

Representation of the Supreme Divinity



- *kenyalang*
- Insular South-East Asia
- East-Malaysia, Borneo (Sarawak State)
- Iban
- 19th-20th century
- Wood
- L. : 173 cm
- Formerly Nelson Rockefeller collection (1930–50).
- INV. 3464-B

The ritual sculpture called *kenyalang* (rhinoceros hornbill), carved from *pelai* (*Alstonia*), a light, easily worked wood, is one of the most spectacular creations of Iban art. It depicts the Iban's supreme divinity, Lang Singalang Burong, also god of war, as a calao (*Buceros rhinoceros*). These sculpted icons are used primarily as spiritual weapons against enemies during the 'hornbill festival' (*gawai kenyalang*), but also as symbols of masculinity during the 'bird festival' (*gawai burong*).

These ceremonies were traditionally associated with head hunting and the acquisition of trophy heads and prestige by warriors – the fruit placed at the end of the beak evokes a human head. During the ceremony, influential men place the icons of Singalang Burong on top of poles on the platform of the longhouse (*tanju'*), where they receive offerings. The Iban still believe the *kenyalang* has the power to spirit the longhouse's quarrels and troubles away to enemies.

This piece's powerful style is attributable to the Iban of the Rejang River basin. It is different to the mannerism of the *kenyalang* of the Saribas and Balau regions and the more exuberant style of the

sculptures of western Sarawak (Ulu 'Ai, Simanggang). The coiled spiral 'flaming' from the horn is a masterpiece of poise and equilibrium. The human figures and animals depicted on the tail may be heroes of Iban mythology. They are evoked in the timang incantations sung by bards at these great festivals. The dominantly red polychrome decoration has faded with age.

Antonio Guerreiro, *Arts of Africa and Oceania. Highlights from the Musée Barbier-Mueller*, musée Barbier-Mueller & Hazan (eds.), 2007: p. 265.