

Coffins, Traditions and Mysteries

By Izabella Kosla-Sluzek

"Do you really want to go to Kuala Lumpur to see *coffins*?" My friend could not believe her ears, but it was precisely what I did on the last weekend of May 2010. The opportunity to view both ancient and modern regional coffins all under one roof was too good to miss.

A spooky poster announcing, *Coffins, Traditions and Mysteries*, and a haunting tune enticed me into the exhibition area, tucked behind the National Museum's classical Malay-style building. The exhibition started chronologically, but soon evolved into a rich multi-ethnic display. At the entrance were Palaeolithic burials from Peninsular Malaysia. In these simple dug-out graves, human skeletons were interred, either supine or on their sides, arms and legs rope-tied or in the foetal position, awaiting their rebirth in the afterworld. In the Neolithic period, some burials took place in jars, replaced in our era by huge ceramic trade vessels. The jars were tightly sealed so as not to disturb the soul.

Metal Age interments showed more diversity. Some were symbolic, such as an empty grave containing a *Dong Son* bronze drum or just its flat tympanum atop a stone slab mound. There were boat coffins once placed deep inside limestone caves (as in Niah, Sarawak), or hung from cliffs overlooking rivers since rivers were considered highways for the living and the dead alike. The Niah Cave had walls covered with red haematite paintings of human figures 'dancing' in boats, possibly ancestors on their way to the afterworld.

Next, the curators focused on the burial rites of Malaysia's many ethnic groups, the oldest being the *Orang Asli* (indigenous people). The Bateq subgroup of the Negrito tribe leave their dead on a platform high in the branches of a tree, far from the village, often on the other bank of the river, to prevent the ghost from returning and terrorising the living. In contrast, the Jah Hut construct a rectangular wooden pyramid directly above the grave, with carvings denoting the sex of the deceased. They believe a spirit called *Bes Kubur* dwells inside.

Animal motifs dominate the coffins of Borneo's Dayaks and those from Eastern Indonesia. Children's coffins often have large lizards carved on the lids. Coffins for adults resemble natural or mythical beasts such as the Kenyah-Kayan dragon, as well as buffalo, snake or crocodile heads on the ends of various log coffins.

The Melanau people traditionally erected a tall and intricately carved pole (*jerunei*) topped by a small house (*salong*) where an aristocrat's bones were placed, but not before a slave had been sacrificed and buried at the pole's



A rattan chair coffin from Luzon Island, Philippines, around 500 years old

base. It was believed that the slave would protect the deceased from evil spirits.

A 500-year-old rattan chair from Luzon, the Philippines, is hardly what you would expect to see at a coffin exhibition. An aristocratic corpse was seated there for as long as necessary to turn into a skeleton and later interred during a secondary burial rite.

Towards the end, the gallery became a showcase of the modern funerary traditions of the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities in Malaysia. Artefacts included a hand-drawn hearse from Penang, a Malay bamboo funeral litter draped in an uncut batik cloth, Chinese urns (some made of jade), Qing-inspired silk burial garments and more.

Incredibly, the mood inside the exhibition seemed far from grave, as the gallery was filled with laughing children who came with their families and teachers. The choir of little voices joined in the singing of a tune underlying the obvious - that our love of life overcomes our fear of death.

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A dog-dragon Asu coffin from the Kelabit tribe, Sarawak

For the National Museum of Malaysia go to:
www.malaysian-explorer.com/muziumNegara.html

Currently two exhibitions are being held. One explores Malaysia's historical treasures and cultural heritage – until 31 December 2011. The second is an exhibition on traditional law, from 1 August to 1 October 2011.

Photos courtesy of the author