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Historical glimpses of Sarawak's hairy rhinoceroses [Part Two]

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This is part two of a two-part series. Part one can be read here: <https://dayakdaily.com/historical-glimpses-of-sarawaks-hairy-rhinoceroses-part-one/>

By Lim Tze Tshen

Early specimens in Sarawak Museum

WHEN it was founded in 1886, the venerable Sarawak Museum was not just the first of its kind in Borneo but also remained for a long time the only one such institution on the whole island. The museum takes pride as the depository of many natural and cultural items related to Sarawak, including some rare specimens of the hairy rhinoceros.

The earliest known records of hairy rhinoceros specimens deposited here—four heads and three horns—were documented in a short note written by Edward Bartlett (1836–1908), a naturalist attached to the government of Sarawak during the late 19th century, who later became curator of the Sarawak Museum from 1893 to 1897.

The article, which appeared in the 1891 issue of the 'Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London', contains an illustration of one of the horns that, according to the report, was about 19 inches long! (More on this magnificent

near record horn in next section.) Bartlett believed that all these trophy specimens came from hunted animals in the jungles of the upper Rajang river.

Tom Harrisson and his Bornean hairy rhinoceros

Our best knowledge about the whole Sarawak Museum hairy rhinoceros collection comes from another curator of the museum, Tom Harrisson (1911-1976).

As a prolific writer, and a maverick among his peers, he produced many articles on various subjects that interested him during his long and productive service heading the museum from 1947 to 1966. A great deal of these articles went into the pages of the in-house journal of the museum, *Sarawak Museum Journal*, which he rejuvenated almost single-handedly during the post-war years.

We know from the voluminous published and unpublished documents that he left behind in the museum that, apart from the bleak future of the animals on Borneo, he was particularly intrigued by two aspects of rhinoceros-related research—ancient Chinese libation cups made from rhinoceros horns, and *palang*. The latter refers to the bygone practice of male genital piercing found among some inland native communities in Borneo, the end results of which bear an uncanny resemblance to the uniquely shaped male organ of rhinoceroses.

His 1956 *Sarawak Museum Journal* article, 'Rhinoceros in Borneo: and Traded to China', was written in a manner that captivated the general public and carried much behind-the-scene information about the collection in Sarawak Museum previously rarely known.

For example, he mentioned about the paucity of zoological specimens of the hairy rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) among the museum collections, except 'some bits of skin and a good horn' of one confiscated body of an animal 'killed in the upper Rejang since the war'. The article also included a picture of a pair of small horns from a female animal (Plate IIa of the original article). Besides, it also alluded briefly to the presence of some other 'small existing horns'.



Fig 1: A mounted hairy rhinoceros in the public display gallery of the Natural History Museum in London. Place of origin of specimen unknown. Picture by Lim Tze Tshen.

Remarkable are some natural objects modified by human—a mounted foot-box with an upper attachment made of 'finely woven basketwork' from the Kayan or Kelabit community (No. 2443 of the original museum catalogue;), and a penis of a rhinoceros with 'a hardwood rod fixed in it (to keep it rigid)'.



Fig 2: A basket box made from a foot of the hairy rhinoceros. Catalogue no. 2443. Picture from the collection of Sarawak Museum. Courtesy of the Sarawak Museum Department

A picture of the latter was also included in the 1956 article (Plate IIIb of the original article). Citing information recorded in the old museum catalogue, Harrisson noted that No. 2443 originally included 'one rhinoceros horn and three feet presented by H.H. The Rajah', but only one foot was found to be present when he wrote his article.

Harrisson's enormously informative paper, however, loses some of its value because in no part of it can a reader find a definitive answer to the question—how many modern hairy rhinoceros specimens Sarawak Museum has in its collections?

The Bornean subspecies of the hairy rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis harrissoni*), said to be physically different from other subspecies found in Sumatra and continental Asia, was officially named after Harrisson in 1965 by the mammal taxonomist, Colin Groves (1942-2017).

In Groves' own words, 'this is just a small way of giving recognition to your work in many Bornean fields: Anthropology, Zoology, and Nature Conservation'. A generous gesture, as it certainly is, that a 'naturally delighted' Harrisson happily accepted, according to his October 1963 reply letter to Groves. The joyfulness of being immortalised in such a way obviously amused him greatly.

A dryly humorous remark, penned perhaps in a more intimate way, was documented in a 1965 letter Harrisson wrote to the Dutch mammal palaeontologist, Dirk Hooijer, with whom he had constantly communicated over the years on matters related to Hooijer's studies of the monkeys and orangutan remains from Niah archaeological sites: "Is it not perfect for Mr Groves to call a rhinoceros after me? Presumably it is in honour of the fact that both it and I are practically extinct!"

The 19-incher and other specimens in Sarawak Museum

Most extraordinary among the recorded specimens said to be in Sarawak Museum is a large front horn first reported and illustrated in the 1891 article by Bartlett. The associated second horn at the back of this 19-incher is well developed but much less remarkable in size. In his 1949 'Bornean Mammals', Edward Banks (1903-1988), yet another curator of Sarawak Museum from 1925 to 1945, remarked that "19 inches is the longest Sarawak horn...".

This magnificent specimen, of course, did not escape Harrisson's attention of. In his 1956 article, the specimen was brought out for discussion in the context of ancient Chinese libation cup manufacture. A picture of the horn, first appeared in the 1956 article, is reproduced here as Fig 3.



Fig 3: A near record front horn of the hairy rhinoceros, about 19 inches long. Picture from the collection of Sarawak Museum. Courtesy of the Sarawak Museum Department.

Harrison also included a black-and-white picture of the specimen in his 1963 publication 'The Sarawak Museum: a living centre in a far country'. Incorporated within the frames of the same picture were some other important natural products from Borneo usually traded with the early Chinese: deer antlers, edible bird-nests, unworked casques of the helmeted hornbills, and stuffed specimens of kingfisher whose turquoise feathers were used in a form of Chinese art and jewellery manufacture called Tian-tsui.

Another picture of the same specimen was to be found in Lord Medway's (now, the 5th Earl of Cranbrook) 1977 monograph 'Mammals of Borneo'. Unlike the previous two images that Harrison produced, which show only a large front horn in isolation, the 1977 picture features a single specimen with the front and back horns mounted together on a trophy board. Except for some minor parts around the base of the large front horn which look like the specimen had been subjected to certain restorative works, the 1977 picture is almost identical, in every major detail, to the illustration Bartlett produced in 1891!

In his study of fossil and prehistoric rhinoceroses from Borneo published in the 1986 issue of 'Sabah Museum and Archives Journal', the 5th Earl of Cranbrook had made use of two skulls of immature individuals from the Sarawak Museum collection. These skulls may very likely be the same ones as those recorded later by Karen Kool and Yakup Nawi in their 1995 Sarawak Museum catalogue 0195/1 and 0195/2.

