until 1895 that, in a large gathering of the majority of Dayak leaders, it was decided to discontinue this tradition. Nevertheless, blood will always tell, and heads were still on occasion hunted in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As to the role played by women with regard to head-hunting, M.H. Halewijn, the former Resident on Borneo, writes in 1832:

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*The so-called head-hunting raids of the Dayak are always celebrated with extraordinary expressions of joy. The head, which they usually acquire by means of assassination, is brought home, accompanied by a kind of fiercely shrieked war cheers (lahap-lahap), and proud gestures, where wife and children meet the husband, and receive him with tokens of happiness; guest meals are held, and the head-hunter considered to be brave is congratulated by the visitors with envy. He sits with haughtiness in their midst, as if to wish to put his comrades to shame, saying, "akau menting joes; akau tato joes", meaning: "I am also a rich man; I am also a man of prestige." The incitements of women here have a particularly damaging influence on this so murderous tradition of the Daijak, as they usually say to their husbands: "Are you not ashamed to see that another man has been able to hunt a head? Why*

*do you stay at home, as if you were a coward? If you do not have enough courage, I, a woman, shall give you an example hereof.", and more such expressions, by means of which the husband's passions are aroused and often inflame in anger, so that he immediately decides to go on a head-hunting raid, and if possible takes the life of the first unfortunate individual he comes across. If, however, he does not succeed in doing so, and he must therefore return home without the bloody spoils, then upon his return, sorrow and contempt await him; his wife taunts him with words and gestures, and throws her veil (selindang) at his face and then, even for a long time, does not wish to meet him as her husband.*

*However, these horrendous practices have, in the nearby Dayak regions which now belong to the Dutch Government, largely been abolished; head-hunting is almost no longer heard of there,*

and at their funerals buffaloes are now usually sacrificed, instead of human beings, while others bury their corpses without this ceremony. Among the Dayak, head-hunting seems to have existed from earlier times, and has only been ingrained by time-honoured traditions. With them it is an act that covers the executioner as well as his posterity with fame and glory. Their prestige increa-

ses according to the number of heads they own. They regard the human heads as showpieces, which adorn their houses and courts, and display them among themselves, as memorials of their glory and prowess, and as the most precious heirlooms left to them by their ancestors.



A group of Iban in Sarawak; five women hold hunted head in their hands. Photo: Charles Hose, c.1896.

Although not all peoples used the same approach, a head-hunting raid was generally not undertaken just like that. First an extensive consultation was held between the chief and the leaders of a village. If one did not feel strong enough to carry out the venture alone, one or more neighbouring villages were asked to join the expedition. In that case, a lengthy deliberation followed. Once the decision was taken, preparations for the journey were

made. The first step was to search for good omens. Several men were sent out in order to observe the behaviour of birds and other animals in the jungle, from which it was possible to deduce whether there were good or bad omens. The dreams the men had during this raid were important, too. In the case of bad omens they returned to the village to try again a few days later. Only if all the omens were auspicious could the expedition start.



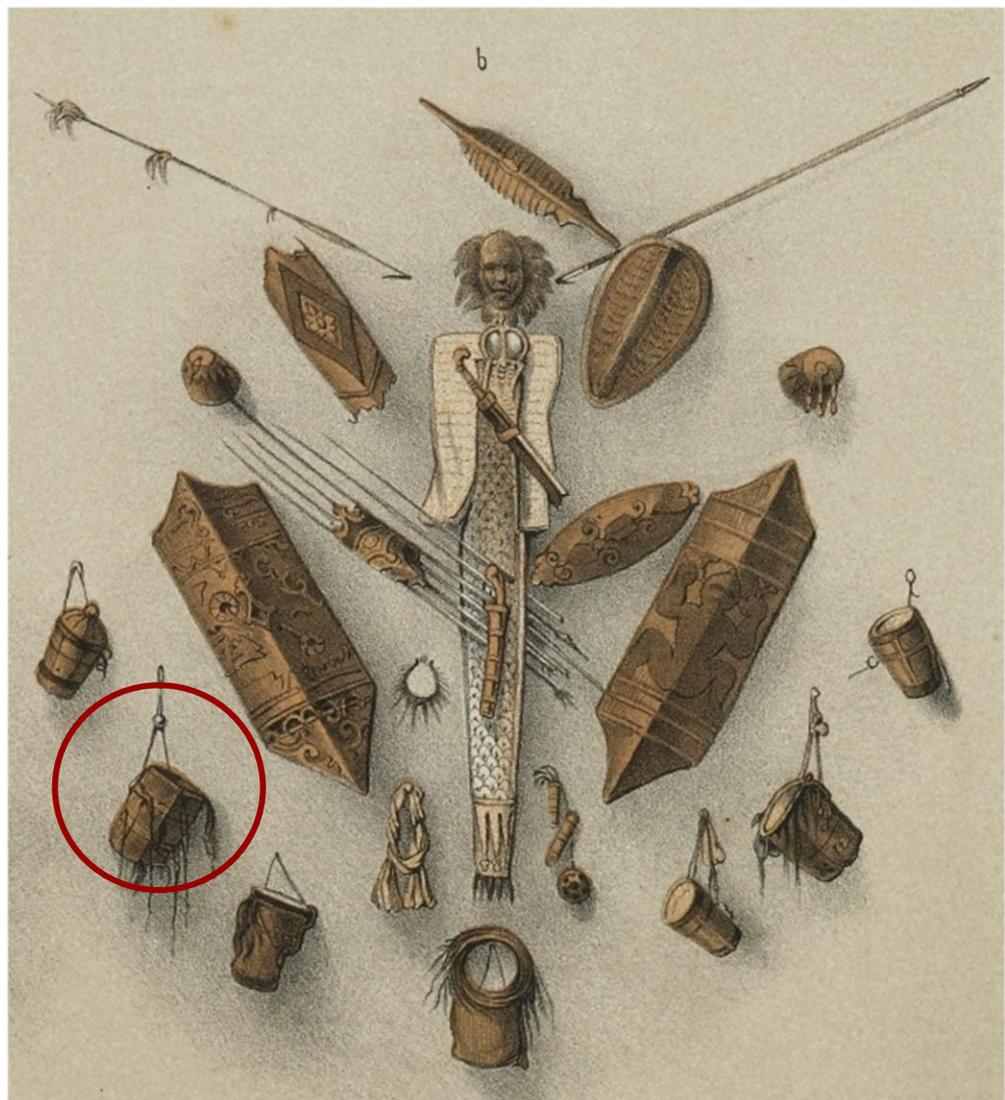
A group of armed warriors in the jungle. Source: Furness 1902.

