




Urban Transformations and Social Change in Iban Handicrafts: Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways in which urban transformations reshape the production and meaning of Iban handicrafts in Sarawak, with particular attention to processes of cultural identity and social change. Drawing on qualitative research, including field observations and interviews with Iban artisans, the study examines how indigenous knowledge systems are adapted in response to modernization and urban influences. Findings reveal that handicrafts function not only as material artifacts but also as social markers that negotiate identity and collective memory within shifting urban contexts. The discussion highlights the intersections between cultural continuity and change, showing how women artisans and rural communities navigate economic pressures, cultural commodification, and urban demands while maintaining indigenous values. By linking material culture with the dynamics of social transformation, the article demonstrates the role of handicrafts as both products of tradition and instruments of adaptation. This contributes to cultural sociology and social change studies by situating indigenous art practices within broader debates on modernization and identity in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Handicrafts, Indigenous Knowledge, Sarawak, Social Change

INTRODUCTION

Material culture is a term used by scholars in the fields of science and humanities to describe the creation and production by Iban, either individually or in groups. According to Asri (2024a), the creation of handicrafts by local indigenous is a form of narrative about the cultural activities of the Iban through aspects of their skills, knowledge, experience, and collective memory. In addition, it is influenced by the scope and values of the Iban, such as their way of life, culture, belief practices, self-protection, communication, and the arts they possess. The implementation of local indigenous people in the creation of traditional handicrafts in Iban culture is closely related to the passage of time. The era and the phase of its development are gradually manifested in symbolizing the level of ability and intellectual level of the Iban, which is based on the influence of nature that exists in the surrounding area and environment that is their habitat (Asri & Tugang, 2020).

In appearance, the Iban is a creature endowed with a natural nature that is seen in three qualities, namely their will, feelings, and intellect. This natural nature has made the Iban preserve their existence through personal fulfillment based on these qualities. In addition, the existence of art in the Iban civilization is seen as a way to show their existence in the form of a group with an identity in a social life. According to Kiyai and Tugang (2020), art in

the Iban has long existed and moved in tandem since they began to develop local indigenous, which is shown through the creation of traditional handicrafts to preserve life within the existing environment.

The early Ibans began to create traditional handicrafts through the use of stone and animal bone materials found in their environment and surroundings. According to Asri and Tugang (2024b), the technology for creating traditional handicrafts practiced by the early Iban was simple, rather crude, and had limited functional capabilities at that time. Since ancient times, modifications to the implementation of local indigenous in the creation of traditional handicrafts in Iban culture have continued to develop along with the transition of time. In addition, it is also influenced by various factors, such as a way of life that is survival-based, experience, and life demands both spiritual and physical, as well as daily activities by the Iban.

The local indigenous concept of creating traditional handicrafts in Iban culture starts from its simple nature and then evolves into a complex one based on the development and progress of civilization from their spiritual and physical perspectives. Furthermore, the local indigenous idea of creating traditional handicrafts by the Iban will also change according to the needs and suitability of the times they are going through. In addition, from time to time, the technology of creation and improvement of traditional handicrafts will continue to develop more advanced and interesting from the perspective of aesthetics and its use as Iban cultural material. According to Kiyai (2021), the earliest Iban began innovating the creation of traditional handicrafts by using materials from nature, such as stone tools and animal bones found around them and then developed using metal materials, copper, silver, and iron. Therefore, the importance of local indigenous life experiences cannot be belittled, played with, or considered old-fashioned among the younger generation today. It should be a bulwark against a material culture for all levels of society, including the Iban.

This article seeks to answer the question of how Iban handicrafts navigate the pressures of modernization, commodification, and cultural preservation. Specifically, it examines how artisans engage both local cosmologies and global markets to sustain their practices, and what this dynamic reveals about broader anthropological debates on materiality, heritage, and the resilience of Indigenous knowledge systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Material Culture

Material culture refers to the study of tangible objects that embody cultural, historical, and identity values within a society. Initially rooted in archaeology and ethnology (Prown, 1982; Kiyai & Tugang, 2020), the field has evolved to encompass broader disciplinary intersections, such as heritage, art, and consumption studies. Rockcliffe et al. (2020) trace its development within anthropology, emphasizing the symbolic and functional interpretation of objects through ethnographic methods.

