

## 31 Days of Borneo

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### Abstract

Borneo is the world's third largest island, and is shared between Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak), Brunei and Indonesia (Kalimantan). One thing which stands out about the island is its incredible biological and ethnocultural diversity. It also has a long history of human occupation, dating back to at least 40 000 years ago. As such it has been, and continues to be, a place of archaeological, anthropological and scientific interest. This photo essay attempts in thirty-one images to explore some of this diversity and offer a very brief insight into Borneo's unique heritage.

*Editor's note: This series of illustrations was discovered on Instagram and were valuable both as a collection of illustrations, and also because their subject matter shed some light on the various and diverse cultures of Borneo.*

Keywords: Borneo, illustration, photo essay

31 Days of Borneo was an art initiative I undertook over winter break in 2017. Set up as an Instagram art challenge, the end goal was to upload 31 illustrations relating to Borneo, one for each day, by the end of December. Its underlying aims are more reflective than artistic, and each illustration involved either looking up something I had never seen or heard of before, or alternatively, trying to find out a bit more about the things which I had.

One problem I faced was being spoilt for choice. Borneo's biodiversity is equalled by its cultural diversity, and it is impossible to fully represent either in just a month's time. The result was a mixed bag of archaeology, cultural arts and natural history, but having lived in Sarawak for the past 20 years the series ended up being heavily centred on the region. Many of the objects were referenced from those in museum collections, most notably that of the Sarawak Museum and the Sibu Cultural Heritage Museum where I have worked, while some creative liberties were taken with others.

Working on this series has given me a greater understanding and appreciation of the complex mix of culture, life and history that forms Borneo as it stands today. It is my intention to continue exploring this complexity, with a broader focus on the island as a whole.



The *sape* is a traditional stringed instrument of the Orang Ulu in Sarawak. It is carved from a single bole of wood and is often compared to a lute.

