Hornbill Carvings of the Iban of Sarawak, Malaysia

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Hornbill carvings of the Iban of Sarawak, Malaysia

WILLIAM H. DAVENPORT

Some of the most stunning wood sculptures carved by any of the Dayak peoples of the island of Borneo are those depicting the rhinoceros hornbill bird (*Buceros rhinoceros* L.), made by some of the Iban and Ibanic-speaking groups of Sarawak, Malaysia, and Kalimantan, Indonesia.[1] These figures, called *kenyalang* (or some dialect alternative such as *tenyalang, kenyali', tenyali',* or *pencalang*), which is also the Iban name for the bird species, are carved for and used in a major sacred rite, the *Gawai Kenyalang.* Before getting to the main topic of this essay, the hornbill figures themselves, I will digress further on the cultural and historical contexts of this notable sculptural tradition.

In former times, the *Gawai Kenyalang* was associated with a raiding and trophy-taking (headhunting) complex for which the Iban were notorious. However, as regards material culture, the Iban are best known for their cotton *ikat* textiles woven by women (see Gavin 1996, Linggi 1998). It is other Dayak groups, such as the Kenyah and Kayan, who enjoy the preeminent reputations for sculpture and carving in wood. Nevertheless, the hornbill sculptures clearly show that there were and still are fine carvers amongst the Iban, and it is noteworthy that this sculptural tradition continues, despite the fact that the days of raiding and taking trophy heads of enemies are long past. Today, the *Gawai Kenyalang* is still a major sacred rite for the Iban, and the carving of spectacular hornbill images is still an essential part of that celebration, even though the cultural and political contexts have changed greatly during the twentieth century. Formerly, when headhunting was a way of life, a *Gawai Kenyalang* would be celebrated by one community for several reasons: to boost the courage and fighting spirit of the men who were actively engaged in raiding and taking heads; to call upon the supernatural realm for increased powers that would ensure success on future raids; and finally, to intimidate a designated enemy and weaken its resolve to defend itself.

To further explain some of the religious ideas that underlay Iban headhunting, a successful raid that resulted in the taking of and returning home with trophy heads was believed to increase the supernatural powers of the community from which the victorious raiding set out. These powers resided in the head itself, and the trophy was ceremonially received into the community by a small group of its mature women. In this ceremony, the women first wrapped the trophy in a sacred *ikat* cloth *(pua kumbu)* and then ritually pantomimed a birthing of it. One might say the trophy was ritually reborn into the community. This invigorated the community's life force, which in turn would ensure continued prosperity, security, and general well-being of the community as a whole. At the same time, the loss of heads and the powers they contained greatly diminished the life force of victims' communities, to say nothing of what it did to their self esteem. Of course, losing heads had to be avenged, and a vendetta of raiding could go on indefinitely. Sometimes, however, the goals of the attackers were grander, and the victimized community would be completely routed and dispersed, with the victors taking over the lands as well as all the personal property of the vanquished. This amounted to a limited war. Obviously, in these days of unrestrained raiding there was no central political authority—that is, no government—that exercised control over the actions of individual Iban communities.

The Islamic (Malay) sultanates that technically ruled over large sections of Borneo interfered with neither intra-Dayak affairs nor the religious observances as long as the forest commodities they wanted (for trade with other sultanates) were delivered to them. Traditionally, the Iban of Sarawak were under the Sultanate of Brunei, which exists as the independent country of that name.

Iban social organization was fluid. Even residence and membership in a community, which lived tightly together in a large, multi-apartment structure called a longhouse, was largely a matter of choice. Individual men and married couples often changed longhouse affiliations when they thought they might fare better in another community. And even the locations of Iban longhouse communities shifted about in a perpetual quest for more and better agricultural land upon which to grow rice, their staple food. There was neither social

1. I wish to thank Dr. Peter Mulok Kedit, the Director of the Sarawak Museum at the time the last phase of this study was made, for allowing me to photograph collections as I wished, and for permission to publish, in any scholarly publication I choose, both Sarawak Museum photographs and those I took of their collections.

class nor hereditary rank amongst the Iban. What social hierarchy there was within a longhouse community was determined by individual achievement and personal charisma.[2] Anthropologists often point to the Iban of the early nineteenth century as the prototype of an acephalous, agricultural society, without any form of perpetual or corporate structure larger than the fundamental household group *(bilek).*

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the Sultanate of Brunei began to come apart, and at its invitation, an English presence became established. Over three generations, this presence developed into a unique state, an independent and privately owned kingdom, ruled by a dynasty of British subjects. The rulers and virtual owners were named Brooke, and for three generations, they ruled over an independent kingdom they named Sarawak, after a river in the west where the first Brooke assumed the title of Rajah. The Brooke dynasty ruled Sarawak until after World War II.

In the beginning, the first Rajah Brooke pacified—but not without difficulty—some Iban who resided in the realm. Impressed with their fighting ability, he, and later the second Rajah Brooke, enlisted their support, and Iban fighters became a major component of the Brooke forces, which continued to expand eastward, further eroding Brunei-controlled areas and peoples.

When the first Brooke assumed the title of Rajah, the Iban were known only as Sea Dayaks, and they did not think of themselves as a single, distinctive ethnic entity. The Brookes took advantage of this, so that loyal Sea Dayaks were set against any and all hostile and rebellious peoples, some of whom were also Sea Dayaks. In the end, Sea Dayaks came to see themselves as an ethnic and linguistic, but somewhat culturally diverse, group, and in time came to call themselves and be called the Iban. As this identity was evolving, the Iban also developed into the influential political force they are today.

Many Iban of Sarawak and Kalimantan (the Indonesian part of Borneo) have declined to become either Christian or Muslim, especially the latter, even though both Malaysia and Indonesia, the countries in which all the Iban and Ibanic people live, are officially Islamic nations. For the most part, Iban and Ibanic groups have remained self-aware enclaves in the mosaic of peoples, racially the same but culturally and linguistically diverse, that have always been known as Dayaks. Moreover, most Iban have remained to some degree committed to their traditional world view and religious beliefs and practices, even after accepting an external veneer of Christianity.

Today the Iban are in one sense a modernized people whose economies are based partly on subsistence agriculture and partly on money. Most Iban are literate in their own language, and a few have college degrees. Three Iban men even have obtained advanced degrees in cultural anthropology from universities overseas. Many Iban men and women serve in important Sarawak government positions; several have even served as ministers.

The *Gawai Kenyalang* is one of the sacred rites to which the Iban cling, even some of those who are regarded as Christians. The *Gawai Kenyalang* nowadays is a kind of thanksgiving celebration that is held somewhat irregularly and only after a series of years of prosperity and good health.[3] It is an extensive social event to which neighboring longhouse communities, and even government officials, are invited and honored. Iban living and working in the cities will do everything they can to return to their longhouse community when it is celebrating a *Gawai,* and they give all the support they can.

