

Dayak Hudoq Masks

By Mark Gordon

In the 16th century, when European traders and colonialists first began to explore Southeast Asia, they discovered a cacophony of vibrant cultures, each with its own distinctive tradition of arts and crafts. While the range and style of these arts varied widely from group to group, one element was found to be almost universal – masks.

Indeed, masks are an important part of spiritual life across Southeast Asia, not only for the indigenous peoples who inhabit the region's deep forests and wayward islands, but also for the people who today populate its bustling cities and work in its modern offices and factories. *Topang* masks, for example, are a key element in contemporary Javanese ritual and *Khon* masks are an integral part of many Thai ceremonies.

To hide the identity of the wearer and create the presence of another being, masks are worn over the entire head or in front of the face. The wearer is thought to undergo a psychic change and assume the character of the spirit depicted by the mask.

Because the mask-wearer is in direct association with the spirit-force of the mask, he or she is considered to be in grave personal danger while the mask is worn. For this reason, the people who make masks and the people who wear them follow strict procedures for creating and handling them.

In many Southeast Asian indigenous societies masks are used in rituals to establish a link with the spirit world so that ancestors and deities may be present and active during the ceremony. Masks are most often worn during ceremonies that retell creation myths, where they help align the spiritual forces of a given society's world with what it believes is the true and proper structure of the universe.

Perhaps the greatest flowering of Southeast Asian mask art can be found in the *hudoq* masks produced by the Dayak peoples of Borneo.

Hudoq masks were worn during agricultural rituals to ensure the fertility and safety of the group's gardens. Myths that recounted the destructive powers of spirit-charged garden pests and how the ancestors vanquished them were



Wooden masks (*hudoq*), circa 1900s, Kayan Dayak, Sarawak, Malaysia. Almost all Dayak groups produce wooden masks that depict gods, ancestors, demons or animals.

acted out in the darkness of the night. The goal of these rituals was to scare away destructive spirits so crops could flourish and provide a bountiful harvest.

The efficacy of these rituals was based on sympathetic magic, which required the participation of onlookers. In retelling the myths, the masked performers tried to frighten spectators who symbolically represented the dangerous spirits that threatened the gardens.

In keeping with this role, *hudoq* masks were purposefully made to look weird and frightening. Artists competed to create the most grotesque variations of traditional character themes. The most effective masks were also the most popular. They were used for decades and sometimes even generations, being periodically repainted to keep them looking fresh and vibrant.

Within the serious business of ensuring spiritual harmony, there was room for more lighthearted activity. Entertainment was also an important part of *hudoq* rituals. During the course of the night's ceremonies, *hudoq* mask wearers playfully targeted children in the group with the aim of frightening and shocking them. These rituals provided adrenalin-pumping entertainment for the children while at the same time teaching them about the ancient myths and rituals and the important characters who dwelled in the world of their ancestors.

In addition to ceremonies connected with the fertility and protection of gardens, *hudoq* masks were also enlisted by shaman healers to treat certain illnesses that were thought to be caused by bad spirits. In these 'curing' rituals, shamans used the same sympathetic magic employed in the agricultural ceremonies. The grotesque and

frightening masks were donned in an attempt to scare away the bad spirits that were generating ill-health.

Mark Gordon is a Singaporean collector who also owns several fine pieces which have been publically displayed in Singapore several times over the past few years.

Photos courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum