Journal of Borneo – Kalimantan

UNIMAS UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK INSTITUTE OF BORNEO STUDIES

Out of Borneo
Provenance and Materiality of Objects from Borneo in the Wunderkammer at the Halle Orphanage: International Comparative Perspective

Papers presented in the interdisciplinary digital workshop organized by the Francke Foundations, 2 April 2025.

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Received Date : 8 Sept. 2025 Accepted Date : 4 Dec. 2025 Published Date : 28 Dec. 2025

ABSTRACT

The Wunderkammer of the Francke Foundations (Halle, Germany) is an 18th-century museum space. However, the collection also possesses a vibrant and evolving history in the 19th century. This includes the fascinating and complex story of objects from Borneo, sent to Halle in the 1840s – a history now situated within current scholarly debates and postcolonial research. A project funded by the German Lost Art Foundation is conducting an in-depth provenance study of these objects between 2023 and 2026. On 2 April 2025, an international workshop brought together experts from institutions in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Malaysia to share research findings and perspectives on Bornean collections held in various countries, as well as on the broader history of collecting objects from Borneo. The workshop explored specific themes and research questions concerning individual collection items, focusing on their original meanings and uses, as well as their significance within the history of collecting in Borneo. These discussions enabled the identification of connections among the various collections, within which the objects housed in the Wunderkammer of the Francke Foundations can be situated as part of one of the earliest known collections.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage; Ethnology; International Collaboration; Object Histories; Provenance Research

INTRODUCTION – THE FRANCKE FOUNDATIONS AND THEIR *WUNDERKAMMER*

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FIGURE 1: Aerial view Francke Foundations (photo: Horst Fechner).

The Francke Foundations in Halle in eastern Germany bear unique testimony to social and educational architecture constructed by a civil society initiative in the European Baroque period. The ensemble's significance as purpose-built school and welfare architecture has been deliberately infused with the Christian Pietist idea of comprehensively educating individuals from all walks of life to promote a fundamental social reform.

FIGURE 2: Coloured historical aerial view/Historic Orphanage (AFSt/B Sa 0053/detail from AFSt/B Sd 0002).

The Francke Foundations were established in 1695 as a school for the poor and an orphanage by the theologian and educator August Hermann Francke (1663–1727), one of the leading figures in global Pietism – a Protestant reform movement. In a few decades the Foundations developed into a building ensemble which comprised: numerous educational institutions and schools (including higher education in the Latin School and the Royal Paedagogium), the East Indian Mission, a Bible Institute, an ever-growing collection of teaching materials including the Library and the Cabinet of Artefacts and Natural Curiosities, as well as production facilities such as pharmacy, printing workshop, publishing house, farms and agricultural enterprises. The building ensemble express the idea of fundamental social and educational reform through a systemic change in welfare away from the provision of alms towards combatting poverty through education for boys and girls. The Foundations formed the heart of a global correspondence and action network designed to disseminate Halle Pietism's ideas for reform.

Within these far-reaching activities, the Foundations were the starting point for the first sustainably organised Protestant mission on the East coast of India, supported by the court in Copenhagen in Denmark and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in London. This mission context is the background for the Borneo activities.

FIGURE 3: The Cabinet of Artefacts and Natural Curiosities (photo: Thomas Meinicke).

The Cabinet of Artefacts and Natural Curiosities was designed in the years 1736–41. It can still be visited today in its original location in the lower part of the mansard roof of the Historic Orphanage. It was organized to display the macrocosm within a microcosm. The Cabinet – which is named after the early modern umbrella term Wunderkammer – is important for the history of the museum as it is the only surviving cabinet of curiosities of civil origin from the early modern era, complete with its setting of objects, cabinets, historical inventories, instructions, within the original museums space.

The Wunderkammer also has various unique features – one is the so-called Malabarian Cabinet with objects from southeast India. The missionaries sent to India had the task of collecting objects of Indian culture and nature, describing them and sending them back to Halle. During the 18th century a large amount of knowledge was established, which found its expression in this cabinet. This had a substantial impact, as the Wunderkammer in the 18th c. was open to the public with two guided tours a day. Therefore, the objects from India served multi-layered purposes. In addition to collecting knowledge from and about India, the objects became evidence of the allegedly superiority of the Christian faith and of the supposed progress of the mission in order to collect donations for it.

Following on that missionary activity in 18th-century South India, in the 19th c. the Francke Foundations director Hermann Agathon Niemeyer (1802–1851) sent two missionaries to Borneo. Part of their activities was to acquire objects and to send them back to Halle, explicitly following the practice of collecting objects by the missionaries in South India during the 18th century.

The intention was to exhibit these items as well as to give public visible testimony of the continuation of missionary activities and the allegedly dominance of the Christian faith. Furthermore, they served for the accumulation of knowledge on Borneo. Hence, a strong exchange with the University of Halle has been established in the 19th c.; this is a field of post-colonial research, which is conducted by Thomas Ruhland (Halle). A display cabinet was made to hold the objects. The objects were (and are) displayed in the cabinet itself and on the outside walls of the Wunderkammer.