In a religious sense, the present-day *Gawai Kenyalang* is still a ceremony to which various supernatural personages are asked to mingle with humans and enjoy the celebration. Part of the rite is a request that honored supernatural personages maintain their concern for the health and welfare of the community. The celebration of a *Gawai Kenyalang* is also a more or less reciprocal event amongst neighboring communities. That is to say, every celebration is simultaneously a payback to some neighboring communities for celebrations they hosted in the near past, and a social event that obligates some of the communities attending to reciprocate in the future.

Not to be overlooked, the cultural memory of the days of fighting, raiding, and taking heads is still vivid and is a vital part of Iban cultural identity. Many

2. For an ethnography of the contemporary Iban of the Sibu District, Sarawak, see Sutlive 1978, and for an analysis of the importance of the Iban to the three Brooke rajahs, see Pringle 1970.

3. Contemporary *Gawai Kenyalang* celebrations are described by Kedit 1969, Freeman 1960b, and in "An Account" 1955.

longhouse communities, now in permanent longhouses—some even with electricity, television, and automobiles parked outside—still display bundles of skulls saved from trophy heads taken by their forebears. A contemporary observance of *Gawai Kenyalang* is almost as much a commemoration of the remembered cultural tradition as it is a celebration closely attuned to concerns about contemporary living.

As indicated, the *Gawai Kenyalang* is not celebrated by all Iban and Ibanic groups. A related rite called the *Gawai Burong* ("bird rite," see Sandin 1977) and a quite different rite called the *Gawai Antu* ("spirit rite" or "ghost rite") occupy the same niches in the Iban subcultures of different areas. Perhaps all three of these stem from a common form that existed a very long time ago. The subcultural area that observes *Gawai Kenyalang* is a somewhat discontinuous one, which includes the Ulu Ai region of Sarawak (in which the town of Lubok Antu is now located), northeast of the Ulu Ai in the upper reaches of the Baleh River, and southward from the Ulu Ai across the watershed to the headwaters region of the Kapuas River in Kalimantan, the Indonesian portion of Borneo. In this last region, Iban-speaking groups that I have referred to as Ibanic are known by several different names, two being the Mualong and the Kantu'. The *Gawai Burong* is observed in the Saribas/Sekarang River area of Sarawak.

Recently all the Iban living in Sarawak have come to recognize the distinctive hornbill figures carved for the *Gawai Kenyalang* as a common ethnic icon.[4] Even a representation of a *kenyalang* carving—not the bird itself—is a conspicuous element in the state crest of Sarawak. This is appropriate since the Iban comprise about one-third of the indigenous Dayak population and, since the days of the Brooke Raj, have been very influential in the internal and ethnic politics of Sarawak. Sarawak did not become a state in the federation of states that became Malaysia until well after World War II.

Kenyalang figures are not well-known among tribal art specialists, because very few specimens are located in private and museum collections. Hence they are rarely pictured in publications devoted to outstanding genres and specimens of tribal and exotic art.[5] The largest assemblage of *kenyalang* carvings is held, appropriately, by the Sarawak Museum, located in Kuching, the capital of the state of Sarawak, the political division of Borneo in which most of the Iban live.

The figures

Actually, there are two types of *kenyalang* figures: one is large, elaborately embellished with many small carvings of animals, humans, and plant forms, and lavishly painted in bright colors; the other is smaller, has no secondary naturalistic carvings applied to it, but has an ornate crest over the head of the bird figure and an unadorned spiral exaggeration of the distinctive horn that gives the bird species its English common name. The large figures range from about 6 to 9 feet in length and about 2 1/2 to over 4 feet in height; the smaller type ranges from about 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 feet in length and 22 inches to 2 1/2 feet in height. The larger is the type that the main rituals of the *Gawai Kenyalang* are focused upon, and in the broadest symbolic sense, the carving can be said to represent the entire rite. I shall refer to these figures as "principal" *kenyalang* figures. The smaller type is associated with only ritual portions, albeit important ones, of the *gawai*. The smaller type is referred to variously as the "female," the "consort," and the "child" or "subordinate" *(anak)* of the larger. I shall refer to these as the *anak* type.

The few *kenyalang* carvings that are known to be in private and museum collections outside of Sarawak are all of the *anak* type, and they include the oldest specimens, dating back to the 1890s. One obvious reasons for this is that it was easier for early collectors to transport *anak* specimens out of the interior riverine and rainforest locations where the Iban live. Another reason is that, as property, the *anak* figures belong, so to speak, to single household groups *(bilek),* or a group of women, while the principal figures, as they are moved through the ritual processes of the *gawai*, become

4. At a multi-ethnic performance, May 31, 1990, during the Sarawak national celebration of *Gawai Dayak,* Iban performers represented their culture with a danced depiction of the *Gawai Kenyalang.* They carried genuine *kenyalang* figures lent by the Sarawak Museum. The image pictured in figure 1a was one of them.

5. Photographs of *kenyalang* figures are reproduced in "An Account" 1955, Chin 1980, Davenport 1988, Freeman 1960b, Ganjing 1988, Gavin 1996, Gill 1967, Harrisson 1960, Hersey 1991, Hose and Macdougall 1912, Kedit 1969, Morrison 1962, Roth 1896, Sellato 1989, and Wright, et al 1972. The photo archives of the Sarawak Museum has photographs of only some of the figures in its collections. It has photo records of three *Gawai Kenyalang* at different locations in 1968, 1975, and 1987.