The warriors left for the selected village and camped nearby. Towards dusk, scouts were sent out. If their messages were favourable, the attack began the following day at dawn. The longhouse was first surrounded, and then stacks of dry wood were lit under the building. In order to provoke panic, the attackers burst out in war chants and uttered horrifying cries. The residents defended themselves with throwing spears, blowpipes with small poisoned darts and, if available, with firearms. However, once the longhouse had caught fire, fleeing into the jungle was often the

only option. While trying to get into safety, the target of the attackers was to intercept and capture them. The heads of those who resisted were cut off. Whenever several heads were taken, the attackers left as quickly as possible. In doing so, they took all the valuable items they could get hold of as war booty. But only objects that were easy to carry, as there was always the risk of being ambushed when retreating by the villagers who had regrouped, on occasions reinforced with hastily summoned inhabitants of nearby villages.



Zuider- and Oosterafdeling of Borneo. A small woven rattan basket, decorated with tufts of human hair and used to keep hunted heads in. Collection Museum Bronbeek 1881/05-2-8. Acquired in 1881 from Douairière von Pestel; obtained in 1853 /1854 by Luitenant-ter-zee Jhr. Franz von Pestel. H. 26 cm, w. 19 cm.



Colour lithograph of a trophy wall in Museum Bronbeek. In the red circle, the small basket depicted above is shown in which hunted heads are kept. Source: Smits 1881, pl. XI (detail).

If the expedition had been successful, no secret was made during the return journey. From time to time, when a befriended village was passed, a warrior song was raised and the detached heads were shown proudly. Once they arrived in their

village they were brought in as heroes with a loud song. Then rituals were performed, and an exuberant party was celebrated. The detached heads are eventually hung in the gallery of the longhouse.



Skulls suspended on bands in the front gallery of the house of a Dayak chief, Northeast Borneo. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen Coll. nr. TM-10002948.



War costume of a Kenyah warrior. War helmet decorated with, for example, hornbill feathers, a war jacket made of animal skin decorated with hornbill feathers and beadwork positioned on the neck side of the opening, a shield painted with monster heads and tufts of human (?) hair, a richly decorated *mandau* with a matching small cutting knife. With its scabbard, it belongs to the rear side of the *mandau*. Source: Hose 1912, Plate 94.



Kayan. An exuberantly decorated shield with typical Dayak motifs aimed at protecting the carrier. A monster head, the *udo* motif, is central. L. 130 cm, w. 42 cm. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen Coll. No. RV-3600-402. Acquired in 1959.



The shield is red on both sides and painted with black figures, with details in white. On the front, a squatting monster figure with spirals on hands and feet. On the back, two stylized serpentine figures facing each other are shown in the middle. On the upper and lower part, the figures resemble those depicted on the front. L. 117 cm, w. 45 cm. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen Coll. No. RV-1239-135. Acquired in 1899 from Dr. Helmkampf.



Kayan River Basin, Lepo Moöt Dayak. A shield decorated with human hair.  
Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen Coll. No. RV-3600-3360.



Painted dark red and black, partially covered with tin foil, and decorated with a lozenge, in which a four-petalled flower, surrounded by an (incomplete) second lozenge. On the sides, it is adorned with three (originally twelve, on both sides four and on the top and bottom two) tufts of hair, which are inserted into the wood by means of small metal wedges. L. 79 cm, w. 21.5 cm. Collection A.G. van Zonneveld.



*Pahangang*. Ot Danum. Plaited from thin rattan strips, in wavy pairs. Decorated with a woollen fabric, hornbill beaks, feathers of the hornbill, the Argus pheasant and the forest rooster, and cotton. H. 13.6 cm, diam. 17 cm. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen Coll. No. RV-942-18. Acquired in 1893 from H.F. Hesselaar.



*Klambi*. Sampit. Leopard skin (*Felis macrocelis*, the Banjarmasin name is *macan dahan* and the common term: *hangkuli*); the edges are bordered with cotton and decorated with the beak and feathers of the hornbill. L. 113 cm, w. 42 cm. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen Coll. No. RV-789-18. Acquired in 1890 from A. van Senden.



*Baju beruti*. Tebidah Dayak, Sintang. In the Melawi subsection of West Borneo almost all the men wear this type of jacket on festive occasions and during raids. It is made by men from rope consisting of *tengang* fibres (the unraveled inner part of a liana) and decorated with red cotton as well as porcelain buttons. Wooden plates painted with geometrical patterns are connected to the shoulder pieces, to which small tufts white feathers are attached. L. 68 cm, w. 50 cm. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen Coll. No. RV-893-3. Acquired from S.W. Tromp in 1893.



Seat mat, Kayan. Plait work with a border of red fabric, decorated with sewn-on buttons and beads. L. 48 cm, w. 23 cm. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen Coll. No. RV-1219-139. Acquired from Dr. A.W. Nieuwenhuis in 1899.