Currently a project at the Francke Foundations researches the provenance of the objects. The project is funded by the German Lost Art Foundation, Department of Cultural Goods and Collections from Colonial Contexts. It aims to contribute to the historical deep structure of the relations between European colonialism, missionary activities,

and collecting practices. To conduct those goals the project establish cooperation with several institutions and scholars from Germany, Europe, and Borneo. This process of academic networking und exchange was the background as well as the goal of the workshop. Therefore, the workshop focussed on provenance and materiality, on different collections holding objects from Borneo for comparisons, and addressed specific groups or clusters of objects.

'REMINISCING THE EARLY DAYS', EARLY SARAWAK MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

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The Sarawak Museum's history began with the establishment of Sarawak, and therefore, intrigued countless scientists, researchers, artists, and other foreign interests to come and satiate their curiosity. Numerous maps and publications have indicated the geographical location of Sarawak. Few maps indicate the location of Sarawak, which is also published in books.

The Sarawak Museum was established in 1886, and this year marks its 139 years of operation. On 4th August 1891, the official building was completed and housed mainly ethnological and zoological collections for display. The exact motivations behind the museum's establishment remain unclear. Although several missionaries and scientists had arrived in Sarawak earlier to collect specimens and artefacts to take back to their home countries, the Sarawak Museum Journal of 1983 and other research papers noted the significant influence of Alfred R. Wallace, who visited Sarawak between 1854 and 1856.

The establishment of the Sarawak Museum was largely attributed to the Second Rajah, Charles Brooke, who expressed his intention to create a museum in the Sarawak Gazette on March 26, 1878, stating, "His Highness the Rajah intends on a future day to establish a Museum for all specimens of interest in this country, for which a suitable building will be constructed at Kuching by the Government." A few years later, the official building was completed.

The initial building where the collections were located and displayed was in Astana, and above the market at the main bazaar street. Following the completion of the Sarawak Museum in 1891, the collections were relocated there and have remained ever since. The building has undergone a series of renovations, the most significant of which was in 1911 and in 1945, it was painted white from its original brick colour and has maintained its look to this day. (Chin et al.,1983)

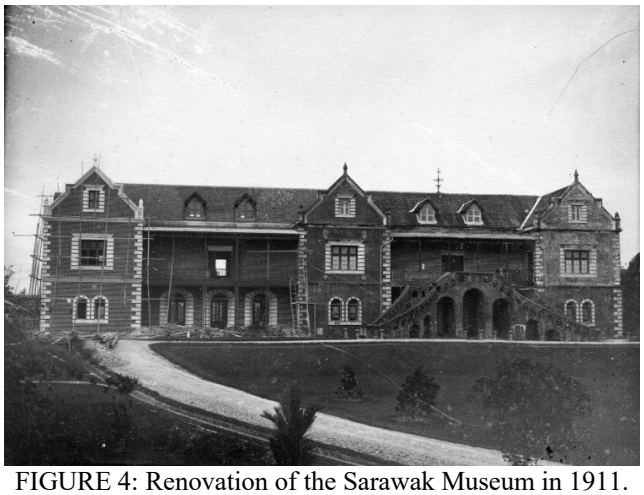

FIGURE 4: Renovation of the Sarawak Museum in 1911.

One of the earliest collections displayed was acquired from Hugh Brooke Low, known then as the Brooke Low collection, where the Sarawak Museum bought the 'nucleus' ethnography collection as a start. There are also artefacts collected by Charles Brooke himself, like the Sulu cuirass and other Sulu items. (Morris, J.R., 2019) Along with that, the zoological specimens were also part of the early collections, collected through fieldwork and donations from various parties, with early curators being the largest contributors at that time.

According to the museum catalogue, a total of 649 artefacts from the Brooke Low collection were first recorded in 1891, coinciding with the establishment of the Sarawak Museum building. Hugh Brooke Low, the son of Sir Hugh Low, received an education in Europe and then served Sarawak under the second rajah for 18 years, primarily stationed at the Rejang River, which reflects the origin of his collections (Roth, H.L., 1896).

His documentation on his collections was then compiled and published by Henry Ling Roth in "The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo, Vol. I and II". The types of collections reflect daily and ritual items, predominantly sourced from the Rejang area. Many of the items are of Melanau origin, including the first ever item: a woven basket that remains in excellent condition at the Sarawak Museum. There are several Brooke Low collections residing in the Sarawak Museum, and some of them appeared in the book with illustrations, with similar descriptions as in the catalogue book. Among those mentioned in the book with descriptions from the Sarawak Museum old catalogue book are "50. Dyak gasieng inggar, noisy spinning wheel" (Figure 5), "32. Kaian 'abat'., baby's chair carved and studded with ground shells. It is worn slung over the back" (Figure 6), and "20. Tepoko, Kanowit basket. Pattern 'seraiong bedukan' or 'sulow' (a perforated disc) cf also war coats and mabat" (Figure 7). Other duplicate items featured are tattoo blocks, Melanau items, and others.