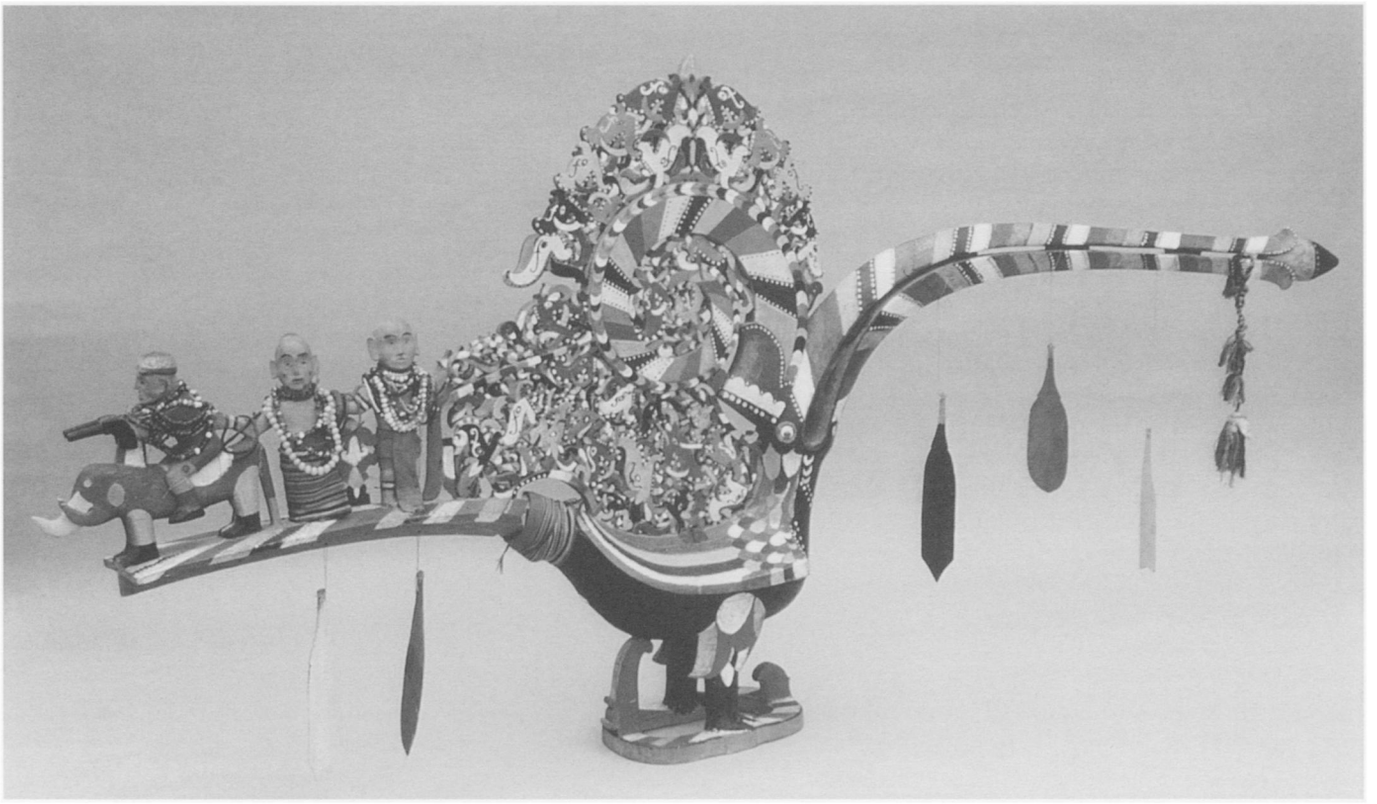

Figure 1a. A principal hornbill figure (L: 82", H: 42") with floral center pattern, traditional fig held in bill, twirling pendants attached to bill and tail, and base support of hook-shaped motifs. Tail figures: male standing, female standing with cloth garments and beads, male pointing gun astride an elephant. Colors: black, white, green, red, yellow. From Wang Pandak, near Lubok Antu in the Ulu Ai region, carver unknown. Sarawak Museum, no number. Photo: William Davenport.

completely communalized, and therefore it is more difficult for collectors to acquire them from the large number of persons who have a vested interest in them. Some informants insist that, formerly, the principal figures were sacralized by the *gawai* and transformed into valuable heirlooms *(pusaka)* belonging to the sponsor of the rite. Only under the direst of circumstances would the Iban part with *pusaka,* especially to an outsider, and that reluctance exists to this day. However, some of my informants denied the communal ownership of principal figures and maintained that the sponsor of the *gawai* could always do with the principal figure as he wished—keep it as a memento, destroy it, sell it. Certainly, that is the present situation in the subcultural area of the Ulu Ai from which most of the principal figures outsiders know about have come. The oldest principal figure that I know of is a specimen in the Sarawak Museum, which is very similar in style to the specimen pictured in figures 1a, 1b, and 1c. It appears to be the first principal figure acquired by the Museum and, according to former Director Lucas Chin, has been on exhibition for as long as he can remember.[6]

Today, some recent principal figures are available for purchase in the shops of several art and antique dealers

6. Unfortunately, the identification number penned on this specimen (CPLO1 BAC 51 10/5/50)) and the relevant catalog record (apparently made some time after its acquisition) states only that it is from the Ulu Ai (which is apparent from the carving style) and has neither the date of acquisition nor the source. The date contained in the specimen number is most likely that of when it was catalogd, which we know was sometime after it was acquired. Our best guess is that it was carved and used sometime in the 1930s. Unfortunately, this is not a very reliable baseline date for the oldest specimen of its kind.

Figure 1b. The principal hornbill figure shown in figure 1a resting on a sacred *ikat* during the *Gawai Kenyalang* at Wang Pandak, August 1968. Photo: Sarawak Museum, published with their permission.

in Kuching. The recent Sarawak Museum acquisitions have been purchased directly from Iban individuals, who brought the figures directly to the Museum for sale.

With the change in the context of the *gawai*, brought about by the cessation of raiding and taking of trophy heads at the end of the last century, the iconographic details on principal figures seem to have changed accordingly. For example, on some of the recently carved principal figures, the traditional *Ficus* fruit, representing both food and human trophy heads, is absent. Instead, a *naga* (dragon's) head is used at the tip of the bill. The dragon is a common motif in the arts of several Dayak tribes, and it clearly has been borrowed from imported Chinese ceramics, which are very common throughout Sarawak (see Chin 1980). The use of a *naga* head motif in place of the ficus/trophy head icon removes the single direct reference to headhunting that principal figures used to carry. Some of the caricature-like depictions on the tails of principal figures are intended to depict contemporary events that occurred within the community, and in some instances, there are obvious references to national events. All of my informants stressed that humor, and perhaps satire, are intended, but they were not certain that morality or allegory, as suggested by Freeman (1960b), were ever indicated. Also, there are many decorative elements and compositions that seem not to have had any particular significance. While the object is being carved, all these iconographic details are determined either by the sponsor of the *gawai* or are left to the taste and whim of the carver. Obviously, as a result of this manner of conceptualization, each principal figure is

Figure 1c. The principal hornbill figure shown in figure 1a with the central floral pattern surrounding the horn erased. Digital editing: William Davenport.

unique. Moreover, only an individual who was involved in or closely associated with the making of a principal figure can fully decode it. Unfortunately, not one of the principal figures I have examined has with it any sort of explication of the references that the maker carved into the figure. In fact, no carver's name accompanies any piece.

There is some evidence that overall composition of the figures has become more complex. More and brighter colors are used now, as industrial enamels have become available from local merchants and traders, and Iban sculptors are using them with little restraint. The point to bear in mind here is that the rhinoceros hornbill carvings of the Iban are part of a ritual tradition that is still very much alive, even though its original context is gone. In summary, this carving tradition does not persist as a stagnant cultural survival. Rather, it continues as a vibrant expression of Iban cultural values and religious ritual in the contemporary world, while at the same time, the carvings and the *Gawai Kenyalang* are conscious reflections upon a very different former way of life.

The species (*Buceros rhinoceros* L.)

