



Fig. 3.11

Hornbill figure. Iban peoples, Sarawak (Borneo), Malaysia. 19th-20th century. Wood, paint, thread, cloth. L: 84 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of the Wellcome Trust. X65.5653.

A graphic for Unit 3. It features a dark orange square with a white border. Inside the square, the word "Unit" is written in a white, serif font. To the right of "Unit" is a large, white, bold number "3".

LESSON 18: HARNESSING SPIRITS

The Hornbill: Bird of Prophecy, Malaysia



Lesson Summary and Objectives

Study of a hornbill mask from Borneo introduces students to the natural history of the bird and to cultural practices related to it. Students' study leads to visual and performing arts activities and to their understanding of and respect for omens and other beliefs that are centered on observations of the natural world. Students will

- Explore the natural history and the symbolism of the hornbill in Borneo through research and artmaking activities.
- Engage in performing arts activities centered on an understanding of indigenous beliefs concerning the hornbill.
- Contextualize their study of the hornbill in other learning activities related to the study of the art and ritual of rice in Asia.

Background Information

To the Iban peoples of Borneo, the hornbill is known as a bird of prophecy. At the Gawai Kenyalang, greatest of all Iban festivals, many carved and painted hornbill figures are raised on tall poles. Perched on high, the spirits of the hornbill are ready to take messages from the human world to the upperworld, the world of spirits.

The Gawai Kenyalang is a major event requiring many months of preparation. The festival may last many days and people throughout the area are invited to partake of large quantities of food and drink. Preliminary rites begin at the flag-decorated longhouse—dwelling place of community members—and involve prayers, chants, offerings, dance, and the playing of drums and gongs to summon the spirits. Finally, after hours of incantations, the carved and painted hornbills are brought outside. More sacred speeches follow, offerings are placed in the birds' beaks, and the sacred images are attached to the poles, which are then raised into place.

In earlier times the Gawai Kenyalang celebrated victories of warfare. Today on Borneo, third largest island in the world, it celebrates the rice harvest. It is the most important festival in a year-long series of rites considered essential to the fundamental well-being of the community and to the successful cultivation of rice. The grain is believed to have a soul and must be treated respectfully.



A graphic for Unit 3 featuring the word "Unit" in a small box and the number "3" in a large, bold font, both set against a dark orange background with a decorative border.

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About the Artist

The Iban value creativity and artistic skills, especially in the carving of wood by men and the weaving of cloth by women. Before he is five years old a boy imitates his father, grandfather, and other local men as he makes simple items to be played with; works made later include more intricately decorated canoe paddles, armlets, and household and weaving tools. Not until his early forties will a talented carver be commissioned to carve a kenyalang such as the one displayed in the *Intersections* exhibition.

Curriculum Connections

1. Hornbills, Quilled and Otherwise

There are more than fifty species of hornbills, mainly in Africa and southern Asia. Of varying colors, dark and light, they are mainly recognized by their huge, downward curving bill topped by a large horny growth called a casque, and their long tail. The ivory-like casque of the Borneo species is larger than most others and prized as material for personal prestige ornaments. The bird's wingspan can measure up to six feet. Its flight begins with a loud rocket- or jet-like sound made by its large wings. Other sounds come from its great variety of birdcalls variously described as trumpets, bellows, brays, toots, barks and grackles. (See San Diego Zoo's website www.sandiegozoo.org/animalbytes/t-hornbill.html. [8/11])

The breeding behavior of the hornbill is noteworthy. The male and female search together for a hole in a dead tree trunk. With the female inside, the two seal up the cavity's entrance, leaving a slit only large enough for the male to feed the entombed female, and after about 39 days the chicks as well. The mother bird breaks out of the nest after about a month following the hatching; the chicks remain about another 80 days.

The rhinoceros hornbill plays a major role in the origin stories and ritual life of nearly all groups on Borneo and at different levels it is important to nearly all. The birds serve as inspiration for Iban art, particularly the Gawai Kenyalang. Their graceful movements are emulated in dances, they symbolically play roles in young men's initiations, and they are used to foretell or prophesize the future. Their influence is seen in death rituals that last about the same time as the nesting period of the hornbill, after which the soul of the dead is considered set free from captivity.



Activity

Students can further research this unique bird and its relationship to human life, not only on Borneo, but also particularly in many parts of Africa. They can use this information for a creative dance or art project. One such activity follows.

The large carved birds at the Gawai Kenyalang festival, and on display in the *Harnessing Spirits* portion of the exhibition are noteworthy for the many curved embellishments of a basic bird form. After viewing the carved bird or its image here (**fig. 3.11**), students may interpret its appearance in a paper sculpture project. Using cut strips of paper and tagboard, they will first construct an outline version of the hornbill by joining the paper lengths to form the shape, including the casque. Use quilling techniques of rolling and creasing the paper strips to fill in and elaborate the form, taking inspiration from what the carvers have done with wood. Several sites on the Internet (keywords: paper, quilling instruction) illustrate the many possibilities with this effective technique.

2. Omens and Augury

For the Iban, spirits manifest as animals, insects, and birds to communicate with humans and to give them warnings and advice. Birds are particularly important and the Iban closely watch their flight and ground movements and listen to their calls. According to Scholar Jensen (1974), “When a bird utters a call and appears in sight, this is meaningful. The interpretation, however, depends on the direction of its flight. This may be either from right to left, called *mimpin* (which also includes passing on the right), or from left to right.... If the bird flies in the same direction as the Iban is himself progressing, this is a good sign. If it flies in the opposite direction, the Iban is more likely to consider it a bad omen. When the bird flies both ways across the Iban’s track...it lacks confidence...and the prospects are not encouraging” (1974, 132).