Archaeological approaches often align material artifacts with spatial and historical layers while also reflecting colonial-era paradigms in interpreting ancient objects (Gamble, 2015). Cuno (2014) emphasizes the political function of material culture in shaping national identity and modern political narratives, with reference to Egyptian, Persian, and Roman civilizations. Ghazali and Mohammad (2017) argue that such material objects also foster critical inquiry and engagement with the past.

Sahari et al. (2020) highlight that material culture includes man-made objects embedded in lived practices, stressing local agency in preserving heritage. Historically, preservation efforts in many postcolonial contexts were influenced by Western ideologies, such as those of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Nonetheless, indigenous communities have increasingly played active roles in safeguarding and reorganizing their cultural objects to sustain collective identity.

Askegaard (2015) positions material culture as a contemporary and interdisciplinary field, bridging anthropology and marketing by examining consumption patterns beyond econometric models. This broader relevance underscores the adaptive and symbolic roles of cultural objects in today's societies.

2.2 Borneo Material Culture

Material culture in Borneo has long attracted scholarly interest, particularly among Western researchers, since the 19th century (Sellato, 2017). Early accounts by Schwaner, Veth, St. John, and Whitehead documented local artifacts in narrative form without analytical engagement. It was only in the 20th century that attention shifted toward detailed documentation of indigenous heritage, recognizing its cultural and contextual significance (Sellato, 2017).

Prown (1982) notes that material culture in Borneo is deeply tied to ritual practice and aesthetics rather than mundane utility. Among Dayak communities, material objects reflect belief systems and social taboos. Sellato (2016) emphasizes that studying Indigenous material culture is crucial for preserving complex knowledge systems across generations.

Beyond tangible artifacts, Borneo's material culture encompasses themes such as gender, religion, health, and cosmology, as documented in various academic forums, including the Borneo Research Council (Sellato, 2017).

Scholars have analyzed the artistic dimensions of handicrafts, decorative motifs, and traditional design as visual expressions of Indigenous identity.

Heppel (2014, cited in Sellato, 2019) describes how carvings made from Tebelian (Borneo ironwood) serve both ritual and economic functions. Such objects are often commodified in global art markets, though they remain sacred symbols locally. Guerreiro (2011) documents their use in healing practices and as war talismans, indicating their deep-rooted spiritual significance.

King (2012, 2017) highlights the role of material culture in asserting cultural identity and community resilience. From daily tools to ceremonial artifacts, material culture in Borneo is not only utilitarian but also a symbolic medium of collective memory, spirituality, and socio-political meaning.

Classic and Contemporary Anthropological Perspectives

Beyond regional studies, the analysis of Iban handicrafts also resonates with foundational debates in anthropology. Mauss's ([1925] 1990) classic work on *The Gift* demonstrated how the exchange of objects embodies social obligations, reciprocity, and moral order, reminding us that handicrafts are never only material products but mediators of relationships and obligations. Similarly, Lévi-Strauss (1963) emphasized the symbolic structures underlying cultural practices, including craft traditions, showing how material culture expresses deep-seated cosmologies. Geertz's (1973) interpretive anthropology further situates handicrafts within systems of meaning, suggesting that artifacts must be "read" as texts embedded in cultural worlds.

In contemporary debates, Appadurai's (1996) analysis of globalization and the circulation of cultural forms provides a lens to understand how Iban handicrafts move from longhouse economies to urban markets, where their meanings are transformed. Tsing's (2005) notion of "friction" highlights the productive encounters between local knowledge and global networks, relevant to the ways Iban artisans negotiate cultural authenticity in tourism and craft festivals. Scholars such as Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) further argue that heritage and ethnicity are increasingly commodified, a framework useful for analyzing how Iban handicrafts acquire new economic and symbolic value in the context of cultural tourism.

Recent decolonial approaches also underscore the importance of engaging with indigenous epistemologies on their own terms (Mbembe 2001; Smith 2006). These perspectives emphasize that recognizing Iban knowledge as an intellectual tradition is vital for countering hegemonic narratives in anthropology and for situating handicrafts not as "folk art" but as critical sites of cultural theorizing.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore indigenous cultural practices among the Iban in Sarawak. Ethnography was chosen to understand cultural expressions from the perspective of the community itself, which is essential for a study grounded in local knowledge systems. The aim is to capture the meaning, context, and lived experiences tied to the creation of traditional handicrafts. As Mok (2008) and Creswell (2009) suggest, qualitative methods are appropriate for examining phenomena in natural settings, offering interpretive insights rather than numerical analysis. Ethnography, therefore, provides a valuable lens for deepening understanding of Iban cultural expressions and identity.