The habitat of the rhinoceros hornbill is the rain forest of lower elevations. In this environment, individuals of this species are very conspicuous because of their large size and the way they fly so easily over the towering forest canopy. When an individual bird takes to flight from its high perch, the whir of its wings can be heard from a long way off, and when it flies in to perch, it appears to crash into the branches rather than alighting with grace and precision. The bird also has a distinctive and commanding call that can be heard over a comparatively broad area.

The rhinoceros hornbill is not one of the sacred augury birds (also called omen birds), which are ritually so important to the Iban that no serious undertaking is commenced without first consulting one (see Freeman 1960a). Neither is the rhinoceros hornbill associated with any deity (such as the brahmany kite, *Haliastur indus,* through which the deity Singalang Burong reveals his presence to humans), which gives several other bird species special roles in the religion. In the *Gawai Kenyalang,* as we shall see, the rhinoceros hornbill, as

Figure 2. An *anak*-type figure (L: 41", H: 29"), classic style with fig in its bill, radial crest, legs in crouched position, tail arched upward. Colors: black, white, dull red, light blue, yellow. This carving is very similar to the one used for the logo on Sarawak Museum publications. No provenance. Sarawak Museum no. C76-216 (also W 265). Photo: William Davenport.

represented by the principal carving, is seen as a conveyor, so to speak. Its role is to transport an immaterial substance, or mystical force, from the community that is celebrating the rite to another place, into the infinite or to another designated community. Being the powerful flyer that it is, the rhinoceros hornbill is an apt selection to act in this role. The rhinoceros hornbill is a valued species for another reason: its distinctive black-banded tail feathers are greatly admired and desired for ornamenting the traditional garments that are now worn only on ceremonial occasions.[7] The central performers and ritual leaders at a *Gawai Kenyalang* always wear this formal, traditional clothing, which is decorated with beads and other ornaments, as well as with rhinoceros hornbill tail feathers.

Hornbills, as a genus, have unique nesting and brooding habits, which are of iconic significance in the *Gawai Kenyalang*. When a female hornbill is ready to lay, she seeks out a suitable cavity in a tree trunk or a crevice in a rock formation to make her nest. With the assistance of her mate, she is sealed into the cavity by a protective barrier of mud contributed by the male, and of her own droppings. Only an ovoid slit is left open through which the male will feed his mate during the confinement. The Iban are clearly aware of the fact that this nesting behavior is that species' way of protecting the nest, its eggs, and hatchlings from ground predators, as well as tree-climbing snakes and monitor lizards (*Varanus* sp.). Such snakes are often depicted in the decorative imagery on principal figures, and in the final ritual of the *Gawai Kenyalang,* women construct one or two rough images of monitor lizards out of dried ginger

7. Specimens of fine old garments, formerly used by men for fighting and on ritual occasions, are to be found nowadays mainly in museum collections. See Davenport 1988:39 b, d for nineteenth-century specimens with rhinoceros hornbill tail feathers.

Figure 3. The Rhinoceros hornbill *(Buceros rhinoceros).* Digitally edited version of a painting held by the Sarawak Museum. Published with their permission.

leaves and attach them to the tall pole atop which the principal image has been mounted. In explaining this women's contribution to the final ritual, informants told me that these lizards will provide food for the *kenyalang* on its long flight.

Rhinoceros hornbills feed primarily of the fruit of wild *Ficus* of whichever species is currently bearing. In many of both the principal and *anak*-type figures, the bird holds a fig at the tip of its bill. Since this fruit is ovoid in shape, an association is made with the human head, and more precisely, the human head as a trophy. The connection of head hunting to life itself is a difficult one for outsiders to make. In Iban religion, the human head holds the life-force of that individual. To take a trophy head, return with it, and ritually induct it into the community is to replenish that community's collective life-force. Simply stated, this replenishment must be done from time to time to offset the loss of life-force due to the loss of lives through natural causes and raids by enemies. Fittingly, the ritualized induction of the head into the community is done by women, who, as part of that ritual, place the head between their thigh, as if giving birth to it.

When the male bird feeds the nesting female, he pokes his large bill in and out of the slit in the barrier. This suggests copulation, and sustaining the isolated female and her hatchlings with food is regarded as a visual trope for the unseen processes of generating and maintaining new life. To the Iban, generation, regeneration, and the continuity of life are merged into a single cultural construct, a vital life-force, which is an essential and vital component of the entire universe of living things. The rhinoceros hornbill, as a species, has been singled out as a conspicuous animal of the rain forest whose reproductive behavior partially illustrates this construct.

The *Gawai Kenyalang*

Gawai Kenyalang are not celebrated at fixed intervals; rather, they are celebrated when a community feels there is a need to hold one. Ultimately the need is turned into action when a man of some standing and wealth decides to sponsor a rite. Because the observation of the rite requires the expenditure of a great amount of energy and resources, it can be held only when the community is experiencing relatively prosperous times. As mentioned before, the main purpose of the rite is to maintain, increase, and purify the spiritual strength of the community. It is a religious rite in that it has to do with supernatural forces and beings; it is a social ritual in that it involves participation of the entire community as well as of guests invited from neighboring longhouse communities. Some portions of the *Gawai Kenyalang* during which the ritual leaders chant their invocations are very solemn events, but these are interspersed with intervals of boisterous activities, such as cock fights over which there is heavy betting, and very liberal consumption of rice beer *(tuak)* and potent spirits *(arak).*

It is usually one man who decides to undertake the responsibility of sponsoring a *Gawai*, and his decision to