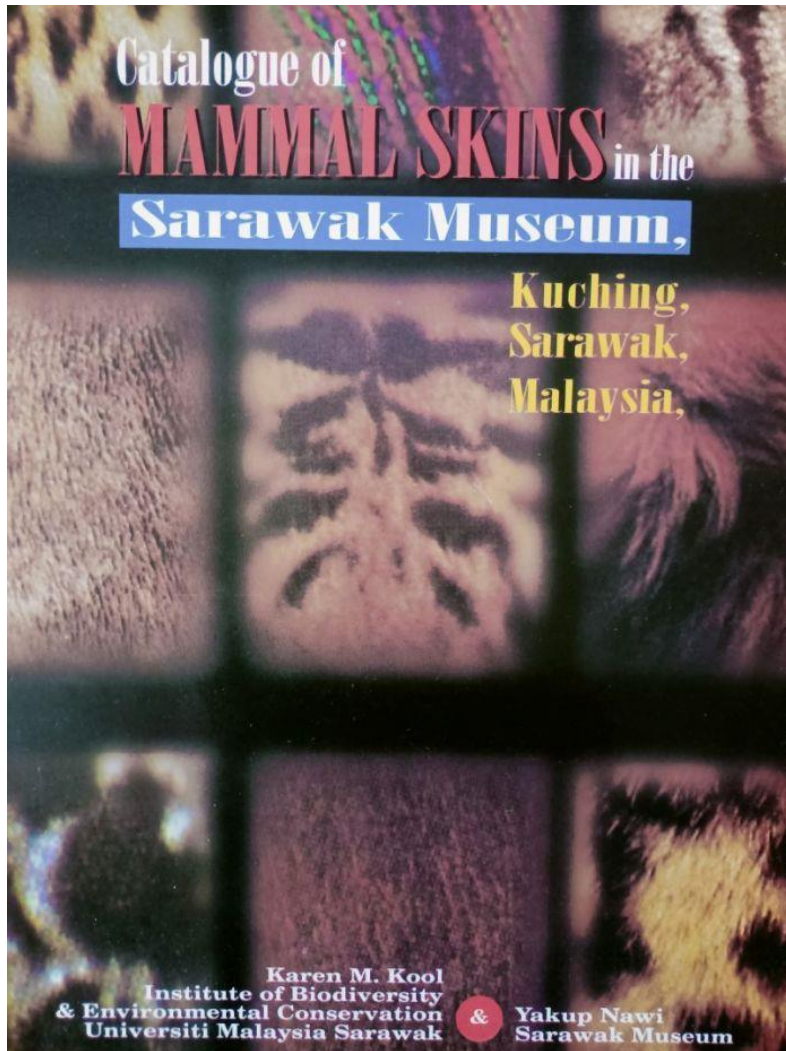


Fig 4: A catalogue of Sarawak Museum mammal collection published in 1995 by Karen M. Kool and Yakup Nawi. Picture by Lim Tze Tshen

Information from a colleague indicated that one other skull (with artificial eyeballs plastered into the eye sockets) also seemed to be present in the exhibition area of the old museum building. Could the origins of some of these skulls be traced back to the 1891 collection Bartlett reported? Or, are they parts of the museum acquisition added on much later?

Lest we forget

The hairy rhinoceros is an iconic animal of the Bornean rainforest. Zooarchaeological remains from Niah show that it has a long history of existence in Sarawak. Extremely rare and critically endangered across the island, it may have left the forests of Sarawak well before any proper scientific documentation can be done.

Old specimens in museum collections (Table 1) and their associated background information—collected and faithfully recorded down by field zoologists in the past and diligently curated by subsequent generations of professional museum workers—all work together now, in as best a way as they possibly could, to fill in the void of our knowledge about Sarawak hairy rhinoceroses.

DEPOSITORY	ITEMS
Museum of Zoology (University of Cambridge)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Skull and skeleton of a single female individual; collected prior 1903 2. Skull and lower jaw of a single individual
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (University of Cambridge)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Worked tooth (Toggle) 2. Worked bone (Armband)
Sarawak Museum	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Four heads and three horns; recorded in 1891 2. Three foot 'boxes' and a horn; recorded in 1929 and 1956 3. Bits of skins and a horn of a single individual; recorded in 1956 4. A pair of female horns; recorded in 1956 5. Small horns; recorded in 1956 6. Two male organs; recorded in 1956 7. A large front horn; recorded in 1956* 8. Worked items - knife handles and sword hilts; recorded in 1978 9. Skulls and lower jaws of two individuals; recorded in 1986 and 1995 10. A skull and lower jaw of a single individual on display in the old museum building#

Table 1: A list of recent specimens of the hairy rhinoceros from (or thought to be from) Sarawak now (or used to be) kept in museum collections.

*This item is very likely the same thing as one of the three horns recorded in 1891.

#This item perhaps belongs to one of the two specimens recorded in 1986 and 1995.

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End of the line? Perhaps not. The few tantalising words in Hans Hazebroek and Abang Kashim Abang Morshidi's 'National Parks of Sarawak' do give us a small hope—"...in 1997 rhinoceros tracks were again recorded here (Pulong Tau National Park)".

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