



Press Release

Release date: 24 October 2024

Pitt Rivers Museum Returns Badeng Sunhat to the Kenyah Badeng Community in Sarawak, Borneo

On Monday 4 November the Pitt Rivers Museum will be hosting a ceremony to mark the return of a Badeng sunhat to the Kenyah Badeng community. The sunhat was acquired in 1923 after the closure of the Chesterton House Museum, which had housed the collection of the Second Rajah of Sarawak, Charles Brooke. It had previously been in the collection of the Sarawak Museum, where it had been donated by government administrator, Charles Agar Bampfylde, in 1903. The sunhat has never been on display at the Pitt Rivers Museum.

Records show that the sunhat was taken during punitive expeditions in 1895 and 1896 targeting the indigenous Kenyah Badeng people, then referred to as 'Madangs'. At this time, Sarawak, now part of Malaysia, was under Brooke rule, an independent monarchy led by successive members of the British Brooke family known as the 'White Rajahs'. War expeditions were a common method of dealing with resistance during the period of the formation of Sarawak as a state on the island of Borneo, which began with Brooke rule in 1841 and ended with Japanese occupation in 1941. Many indigenous groups were subject to government-sanctioned attacks and to heavy fines imposed for resistance to territorial expansion. The Kenyah Badeng, living on the Usun Apau plateau of Sarawak, were targeted in a series of expeditions by mixed forces commissioned by the Brooke regime. Oral histories describe these attacks, including the massacring of women and children, the burning of longhouses and the looting of belongings. They resulted in thousands of deaths and the permanent displacement of a people from their homeland.

The sunhat, made of woven bamboo with designs of human figures, serves the dual function of providing physical and spiritual protection for a mother and her infant. It was part of a set of six looted objects donated to the Sarawak Museum in 1903. The other five objects, all associated with women and the hearth, remained in the Sarawak Museum after the hat was gifted to the Rajah in 1905. The domestic nature of the objects testifies to the absolute destruction of village life wreaked by such expeditions and highlights the overlooked roles of women and children during warfare.

The ceremony will mark the transfer of ownership to the Kenyah Badeng Association (Kebana). The sunhat will be exhibited at the Borneo Cultures Museum.

Prof. dr Laura Van Broekhoven, Director of the Pitt Rivers Museum, said: "I am pleased the sunhat will be returning home to the care of the Museum in Sarawak and the Badeng people, from whom it was so violently taken. At the heart of our work lies caring for objects and people. Given the history of parts of our collections and their entanglements in military violence and oppression, this work of redress is a crucial part of the work we want and need to do, as it helps to restore trust and understanding, and builds hope for a future of peace through partnership. I am especially grateful for the work that has been done to streamline the process, enabling us to act faster than we have been able to do in the past. This helps build practice and understanding, making us even more confident that museums and



communities, supported by their governments, can work alongside each other towards reconciliation and healing."

The Pitt Rivers Museum holds approximately three thousand objects from Borneo, the majority of which are from Sarawak. Nearly seven hundred of these came from the Chesterton House Museum, being transferred to the Pitt Rivers Museum after its closure in 1923. The museum also holds archival photographs from Sarawak.

This return ceremony is especially significant because it is the first repatriation from the Pitt Rivers Museum of a cultural object, as opposed to ancestral remains.

ENDS

Press Contact

Louise Hancock, Marketing & Media, Pitt Rivers Museum
Louise.hancock@prm.ox.ac.uk | press@prm.ox.ac.uk | 07553 433635

Images will be made available after the ceremony.

About the Pitt Rivers Museum

[The Pitt Rivers Museum](#) is one of the leading museums of anthropology, ethnography and archaeology in the world. Established in 1884, it now has over 700,000 items in its collections and is in the top 100 most visited museums in the UK, welcoming over 480,000 visitors in 2019. The Museum was shortlisted for the Art Fund Museum of the Year 2019 for its creative programmes of reinvention and reinterpretation, which show a much-loved Victorian space challenging perceptions and demonstrating the vital role museums can play in contemporary society.

What is the Museum's position on restitution?

The Pitt Rivers Museum acknowledges that some objects in the collections were acquired through violence, looting, and by the exertion of western colonial power on 'subject' people. We aim to work collaboratively with partners from across the world towards redress on a case-by-case basis. The Museum is committed to working with stakeholders and source communities to research the provenance of the collections, consider claims for restitution, and address historic museum practices which require change for the benefit of all our visitors and global community. Further information: www.prm.ox.ac.uk/committed-to-change and <https://www.glam.ox.ac.uk/procedures-for-return-of-cultural-objects-claims>.