Equally significant are the birdcalls—which bird is heard, when heard, when heard in relation to the person’s activities (i.e. heard when first leaving the longhouse, while walking to [or from] the field, while hunting a prey, etc.).

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Jensen writes, “Although general principles certainly apply, the birds may have differing significance for different people at different times. Individual Iban are permitted their own interpretation and the validity of this is borne out by the subsequent failure or success of their undertakings” (1974, 131).

Activity

Students’ discussions on augury and omen should be grounded in their respect for the beliefs of a given community—traditions that are rooted in faith, accepted custom, and lived experience. Emphasize that using terms like “superstition” devalues the context and values from which the beliefs emerge.

Activity

Students can begin by talking about omens and predictions they have encountered in our contemporary society. Sports figures are known to go through specific routines before throwing a ball to ensure a good pitch, or wearing a specific item of clothing such as a jersey or a hat for each game to extend a winning streak, etc. Some people believe that if their hand itches they will receive money, others say a foot itching portends a trip, and an itching ear (or eye) means one will hear (or see) something new.

Activity

Give students the opportunity to set up specific situations in which events or actions can be seen as omens. You may want to limit the subject to animals (knowing full well about black cats crossing a path, and a groundhog seeing its shadow). Consider a spider: what might follow seeing a spider walk up (or down) a wall, or spinning a web between two trees or between two branches of one tree, or finding one in the living room (or another room) of the house, or seeing a web before arriving at school, or seeing a web with an insect already caught in it. Or you might want to limit the activity to bird subjects. Students can look up the significance of birds in many cultures including the owl as symbol of wisdom in ancient Greece, cranes as symbols of long life in many parts of Asia, and the dove as a sign of peace, before they propose possible situations of omens and consequences.

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Rice and Art

Although earlier generations of Iban celebrated Gawai Kenyalang for wartime victories, today the festival is held to celebrate the rice harvest. Most Iban groups are engaged in rice cultivation, which continues to be a highly ritualized activity, although modern methods and concerns threaten perpetuation of many of the traditions. The festival is one of many rituals held throughout Asia to honor rice deities and ensure successful growth of this all-important crop. As elsewhere in Asia, art and ritual are often important components of the growing cycle. A wide variety of art traditions, specific to each group, includes representations of the rice deity; offerings to the rice goddess; painted and sculptural images of animals important to the growing; implements for planting, harvesting, and protecting the crops; decoration of the granaries that house the harvested crop, and pictorial representations of the rice agricultural calendar. The power of art is evidenced in all of these. Many are discussed in the Fowler Museum's Curriculum Resource Unit, *The Art of Rice: Spirit and Sustenance in Asia*, that accompanied the 2004 exhibition of that name, and there are appropriate classroom activities suggested.

Useful Readings

- Avins, Lyn, and Betsy D. Quick
2004 *The Art of Rice: Spirit and Sustenance in Asia* Curriculum Resource Unit.
Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.
- Bosse, Malcolm
1993 *Deep Dream of the Rain Forest*.
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. *
- Chin, Lucas, and Valerie Mashman, eds.
1991 *Sarawak Cultural Legacy: A Living Tradition*.
Sarawak: Society Atelier Sarawah.
- Jensen, Erik
1974 *The Iban and Their Religion*.
London: Oxford University Press.
- Myers, Christopher, and Lynne Born Myers
1994 *Forest of the Clouded Leopard*.
Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. *
- Sellato, Bernard
1989 *Hornbill and Dragon*.
Jakarta: Elf Aquitaine Indonesia.

* Children's books

A graphic for Unit 3. It features a large white number '3' on a dark orange square background. To the left of the '3' is a smaller orange square with the word 'Unit' in white script font. The entire graphic is framed by a decorative border of small white diamonds on an orange background.

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Note to Teachers:

This lesson is part of the curricular materials developed to accompany the exhibition *Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives*. Although this and companion lessons are self-contained, each will be enhanced when used in conjunction with others in this resource. Addressing several lessons within each unit will facilitate the incorporation of the study of world arts and cultures into your curriculum.

The lesson is based on works in the third section of the exhibition called *Art and Power*. In this gallery works are introduced that serve to define and assert power. See “Unit Three—Art and Power” for an introductory statement on the unit, along with some provocative “Questions for Thought,” and suggestions that will inspire the students to relate the unit to their own lives.

Images of objects to be shown to students may be printed as handouts (from within each lesson), viewed online at the *Intersections* web link <http://collections.fowler.ucla.edu>, or downloaded from the curriculum page on our website.

In this unit the topics and lessons are

Lesson 12: Empowering Leaders: Leadership Art of the Cameroon Grassfields, Africa

Lesson 13: Negotiating Gender: Portrayal of a Hunter: *Ere Egungun Olode*, Nigeria

Lesson 14: Negotiating Gender: Powerful Mother: *Ere Gelede*, Nigeria

Lesson 15: Status and Prestige: To Make the Chief’s Words Sweet: A Counselor’s Staff, Ghana

Lesson 16: Status and Prestige: A Wall of Status and Prestige, Africa, Asia, and the Americas

Lesson 17: Harnessing Spirits: Pacific Northwest Arts, United States and Canada

Lesson 18: Harnessing Spirits: The Hornbill: Bird of Prophecy, Malaysia