FIGURE 5: Roth 1896 (Vol II), p. 31/Spinning wheel, Borneo Cultures Museum, 2025.

FIGURE 6: Roth 1896 (Vol I), p. 100/Baby carrier, Borneo Cultures Museum, 2025.

FIGURE 7: Roth 1896 (Vol I), p. 364/Kanowit basket, Sarawak Museum, 2025.

As for the zoological specimens, G.D. Haviland recorded in 1892 that the Sarawak Museum housed 81 species of mammals, 250 species of birds, 5 species of tortoises, 25 species of lizards, 80 species of snakes, and quite some insects and amphibians. Also, four (4) large cases comprise maias (orangutan), gibbons, leaf monkeys, and hornbills. (Cranbrook et al., 1983)

From this, it is evident that a substantial number of zoological specimens have been collected, with the earliest specimens recorded between 1889 and 1891. One of the early contributors was Charles Hose, a Brooke officer from 1884 to 1907, who is also the author of "Pagan Tribes of Borneo (Vol. I and II)" in 1912.

To date, the Sarawak Museum currently houses 402,256 collections, encompassing not only zoological and ethnological specimens but also archaeological artefacts, archival materials, photographs, and audio-visual collections. In the near future, comprehensive documentation of the history will be undertaken, detailing their origins and establishing a precise timeline. For now, the Sarawak Museum remains committed to preserving its extensive collections, which date back nearly 150 years, for future generations and the world.

EXPLORING THE BORNEO COLLECTIONS AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM

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The UK's largest cultural collection from Borneo, numbering more than 4000 objects and several hundred photographs, is housed at the British Museum in London. The majority of these were acquired between the 1880s and 1980s, coinciding with the peak of British involvement in Borneo, but have been under-researched and underutilised for most of their time in the museum. Currently, only a handful – mostly Melanau belum (often translated as 'sickness/healing images') from Sarawak – are on public display. From 2024 to 2026, however, the 'Interpreting Borneo in Britain' project, funded by UK Research and Innovation's Arts and Humanities Research Council, has been conducting an in-depth historical analysis of the collection and collaborating with stakeholders in Borneo and the UK to rethink its documentation and interpretation.

Although the British Museum collection represents all three contemporary Borneo territories, more than half of the 4000 objects were acquired from Sarawak. This reflects both the Brooke Rajahs' prioritisation of scientific research in the state, and the influence of Dr Charles Hose, a particularly prolific collector. While the Museum holds objects obtained from multiple well-known figures in Borneo's colonial history, including Ranee Margaret Brooke; Carl Alfred Bock; Ivor H. N. Evans; and, more recently, H. Stephen Morris; more than a third of the entire Borneo collection was acquired through Hose (1863–1929). He was also vendor and donor for thousands of other objects and natural history specimens that now reside in multiple institutions across the UK and beyond.

Hose served Rajah Charles Brooke's government for 23 years at the turn of the 20th century, spending most of his career in the Baram District in northern Sarawak. His collections therefore primarily reflect the cultural diversity of this region. His efforts to assemble an encyclopaedic archive of material culture can be seen in the wide range of objects chosen, from weapons and hunting equipment to textiles and decorative art (including the ba' in Figure 8). Hose was also a keen photographer, and his negatives, amounting to approximately 700 images, were donated to the British Museum after his death.

FIGURE 8: A ba', or baby-carrier, made of wood, rattan, beads and shells (As1904,0416.104). Charles Hose obtained this from a Kenyah community along the Baram River at the turn of the 20th century, and sold it to the British Museum, amongst many other objects, in 1904 (© The Trustees of the British Museum).

Research suggests that Hose's prolific collecting was motivated by three main factors: the demands of administering a remote outstation, which left him heavily reliant on his ability to understand and communicate with the local population; the opportunity to supplement his income by collecting on commission for institutions and private collectors in Europe; and the desire to establish himself as a Borneo scholar on the British academic stage. In the latter he was extremely successful, acting as conduit for much of the knowledge about Borneo that travelled through colonial scientific networks (see Figure 9). These efforts earnt him an honorary doctorate from the University of Cambridge and enabled him to spend his retirement publishing and lecturing widely on Borneo's environment and cultures (Durrans, 1988, 1994; Morris, 2019).

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FIGURE 9: An unidentified man demonstrates a warrior's accoutrements. This is one of many photographs posed by Charles Hose, probably in the grounds of the Brooke government fort at Marudi, Sarawak, to support his interpretation of the material culture he was collecting and disseminating in Europe. The image (NR1930,Hose.B7.1) is among the photographic negatives in the British Museum's Hose collection which have been digitised as part of the 'Interpreting Borneo in Britain' Project (© The Trustees of the British Museum).

