

Sabah's Heritage: The Role of The Sabah Museum in Artifact Collection and Conservation

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Abstract

This study explores the pivotal role of the Sabah Museum in the collection, conservation, and dissemination of Sabah's cultural and historical heritage. Emphasizing its function as a custodian of both tangible and intangible heritage, this research examines the museum's efforts in artifact acquisition, archaeological excavations, and collaborative engagements with local communities. The museum's collection reflects the rich cultural diversity of Sabah, with significant contributions from indigenous groups such as the Murut and Kadazan Dusun. Moreover, this study underscores the museum's commitment to preserving indigenous knowledge systems through conservation programs and public education initiatives. By analyzing the museum's strategies in heritage management, this research highlights its broader implications for cultural sustainability and identity preservation in Sabah. The findings demonstrate that the Sabah Museum plays a crucial role in ensuring that the region's diverse heritage remains accessible and valued by future generations.

Keywords: Archaeological excavation, artifact conservation, cultural heritage management, indigenous knowledge, Sabah Museum

Introduction

According to Christine Ovenden (2014) in her presentation, Spalding (2015) mentioned that during the mid-18th century, in the era of the Enlightenment in Europe, the idea of creating comprehensive collections began. The collection of artifacts has shaped our understanding of past civilizations. Ovenden (2014) argued that museums were previously limited to old ways of thinking, serving merely as storage for knowledge. However, the true potential of museums goes beyond that. Museums have the capacity to display magnificent collections that society desires to see, as well as future generations. Spalding (2015) suggested that museums should tell larger, more significant, and more impressive stories. As mentioned by Ovenden (2014):

"You can't just collect categories, you have to collect the meanings, you can't begin with the objects, you have to look at the meaning, and then the profundity of that meaning."

While Spalding (2015) advocated for more creative approaches in museums by emphasizing contemporary ideas, Jossie Appleton took a more sceptical stance regarding the origins of ideas and the selection of artifacts for museum documentation. She placed greater

emphasis on the relevance of museums in providing services to society. For instance, in the Hancock Museum and the National Museum of Scotland, museum staff are free to select any collection for documentation and storage purposes. Stephen de Borhegyi (1965) stated that a museum curator should:

“The anthropology or history curator should familiarize themselves with all available literature and field notes relevant to the collection. They are also obligated to obtain any first-hand information from donors, vendors, collectors, or local sources. This is especially crucial when dealing with unusual items or those from lesser-known regions.”

Borhegyi (1965) believed that curators responsible for developing a museum's collection should possess the knowledge and experience in their field. Each artifact collected must have a clear provenance and be documented for its historical significance. These sources should be classified based on how the artifact was obtained, such as through donations, gifts, excavations, or purchases.

In Malaysia, museums acquire their collections through various means such as purchases, field research, waqf,¹ or bequests from individuals, families, or organizations that designate the museum as the custodian of these artifacts. According to Zuridah Hassan et al. (2012), a museum without a collection cannot be considered a museum. The acquisition of artifacts for museum storage must follow proper procedures as outlined by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) (2017). These guidelines are meant to preserve the museum's credibility as a repository of historical items for conservation and preservation. The process of collecting and selecting artifacts depends on the objectives and specialization of the museum, as well as its financial budget. Public museums, whether at the national, state, or district level, typically collect items relevant to their specific objectives. *“Museums exist to tell a story, but not to collect objects.”* This statement highlights how museums should approach the development of their collections. The acquisition of museum collections should start with strategic planning to ensure smooth management and alignment with the museum's original goals.

Similarly, the objective behind the establishment of the Sabah Museum is to preserve and document the cultural heritage of Sabah, including ethnography, traditional museums, history, culture, archaeological sites, and natural specimens. The creation of the Sabah Museum is a result of advocacy by the Sabah Society, which has long championed the preservation of Sabah's cultural values and heritage. The Sabah Museum consists of four buildings: the main building, the science and technology building, the conservation building, and the Islamic Civilization Museum. The Sabah Museum plays a crucial role in ensuring the conservation of Sabah's historical heritage, traditional culture, and natural life. The museum also encourages research both domestically and internationally to sustain its development and safeguard the artifacts in its collection (Chong, Moo-Tan & Kitingan-Kissey 1989).

The Sabah Museum is the only institution in Malaysia with specialized knowledge in underwater archaeology. Thanks to this advantage, the Malaysian government has recognized the Sabah Museum as a key centre for collecting and researching underwater archaeological disciplines in Borneo. Artifact collection requires a specific ethical approach in developing the museum's collection, and the museum's curators are responsible for ensuring that the collection aligns with the institution's objectives.

The acquisition of artifacts at the Sabah Museum

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Sabah Museum collects artifacts based on its objectives and mission as the custodian of Sabah's heritage. The acquisition of cultural artifacts at the Sabah Museum is obtained through various means such as purchases, field research, external collection work, gifts, waqf, bequests, and donations. The Sabah Museum collects artifacts based on the objectives and goals of its establishment as the custodian of the heritage of Sabah.

Special Collections

The core collection of the Sabah Museum began with random acquisitions by the British governors who served in Sabah. This collection was named the Special Collection. It is divided into four categories:

i. The Pamol Collection

This collection contains Chinese ceramics from the Song Dynasty (10th century) to the Yuan Dynasty in the 12th century. These ceramics were part of a complete collection of the imperial Chinese family's bedding. Most of these artifacts were discovered by workers in a palm oil plantation in Pamol, Kimanis in 1976.

ii. The Philip Collection

This collection was donated by the Philip family in April 1978 and consists of various species of coral reefs found in the shallow waters around Kota Kinabalu and Tanjung Aru. It is displayed in the Earth Science Gallery on the second floor of the museum.

iii. The Longfield Collection

This collection consists of photographs taken during the British colonial rule in Sabah. The photographs were donated by the Longfield family, who had lived in Sabah since December 1978.

iv. The Wolley Collection

This collection forms the foundation of the Sabah Museum's collection development. It is the first collection owned by the museum, donated by G.C. Woolley, the manager of the Chartered Company, which was the colonial administration in Sabah before World War II. This collection includes cultural artifacts, photos, books, journals, and several documents or records related to the governance of the Chartered Company in Sabah.

The Sabah Museum's collection on the colonial history of North Borneo (now Sabah) has been significantly enhanced with the recent launch of the final two volumes of the diaries of George C. Woolley, a prominent British colonial officer. These diaries are considered among the most crucial historical records for understanding Sabah during the colonial era. The newly launched volumes, *The Diaries of George C. Woolley, Volume 3: 1913-1919* and *Volume 4: 1919-1926*, were introduced at a special event held at the G.C. Woolley Hall of the State Museum. Sabah's Minister of Tourism, Culture, and Environment, Christina Liew, highlighted the profound historical value of Woolley's diaries. She remarked that his writings, spanning from 1901 to 1932, played an indispensable role in documenting and shaping the history of Sabah. Liew expressed that these works were invaluable not just for historians but also for the people of Sabah, contributing significantly to the region's cultural heritage (The Daily Express 16 July 2015).

In her speech, delivered by Assistant Minister Assafal P. Alian, Christina Liew explained that George C. Woolley had a multifaceted role in British North Borneo. He conducted extensive land surveys, resolved land disputes, and was deeply interested in preserving the local customs and traditions of the native populations. Woolley was also an enthusiastic collector of artifacts, photographs, and records, which provided unique insights into the daily life and cultural practices of the time (The Daily Express 16 July 2015).

Woolley's diaries and collections became instrumental to the foundation of the Sabah State Museum after he generously bequeathed them, including all 12 of his diaries, to the state government before his death in 1947. His extensive documentation was key to the creation of the museum, which continues to house these significant historical materials. Christina Liew further emphasized that Woolley's diaries played a pivotal role in the drafting of the 1930 Land Ordinance, which granted indigenous people the right to own land titles, a historic development that better safeguarded their rights (The Daily Express 16 July 2015).

The edited volumes, Volume 3 and Volume 4, were carefully compiled by Professor Danny Wong Tze Ken, a historian at University Malaya, and Stella Moo-Tan, the senior curator at the Sabah Museum. Volume 3, covering the years 1913-1919, chronicles Woolley's third tour of duty in Sabah, where he served as Commissioner of Lands. Volume 4, which spans 1919-1926, is the largest of the four volumes, containing more than 600 pages, 16 maps, and 262 photographs. This final volume includes entries from Woolley's notebooks 9-12, providing a rich, detailed account of his experiences and observations during his time in the region. Together, these diaries offer an unparalleled window into the life and times of colonial Sabah, shedding light on Woolley's contributions to land administration, cultural preservation, and the development of Sabah as we know it today (The Daily Express 16 July 2015).

Items Seized by Authorities

A report by *The Daily Express* (1994) highlighted that authorities in Kota Kinabalu successfully intercepted over 27 pieces of pottery that were nearly smuggled into Manila, Philippines. Of the 27 seized pieces, 8 pottery items were estimated to be nearly 100 years old. Eight of these pottery items were believed to have originated from China, while the other 19 were from Vietnam during the 15th century. The authenticity and description of all these artifacts were confirmed by Patricia Reggis, the director of the Sabah Museum at that time.

According to the authorities, 8 of the pottery pieces had already been placed in cargo and were ready for departure, while the other 19 were stopped at the security checkpoint of the Kota Kinabalu International Airport after one of the pottery items was intercepted. As a result of this incident, 27 ancient pottery pieces were saved from an antique smuggling syndicate. All the pottery pieces were placed in the Sabah Museum for safekeeping and preservation. The Sabah Museum created a special gallery, the Ceramic Gallery, to house all these artifacts, including ceramics, jars, and ceramic dinnerware.



Figure 1: Handing Over of the Jar to the Sabah Museum- Treasures Boots. *The Daily Express*, 27 Januari 1994

Source: Sabah State Archives, 2014.

Archaeology and Excavation

Over the decades since the establishment of the Sabah Museum, various sites have been given special attention for development as heritage sites and eco-tourism attractions. The museum's curators, along with other units, are committed to preserving the cultural treasures and heritage of Sabah. The table below highlights some of the sites that have been studied by the Sabah Museum in collaboration with recognized research agencies.

No	Site	Findings / Artifacts
1	Agop Lungun, Gua Gomantong	Wooden coffins, pottery shards, human and animal bone fragments, and tools
2	Agop Keruak III, Hulu Kinabatangan	Ceramics and jars
3	Suluk I, Batu Putih, Kinabatangan	17 wooden coffins and ceramics
4	Suluk II, Batu Putih, Kinabatangan	16 wooden coffins
5	Suluk III, Batu Putih, Kinabatangan	7 wooden coffins
6	Suluk IV, Batu Putih, Kinabatangan	11 wooden coffins
7	Suluk V, Batu Putih, Kinabatangan	9 wooden coffins
8	Sapa Tereng II, Batu Supu, Kinabatangan	2 wooden coffins
9	Agop Semangat Bebuah, Batu Supu, Kinabatangan	Wooden coffin fragments
10	Agop Bugdado, Batu Supu, Kinabatangan	Wooden coffin fragments
11	Agop Miasias, Sungai Lokan, Pintasan	19 wooden coffins, ceramics, and iron artifacts
12	Miasias Darat, Sungai Lokan, Pintasan	235 wooden coffins, ceramics, and iron artifacts
13	Agop Sarupi I, Kuala Kuamut	40 wooden coffins, ceramics, and iron artifacts
14	Agop Sarupi II, Kuala Kuamut	14 wooden coffins, ceramics, and iron artifacts
15	Mandag Awan, Tapadong	3 wooden coffins, pottery shards, and tools
16	Samang Itay, Tapadong	5 wooden coffins, ceramics, and beads
17	Samang Buat, Tapadong	4 wooden coffins, pottery shards, and tools
18	Bagdapo, Tapadong	Wooden coffin fragments, pottery shards, and ceramics

No	Site	Findings / Artifacts
19	Pusu Lata, Tapadong	Pottery shards, beads, bracelets, shell, bronze tools, iron, and human bones
20	Pusu Lumut, Tapadong	Excavation: Stone tools, bronze axe, iron tools, pottery shards, stone adze, and human bones. Said to be a Neolithic-Bronze site based on carbon dating of $10,300 \pm 1,100$ BP
21	Sipit, Teluk Darvei	10 wooden coffins, pottery, and ceramics
22	Agop Atas, Madai	Trial excavation: Ceramic fragments, pottery, iron artifacts, tools, pounding tools, flaking tools, stone cores, food remains, bones, and shells. Carbon dating on shell layers 54-60 gives $10,800 \pm 100$ BP
23	Agop Tuban, Madai	Pottery shards, food remains, bones, and shells
24	Pusu Samang Alag, Madai	Surface find: 1 wooden coffin Trial excavation: Pottery shards, human bone fragments, food remains, beads, and iron tools
25	Gua Kubonatok, Madai	Wooden coffin fragments
26	Pusu Bakas, Baturong	1 wooden coffin
27	Pusu Serap Gaya, Baturong	1 wooden coffin
28	Pusu Bakas Baturong	1 wooden coffin
29	Lobang Tingalan, Baturong	Trial excavation: Pottery shards, shell, and bone fragments
30	Hagop Bilo, Baturong	2 wooden coffins, pottery shards, human bone fragments, iron artifacts, carved wood
31	Gua Pulau Burung	Trial excavation: Pottery shards, ceramics, human skeletons, and megaliths
32	Open site Pulau Eno	Trial excavation: Pottery shards, ceramics, human skeletons, and megaliths
33	Pulau Usukan	Megaliths
34	Sungai Damit, Jalan Kota Belud	2 menhirs
35	Jalan Tuaran	10 menhirs
36	Jalan Papar	71 menhirs
37	Open site Tomanggong Segama	Tools, bifacial pebble tools, flaking tools

Figure 2: Sites and Excavation Findings by Tom and Barbara Harrison.

Source: List of study sites by Harrison and Harrison (1971), Abdullah (2015), Chia (2016) and Abdullah et al. (2017).

The archaeological data detailing various findings from the Sabah region of Borneo presents a fascinating glimpse into the lives and practices of ancient communities. Spanning thousands of years, this dataset highlights both the continuity and evolution of cultural, technological, and social practices. By examining the types of artifacts discovered, their

geographical distribution, and the chronological context provided by carbon dating, we can begin to understand the cultural dynamics and technological advancements that shaped the prehistoric societies of Borneo.

Burial Practices and Rituals

One of the most striking features of the archaeological sites listed is the prevalence of wooden coffins (*keranda kayu balak*). Found at a majority of the sites, such as Agop Lungun, Suluk, and Miasias, these coffins are likely associated with burial practices that held significant ritualistic and symbolic meaning. The sheer number of wooden coffins, particularly at sites like Miasias Darat (with 235 coffins) and Agop Miasias (with 19 coffins), indicates that these locations may have served as major burial or ceremonial centres. The use of wooden coffins suggests a deeply ingrained belief system centred around death and the afterlife, potentially indicating ancestor worship or other ritualistic practices related to the deceased.

In addition to the coffins, other items found in these burial contexts, such as pottery, beads, and bone fragments, further support the idea that these practices were integral to the social and spiritual lives of the communities. Pottery shards, frequently discovered at burial sites, may have been used in funerary rites or as offerings to the dead. The presence of beads and shells suggests that these objects might have held symbolic or decorative importance, perhaps linked to status or cultural identity. These findings point to a society that valued elaborate burial rituals, reflecting complex beliefs about life, death, and the afterlife.

Technological Evolution and Cultural Practices

The presence of ceramics and iron artifacts at many sites signals significant technological advancements over time. Sites like Miasias Darat and Agop Miasias show evidence of iron tools, which suggest that these communities had developed metallurgical practices. This shift from stone tools to iron implements marks a critical point in the technological evolution of Borneo's ancient societies. The use of iron artifacts alongside earlier stone tools indicates a period of transition, possibly from the Neolithic to the Iron Age, with its accompanying changes in material culture, subsistence strategies, and social organization.

Iron tools were likely used for a variety of functions, from agriculture to craft production, and could have had both practical and symbolic significance. The emergence of ironworking technology also suggests the possibility of long-distance trade or cultural exchange, as ironworking knowledge might have spread through interaction with other regions. The range of stone tools found across many sites also points to the continued importance of these technologies in daily life, particularly in food production and the crafting of other items. Artifacts such as flaking tools, pounding tools, and stone adzes highlight the subsistence practices of the ancient inhabitants, who likely relied on hunting, gathering, and fishing.

Megalithic and Ceremonial Structures

The discovery of megalithic structures and menhirs at various sites, such as Pulau Usukan, Sungai Damit, and Jalan Papar, introduces a further dimension to the cultural practices of ancient Borneo. Menhirs and other megalithic structures are often associated with ritualistic or ceremonial activities, possibly linked to the marking of significant social events, celestial phenomena, or religious observances. These stone monuments might have served as focal points for communal gatherings, spiritual practices, or as symbols of territorial or group identity.

The presence of these megalithic monuments suggests that the ancient inhabitants of Borneo had a sophisticated understanding of astronomy and geography. These structures could have been used for tracking celestial events or as markers for ritual performances. The construction of such monuments requires organized labor and specialized knowledge,

indicating a highly developed social and cultural structure within these communities.

Geographical and Temporal Context

The geographical distribution of these archaeological sites—spread across Kinabatangan, Tapadong, Madai, and Baturong—suggests a widespread cultural influence or a network of related communities throughout the region. This wide distribution might reflect the movement of peoples, trade routes, or cultural exchanges between different groups. The clustering of burial sites and ritual structures further supports the idea of centralized areas of spiritual or cultural significance within these communities.

Carbon dating plays a crucial role in establishing the chronological context of these sites. For example, the site at Pusu Lumut, Tapadong, dated to $10,300 \pm 1,100$ BP, places it within the late Neolithic-Bronze Age period. Similarly, the Agop Atas, Madai site, with a carbon date of $10,800 \pm 100$ BP, places the region at the heart of early human settlement in Borneo. These dates suggest that these sites were in use for thousands of years, offering valuable insight into the long-term cultural development of the region.

The archaeological evidence from Borneo reveals a complex and dynamic picture of ancient societies. The combination of burial practices, technological innovations, megalithic structures, and geographical distribution suggests a society that was deeply connected to its environment, with a rich cultural and spiritual life. The transition from stone to iron tools, along with the construction of ceremonial monuments, marks a significant evolution in social, cultural, and technological terms. Ultimately, these findings offer a window into the prehistoric past of Borneo, shedding light on the ways in which ancient communities navigated life, death, and the natural world. By continuing to explore and analyze these sites, we can uncover even more about the rich heritage of this fascinating region.

Underwater Archaeology in Sabah

Sabah, one of Malaysia's 13 states, is located in the far eastern part of the country, occupying the northern section of Borneo. It shares a land border with Sarawak and Kalimantan to the south, while being surrounded by the South China Sea to the west, the Sulu Sea to the northeast, and the Celebes Sea to the southeast. Sabah boasts a coastline stretching approximately 900 miles, featuring a labyrinth of natural bays and inlets from Brunei Bay in the southwest to St. Lucia (or Sibuko Bay) in the southeast. These sheltered harbours have historically served as safe havens for trading ships navigating the region, especially during the monsoon and typhoon seasons. The northeast monsoon, which occurs from October to March, and the southeast monsoon, from May to September, bring heavy rains to the coast. Due to its location outside the typhoon belt and its protective coastlines, Sabah is known as the 'Land Below the Wind' by ancient sailors. However, the region is also home to numerous hazardous reefs and islands, both shallow and deep, which have led to many shipwrecks over the centuries (Regis & Koon 1992).

On April 15, 2003, a fishing crew stumbled upon an extraordinary discovery off the northern tip of Borneo—the wreck of an ancient vessel. Yet, by the time the wreck was officially reported, the telltale signs of looting were already apparent. Many of the ceramic artifacts from the wreck had already made their way into the antique shops of Kota Kinabalu, a testament to the illicit scavenging that had taken place prior to any formal excavation. Recognizing the historical significance of the site, the Sabah Museum granted Nanhai Marine Archaeology Sdn Bhd, a salvage company, the necessary permit to carry out a formal excavation. What followed was an impressive recovery: more than 800 items, both ceramic and non-ceramic, were salvaged from a depth of 400 meters. These items, retrieved from the wreck lying off the shores of Tanjung Simpang Mengayau, close to Kudat in Sabah, offered a rare glimpse into the region's rich maritime history.

The location itself is steeped in both natural and cultural significance. Tanjung Simpang Mengayau, or “Lingering Junction”, marks the point where the South China Sea gently converges with the Sulu Sea. Its strategic position, coupled with a treacherous coastline, has made it the site of numerous shipwrecks throughout history. For centuries, the winds and currents here, unpredictable and dangerous, have claimed many vessels attempting to navigate these waters. As such, the wreck discovered in 2003 stands as a poignant reminder of the perilous maritime routes that have long shaped the lives of those who sailed these seas. The artifacts salvaged from this site are not merely remnants of a sunken ship; they are echoes of a bygone era, preserved beneath the waves, and a window into the trade and cultural exchange that once flourished in this region (Regis 1990).

Between 2003 and 2016, underwater archaeological excavations at the Tanjung Simpang Mengayau shipwreck site, located off the coast of Kudat in Sabah, revealed invaluable insights into the maritime history and archaeology of both Borneo and Southeast Asia. This shipwreck, though disturbed and looted by local fishermen and treasure hunters since the 1980s, has provided a unique window into the past. The collaborative efforts of the Sabah Museum Department, the Department of Museums and Antiquities Malaysia, and Universiti Malaysia Sabah proved instrumental in rescuing and recovering thousands of historical artifacts from the site between 2003 and 2006. Despite the challenges posed by prior looting, these efforts yielded remarkable discoveries that contributed significantly to our understanding of ancient maritime trade and cultural exchanges in the region (Jusoh et al. 2022).

The Tanjung Simpang Mengayau shipwreck is particularly noteworthy as the oldest known wreck found in the northern Borneo waters, dating back to the 10th century CE during China's Song Dynasty. This period marked a flourishing era of global trade, and the shipwreck is believed to be a relic of the vibrant trade routes that connected China with Southeast Asia and beyond. The artifacts recovered from the site—a mix of ceramics, tools, and other materials—offer a tangible link to this rich cultural heritage, providing scholars and historians with invaluable evidence of the maritime connections that shaped the region's history long before the age of modern navigation. This wreck is not just a sunken vessel but a repository of history, offering stories of trade, craftsmanship, and cultural exchange that spanned vast distances. It serves as a testament to the significance of Borneo's waters in the broader maritime network of the time, where goods, ideas, and people traversed the seas, leaving a lasting imprint on the region's cultural fabric (Jusoh et al. 2022).



Figure 3: Artifacts Found at Tanjung Simpang Mengayau
Source: Courtesy Baszley Bee Basrah Bee, 2015

Donations

Recognizing the importance of heritage as a historical resource, many people in Sabah are keenly aware of its significance. As a result, the current generation has chosen the Sabah Museum as the custodian to preserve their heritage. Some of the artifacts stored in the Sabah Museum have been donated by the people of Sabah. Most of the donated artifacts are ancestral heritage or artifacts discovered by local villagers by chance. These donated artifacts span various periods and functions, including colonial-era artifacts, ethnographic items, and more. The community's commitment to supporting the Sabah Museum in its efforts to conserve Sabah's heritage is evident through these donations.

One such community in Sabah that is aware of the importance of preserving heritage artifacts is the family of Frederick Venatius Ozulu Joulinah from Kampung Rampayah, Penampang. They donated a human skull, locally known as *Bangkawan*. In KadazanDusun culture, *Bangkawan* is considered the guardian spirit of a family, believed to ensure a bountiful rice harvest and protect against evil spirits. This *Bangkawan* had been passed down through generations in the family, but in the modern era, the younger generation of the Frederick family could no longer continue the traditional practices due to changing times and religious beliefs. Therefore, the best course of action was to donate the artifact to the Sabah Museum to ensure it would not be lost in the future. According to Frederick, the family decided to donate the *Bangkawan* and several other artifacts belonging to their ancestors to the Sabah Museum so that they could be preserved.



Figure 4: Family Collection Donated to the Sabah Museum

Source: Sabah Archives, 2015

The Lotud Dusun people of Tuaran District, located in the western part of Sabah, have a rich cultural heritage deeply connected to their ancestors and spiritual beliefs. Among their traditions is the collection of *bangkawan*, or inherited skulls, which are regarded as sacred relics that carry the spirits of the past. These skulls are seen not only as symbols of ancestral lineage but also as important spiritual anchors within their community. The *bangkawan* are believed to

house the rice spirits, vital deities for the Kadazandusun people, who are central to their agricultural practices. Rice cultivation, a cornerstone of their livelihood, is infused with reverence for these spirits, reflecting a deep connection to the land and the ancestors who once tended it. The universe of the Lotud Dusun, particularly their reverence for the rice spirits, is a reflection of their broader worldview, where nature, ancestry, and spirituality are intricately intertwined. The bangkawan skulls are not merely objects of reverence; they represent a bridge between the living and the spirit world, ensuring the prosperity and well-being of the community. Through this practice, the Lotud Dusun maintain a living connection to their past, honoring the wisdom and presence of those who came before them, while ensuring the continued fertility of their lands and the blessings of their rice harvests. (Pugh-Kitingan 2020).

In 1987, Professor John Landgraph from New York University visited the Sabah Museum to donate several Murut cultural artifacts from the British colonial era in Sabah. The donated artifacts included printed materials dating back to 1947, 8 cannisters, microfilm of government documents from 1955, documents on Murut customs and culture, 2000 black-and-white film negatives, as well as various items made of bamboo, wood, silver, and traditional Murut clothing accessories. According to Professor Landgraph, these artifacts were collected during his research under a British government grant in North Borneo at the time. He stated that these artifacts should rightfully return to their proper hands and expressed hope that his research materials on the Murut people would contribute greatly to the State of Sabah (Sather 2011).

Discussion and Analysis of Sabah Museum's Artifact Collection, Donations, and Research Initiatives

The data provided offers an in-depth look at the Sabah Museum's pivotal role in artifact collection, research, and its substantial contributions to preserving and promoting the cultural and historical heritage of Sabah. It illustrates the museum's multifaceted approach to safeguarding artifacts, its collaborations with local and international partners, and the way in which donations from local communities and researchers have enriched the museum's collections.

i. Artifact Collection and Research Contributions

A central aspect of the museum's operations is its artifact collection, which serves as the foundation of its exhibitions and research. The process of acquiring artifacts not only involves obtaining objects but also understanding their historical and cultural importance. The museum has proven its ability to collect and preserve items from various historical periods, ranging from ancient to colonial times, and from diverse cultural backgrounds, including indigenous groups like the Murut and KadazanDusun. For example, the museum's partnerships with Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) in excavations at sites such as Bukit Tenggorak and Tanjung Simpang Mengayau underscore its active involvement in archaeological research. These excavations led to the discovery of significant prehistoric artifacts, such as pottery fragments, burial tools, and evidence of prehistoric diets, including shell and fish remains. These findings are vital for understanding the region's past and highlight the museum's dedication to research and excavation.

