

## **Weapons and Cosmic Power: the *Keris* and the *Mandau***

Both leaders and the objects they use and with which they surround themselves – both in the past and nowadays – are regarded as saturated with power. This includes the weapons with which heroes do battle and take heads. Weapons like those shown in this exhibition are regarded as being full of cosmic power and as possessed by spirits.

*Keris* swords, with their characteristic wavy shape echoing a serpent or dragon (*naga*), are super-powerful weapons, particularly if they are said to have been owned by a powerful leader – whose personal cosmic power is believed to be transmitted to the *keris*. They are often highly decorated, including with precious stones, and great skill went into their making. They were used in wars, both between lowland kingdoms and in the wars fought by lowland kingdoms against European colonial powers between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. *Keris* are still kept by some leaders, as objects carrying cosmic power.

The *mandau* sword shown here, which is highly ornamented and decorated, would have been used for headhunting. The more heads such a sword has taken, the more powerful it is believed to be.

Headhunting is a practice with a long history in inland/upland areas in the islands and on the mainland of SE Asia. There is debate about the reasons for it, but the main aim seems to have been to gather cosmic power or life force in the form of the souls of those whose heads were brought back. Heads brought back to a Borneo longhouse were welcomed ceremonially by the women of the longhouse.

Heads must be regularly fed and kept warm near the fire, to make them benevolent. Otherwise, it is risky to keep heads, as their souls could become dangerous. Even today, heads must be looked after very carefully to avoid their souls becoming restless or unhappy. This is taken very seriously, including by local authorities. When the Sarawak Museum moved the heads that had been kept in the museum old building in 2018, a complex ceremony was held to feed the souls of the heads and to ensure that they were informed of the reason for the transfer.

Although it was outlawed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, headhunting still occurred at times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the island of Borneo, Japanese heads were taken by local Dayaks during the Second World War and heads are said to have been taken during the so-called 'Confrontation' between Indonesia and Malaysia in the 1960s. It is also rumoured that the heads of 'transmigrants' from other parts of Indonesia were taken by local Dayaks in Indonesian Borneo (Kalimantan) as recently as 1999.