As a result of his domination of both scholarly discourse and museum collections, Hose's voice still looms large in interpretations of Borneo worldwide. This is clear in the British Museum's collections documentation, much of which is structured according to an ethnographic classification system devised by Hose. Unfortunately, this has resulted in significant confusion, notably through the persistence of the term 'Klemantan', which Hose coined to describe all the ethnic groups he could not otherwise fit into his classificatory scheme.

The 'Interpreting Borneo in Britain' project has compiled data on ethnographic material acquired through Hose in six museums across the UK, analysing these scattered collections together for the first time. This has enabled us to start addressing the aforementioned issues in the British Museum's documentation. We are also working with stakeholders in Malaysian Borneo and the UK to improve understanding about the objects, and to discuss how this vast archive of material culture might be made more accessible. In November 2024, the British Museum signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Sarawak Museum Department, facilitating ongoing research collaboration. Workshops in Kuching and Kota Kinabalu in late 2024 also aimed to raise awareness of the material held in UK museums, and to open dialogue about its contemporary significance. The networks formed are exploring how researchers, heritage professionals and grass-roots cultural and heritage organisations might engage with this material going forward.

In June 2025, researchers from the British Museum, Sarawak Museum and documentary filmmakers Borneo Demand Productions visited the Baram River region to continue these discussions with some of the communities from which Hose's collections originally came (Figure 10). Meanwhile, UK-based Sarawak diaspora groups have been invited to visit the British Museum for object-viewing and discussion sessions, and the project has facilitated several research visits from Borneo specialists.

FIGURE 10: Penghulu Lenjau Kulleh and his family examine historical photographs and images of objects from the British Museum collection during a community engagement session at Long Banyok longhouse, on the banks of the Baram River in northern Sarawak, in June 2025 (© The Trustees of the British Museum/Shelly Shirlenna Nadin-Tan)

These community engagement activities have confirmed that there is widespread public interest in interacting with these historic collections, and a need to think creatively about how information about them might be more effectively disseminated. Most of the Museum's Borneo objects are already digitised on the British Museum Collections Online website, but the project has helped clarify how the available media and search terms might be improved to make this database more user-friendly (British Museum Collections Online, https://britishmuseum.org/collection). The newly digitised Hose photographic collection will also be available to browse online by the end of 2025.

This project has not only emphasised the significance of the Borneo collections in the UK, and their potential to contribute to discussions on indigenous identity and heritage, but has also revealed the importance of connecting expertise on Borneo collections globally. Existing difficulties in accessing information may be alleviated by collaboration and information-sharing between both institutions and communities. We hope the network that has facilitated the publication of these papers will continue to build on this important initiative going forward.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, part of UK Research and Innovation [Research Grant AH/Y005406/1].

MISSIONARY JOURNEY AND COLLECTING CONTEXT OF THE FRANCKE FOUNDATIONS' BORNEO COLLECTION

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The "Wunderkammer" of the Francke Foundations in Halle combines natural history, missionary heritage, and ethnographic material. A relatively small portion of it originates from the Protestant mission to Borneo in the 1830s and 1840s. This contribution has outlined the historical context of the Borneo mission, the formation of its collection, and its scholarly relevance.

The Francke Foundations actively encouraged their missionaries to send objects home. Director Hermann Agathon Niemeyer emphasized both the promotional value – attracting sponsors through "exotic" artefacts displayed in Halle – and the scientific value of such acquisitions. He wrote to missionary Heinrich Julius Berger in 1838: "You will probably also enclose ordinary items of clothing, weapons of the savages, etc. I would deposit all this in our Cabinet of Natural Curiosities and let the strangers visiting the cabinet be made aware of you and your activities" (AFSt/M 1 G 4 : 38). Natural specimens, weapons, textiles, and everyday objects were requested to enrich the Cabinet of Natural Curiosities. The missionaries in Borneo thus collected within a structured framework aimed at strengthening the mission's reputation and contributing to European scholarship.

FIGURE 11: Cabinet with objects from Borneo in the 'Wunderkammer' (photo: author).

Between 1835 and 1847, only two missionaries from Halle were sent to establish a mission among the Dayak in southern, Dutch-ruled colonial Borneo. Heinrich Julius Berger arrived in Banjarmasin in 1838 and established a station called "Bethabara" among the Ngaju Dayak. It was located between the villages of Sungei Palangkai and Sungai Kangkawang, in the government district of Kabupaten Kapuas in Kalimantan Tengah and about a two days' journey from Banjarmasin. He remained there until his death in 1845, and the provenance of the objects he sent to Halle can therefore mainly be traced back to this area in Pulopetak and occasionally from the regional trading hub of Banjarmasin.