Data Collection Techniques

Fieldwork was carried out across selected longhouse settlements in Serian, Sri Aman, Sarikei, and Saratok. Data collection relied on a triangulated method combining non-participant observation, participant observation, and in-depth interviews through collective memory. Informants were identified using non-probability snowball sampling, whereby each participant recommended other individuals with relevant knowledge. This method enriched the quality of the data and ensured diverse representation.

Non-Participant Observation

This method allowed the researcher to observe Iban daily life and handicraft-making practices without direct involvement. It involved visually documenting how natural resources are transformed into craft objects, revealing connections between material culture and lived experience. As Creswell (2014) and Chua (2011) emphasize, observation enables researchers to understand and interpret cultural practices in situ.

Participant Observation

The researcher resided temporarily in the Iban's longhouses to gain immersive exposure to cultural practices. This approach facilitated deeper engagement with the Iban worldview and social environment. Living alongside the community was critical to building trust and obtaining a firsthand understanding of their indigenous knowledge. Table 1 presents the details of the informants, identified only by their first names to maintain confidentiality:

Table 1: Information of the Participants

No.	Name	Event / Festival	Location	Ethnicity	Age Group
1	Doris	Festival Kraf Tekstil Borneo 2023	Kapit	Iban	51 & Above
2	Engga	Festival Kraf Tekstil Borneo 2023	Kapit	Iban	51 & Above
3	Lucile	Punggu Borneo	Bau	Bidayuh	36-50
4	Oshin	Bazar Gawai Dayak Sarawak 2024	Kelabit	Iban	18-35
5	Dickson	Bazar Gawai Dayak Sarawak 2024	Bau	Bidayuh	51 & Above
6	Cathrine	Aeroville Bazar	Kapit	Iban	51 & Above
7	Suzana	Aeroville Bazar	Serian	Iban	36-50
8	Maria	Aeroville Bazar	Mukah	Iban	36-50
9	Angelia	Bazar Gawai Dayak Sarawak 2024	Sri Aman	Iban	36-50
10	Ita	Bazar Gawai Dayak Sarawak 2024	Lubok Antu	Iban	51 & Above

In-depth Interviews and Collective Memory

Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with Iban craft practitioners using collective memory techniques. Informants reflected on their experiences, knowledge transmission, and cultural meanings associated with handicraft production. As Creswell (2009) and Govindasamy (2015) highlight, such methods allow researchers to access internal perspectives that are often overlooked in surface-level studies. Recurring themes from the interviews were later analyzed to develop key insights for this study.

Research Ethics and Reflexivity

Ethical considerations were central to the conduct of this study. Working with Indigenous knowledge requires particular sensitivity, since much of the cultural heritage of the Iban—especially sacred objects such as the Pua Kumbu or Ilang machete—carries spiritual significance and is governed by taboos. Prior informed consent was obtained from all participants, and care was taken to respect restrictions on knowledge considered private or sacred. In line with anthropological best practices, potentially sensitive details were anonymized, and community members were consulted about how their knowledge should be represented.

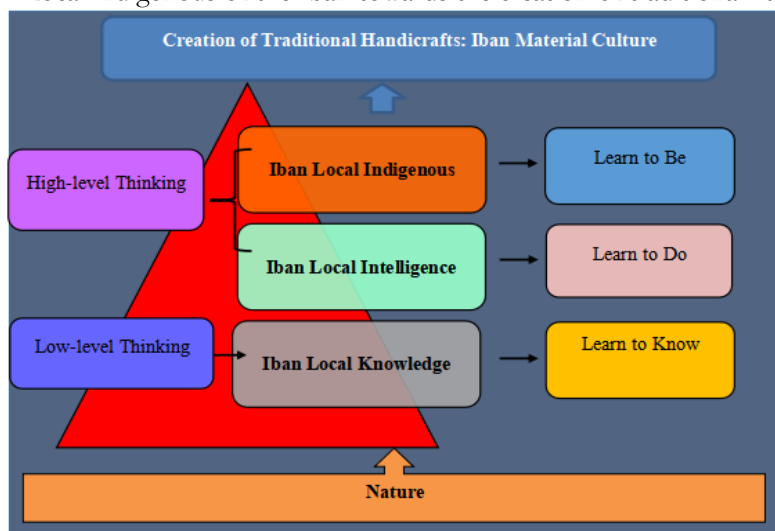
Reflexivity also played a significant role in shaping the research process. As Clifford and Marcus (1986) and Abu-Lughod (1991) have emphasized, ethnography is never neutral, and the positionality of the researcher influences both access to information and interpretation of findings. My status as an outsider created both opportunities and constraints: while it enabled participants to reflect critically on the commodification of their crafts for external audiences, it also required ongoing negotiation of trust. Acknowledging these dynamics is crucial for situating the analysis and avoiding claims of cultural authority that extend beyond what was shared.

Furthermore, the research was designed to align with principles of decolonial methodology (Smith 2012), which emphasize collaboration, accountability, and recognition of Indigenous epistemologies as equal forms of knowledge. By centering Iban voices and narratives, this study seeks not only to document cultural practices but also to contribute to a more ethical and dialogical anthropology.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The creation of traditional handicrafts among the Iban people is rooted in a deep connection with nature, shaped by observation, adaptation, and interaction with the environment. Historically, these creations were not only utilitarian in nature—serving domestic, spiritual, and protective purposes—but also reflective of the Iban's material culture, values, and cosmology. The sustained practice of traditional craftsmanship is a testament to the Iban's cultural resilience, intelligence, and ability to innovate in response to environmental and societal changes. The findings suggest that the evolution of Iban handicrafts is not only a matter of cultural preservation but also a reflection of broader processes of social change driven by urbanization, market integration, and shifting community roles.

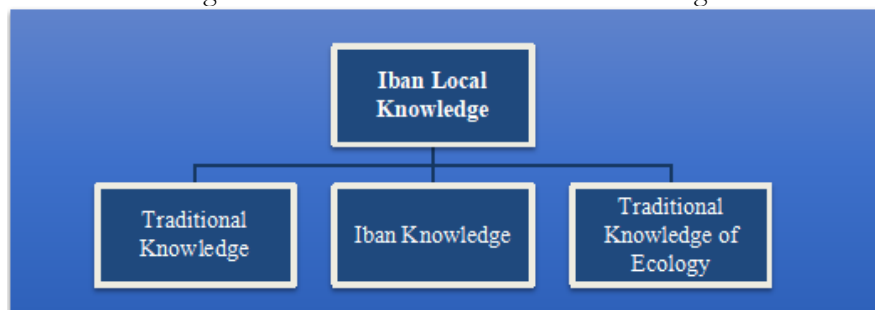
Figure 1: Local indigenous of the Iban towards the creation of traditional handicrafts



Iban Local Knowledge

Globalization has introduced new forms of universal knowledge, yet not all elements of Iban local knowledge are adaptable to this global context. The classification of local knowledge (Figure 2) includes traditional ecological knowledge, which is tested and refined through daily life, oral transmission, and adaptation to local conditions.

Figure 2: Classification of Iban local knowledge



The Iban’s former nomadic lifestyle contributed to the accumulation of this knowledge through migration, trial and error, and environmental observation.

Habitus and Cultural Capital

The reproduction of craft knowledge among Iban artisans can be understood through Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of habitus and cultural capital. The embodied skills of weaving or carving are not only technical competencies but also forms of symbolic capital that grant artisans social recognition within their community. These practices illustrate how cultural capital circulates across generations, reinforcing collective identity while simultaneously opening avenues for economic participation in broader markets. Women artisans, in particular, have become key agents of social change, negotiating between traditional knowledge and new urban demands.

Iban Local Intelligence

Local intelligence among the Iban refers to the practical wisdom and cognitive ability to integrate logical, technical, and spiritual elements in the making of handicrafts. Informants indicated that before colonization, the Iban were already an organized, literate, and culturally rich society. Their craftsmanship reflects intellectual sophistication, combining traditional governance systems, language, and artisanal knowledge in their daily lives and production systems

