

Iban War Jacket

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This rare jacket (Figure 1) comes from the interior of the Saribas River basin in eastern Sarawak. It dates to the late 19th century and is made using a combination of both traditional techniques and materials along with imported cotton cloth, thread and glass beads. The use of valuable imported materials marks the jacket as a prized heirloom. The cloth it was tailored from was woven using the *sungkit* technique, a type of warp wrapping in which coloured threads are wound round the warp threads as the cloth is woven. Embellished with powerful symbolic motifs representing ancestors and deities, this most interesting jacket bears a row of seven lozenge-shaped decorations known as *anak buau* (See Figure 2.) along the base of the back of the jacket. These motifs represent curses against the enemy woven into the cloth by the original weaver. Their placement at the back of the jacket suggests that they were meant to guard the wearer against attacks from that quarter.

It is likely that this jacket was originally fashioned as a sleeveless vest meant to be worn in a war party. Warfare and headhunting were an integral part of Iban life. They practised shifting agriculture and different groups were in constant competition for access to suitable territory. The Iban also believed that taking heads brought great benefits to the community because the head was thought to be the seat of life force. After a successful attack the warrior who wore this vest seems to have had it further embellished. The sleeves were added, as were the glass bead fringes. The fitting of a lining of imported trade cotton is another indication that the vest had been used in a successful raid. After conversion the vest would have been worn as a *kelambi* or jacket by the warrior who owned it.

The cotton trade chintz, glass beads and brightly coloured aniline dyed threads used in this jacket would have been obtained through traders from



Figure 1. Iban war jacket, late 19th century, Sarawak. Collection of Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board.



Figure 2. Detail image showing *anak buau* motif, late 19th century, Sarawak. Collection of Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board.

the coast. The Iban gathered valuable forest products such as rattan and exotic hardwoods, aromatic woods and resins, beeswax, birds' nests and a host of other items that were valued in markets around the world. They exchanged these products for items which they could not otherwise make or obtain themselves as easily.

Sarawak in the late 19th century was ruled by an English hereditary monarchy established by James Brooke in 1841. The state had close ties with other British colonies in Southeast Asia, particularly Singapore, which was the hub of British activity in the region and had long been established as an important regional entrepôt trading centre. A natural crossroads for trade between the East and West, Singapore became a key player in the regional carrying trade conducted by local traders between the myriad small and medium-sized ports scattered across insular Southeast

Asia. Southeast Asian produce was brought to Singapore by traders where it could then be sent on to global markets. Those same traders then often obtained Chinese, Indian and European manufactures which they could sell or trade with in their home countries. These products made their way into the interior where they would have been in high demand due to their comparative quality and cache as imported goods. Objects like this jacket would have been regarded in much the same way as imported goods are still highly regarded today and would have been used and worn on special occasions.

The jacket came to be in the Asian Civilisations Museum's collection by way of the colonial era Raffles Library and Museum in Singapore. It was acquired by purchase from a Mrs St Vincent Bowen Down, the wife of a British expatriate businessman and entrepreneur who was based

mainly in Singapore but who also lived and worked periodically in Sarawak. The Downs seem to have developed a keen interest in the museum and contributed to both the natural history and ethnology collections over the years, appearing regularly in the Raffles Museum's collections records. They also put together a significant collection of ethnological objects, mainly from Sarawak which Mrs Down sold to the museum in 1936 some years after Mr Down passed away. □

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