Johann Michael Carl Hupe followed in 1844. His movements were more extensive: he spend some time at Banjarmasin and Bethabara, travelled to Pontianak, and visited several places in its vicinity. In November 1844, he arrived in Sambas, travelled along the Sambas River past several villages and the Sarawak River to Kuching. Now he was no longer in Dutch colonial territory, but in the empire of the "white rajah" James Brooke. From there he went to Singapore, where he resided for over a year before returning to Borneo. At last, in 1846, Hupe attempted to establish a mission in Sarawak between Malay, Chinese and Malabar settlements and trading posts as well as the residence of James Brooke. Today, a signboard at the "Old Courthouse" in Kuching, which is located on the grounds of the missionary house he started to build and now houses a tourism centre, pays tribute to him. When he returned to Europe in 1847, James Brooke took over his house. It was demolished in 1858 and new buildings were built in its place, which were replaced again in the 1870s by Charles Brooke with the Old Courthouse.

The missionary activities of Berger and Hupe thus left their mark not only through the artefacts in the Cabinet of Artefacts and Natural Curiosities in Germany, but also on a smaller scale on Borneo itself.

Archival sources from the Francke Foundations document six shipments of Bornean objects sent between 1839 and 1847. Berger dispatched the first two consignments; Hupe sent four more, including a carefully listed 1845 shipment from Singapore. Many objects entered the Wunderkammer, though duplicates were redistributed to institutions or private recipients. Notably, orangutan remains, geological specimens, and insects reached zoological university institutes.

The extant collection largely comprises everyday objects, including weapons, textiles, baskets, musical instruments, amulets, and ornaments. Archival lists and printed mission reports allow the provenance context of several items to be reconstructed. They include for example:

Musical instruments: Hupe described in a printed report that "Musical instruments play a major role at Dajak festivals and are the same for all tribes, namely the copper gong or kettle drum and an elongated drum, sometimes sixteen feet long, called katambong, of varying thickness." He then sent drums (katambong), and a bamboo- and gourd-based wind instrument.

FIGURE 12: "a composite wind instrument: a hollow cob made from the fruit of a small pumpkin hollowed out by water and ants, in which a bundle of six to seven thin bamboo tubes are inserted like organ pipes", Francke Foundations, reg. no. 485 (photo: Sabrina Mögelin).

Weapons: Shields with faded illustrations, enhanced with rattan (and previously existing human hair which is no longer present), reveal clear signs of prior use. Alongside a dismountable blowpipe, there are darts, quivers and variously shaped spearheads.

FIGURE 13: Shield, sent in 1846, Francke Foundations, reg. no. 613 (photo: Sabrina Mögelin).

However, from which specific pre-owner in which way these objects were acquired or taken so far remains unclear from the archival sources.

The collection at the Francke Foundations is among the earliest European missionary collections from Borneo, predating or paralleling the better-known assemblages of Oscar von Kessel (Dresden, Germany) and Charles Hose (British Museum, London). It reflects the intertwined goals of missionary promotion, scientific inquiry, and European fascination with "curiosities" from colonial contexts. While rooted in 19th-century colonial and missionary agendas, current research on the surviving artefacts focuses on reconstructing the provenance and social significance, supported by archival documentation. The project aims to present findings in a digital exhibition, making both objects and their historical context accessible for further study.

COLLECTED BEFORE 1850 – SOME REMARKS ON THE BORNEO COLLECTION OF OSCAR VON KESSEL

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The Dresden Museum of Ethnology preserves around 650 cultural artifacts from the island of Borneo, which can be traced back to 60 previous owners, including missionaries, colonial officials, and scientists. Although the Borneo collection is not one of the museum's most significant holdings in terms of quantity, it is certainly one of the most significant in terms of age. About one-third of the Borneo artifacts had already found their way into the electoral and royal collections of Dresden decades before the establishment of an independent ethnological museum, which did not take place until 1875. Among the oldest artifacts are a spear, a blowpipe with a spear tip attached, and a quiver with 12 blowpipe arrows (Figure 14), which were recorded in 1687 as weapons belonging to an "Indian king" in the inventory of the "Indian Chamber."

FIGURE 14: Quiver with 12 blowpipe arrows, Dresden Museum of Ethnology, catalogue no. 02873.

It was not until the 19th century that these cultural assets, presumably acquired in the Netherlands, were recognized as evidence from the island of Borneo. This outlines a fundamental problem of early ethnographic collections that poses major challenges for today's curators: reliable information on provenance is rarely available, and imaginative descriptions sometimes conceal a lack of knowledge.