Local Indigenous of Iban

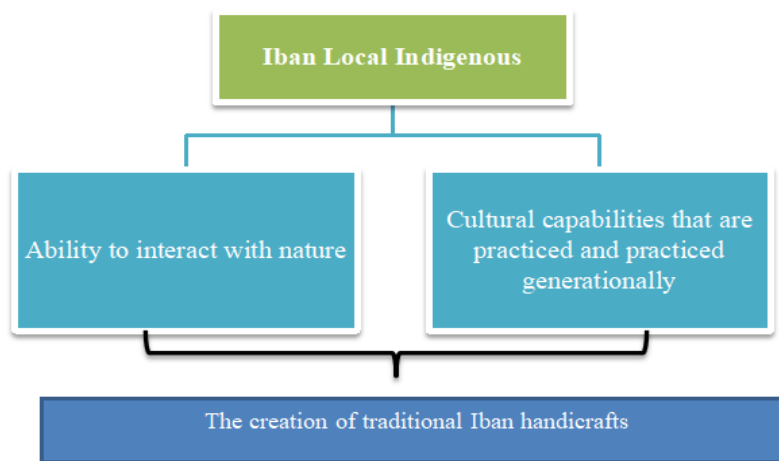
Local indigenous knowledge refers to the wisdom, values, and practices embedded in the lives of the Iban people. It plays a critical role in ensuring their survival, sustaining their culture, and contributing to the construction

of civilization and nationhood. This knowledge is evident in the Iban's interaction with nature, daily routines, and communal behavior within their inhabited areas. It is transmitted through generations, guiding their way of life and informing their cultural practices.

Among the Iban, local indigenous knowledge evolves through processes of migration, adaptation, assimilation, and interaction with their environment. It encompasses their understanding and conceptualization of various phenomena—experienced, observed, or imagined—formulated within their cultural framework. This includes cosmological beliefs, knowledge about flora and fauna, everyday practices, and social events.

This knowledge is often developed through experiences with the natural world. The Iban engage in a process of trial and error, driven by curiosity about their surroundings. The consequences of their actions—whether beneficial or harmful—become lessons stored as collective memory, experience, or even trauma. As Osup (2019) highlights, the oral literature of the Iban—including fables, folklore, legends, myths, chants, riddles, and epics—survived in oral form until the late twentieth century but remains highly fragile due to the decline of elder custodians and the pressures of modernization. Their reliance on oral tradition reflects the absence of a fully developed writing system in earlier times, with memory and storytelling serving as key tools for cultural preservation.

Figure 3: Local indigenous demonstrated through the capabilities of the Iban.



The knowledge also serves as a moral compass and regulatory system within longhouse communities, influencing conflict resolution, rituals, and environmental stewardship.

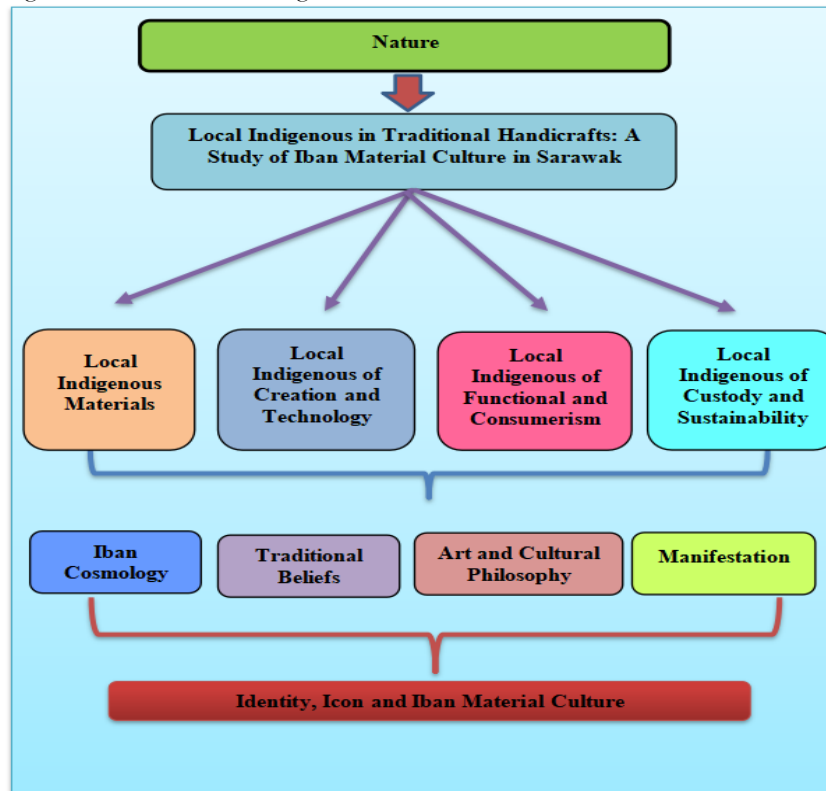
Local Indigenous in Traditional Handicrafts: A Study of Iban Material Culture in Sarawak

Culture in Sarawak

This study employs Fleming's (1974) Artifact Study Model (as cited in Pearce, 2017), which enables a comprehensive cultural and material analysis of traditional objects. The model emphasizes both intrinsic characteristics (material, construction, design, function, and history) and cultural significance (identification, evaluation, interpretation). In the Iban context, handicraft creation functions as a "time machine" that embodies history, belief, identity, and cosmology.