Additionally, the museum's involvement in underwater archaeology, particularly in collaboration with USM and UMS, establishes its leadership in the field. The discovery of artifacts from sunken ships at Tanjung Simpang Mengayau, including pottery, jewelry, and other items, sheds light on Sabah's historical maritime trade routes. Sabah's strategic location along the South China Sea and its role in maritime trade are reflected in these underwater discoveries. The museum's collaboration with

both local and international institutions ensures its continued prominence in archaeological research and contributes significantly to the global understanding of maritime archaeology.

ii. **Donations and Community Involvement**

A significant strength of the Sabah Museum is its strong relationship with the local community. Not only does the museum preserve artifacts, but it also serves as a cultural repository for items donated by local people. These donations reflect the trust that the people of Sabah place in the museum to protect their cultural heritage. For instance, in 1987, Professor John Landgraph from the University of New York donated several Murut artifacts, including printed materials, microfilms, and traditional Murut items made of bamboo, wood, and silver. These artifacts were collected during research funded by the British government in Borneo. The donation of these items highlights the museum's role as a link between academic research and the preservation of indigenous heritage. The materials donated by Landgraph provide valuable historical data and offer insight into the Murut people's culture during the colonial era.

Similarly, local families, such as the Frederick Venatius Ozulu Joulinah family from Kampung Rampayah, Penampang, have contributed significant cultural artifacts. The donation of the 'Bangkawan' (a human skull) by the family is an example of the cultural significance these objects hold for the indigenous KadazanDusun people. The 'Bangkawan' is traditionally seen as a guardian spirit for the family, and its donation reflects the family's decision to preserve their heritage for future generations. By entrusting the Sabah Museum with these cultural artifacts, local families are supporting the museum's role as a trusted custodian of heritage, while also acknowledging the shifting cultural and religious values that no longer align with traditional practices.

This growing practice of donations reflects a broader trend in which local communities recognize the importance of preserving their cultural heritage, particularly as modernity affects traditional practices. Through these donations, the museum not only expands its collection of physical artifacts but also gains invaluable intangible cultural knowledge, stories, and traditions tied to these objects.

iii. **Challenges and Opportunities for Growth**

While the museum has established a solid foundation in artifact collection and research, it faces several challenges that come with growth and responsibility. The need to maintain and sustain its collection and ensure proper conservation is an ongoing concern, especially as the museum's holdings continue to expand. Artifacts like the 'Timbang Dayang' bronze drum, which was found at a burial site in Bukit Timbang Dayang, Pulau Banggi, are of great historical value and require specialized conservation efforts. Preserving these types of items demands both expertise and adequate facilities to ensure their long-term protection. The museum's capacity to manage and expand its collections, research initiatives, and exhibitions is limited by its budget. Most available funds are allocated for day-to-day operations, leaving less for conservation and research. While the museum's dedication to preserving artifacts is clear, its ability to scale its activities is constrained by financial resources. The museum must balance ongoing operational expenses with long-term development plans that focus on expanding its collections, enhancing conservation efforts, and investing in outreach programs to engage both local and international audiences.

One potential growth area lies in increasing the museum's role as an educational institution. With its extensive collection of artifacts and research materials, the museum has the potential to become an important hub for public education.

Developing educational programs, workshops, and collaborative projects with universities and schools can increase public engagement while also creating a sustainable revenue stream. These programs can help foster greater understanding of Sabah's rich cultural history and provide a platform for both local and international communities to engage with the museum's work.

Preserving Sabah's Heritage: Strategies for the Future

The preservation of cultural heritage is not just about saving objects, but about safeguarding the stories, traditions, and identities that shape a community. For Sabah, a state in Malaysia with a rich and diverse history, the Sabah Museum holds an essential role in protecting and sharing this heritage. The museum houses artifacts that tell the stories of Sabah's indigenous communities, colonial past, and vibrant trade routes, making it a cornerstone in preserving the state's identity. To continue safeguarding this legacy, the museum must embrace a variety of preservation strategies. These strategies are not just about preserving physical artifacts but also about connecting with the community, using new technologies, and creating lasting educational experiences for future generations.