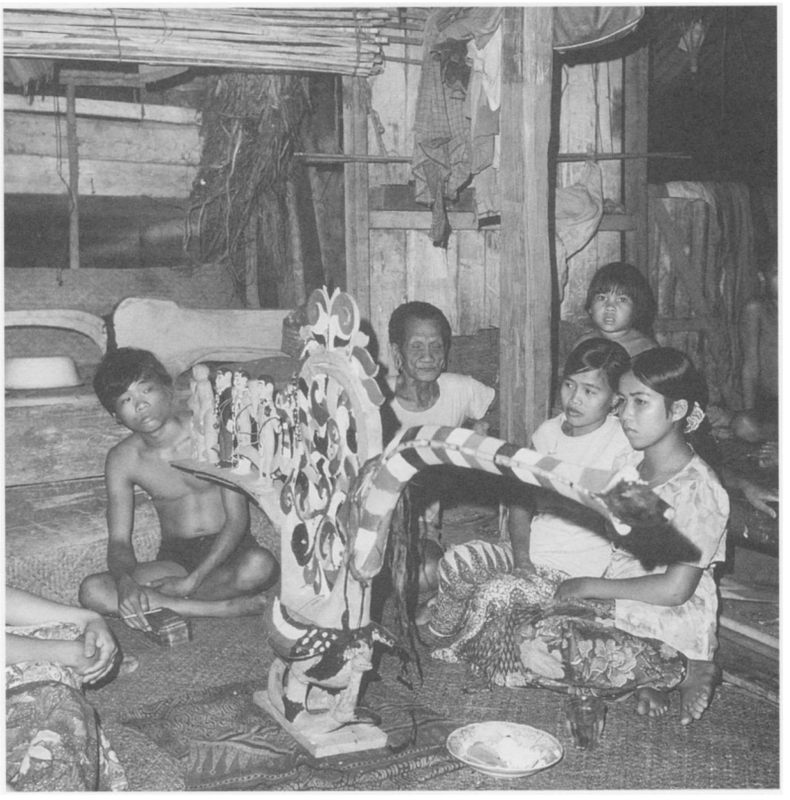

Figure 4. A principal hornbill figure resting on a sacred *ikat* at a longhouse community near Lubok Antu. The man at center rear was touching up details and chanting when asked to pose. He repositioned the offering on the plate before the carving, and other persons of the longhouse joined for the picture. The figure holds a traditional fig in its bill. August 1974. Photo: William Davenport.

do so often comes after he had a singular dream, which, when interpreted by a specialized reader of dreams, is viewed as a command from a supernatural source that cannot be ignored. But the decision can also be arrived at for purely social reasons. For example, it may be that it has been a long time since the last *Gawai Kenyalang* was celebrated, and because surrounding communities have celebrated them, it is time to follow suit or lose the respect of the neighbors. Or it might be due to very special circumstances, such as some years back during the armed Confrontation with Indonesia *(Konfrontasi)* when many young men were away in the national army, and some communities held *gawai* to ask for the safety and well being of their absent sons. I also know of one *Gawai Kenyalang* that was held on behalf of a number of young men who had gone out as a group to work overseas for several years.[8] Obviously, a sponsor must have the consent and support of the entire community, or at least a substantial number of households in it, because holding a *Gawai Kenyalang* is such a major undertaking.

Viewed in its most extended sense, the *gawai* commences with the selection of a tree suitable for carving the principal image. This is usually a species of pelai' (*Alstonia* sp.), the green wood of which is very soft and easy to carve with the simplest of steel blades.[9]

8. This is a custom called *bejalai,* a tradition in which young men leave their communities for the first time, often in small groups, to work, "see the world," have notable experiences, and hopefully, to return with many gifts as well as other visible signs of wealth.

9. The Iban and other Dayak peoples of Borneo have had iron and steel tools for a millennium or more.

Figure 5. A carver cuts the slit between the upper and lower halves of the bill, which will free the tongue. Photo: Sarawak Museum, published with their permission.

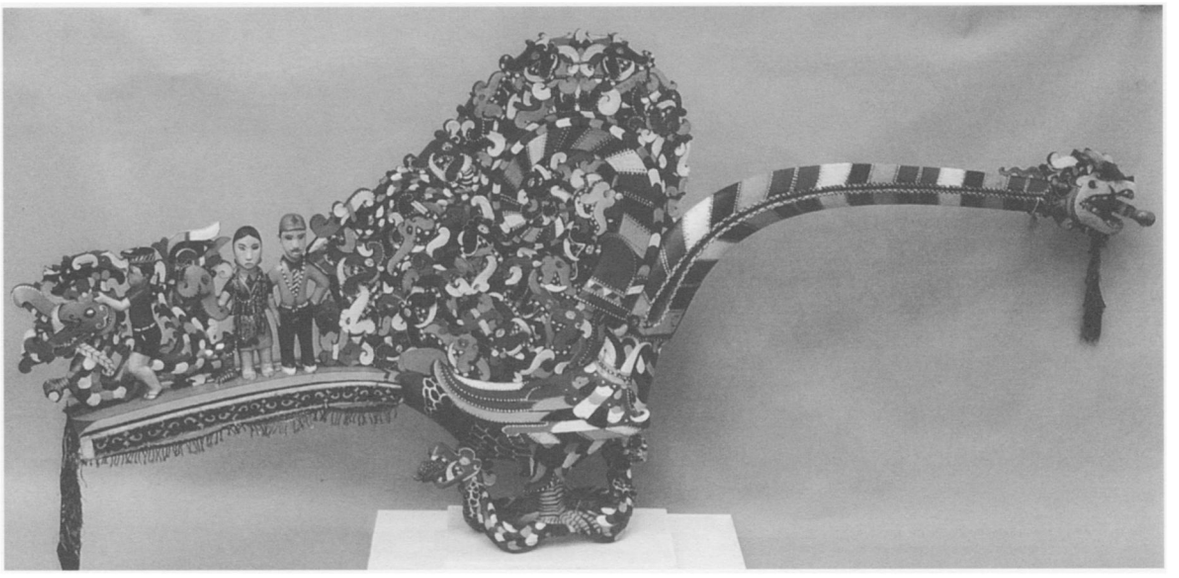

Figure 6. A principal figure (L: 94 1/2", H: 41") with dragon *(naga)* head devouring a human; bill with fully carved tongue; bird stands grasping a double dragon. Tail figures: standing male with cap, tie, and trousers; standing female in skirt and blouse; male figure in hat and shorts astride a dragon; central pattern consisting of versions of *aso* motif (see Ganjing 1988). Colors: black, white, light blue, yellow, green, red, lavender. From Wong Panjai near Lubok Antu, carver unknown. Sarawak Museum no. 78/23 (also 78/65). Photo: William Davenport.

The wood is taken from the buttress roots, which are relatively flat and can be trimmed down to form slabs or planks. Because of the large size of the principal figures, several slabs must be doweled together to make the uncarved block large enough. As the carving of the image progresses, every stage of the shaping and finishing is marked by a ritual called *piring*.[10] Two of these stages are especially noted: one is the final carving, or "freeing," of the image's tongue, as if it were enabling the bird to make its distinctive call. The other is the placement of a hen's egg in a cavity hollowed out for it on one side where the long bill joins the head. The egg is an offering signifying nascent life, and it is most appropriate if the egg has been laid by a hen that also displays some characteristics of a rooster (such as crowing)—a so-called hermaphrodite hen. Symbolically, this egg offering appears to convey its embryonic nature to the whole carving—a living creature about to emerge into the world. To emphasize the obvious, the carving of a principal *kenyalang* figure is itself an extended ritual, various stages of which are marked by a *piring* ritual, which is one part of the overall *gawai*. Seen in this hierarchical way, each ritual sequence can be broken down into constituents; at the same time, each ritual sequence is itself nested in a larger ritual context.

The penultimate treatment of a principal figure is the presentation of it to each individual apartment in the longhouse. A procession led by a ritual director *(tuai gawai)* and a group of recognized ritualists *(temambang),* who usually have been called in from several places because these specialists are few in number, calls at the door of each apartment. The occupants greet the image, offer it rice beer *(tuak),* and hang decorations such as thin strips of metallic foil, light-colored wood, or shiny paper on the bill by strings. Someone may present a piece of *ikat* fabric with one fringed edge to fasten to the trailing edge of the tail. Others will drape strings of glass beads around the neck of the image. These will twist, flash, and flutter in the breeze when the image is ultimately elevated on a tall pole at the conclusion of the

10. *Piring* (or *miring,* meaning "small plate") is an offering of several prescribed foods, tobacco, and betel ingredients, to the deities. It is always made on small china plates, with an invocation. There are many variations in the content and size of this ritual. See Gavin 1996:pls. 16–17.

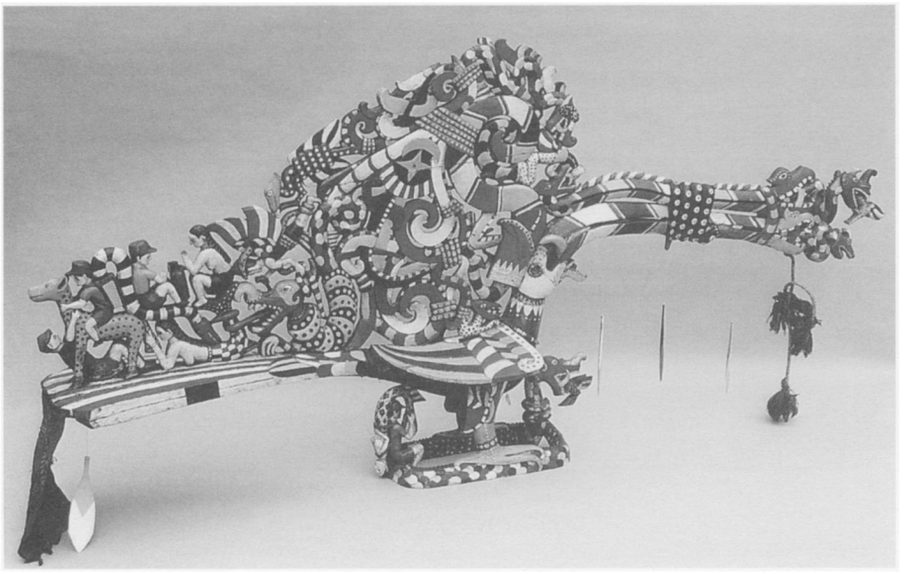

Figure 7a. A double-billed principal figure (L: 85", H: 41"), both bills wrapped with spotted snakes, ending in *naga* heads holding other *naga* heads holding birds; bird stands on a snake with *naga* head and human holding upside-down mermaid. Tail figures: four humans, mermaid, banded snake, and spotted dog (rider astride, another figure under); tight integration of tail figures with central composition. Colors: black, white, light and dark blue, green, yellow, red, lavender. Probably made by the carver shown in figure 5. Sarawak Museum no. 86/234. Photo: William Davenport.

rite. These family groups will also give some cash to the sponsor of the *gawai* to help offset his expenses. The many *piring* rituals performed as the carving and decoration by the sculptor have progressed impart a spiritual essence *(semengat)* to the material image. And the round of introductions to each *bilek* conveys a small degree of collective sponsorship to the image and the proceedings. All of this attention to the image in no way detracts or diminishes the prestige and honor that will accrue to the sponsor of the *gawai* for having organized and supervised the celebration.

During the five or six months that the principal figure was being fabricated, some of the households will have arranged to have a small, *anak*-type image carved just for themselves. However, there is significant variation among communities in this. At some longhouses, the *anak* figures are made for a separate celebration in which the women are the main participants; this ritual is held after the main event involving the principal figure has been completed. At other longhouses, the *anak* image is brought out as representing that *bilek* group just when the principal image is being introduced at the *bilek* doorway. The term *"anak"* aptly describes these images and observances, for it means not only "child" but also "smaller," "lesser," "subordinate."

The climax of the *Gawai Kenyalang* is a very large social affair that lasts several days and to which people from surrounding longhouse communities have been invited. Community members who are away working or are married and residing elsewhere will always try to return to participate in this signal event. Government officials and other important persons may also be invited.[11]

Obviously, in former times, invitations would have been extended only to communities that were on friendly terms or were allied by formal raiding and defensive agreements. Today, the notion of perpetual social reciprocity is very strong, and hundreds of individuals may turn up. Feeding and housing these

11. Note reference "An Account" 1955.

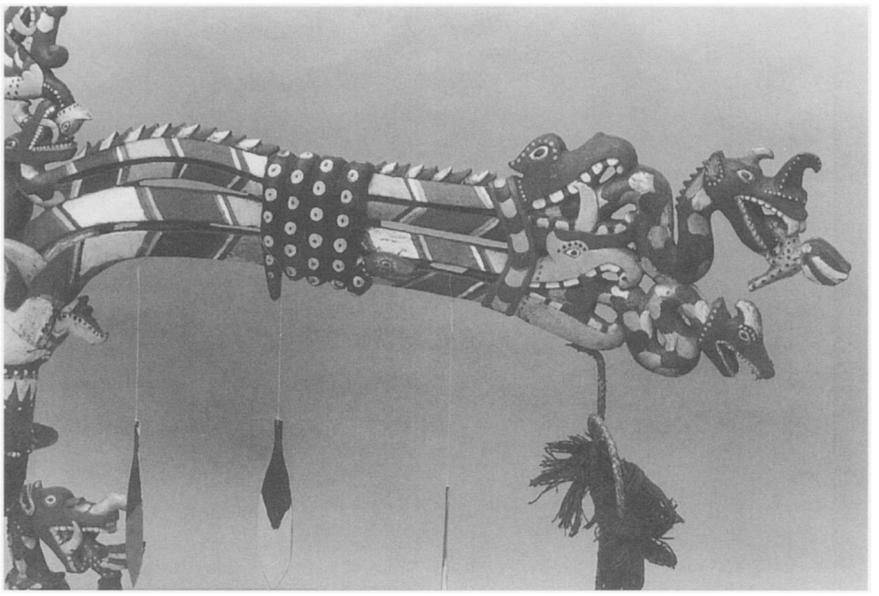

Figure 7b. Detail of bills shown in figure 7a. Photo: William Davenport.

Figure 7c. Detail of tail figures shown in figure 7a. Photo: William Davenport.

Figure 8. An *anak*-type figure (L: 31", H: 21 1/2"), classic style as in figure 2. Collected between 1896 and 1898, probably in Baram River area. University of Pennsylvania Museum no. P8156. Photo: W. Davenport, published with permission of the University of Pennsylvania Museum (see Davenport 1988).

guests is a great effort, and preparations will have been underway for many weeks before the event. This is another reason why a *Gawai Kenyalang* can only be held following a good rice harvest and when storage bins are still filled. The celebration must also be held before the intensive work of preparing and planting new fields for the next year's crop commences. In Sarawak this is usually during the months of July and August.