As shown in Figure 4, the proposed model integrates natural and social sciences in understanding how local indigenous knowledge contributes to craft production. The model is scalable and applicable to other Indigenous communities across Malaysia, especially in Borneo. It underscores the significance of indigenous epistemologies in cultural sustainability and supports national initiatives in heritage preservation.

Figure 4: Model of local indigenous in the creation of traditional Iban handicrafts



Through Figure 4, it shows the local indigenous model of the Iban, which combines natural science and social science. This model was modified through research, and it is seen as suitable for local indigenous people who want to create traditional handicrafts in the Iban material culture in Sarawak. The capabilities of this model are not only limited to local Indigenous Iban material culture in Sarawak. However, they can also be applied to the local Indigenous of other Indigenous communities in Malaysia, especially those found in the Borneo Islands. The concept of combining natural science, social science, culture, and intellectuality for an indigenous community in developing indigenous is not a common thing abroad. This is because, for Malaysia, which is categorized as a developing country, the method of combining is not yet as large and practical as in other developed countries in prioritizing the culture of its local community, which is formed through local Indigenous.

The Iban in Sarawak has its own local indigenous people utilizing and using natural resources as materials for creating traditional handicrafts as a necessity for their lives. Along with the transition of time and era, the Iban developed ideas. It opened their minds to making traditional handicrafts that were created as evidence of their local indigenous adapting and assimilating with nature. In addition, it has indirectly made it one of the significant identities and heritages and has become a manifestation of culture and art in stages in the Iban itself. With the existence of Figure 4, it is believed that it can have a great impact and can ensure the implementation of local indigenous people in the creation of traditional handicrafts, as well as being a significant reference for all levels of society worldwide. Therefore, local Indigenous people's contribution to the creation of traditional handicrafts is a contribution that can be aligned with the efforts of the Malaysian government in preserving knowledge of human civilization to create a civilized society.

Local Indigenous of Material

According to informant 3, the Iban traditionally derived all life necessities from nature, including food, shelter, and cultural tools. The selection and use of raw materials—often biocompatible and naturally abundant—were guided by spiritual beliefs and ecological ethics. Their use was sustainable and non-exploitative, and materials like wood, bamboo, and rattan were transformed into sacred or utilitarian items through intuitive craftsmanship.

Local Indigenous of Creation and Technology

As shared by informant 5, early Iban craft techniques were based on collective memory and ancestral knowledge. These methods, though technologically simple, were conceptually rich and rooted in natural sciences derived from adaptation, migration, and oral tradition. Nature served as both a spiritual guide and a practical resource, inspiring sacred motifs and influencing aesthetic and technical decisions in craft-making.

Local Indigenous of Functional and Consumerism

Informant 6 noted that the Iban's nomadic lifestyle and survival needs necessitated functional craftsmanship. Tools such as farming implements, weapons, and ritual objects emerged from practical needs. Over time, handicrafts evolved to carry sacred meaning, as seen in the veneration of objects like the Pua Kumbu, Ilang machete, and Tajau jars. These items, associated with dreams and ritual offerings, became markers of social status and spiritual connection.

Local Indigenous of Custody and Sustainability

Traditional storage and maintenance practices reflect the Iban's cosmological understanding of space. According to informant 8, sacred items like the Ilang machete were stored strategically within the longhouse, often in central areas like the Tempuan, for both spiritual and practical purposes. The maintenance involved natural substances such as banana sap and lime juice, aligning with a sustainable and respectful use of resources.

Sacred objects received annual offerings and participated in rituals such as Miring and Gawai, reinforcing their role in spiritual protection. These practices illustrate a holistic approach to cultural preservation that is both practical and symbolic. The Iban's stewardship of handicrafts reflects a broader cultural ethic that integrates belief, functionality, and ecological respect.