While the museum is dedicated to preserving physical artifacts, it must also consider intangible cultural heritage, such as oral traditions, music, and rituals. Many of Sabah's indigenous groups have rich oral histories that have been passed down through generations. By recording these stories, songs, and practices, the museum can ensure that even aspects of culture that are not represented through physical objects are preserved. These intangible elements are just as important as material artifacts in understanding the full scope of Sabah's history. The museum could collaborate with indigenous leaders and cultural experts to record these traditions through video, audio, or written accounts. These records could then be made accessible to visitors and researchers, allowing the museum to offer a more holistic view of Sabah's cultural landscape.

Preserving the artifacts themselves is, of course, a primary concern. Proper care and conservation practices are essential to ensure that the museum's collection remains intact for future generations. This involves creating suitable storage conditions that protect artifacts from damage caused by light, humidity, and temperature fluctuations. Climate-controlled storage areas can help protect delicate items, while regular checks and maintenance can ensure that they remain in good condition. The museum can also employ conservation experts who specialize in the restoration and maintenance of specific types of artifacts, from textiles to metals to ceramics. Furthermore, technology plays a crucial role in conservation. Digital documentation, for example, allows the museum to create a permanent, easily accessible record of each artifact's condition, provenance, and cultural significance. This ensures that even if an artifact is damaged, there is a digital backup that can be used for future research or restoration efforts.

Collaboration with Academic Institutions

One of the most effective ways the museum can preserve Sabah's heritage is by partnering with universities and research institutions, both locally and internationally. The Sabah Museum already works with institutions like University Sains Malaysia (USM) and University Malaysia Sabah (UMS) on archaeological projects. These collaborations not only help discover and document new artifacts but also allow experts to use modern technology such as 3D scanning and GIS mapping. For example, recent archaeological digs have unearthed ancient tools, pottery, and even remnants of early societies in Sabah. By working with academics, the museum can ensure these discoveries are well-documented and protected for the future. Research projects also help deepen our understanding of the artifacts and their cultural significance and provide the museum with invaluable resources for educational programs.

Engaging the Community

The active involvement of the local community is crucial for any museum's success. Sabah is home to a diverse range of indigenous peoples, each with their own unique traditions and histories. Many of the museum's artifacts have been donated by local families who understand the value of preserving their heritage. To continue this, the museum can foster stronger relationships with local communities by engaging them in the process of collecting and preserving cultural objects. Programs that encourage the donation of artifacts, or even loans for temporary exhibits, can ensure that more of Sabah's cultural history is preserved in the museum for future generations. Community outreach programs can also raise awareness of the importance of safeguarding cultural heritage. By creating a sense of ownership and pride in the museum's collections, people will be more motivated to take part in preserving their heritage. Additionally, the museum could offer workshops or talks that educate the public about the importance of preserving their traditions, creating a deeper connection between the artifacts and the people they represent.

Education is at the heart of the museum's mission. It is not enough to simply collect and preserve artifacts; the museum must also share them with the public in a way that promotes understanding and appreciation. Educational programs can help visitors learn not just about the artifacts themselves but about the stories behind them. School groups, local families, and tourists alike can benefit from interactive exhibits, hands-on workshops, and guided tours that highlight the cultural context of the museum's collection. By creating an engaging and educational experience, the museum can spark a deeper connection between visitors and Sabah's history. Special exhibitions on themes like the region's maritime trade routes, or the significance of indigenous rituals, can allow people to understand the broader picture of Sabah's past. These educational programs will also inspire future generations to value and preserve their heritage.

Conclusion

The Sabah Museum plays a pivotal role in the preservation, documentation, and promotion of Sabah's cultural and historical heritage. Through systematic research, archaeological excavations, and the acquisition of significant artifacts, the museum has established itself as a key institution in heritage management within the region. Its extensive and diverse collection, encompassing various historical periods, cultural traditions, and geographic areas, serves as an essential resource for scholars, policymakers, and the general public in understanding Sabah's rich and multifaceted past. Despite challenges related to funding constraints and operational sustainability, the museum has demonstrated commendable achievements in artifact conservation, scholarly research, and community engagement. To further enhance its impact, increased institutional and governmental support in areas such as conservation techniques, digital archiving, and educational outreach would be beneficial. The long-term success of the Sabah Museum will depend on sustained collaboration with academic institutions, local communities, and governmental agencies, ensuring that its invaluable collections and cultural knowledge are preserved, accessible, and continuously relevant for future generations.

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Note

1. Waqf is defined as a practice of surrendering owned property for the use and benefits

of the public. The Concept of Waqf. Waqf is a religious act because the basic purpose of waqf is to be closer and gain the blessings of Allah by way of spending your wealth in the path to Allah.

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