The final and climactic events of the *gawai* begin after the guests have all arrived and been ceremonially welcomed with food and libations of rice beer and stronger spirits *(arak).* These final episodes are the most deeply religious portions of the rite, because deities and other supernatural beings will be present. A shrine *(pandong ruai)* with a central pole *(tiang pandong)* that symbolically reaches to the heavens and functions as a conduit to the realm of the deities is constructed on the veranda *(ruai).* Various paraphernalia are placed inside the shrine, and the whole is enclosed with blankets of sacred *ikat* weaving *(pua kumbu).* The principal image will be placed close by, resting on another sacred *ikat.* One of the ritualists will send his spiritual self up the pole (the conduit, that is) while chanting *(timang)* invitations to the supernaturals to descend and attend the final phases of the rite. Outside some of the apartments, smaller platform shrines *(bilek pancha)* have been constructed at which similar rituals are performed. Depending on decisions made by the ritual leader, wishes of the sponsor, and requests of individual family groups, several other rituals, such as killing pigs and examining their livers for omens or seeking charms brought by visiting deities, will be performed in the course of events that take place over the next two or more days. Because so many decisions to include and omit minor rituals are made seemingly ad hoc, no two *Gawai Kenyalang* are the same during this phase. Even though the apparent control of events is in the hands of the ritual leaders, they are responding to commands that they perceive as coming from supernatural sources.

Meanwhile, younger men nave cut down and stripped a long, straight tree trunk and leaned it against a scaffold built off the rear porch *(tanju)* of the sponsor's apartment. A deep hole is dug in the ground into which the tree trunk will be slid as it is erected. The veranda shrine *(pandong ruai)* is dismantled, signifying that intercourse with the heavens is terminated, and the principal carving is carried ceremoniously to the scaffold, amidst songs of praise and flattery. In these

chants and songs, the image is referred to as female, admired and extolled for her beauty in words that in normal usage are used when complimenting and praising young women who are made up and dressed in their most elegant finery.

The porch area around the mounted hornbill figure will have been delineated by draped, sacred *ikat (pua kumbu).* This designates the surrounded area as sacred ritual space. The hornbill figure is fastened to a base of crossed arms *(candi),*[12] and the entire assembly is fixed to the top of the stripped tree trunk *(sandong).* Colored flags are attached to the pole, and women will affix rough images of monitor lizards fashioned of dried straw to the pole, heads upward, as if they were creeping up toward the bird, which recalls the natural habitat of the bird.

Long lengths of rattan are tied to the head of the pole, and amidst shouted urgings to the hornbill to fly away and the chanting of farewell laments, it is hoisted into the air. The Iban do make quite an event out of departures, especially those of important persons and those departures that will be long-lasting or permanent. Now elevated, the decorative flags start to gently wave, and the decorative pendants and fringes attached to the image commence to twirl, flash, and flutter. It is as though the hornbill figure has come to life.

Nowadays the figure is pointed toward the setting sun, or just any place on the horizon. The underlying rationale is that the spiritual aspect of the carving will fly away taking with it all the forces that cause misfortune. The celebration is drawing to a close as a kind of rite of purification for the community. Formerly, when raiding and trophy-taking were still a major part of Iban life and the *Gawai Kenyalang* had a different significance, the raised figure was pointed toward the longhouse of an enemy, one that was high on the list of those against which retaliatory attacks were due. The crowd urged the spirit of the image to fly over the forest and enter into the spiritual domain of the targeted community and destroy its collective will, and supernatural power, to successfully defend itself. Put another way, the *Gawai Kenyalang* culminated in a threatening notice to a specific enemy community that it could expect to be raided and plundered and that trophy heads would be taken. The older versions of the chants and prayers that explicitly convey these threats are still known by the ritual experts, although they are not used in contemporary *Gawai.* However, in both the old and the new versions of the launching, the phraseology used is as if the bird were a young man leaving the longhouse on some dangerous quest. It urges him to be brave, fearless, and single-minded in his pursuit of success. The fact that the gender signification of the image has changed from female, when its beauty is extolled, to male, when it is commanded to fly away on its distant mission, is not of symbolic importance in itself. In the initial instance, the image is being praised for its aesthetic appearance, its beauty, and the most salient linguistic forms for this are those usually reserved for females. (English and Iban are similar in this respect.) When the image is hoisted aloft and urged to fly off on its mission, the analogy invoked is that of young men leaving the longhouse and going off into the world (formerly on raids and today, as in the past, on *bejalai*), something women rarely do.

As with other parts of the *gawai,* there is variation in the performances of the climactic ritual when the figure is elevated. At some performances, on the day following the raising of the principal figure, a group of women raise another shorter pole supporting an *anak*-type figure. But this is a light-hearted imitation or parody of the more serious ritual that went before. The women clown and make fun of the men, turning the ritual into an interval of relief and entertainment. This appears to be a classic instance of a so-called inverted or reversed ritual, one hypothetical explanation of which is that it underscores the complementary roles of males and females in this undertaking: men preside over the serious ritual matters while women are responsible for hospitality and making the event a successful and enjoyable social event.

At some *Gawai Kenyalang,* more than one principal figure is raised up on its pole. This is when the *gawai* has been cosponsored, and each sponsor raises up his own principal figure. In any case, the poles topped by the *kenyalang* figures are taken down at the will of their sponsors, and that is usually not long after community life has returned to normal. The images are brought into the apartments *(bilek)* of their sponsors and kept with other valued memorabilia and the household's hoard of treasured heirlooms *(pusaka).*

12. *Candi* are a functional feature of all objects to which offerings are made. Essentially, they are a framework from which offerings are hung. In the case of principal *kenyalang figures,* the pair of crossed arms also forms the base on which the carving is mounted. However, in one unique instance that was photographed, the traditional crossed arms were replaced by a model of a commercial jet aircraft. Large commercial jets are often seen flying over the interior of Sarawak, headed to and from Singapore. (See Wright et al.:112–113.)

Some considerations of style

The principal *kenyalang* figure is made to be viewed from two perspectives: close up during the rituals involved in its carving, painting, and decoration; and at a distance from below after it has been elevated on its pole at the close of the rite. In the former perspective, the way in which the carver has composed, repeated, and integrated the details is dazzling. The intricacy of details in the central area is amplified by the use of many bright colors; the visual effect is kaleidoscopic and even garish by some tastes. Close scrutiny of the carving of the central area surrounding the head of the bird will reveal considerable variation in the quality of the carving, especially in the techniques the carvers used to form details. In the most notable pieces, great care has been paid to rounding the edges of each motif so that each detail is sculpturally distinct from contiguous ones. In some pieces, very little volume is lost to perforations between motifs, and these are the pieces on which the most care has been applied to edges. The overall sculptural effect of a finely executed central array is as if it were bas relief. In some pieces, however, the sculptor has relied more on empty, cut-out space to separate one motif from those adjacent to it, giving the appearance that a coping saw had been used. I judge this to be a less skillful sculptural technique than that which produces the bas-relief effect. The more one attends to this sort of analysis, the more unique each piece becomes, and the more the creativity and skills (or lack thereof) of the carver are revealed.