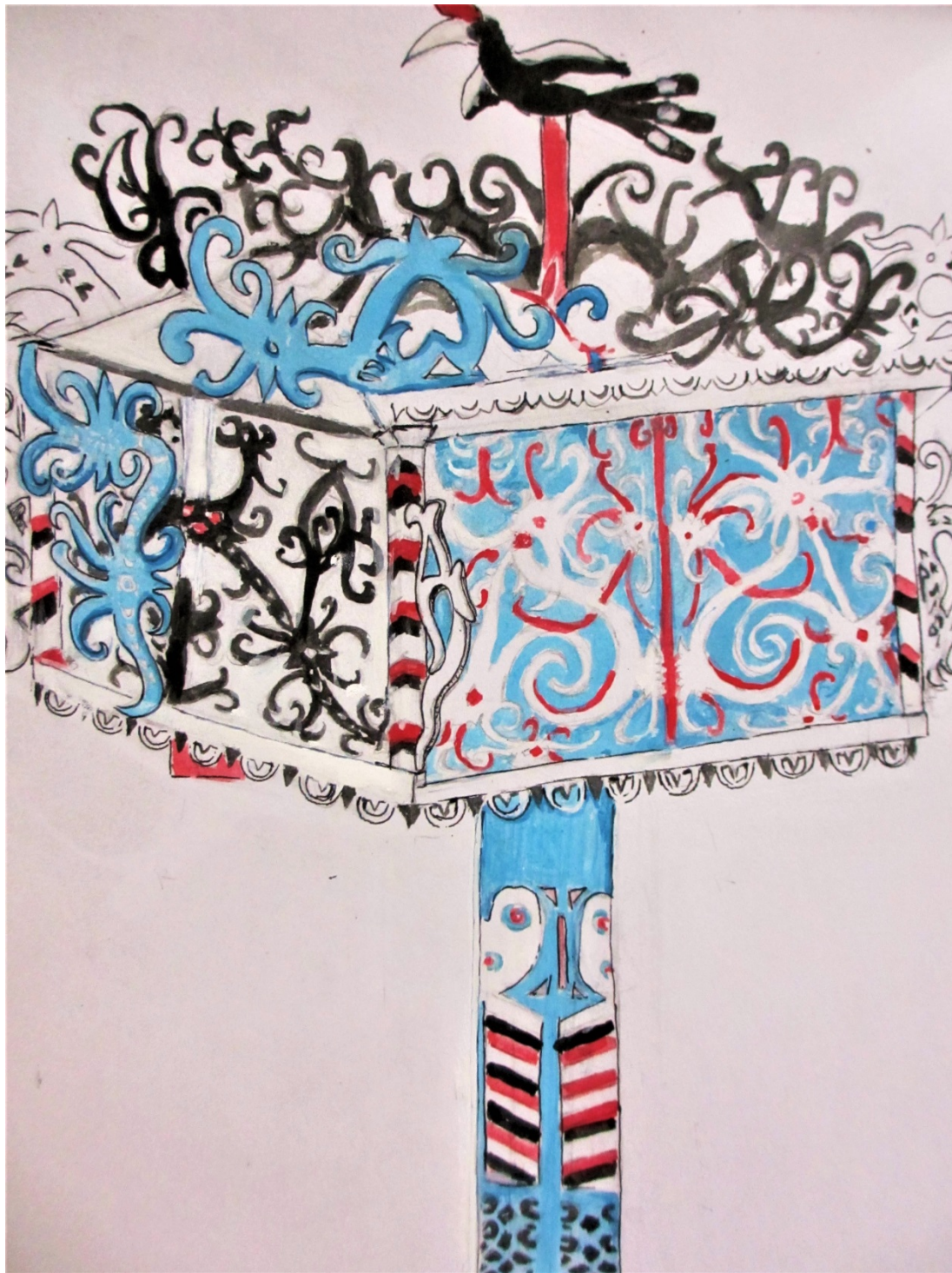


A *tawak* is a big, knobbed hanging brass gong, often suspended from a wooden frame. It typically forms part of a larger musical ensemble, and is relatively widespread throughout Borneo.



The *sompoton* is a Sabahan aerophone or mouth organ, consisting of 8 bamboo pipes fitted into a gourd which forms the mouthpiece.





This *salong* or burial hut comes from the Orang Ulu displays at the Sibu Cultural Heritage Museum. *Salong* huts are elaborately carved from hardwood, and are used to inter the remains of local aristocrats.

