



Priest's staff

Not on display

Title/Description: Priest's staff

Object Type: Staff

Materials: Feather, Fibre, Hair, Metal, Wood

Measurements: l. 1689 x w. 65 x d. 75 mm

Accession Number: 914

Historic Period: 19th/early 20th century

Production Place: Oceania, Pacific, Sumatra

Cultural Group: Batak, Toba

Long staffs (*tunggal panaluan*), elaborately carved for most of their length, were an important part of the Toba Batak priest's ritual equipment. The priest (*datu* in the Toba language) presided at

seasonal rituals, like the harvest festival, and was the agent through whom ancestral spirits and deities could be contacted for purposes of divination or healing or for assistance in matters affecting the welfare of the community. Tobing (1963: 170-89) discusses *tunggal panaluan*, calling them representations of the 'tree of life', but his illustrations of their use were apparently at 'rituals' he himself choreographed (see Barbier, 1983: 161-7), thus calling into question the validity of his observations.

This staff is a fine example of the type, the hard thorn-tree wood from which it is made having acquired a glossy black patina. The principal figure retains the original head-dress of coarse black hair bound with red, blue-black and white fibre threads. Beneath this were placed magical substances (*pupuk*) which assisted the *datu* in his sacerdotal work. The shaft above the handgrip is completely carved with human and animal images, variously contorted and integrated into the cylindrical design space. Humans and water buffalo face the front, while snakes, lizards, dogs and tiny humans are arranged on the sides and back. The shaft below the handgrip is carved with a figure above a snake which bites the tail of a lizard.

Cameron (1985) refers to a myth associated with this complex iconography, which concerns five *datu*, two children and various creatures which were 'swallowed' by a thorn tree. Eventually a *datu* cut down the tree and carved from it a staff of this kind, thereby gaining the assistance of the spirits of those who had been swallowed.

Although the provenance of this example is not known it most probably dates to the late nineteenth century and is almost certainly of Toba origin (see Barbier, 1984: pl. 14a, Schoffel, 1981: 40-51 and Cameron, 1985: 93, for comparable examples).

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) pp. 82-83.