At a distance, after the image has been elevated in the final ritual of the *Gawai Kenyalang*, obviously the details disappear as the image nearly becomes a silhouette against the sky. The subjective reaction from this view is to the gentle curve of the bill, the balance of bill, body, and tail—the overall grace of the total figure. The perception of the image from this perspective is really not that of a great bird beating its wings in flight; rather it is as if the image were a missile or projectile hurtling through space. Obviously, this perception is suggested by the accompanying chants and knowledge of the underlying beliefs on which the *Gawai Kenyalang* is based.

The smaller *anak* figures are obviously simpler in many ways. They have fewer details, and this puts emphasis upon their formal characteristics. The *anak* figures are handled, carried about, and viewed close at hand within the confines of the *bilek* apartment. The decorative enhancements of these figures are also located around the head of the figure, but they consist only of a radial crest. There is less variation among *anak*-type images than among principal figures, and as mentioned above, they seem to have undergone less change over time. Possibly, this is because of the fact that in the context of the *Gawai,* the *anak* figures represent a constant sociological unit, the household, and do not contain references to actual situations and events, which are always depicted on the figurative ensembles located on top of the tails of principal figures.

Anak and principal figures have two basic representational features in common: in both types, the bill of the bird is attenuated into longer and thinner forms than are characteristic of the bird species. In the principal figures, the bill curves forward into a nearly level, projectile-like appendage; in the *anak* figures, the bill curves downward, complementing and in balance with the upturned angle of the tail. In both types of objects, the horn that gives the species its name is greatly elongated upward either into a spiral or a curved armature to which arrays of small representational forms are attached. In the *anak* figures, the down-curving bill opposed by the back-curving horn are formal features that hold the eye. In the principal figures, the exaggerated horn—spiraled forward in some figures, backward in some figures, or meandering in still other pieces—is often visually submerged by the complex array of articulated motifs that surrounds it.

To European eyes, the principal figures present a subjective incongruity between the purely formal aspects of the figures, such as the delicate curve of the bill, the spiral of the horn, flattened depictions of wings and tail, and the somewhat naturalistic rendering of human and animal figures of the tail ensembles. The former are sophisticated in a sculptural sense: a single geometric feature, such as a curve, spiral, or flat surface, dominates. But, with the renditions of human figures and animals, the naturalism is detailed in a way that we might judge, ethnocentrically to be sure, as "child-like" or "juvenile," the way young children in our society render figures and animals in clay. From the few conversations about form and style I have had with Iban friends and informants, they perceived no such incongruity.

Other Dayak societies also carve figures representing hornbills, but they are very different in many ways, such as size, posture, and style. Carved hornbill figures are now being carved specially for the tourist market, but by

Figure 9. Men in ceremonial garb constructing an altar *(pandong ruai)* at a modern longhouse, Rumah Pemanen Kuli, near Kapit, May 1987. Photo: Sarawak Museum, published with permission.

Figure 10. Two elevated figures on poles against the sky; the pole on the left has a monitor lizard figure of dried ginger leaves attached, Kaong Ili, near Lubok Antu, August 1975. Photo: Sarawak Museum, published with their permission.

whom is not known to me. Most of these are clearly takeoffs from the *anak* type. They are smaller, often made from mahogany-type woods, and varnished instead of painted. The two I have seen that were derived from the principal figure type, of necessity, are much smaller and do not have the tail ensemble of human and animal forms. The central arrays around the horn had the cut-out, coping-saw look. All of the curio *kenyalang* are easily distinguished from genuine, traditional artifacts. The fact that hornbill carvings are being produced as curios in this instance is not necessarily a sign that the ritual carving of figures for the *Gawai Kenyalang* is an aesthetic tradition in decline and becoming "airport art." Everything I have seen suggests that the *Gawai Kenyalang* is a strong tradition that has endured by becoming adapted to the contemporary sociopolitical scene. Perhaps the emergence of an "airport art" type of hornbill figure is another instance of adaptation, but I am not certain of this because I do not know who is responsible for making the curios. It is inevitable that there is a spin-off hornbill curios in the face of the Sarawak government's efforts to develop a tourist industry. One of the promotional themes of the industry a few years ago was the exotic aspect of the tropical environment, in particular, the rain forest and its animal life. One poster seen in airport terminals and hotel lobbies proclaimed in large bold print "Sarawak, Land of the Hornbills," with a naturalistic rendition of a rhinoceros hornbill perched amidst forest foliage. It is not surprising, then, that some carved-for-curios representations of this singular bird are to be found in shops catering to the visitors. Neither is it surprising that whoever is responsible for making them has selected the genuine Iban artifacts as a prototypes.

In the domain of tribal art (exotic art, traditional art, or whatever designation one prefers), the Iban tradition of carving *kenyalang* figures is an all-too-rare example of the persistence of a tradition without degeneration or fossilization. The carvings remain vibrant and expressive, because the making and primary use of them remain embedded in their traditional ritual context, the *Gawai Kenyalang*. Over the last century, that ritual context has adapted to the political and economic environment that is the state of Sarawak and the nation of Malaysia. The Iban are not an indigenous "tribe" in the traditional colonial sense; they are one of many ethnic/linguistic groups that reside in parts of two southeast Asian nations. In Malaysia, where most of the *kenyalang* figures we know about were made, their significance has broadened from being a part of a rite to becoming an icon of ethnicity. Even when these sculptures are totally removed from their cultural and social contexts, Iban hornbill carvings can be ranked as one of the most distinctive and spectacular traditions of wood sculpture in insular southeast Asia.

The reader may legitimately ask if these interpretations are the writer's or the Iban way of seeing and understanding the interrelationships of the rhinoceros hornbill, both bird and figure, to headhunting and the restoration of vital life force to the community. The answer is that this is the Iban way. Obviously, in listening to informants, speaking either in the Iban language or in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language, and then through an interpreter into English (the writer speaks no Iban and very poor Bahasa Malaysia), all was not always clear. So, I had to consult ornithological sources and interrogate still other Iban on details of the natural history of rhinoceros hornbills and their metaphorical relationships to religious beliefs and rituals. To place this analysis in the antiquated jargon of Fraserian magic, the *Gawai Kenyalang* is a rite in which both sympathetic and imitative magic are deeply embedded.

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