

Hampatong or Ancestor Pole Figure from Kalimantan

Ethnographic items are often the silent witnesses to vanished, hidden worlds. The same holds for Indonesia, an immense archipelago that is home to staggering ecological and cultural richness and diversity. Kalimantan spans the southern and central parts of Borneo. The island was at one time completely covered by a unique, very old tropical rainforest. Of this, over eighty-five per cent has now been lost as the result of logging and palm oil plantations.

The original inhabitants are commonly referred to as 'Dajaks'. Until recently, these hunter-gatherers excited the Western imagination mainly because they were known as warlike 'headhunters'. They themselves do not consider themselves as a homogeneous ethnic group, but as diverse peoples with their own languages, cultural practices and lifestyles. Most highland communities there also practice simple forms of rice cultivation.

Some twenty-five years ago, a clan chief of the Kayans gave this ancestral image in confidence to Mark De Fraeye. At that time, the construction of a small reservoir threatened the community's cemetery. This idyllic spot, where they lived with about a hundred families in a traditional longhouse on the banks of the river, was in fact destined by international investors to become a luxury resort hotel.

Ancestors are those who came before us and who assign us – the living – their place and are close to us in everyday life. They mediate between the many forces in nature – here, on earth, but also in the world above and below. In most archaic cultures, you become an ancestor once the memory of your personal, individual life has faded and your descendants have let go of the relationship with you, the deceased. Then you become a protector and supporter of the whole community.

This pole statue or *hampatong* probably served as a boundary marker and powerfully depicts the Kayans' animistic cosmology: everything and everyone are intertwined, and the boundary between life and death is fluid. Hence the emphasis on fertility. The ancestor figure here has elongated earlobes, a clear navel and prominent genitalia. The *banteng* or wild buffalo symbolises strength, composure, deliberation and prosperity. The Kayan love to hold joyful celebrations and dance, and, until the arrival of the Dutch colonisers, lived in harmony with their natural habitat.



Hampatong (Indonesia)
Tropical wood
90 cm h x 15 cm diam.

Collection De Fraeye-Verburg
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Ghent