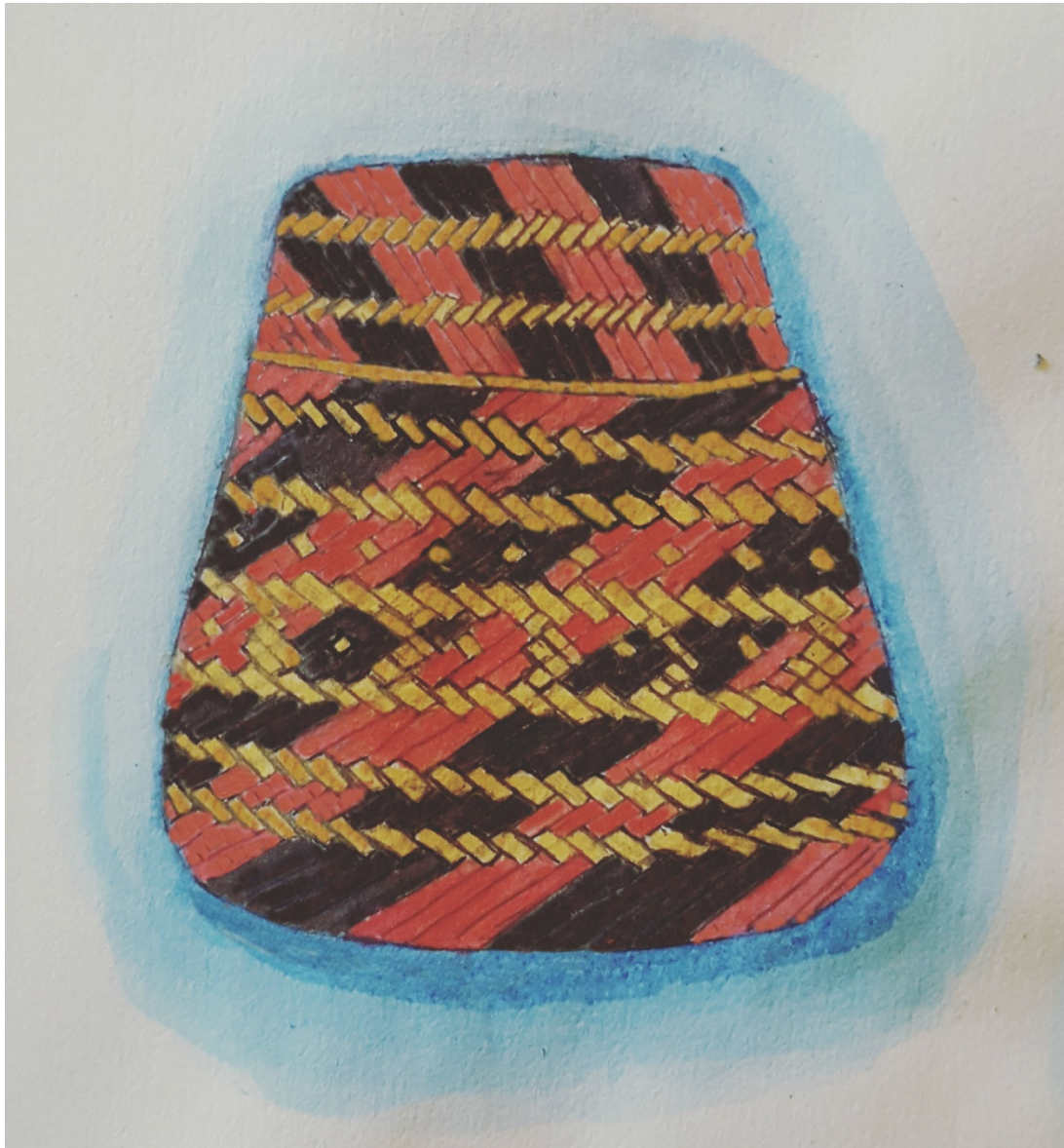


Outline of a carved stone (*batu narit*) near Pa' Bangar in the Kelabit Highlands.





This is a double-trunk burial pole and hut (*salong*) from Long Segaham, Ulu Belaga which is now erected outside the Sarawak Natural History Museum in Kuching.



An example of Melanau basketry, which often incorporates black, red and tan colour schemes.





*Terendak* (or *tapou*) are the conical sunhats woven from sago palm leaves by the Melanau. One of the better-known varieties of sunhat, pictured above, is known as the *terendak igan*.



An intricately designed *kelebit* war shield, from the Orang Ulu displays at the Sibu Cultural Heritage Museum.





The Miss North's pitcher plants (*Nepenthes northiana*) are endemic to Borneo. The above is copied from a (ca. 1876) painting by Marianne North, after whom the species is named.



*Rinago* refer to a variety of coil-work baskets woven by the Rungus in Sabah. Above is a depiction of the *rinago gasing*.





The ability to “take heads” was once a sign of bravery among the Iban, and headhunted skulls were often retained as trophies. Although headhunting is no longer practised today, the skulls (or *antu pala*) continue to be treated with respect as they are believed to hold the spirit of the deceased.



*Takinan* are Sabahan baskets best characterised by the 4 rattan stands which support them.



A wood-carved Berawan food bowl from the collections of the Sarawak Museum.





*Bayung* are multipurpose baskets woven by the Dusun from a type of wild grass known as *bemban* (*Donax canniformis*).





*Belum* or *dakan* are carved wooden effigies made for their use in traditional Melanau healing rituals. The images vary based on the carver, local traditions and the type of spirit. Depicted above is the *naga sebalun* on display at the Sarawak Museum.



The solid casque of the helmeted hornbill makes it a prized commodity, and it was traditionally used to carve accessories such as ear pendants.



One of the countless examples of Bornean beadwork, *pinakol* are bandoleer-type belts worn over the torso and are part of the traditional attire of the Rungus in Sabah.





This is the carved wooden *terabai* (war shield) from the Iban displays at the Sibu Cultural Heritage Museum.



*Ajat* baskets are traditionally woven from rattan by the Penan.





The stretching of ear-lobes for aesthetic purposes was often achieved through the use of brass or lead ear-weights. The practice is typically started when the individual is a child, with more weight being added to the lobes as he or she gets older.



This *ba* or baby-carrier incorporates both basketry and beadwork, and is part of the Urang Sarawak display in Kuching.





*Sungkup* are Iban mortuary structures which can only be carved during Gawai Antu. The example above is from the Sibuh Cultural Heritage Museum.





A Kenyah carving from the collections of the Sarawak Museum depicting a leopard and a dragon dog.



The rhinoceros hornbill (*Buceros rhinoceros*).





Kenyah ritual mask with protruding ears, on display at the Sarawak Museum.





Four types of Melanau *bilum*. From left to right: (a) *Buaw pengamou*, an earth spirit from the Sarawak Museum; (b) *Jin seperangin* from the Sibu Cultural Heritage Museum; (c) *Kulum pengamou* from the Sibu Cultural Heritage Museum; (d) *Kulum pengamou* from the British Museum (As1994,05.52).



