

## Spirit Ship (*Tiweh*)

Borneo, Bentian Dayak, 19th century  
Wood, rattan, bamboo, natural fibers

Gift of The Christensen Fund, 2001  
(10619.1)

The traditional means of transportation throughout Borneo was by canoe, as the central mountain regions could only be penetrated by river. As some Borneo societies believed that a river connected the realm of the living with that of the dead, it was necessary to construct boats such as this one to transport the souls of the deceased chief and his kin to the land of the dead. The boat would have been suspended from the rafters of a longhouse.



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**DAYAK BAHAU SPIRIT SHIP (OR SOUL BOAT)**

**Upper Mahakam River, Kalimantan (Borneo),**

**19th century**

**Blackened carved wood, rattan, bamboo and other natural fibers (L32,724)**

Model canoes of this type were the vehicles used to carry the soul of a deceased chief and his kin to the Upper World. The long, narrow hull is covered by a wide-planked deck surrounded by deep gunwhales which are painted with a continuous zig-zag motif. Attached around the gunwhale is a rattan balustrade. The bow is carved in the form of a naga head whose gaping jaws bare curled fangs.

Tied and nailed around the balustrade are animals (dogs or monkeys) and numerous figures brandishing shields, swords and blunderbuss. Inserted through the cabin roof is a tun-tun figure while a bird perches on the ridge. Flag poles of split bamboo are inserted through the cabin roof.

At the stern is a curvilinear pulpit above which perches another bird. A long steering paddle is attached to starboard. The canoe was suspended in the rafters of the Long House by a stout palm-fiber rope tied to bows and stern.

The canoe was the traditional means of travel throughout Borneo. Trade goods and new ideas could only penetrate the central mountain regions by river. Some Borneo and Southeast Asian societies believed that a river connected their living world with that of their ancestors, the Upper World. Only after a long river voyage did the dead gain access to heaven. Accordingly, special canoes were built to carry the souls on their final river journey. The richer the man in life, the better equipped his canoe. The soul of a powerful chief would not travel alone but would be accompanied by his regular followers.

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Anthony Plowright

SHIPPING INVOICE 11.

SPIRIT SHIP

A unique model canoe for carrying the soul of a deceased chief and his kin to the Upper World. The long narrow hull covered by a wide planked deck surrounded by deep gunwales which are painted with a continuous zig-zag motif. Attached around the gunwale is a rattan balustrade. The bow is carved in the form of a naga head whose gaping jaws bare curled fangs.

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Length 90 inches  
Beam 38 inches

Collected at Desa Matalibaq, Maribu River

Exhibited at the Museum of Cultural History, U.C.L.A. 1985

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The antiquity of this cosmological image is testified by the Dongson bronze drums, some of which on their sides have pictures depicting canoes laden with warriors wearing feathered ceremonial dress. (Golubew 1929, Heine Geldern 1947, Spennemann 1985).

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I the undersigned declare that the wood canoe described above is a genuine ethnographical specimen over 100 years old, of native tribal Indonesian origin and which was not produced for commercial purposes or gain.

  
J.A. Plowright