4.6 The Goal of Implementing Local Indigenous in the Creation of Traditional Handicrafts: A Study of Iban Material Culture in Sarawak

Iban Cosmology

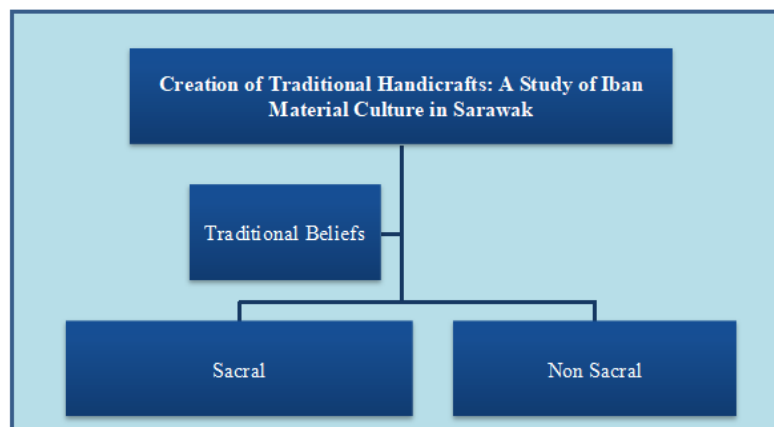
According to informant 1, the meaning of Iban cosmology is a reference to the frameworks of ideas in life that they believe facilitate their understanding of the spatial order of the inhabited world. These frameworks of ideas play an important role in shaping cultural values in Iban. The meaning of Iban cosmology is also a framework of ideas in their life that they believe facilitate their understanding of the spatial concept of the world that exists.

The term cosmos in Greek means the universe. In Malay, the term cosmos is also referred to as the universe. Meanwhile, cosmology is a field of knowledge that explains the origin of events and the position and arrangement of nature. In cosmology, the position and relationship or communication of the Iban as a group of people with the nature that exists around them is often observed. The existence of nature exists where the Iban, as a group of people as inhabitants in the real world, see that everything, whether living or non-living, is a creation that is beyond the limits of a human being. In this regard, the Iban believes that there are great powers that create nature and the contents contained therein. Furthermore, everything that happens in the environment and surroundings of the Iban also shows that there are supernatural forces that also live with them but cannot be seen with the normal eye.

The existence of nature is not only the source of life for living beings, namely the Iban but is also said to have a very high level of magic in forming other natural systems contained within it. This explains that there is a large and main group of creators in the creation of nature. Since the Iban is a group of humans that inhabit the real world, all their behaviors and movements are always observed and will have a great effect on the lives they live. This shows that there are other supernatural forces that also live with the Iban, whether they live in other natural systems or their environment and surroundings. In addition, the Iban feel that they are not the only ones who live in the real world; they also 'share nature' with supernatural forces. However, other natural systems cannot be seen by the eyes of the Iban as ordinary humans, so they are stated as supernatural. In connection with this, an idea framework has been created about the creation of traditional handicrafts to express the 'sharing of the world' by the Iban with supernatural forces, which in turn form their cosmology. This is because the 'sharing of the world' by the Iban has been applied in the creation of traditional handicrafts, which shows the network of relationships between the Iban and other Iban, the Iban with nature, and the Iban with supernatural forces.

Traditional Beliefs

Figure 5: The creation of traditional Iban handicrafts in the context of traditional beliefs.



Based on Figure 5, according to informant 9, the creation of traditional handicrafts in the Iban is also based on the practice of their heritage beliefs, which consists of several elements, namely cosmology, rituals, ceremonies, and taboos which have been depicted in the Pengarap Lama. The concept of these traditional beliefs is not only used as a practice to be practiced but is also absorbed in the creation of Iban traditional handicrafts. Before the Iban forms the practice of traditional beliefs, they first need to understand the concept of cosmology that exists in the environment and surroundings. This is because it is important as a framework of ideas for the Iban in forming the most basic culture in creating traditional handicrafts.