One exception among the early collections is that of the Prussian Oscar Moritz von Kessel (1812–1888), which is remarkably well documented for its time. This proves that the collector had acquired in-depth knowledge of the country. From 1839, O. von Kessel served in the Dutch East Indian colonial army, where he was initially deployed in West Sumatra before being sent on a secret mission to Borneo in 1846. The background to the secret mission was the British-Dutch conflict of interest. After the Sultan of Brunei transferred governmental power over the Sarawak region to the British adventurer James Brooke in 1842, the Dutch feared that he would extend his influence to territories and population groups to which they themselves formally laid claim.

O. von Kessel was tasked with conducting topographical surveys in the border region and covertly investigating Brooke's objectives and the influence he already had on the "Dutch possessions." Between 1846 and 1848, Kessel traveled upstream along the Kapuas River and ventured into the border regions along its tributaries. The exact itineraries of some of his journeys have been preserved in archives. They show that Kessel also documented ethnographic facts.

In 1849, von Kessel was discharged from military service and returned to Europe. He brought with him a collection of 1,200 cultural artifacts, including more than 900 from the island of Borneo. His wish to sell this collection, which he himself called the "East Indian Museum" and exhibited at various locations in Europe, to a museum as a whole remained unfulfilled. Only parts of the collection were acquired by the Royal Art Chamber in Berlin and the Royal Historical Museum in Dresden. The majority of the collection went to the Crystal Palace in London in 1853 and was probably destroyed in the fire of 1936.

Today, the Museum of Ethnology in Dresden still preserves 112 objects from this early Borneo collection. The transcripts of the annotated object lists that O. von Kessel had made available to the purchasers have also been preserved. He preceded these with a general overview of the population of Borneo, which he divided into four groups based on his knowledge at the time, using the then "Wester Afdeeling" of Borneo as a frame of reference rather than the island as a whole: He grouped the inhabitants of Central and North Borneo, the inhabitants of Northwest Borneo, those of East Borneo as "Pari," and those of South Borneo as "Bijadju" according to cultural aspects. The respective cultural artifacts are assigned to these groups and provided with brief, factual explanations and local language terms.

Kessel's lists formed the basis for the inventory at the Ethnographic Museum, which was not completed until 1882 after the collection was taken over from the Historical Museum. The documentalist supplemented the original descriptions by comparing them with the available literature and added his own assessments. These were influenced by the status quo of science at the time. At that time, evolutionism dominated academic discussions with its assumption of a lawful progression from the lower/simple to the higher/more complex. "Savages" or "primitives" were considered representatives of the beginnings of human development, while Europeans believed themselves to be at the highest level of civilization.

The Ethnographic Museum in Dresden used this classification scheme when cataloguing its Borneo collection. The Dayak were characterised as a "very low-level race" in terms of culture, and the description of the individual artefacts also used the common vocabulary of primitivism. There is talk of "raw Dayak originality," "raw aesthetic love of decoration," "wildness," "cruelty," and even "head-chopping rage." The supposed "wildness" and 'cruelty' is illustrated by warrior accessories (Figure 15), trophies, and weapons. Textile products, which the collector Kessel himself had described as "exquisitely beautiful weavings," serve as evidence of "primitiveness." The textiles collected by Kessel are a prime example of the

significance of such early collections for the present-day inhabitants of the regions where Oscar von Kessel once collected.

FIGURE 15: War poncho, Dresden Museum of Ethnology, catalogue no. 01528.

As part of a project to revitalize ikat weaving in Sintang, initiated by the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, the Dresden Museum also made a small contribution, providing photographs of textiles from Kessel's collection as inspiration. These were commented on by the weavers in the region. Many were amazed that the patterns of the old ikat textiles from before 1850 were predominantly simple compared to the elaborate patterns of the later well-known ceremonial textiles (pua kumbu). The heyday of ikat weaving was not to come until later. A women's jacket made using the sungkit technique, according to Kessel from the Ketungau region (Figure 16), was said to be unable to have come from there because it seemed unfamiliar to contemporary weavers in the region. The profound cultural change that has taken place over the past 175 years makes historical documentation such as that of Oscar von Kessel an important source for historiography.

FIGURE 16: Women's jacket “Bahdju Katungau”, Dresden Museum of Ethnology, catalogue no. 01628 (photo: Eva Winkler).

RA'ONG KELABIT (KELABIT SUNHAT) BRITISH MUSEUM NUMBER 1988,22.46

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Ra'ong Kelabit (Kelabit sunhat)

Alena was searching for a Kelabit sunhat. She didn't need a physical sunhat; she just needed an image. She typed the words in *Google Ra'ong Kelabit* and she was very surprised when the British Museum website came up with the image number 1988,22.46.

FIGURE 17: Kelabit sunhat 1988, 22.46 (Photo copyright: Trustees of the British Museum).

It was a serendipitous moment as she wasn't expecting a museum in the UK to be the source for the image, nor did she expect to be intimately linked to this particular sunhat through kinship. This very sunhat was obtained for the British Museum from her own auntie Sina Rang Bala who lives in the Kelabit village of Batu Patong. This short article celebrates the marvels of digital search engines and the way in which source communities in the highlands of Borneo can become connected across the world through museum objects whose profile have been digitalized online. I will look at this hat, look at how it might have been put together and its history and then I will outline why Alena Murang, a contemporary young Kelabit creative artist wanted the image of this hat.

