

La Collezione Brignoni Arte per metamorfosi

Museo
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Cultura
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di
Legano

Primo
volume



MAZZOTTI

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The Pantak Sculpture

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84 Carved from ironwood in the shape of a human being holding his arms stretched out to the sides and his hands open with palms turned upwards, the statue known as *pantak* (As.Ins.4.001, cat. 18) is one of the works that arouses most curiosity at the Museo delle Culture. The reason for such interest derives from the figure’s realism, its balanced proportions, and its peculiar pose, which to most observers seems in contrast to the expressionist and apparently irrational character of most other artefacts in the Brignoni Collection.

The work comes from the western area of Borneo, which is inhabited by a number of different tribes generally associated under the name of “Land Dayak”. It dates from the period between the two world wars. Briefly, we can say that it is the receptacle for the spirit of an illustrious ancestor, whose presence was of fundamental importance in the course of the agricultural rites. On such occasions, the *pantak* embodied the power to lead the village and the descent community, to ensure its continuity and prosperity. The three main ethnic groups among whom this kind of sculpture existed and is still found, though only in part, are the Selako, the Bidayuh, and the Kanayatn (Kendayan). All three groups have an economy based on rice growing, and celebrate fests associated with the rice-growing cycle, stretching from sowing to harvest. Most other rites in these cultures, instead, are episodic or semi-episodic in nature, depending on social needs or on events that may jeopardize

the community’s stability, such as disease or natural disasters. The spirits of illustrious ancestors—village founders, healing shamans, and warriors of particular valour—who had exerted a positive influence on the community during their lifetimes, were embodied in the statues stuck in the ceremonial ground, from where they attended the rituals, thus marking the ceremonial ground as a sacred space. The stylistic features of the Brignoni Collection’s *pantak* are not so marked as to permit us to attribute them with certainty to one specific ethnic group among the “Land Dayak”. For its analysis, we shall make use of ethnographic information gathered among the Kanayatn, which will enable us to trace the function, significance, and cultural context of a work about which we still have precious little scientific knowledge.

In the Kanayatn language, the term *pantak* expresses the action of “sticking” or “driving” something into a place. The origin of the statue is recounted in the story of Ne’ Nabi, a highly respected man of honour who held the title of *Sakitar Tanah* (literally, “he who dominates the earth”). When he died, the village had to face up to a significant absence. Since the community was convinced that the Ne’ Nabi’s soul lived on, one of the priests, called Ne’ Ranjang, proposed to conjure up the soul of the defunct in order to allow the descendants to continue benefiting from his presence. According to Ne’ Ranjang, the Kanayatn were able to make contact with the spirit of

Ne’ Nabi thanks to the power of the creator *Jubata*, who was supposed to have “stuck” the spirit of the ancestor into a wooden statue wedged in the ground. To ensure its success it was necessary for the statue to be manufactured in the course of a particular religious rite. Ne’ Ranjang thus conceived a ritual based on the various phases of the work necessary to make a *pantak*. Religious rite accompanied the choice of the timber (*memilih kayu*), the carving of the work (*narah*), the introduction of the spirit into the statue (*nagalamputn tali nyawa dan mihara*), and the placement of the statue in the ground (*nanam pantak*), this final phase was accompanied by sacred prayers (*sangahatn*). Only at this point did the wooden statue become, for the first time, the simulacrum of the *pama* spirit of the ancestor, who, having returned among his descendants, could finally interact with them. The most intense moment of the rite occurred during the phase of the *nagalamputn tali nyawa*, when *Jubata* was asked to bring the statue to life through the holy spirit (*pama*) of the ancestor. The priest made this request to the supreme divinity by chanting the following litany: “We ask you, *Jubata*, that the Ne’ Nabi spirit be perfect, be whole, and that it live in the *pantak*, giving us wisdom. You who are the beginning of life, the beginning of every creation, you who give orders with wisdom. May you tell the wind to give him breath, the thunder to give him a voice, the water to give him strength.”

18.

Pantak.

Strikingly realistic wooden sculpture, it depicts the spirit (*pama*) of a high-ranking person inhabiting the statue. The portrait was done while the individual was still living. The work was a family asset, and exerted a powerfully protective influence on the descendants.

Indonesia. Borneo.

“Land Dayak” ethnic group.

First half of the 20th cent.

128x125x18 cm.

As.Ins.4.001.



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The *pantak* was thus first of all a representation of dignitaries whose soul resided within it. A necessary condition was that they had died a natural death. Dignitaries were particularly important because they possessed *pama*, the sacred spirit that bears good luck. The *pama* communicated, guided, and took care of his descendants at the behest of the demiurge *Jubata*, giving advice and protecting men from the *hantu* demons who brought disturbance and influenced natural beings. For this reason, the *pama* was reified as Ne' Pangu or Ne' Pangingo (lit. "he who guides", "he who brings counsel").

In the public sphere, the concept of *pama* was applied to two kinds of dignitary, and consequently led to a double nomenclature for the *pantak*. A first category was that of the *tuha tahutn* or *papadiatn*, agricultural managers who were known as experts of land and agriculture. Their knowledge allowed them to solve farming problems through the interpretation of the signs of nature and of animals. Agricultural managers were also responsible for founding a new community whenever the clan house (*randakng*) became insufficient for the number of its inhabitants. With their deep knowledge of the land and agriculture, the *tuha tahutn* guaranteed the prosperity of the community settling in new lands. In such cases the founder of the *randakng* donated a *pantak* owned by his family for the use of the entire community. The name of the first kind of statue is *pantak panyugu*.

A second category of dignitaries were those who were renowned in the community for their prowess in battle (*pangalangok*) or their skills as medicine men (*dukun pamaliatn*). As in the first case, the *pantak* belonged to one family but were destined to the entire community. The name of the second kind of statue is *pantak padagi*. In the private sphere, the *pantak keluarga* contained the *pama* of wise and respected people in the family circle; they belonged to a single family and their use was strictly tied up with the lineage.

The rites were performed in holy places (*keramat*), called *panyugu* and *padagi*. In both these areas were kept a sacred stone, a jar covered with a bowl filled with holy water, and the *pantak* statue of the same name. The area surrounding the statues had to be kept clean, it was prohibited

to cut or burn wood, or to kill animals in the immediate vicinity.

The *nabo' panyugu* rite was performed in the *panyugu*, in the period preceding the sowing season (June). The *nabo' panyugu* was directed by the *dukun* priest and taken in by a *pamangko panyugu*, one of the descendants of the sacred site's founder, who was responsible for its maintenance.

The *nabo' padagi* ritual celebration that closed the harvest period (May) was held in the *padagi*, at the end of the *patahunan* agricultural cycle. In this ritual celebration, the Kanayatn thanked *Jubata* and the *pama* for favours received during the past season, and asked for support in the season to come.

On the same occasion, prayers were made to *Jubata* and to the *pama* for *sampore* medicine for the people. This medicine purified the soul and "healed" the errors made during the previous season. The period between the celebrations marking the end of the harvest and the celebrations before sowing the new seeds, known as the *lala tamakng*, was marked by a ban on leaving one's home and on receiving visits from outsiders or from neighbouring villagers, on working and on eating certain kinds of meat. One year ended and another began, all in the redeeming presence of the *pantak*.