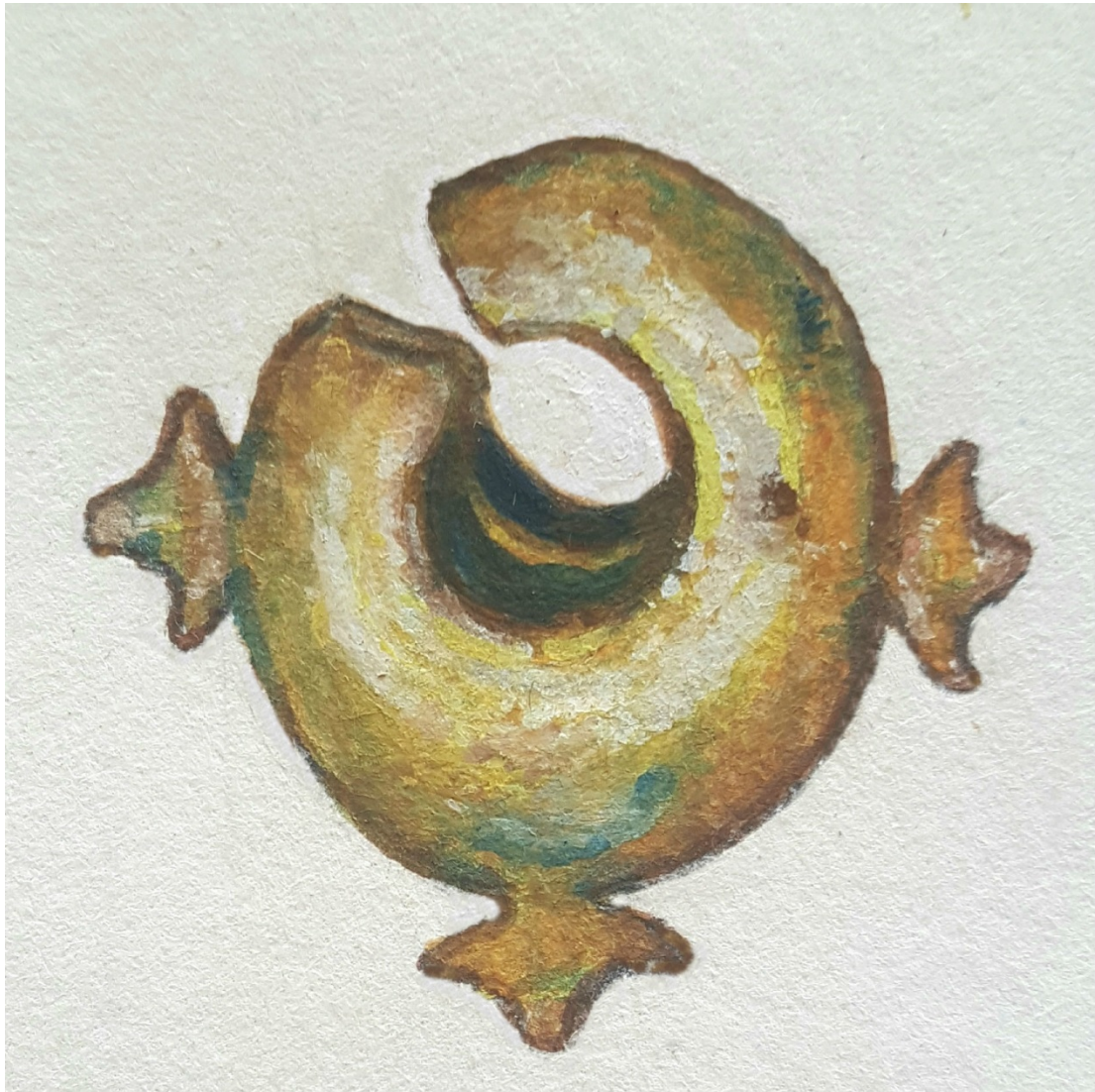
Another take on the *naga sebalun*, on display at the Sarawak Museum.





Ceramic stoneware jars depicting dragons are commonplace in Borneo, regardless of whether they are used as status symbols or as utilitarian wares; this particular jar is from a landscape design setup.





The nephritic lingling-o excavated from the Niah Caves in 1977 (after Iizuka et al. 2005).



This is the headless stone Buddha from Bukit Maras, Santubong made in the Gupta tradition. (photo reference: [@sarawakmuseumcampus](#) on Instagram)





Map of Borneo indicating tribal regions and locations of archaeological sites mentioned in the text. Tribal distributions adapted from Sellato 1989.

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