The Story and the Making of the Sunhat

Sina Rang sold the hat to anthropologist Monica Janowski who was making a collection for the British Museum, for RM30 in 1988. The base of the unornamented hat was originally purchased by Sina Rang from a relative from Long Lellang. I will outline how this was likely to have been made, based on research on other similar hats. This hat is made of leaves of the fan palm *daun ilad Licuala valida*. Immature unexpanded leaflets are collected and dried flat. When they are needed for the making of the hat, the leaves are opened up and flattened. A needle threaded with cotton is pushed through the middle of a leaf. The other leaves are then placed on the needle, and the needle is pushed through them. The leaves are then all opened out to form a rough circle shape that is held in place by the needle at the centre. The edges of the leaves are pinned together with bamboo pins. Next, strong cotton thread is used to stitch across every leaf rib and each edge. The ends of the leaves are trimmed to form an even brim. A rattan ring is inserted to form the rim and this is stitched carefully to the body of the hat. A loop is attached to the underside of the

hat so it can be hung up when not in use. The skull cap that is sewn into the base of the sunhat is woven of a local soft reed (*berpah*).

This type of basic hat is widely used in rural Sarawak for protection from the sun and the rain. More decorated ornamental versions are used for outdoor cultural gatherings. The hat is also an important symbol in a Kayan and Kenyah wedding ceremony when the bride is covered in layers of protective hats.

Literacy and Beadwork

It was in the late 1960s when school girl Sina Rang Bala wrote the words, "*Selamat Pakai* from Kelabit Girl" to make the pattern for the beadwork on the hat. Selamat Pakai means happy wearing. Her sister, the school cook, did the threading of the beads on to the hat. The beads were a gift from their headmaster, Manson Toynbee. The pattern, made of abstract designs and words is typical of basketry patterns of the era of the 1960s. The women were keen to weave messages on their baskets that reflected their newly found literacy skills in English, which had been acquired through the new schools that had been set up at this time in the highlands. Moreover, they had a lot of opportunities to practise their spoken English as there were lots of Allied soldiers in the area defending the border from incursions from Indonesia. There is a story in the museum catalogue that the hat was once intended as a gift for a British soldier but that is a story that yet to be fathomed.

Sky Songs and Sunhats : Alena's Album Cover

To return to the story of Alena's search for an image of a sunhat. She wanted the image for the cover of her new album of Kelabit and Kenyah songs, called Sky Songs, which honours the sky. Why the sunhat? This is because she had read that "our ancestors referred to the sky as a big sunhat dome, and all earthly creation lay under it." One song on the album, *Gitu'an* (stars, in Kelabit) celebrates the stars, the ancestors, and the sky – the lyrics go: "We are our ancestors / We are people of the sky". In a song called *We Watched The Clouds,* she sings about a migration journey and the clouds swirling in the sky above the Masia mountain range. The last song in the album is *Sunhat Song*: "say a prayer for all my lovin' ones under this sunhat up in the highlands." The old idea of the sky as a protective dome, like a sunhat is given new currency.

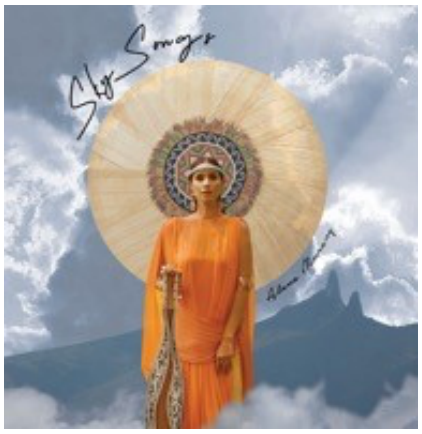

FIGURE 18: Album cover *Sky Songs* (photo: Alena Murang).

FIGURE 19: Inner page from Alena Murang's *Sky Songs* cover (photo: Alena Murang).

Alena fittingly made this hat a background with her image set against the backdrop of the iconic mountain Batu Lawi for her album cover. Her music and lyrics recall the cosmology and the culture of the Kelabit highland people. The digital image and the story of the Kelabit sunhat in the British Museum has now become disseminated to a generation of ethnic music lovers who have purchased Alena Murang's CD.

SOME UGLY, DISPOSABLE, AND CAGEY ARTEFACTS IN BORNEO COLLECTIONS

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Books on Borneo, whether museum or privately produced volumes on thematic collections, mostly display beautiful photographs made of beautiful objects by professional photographers, hardly ever bad pictures made of ugly artefacts by inept photographers. Artefacts of the latter sort, however, do exist, much more commonly than those of the former, and sometimes manage to sneak into ethnographic collections – albeit rarely into books, whatever the photographer's technical skill or artistic flair.

The anthropology of ugly, ordinary artefacts (or 'mundane objects') may well stand at the cutting edge of the discipline, in the same way that archaeologists now prioritize research on antique garbage dumps (see 'history of waste' or 'archaeology of rubbish'). Indeed, past garbage dumps reflect their owners' lives, cultures, and societies in a more profound, detailed, and manifest way than exquisite elite art forms or arresting monumental architecture. The heuristic value of garbage, a mirror of society, should never be made light of. Garbage speaks volumes about life.

Granted, Borneo's traditional hinterland settlements had no garbage dumps, except for the nearby stream, and refuse chiefly consisted of natural materials (animal bones, plant debris, kitchen waste) that were casually thrown out the door or through holes in the longhouse's plank floor, along with shattered earthenware, ripped baskets, broken wooden tools, ruined clothes, and the occasional bead, shell, or other trinket.

In the late 20th century, when modern garbage disposal was still lacking and rivers had turned into maxima cloaca, the space under the longhouse, no longer the foul muddy mess resulting from pigs' frenetic scavenging, had become a dry storage area, where I picked up, for reference, the odd damaged utensil or torn piece of plaitwork that caught my eye as I passed by.

Ethnographers in the field may find themselves faced with bizarre artefacts of the "what is this (for)?" kind. Their usual situation, however, is one in which they either can witness the object being used or are surrounded by participants in the local culture who can offer clarification (about its name, materials, or function). While people might be surprised to see a passing stranger picking up their refuse, they would not hold back explanations.

Artshops' backrooms and museums' depots, too, are likely to reveal, in their darker, dustier recesses, bizarre objects having not seen the light of day for decades or centuries and calling for help. When inventory numbers and ancient files have disappeared or the attendants are clueless, ethnographers must scan their inner pinacotheca to summon reminiscences of artefacts they may have encountered in the field, in collections, or in publications, in order to come up, by mere morphological analogy, with the 'next of kin' for identification: "It looks a bit like this".

Results may be misleading: When I first looked at Artefact No. 2 (Figure 21), I thought of a sling; then I thought again. Ethnographers also scrutinize the artefact for function: "It might be used for …". Beyond making out a mysterious artefact's use, clarifying its origin is a further challenge. Today, taking a photograph and punching it into some AI program in one's smartphone may be a faster way to do the job, for function and origin.

Of course, not all weird objects are necessarily ugly. My focus here is on truly unpretentious daily-use objects serving basic practical purposes, though not immediately recognizable. Here are some artefacts of low aesthetic value, selected from the narrow register of portable or disposable items of material culture of Borneo's nomadic forest hunter-gatherers.

As is well known, when one has to go on a trek with only a backpack, objects can be perceived as burdensome, and even lightweight ones may be deemed superfluous, especially when they can be procured or manufactured anywhere at any time from locally available materials with only minimal effort – and none spent on ornamentation. Instead of carrying along an 'ordinary' item, neither rare nor precious, when traveling, an instant decision may be to discard it on the spot, to replace it later, whenever needed again. Single-use objects, easy to make, easy to discard.

Such unattractive artefacts, however, are rich in meaning. They tacitly inform, embody, and symbolize these nomadic bands' culture, lifeways, and social fabric, as expressed in their collective food production and consumption, their group migrating, or their joint entertainment.

FIGURE 20: Simple disposable forks, made of a soft wood stick split into four pointed teeth, and used to dip into the cooking pot for a mouthful of hot sticky sago gruel; Penan nomads, upper Baram River, Sarawak (photo: author).

FIGURE 21: Forehead strap, made of soft flattened, dried, and plaited sedge stems and used in addition to shoulder straps to carry a heavy burden basket; the braided cord's extremities are tied to the basket's back piece; Penan, Sarawak (photo: author).

FIGURE 22: Bamboo harp, a musical instrument of nomadic Penan; a single bamboo internode, with four narrow strips cut out of its outer skin and uplifted to serve as the harp's strings (frets replaced); a narrow slit was cut through the bamboo section's length for resonance (photo: author).

FIGURE 23: A tool for sago starch production; a long sturdy wooden handle attached with rattan binding and resin to a scoop-shaped piece of hard palm stipe; the sharp edge scrapes the fibrous marrow out of the sago palm stipe; manufactured on the spot, discarded after use; Punan Tubu, North Kalimantan (photo: N. Césard, MNHN, Paris, Inv. ETB-ID-NC-2015-011).

CONCLUSION

The workshop brought together researchers from various backgrounds and countries, resulting in an exchange on different collection areas relating to cultural objects from Borneo. It became apparent where and in which ways collections were created, and even though research in these area has progressed, provenance research remains a desideratum. Therefore, an essential part of the workshop was to promote networking among researchers who can benefit from advanced exchanges.

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