Based on local indigenous people's creation of traditional handicrafts of the Iban, these materials can be categorized as either sacred or non-sacral. The creation of sacred handicrafts usually refers to objects created for specific ritual and ceremonial purposes, such as Pua Kumbu, Ilang machete, and jar (Tajau). Typically, the practice of Iban beliefs begins when creating traditional handicrafts such as Pua Kumbu, jar (Tajau), and Ilang machete, which are considered mystical, supernatural, and sacred, in addition to complying with certain taboos and rituals performed. Furthermore, it is intended as a form of communicating with the existence of supernatural forces to obtain help, guidance, wealth, and blessings of life. All these concepts of traditional beliefs are then applied to the creation of traditional handicrafts, which are seen as capable of becoming one of the intermediary objects between the world inhabited by the Iban and the supernatural world. Meanwhile, non-sacrals in traditional handicrafts are shown to be objects used in the daily activities of the Iban. Therefore, ideas for creating traditional handicrafts developed in line with the advancement of thought among the Iban, who had created a cosmological concept based on their local indigenous regarding nature.

For the process of creating traditional sacred handicrafts, the Iban perform the Miring ritual, where they prepare and give offerings to supernatural forces. This traditional belief has made these objects more sacred, giving them their magic and giving them an aura of the supernatural. In addition, it also has a clear concept of ideas with the purpose of life of the Iban and always lives in the practice of their culture. The Iban believes that most traditional sacred handicrafts are said to have their spirit, soul, and spirit that need to be 'managed and cared for' well. This is because the Iban believe that certain traditional sacred handicrafts can haunt the life of their owner if they are not used in the right way and no symbolic offerings are made. For traditional sacred handicrafts, it is likened to a 'body' that lives and has the same nature as the Iban. This is because the sacred handicraft is given 'life and soul' and endowed with human characteristics, such as the desire to eat, being changed into 'new clothes,' and being put on 'new clothes,' which refers to the physical part. This shows that the owner needs to serve the 'requests' of the sacred objects in order to avoid anger and invite disaster. Typically, the sacred objects 'ask' their owner through incarnations through dreams, faint voices are heard asking for help, and other signs and markers show that they are 'hungry and thirsty' for something. Therefore, the owner is obliged to fulfill all the 'requests' for the sacred material by providing offerings through the Miring ritual. The offerings are filled with special types of food, and a sacrificial animal, such as a village chicken, is provided. Its blood will be given to the objects and will make them continue to live and have supernatural forces in addition to being able to help their owner towards a better life.

However, according to informant 6, if the owner of the traditional sacred handicraft does not take good care of it and does not fulfill the special requests as a sacred material, it will often disrupt the life they live. It is commonly believed that the sacred material will make noise, cry, fall, and move itself from where it was originally placed. Furthermore, the thing that is very feared by the Iban, especially the owner of traditional sacred handicrafts, is the 'desire of hunger' that is not fulfilled, which will cause the object to try to transform itself into a more violent and terrible form, such as in the form of a dragon or a large snake, and try to bring bad luck, infectious diseases, and take the life of the owner as a 'replacement' in fulfilling its desire to 'eat.'

Although these ideas are seen as something terrible and excessive in the context of the Iban thinking today is based on an anthropological perspective, the forms of the depiction of these ideas are very important as a local Indigenous and should be defended in order to maintain the local Indigenous in the creation of traditional handicrafts that refer to sacred objects in Iban culture. Based on this situation, it is a long process and requires the height of intellectual power by the Iban based on the knowledge of local indigenous that they possess. Furthermore, it shows that the Iban has begun to open its mind more widely and is able to improve its thinking towards the creation of traditional handicrafts, whether in the form of sacral or non-sacral in their culture.

Art and Cultural Philosophy

Based on the creation of traditional handicrafts by the Iban, it is not only seen as a spiritual and physical need but also as a meaningful artistic product and a reflection of their civilized and highly intellectual selves. The creation of traditional handicrafts, which are intended as meaningful art, is not just a physical art product but an art product that has given meaning or contains implicit meaning. Meaningful art starts from the initial process of creating traditional handicrafts, and it takes into account its methodology to meet the needs of Iban culture. In ancient times, the creation of traditional handicrafts has long existed in the Iban, but they did not place much emphasis

on the uniqueness of the object. This is because the life of the Iban in the past was survival, a nomadic or migratory lifestyle, competition with other community groups around them, tension, and war, so they were always influenced by the instinct to create traditional handicrafts in the form of basic equipment to meet the needs of life.

The Iban often observe the natural world in their environment and surroundings and connect it with cosmological concepts and heritage beliefs in finding and developing ideas to work on artistic values in the creation of traditional handicrafts in their culture. The close relationship between the Iban with the Iban, the Iban with nature, and the Iban with supernatural forces has become a source of inspiration for creating beautiful traditional handicrafts from the use and utilization of natural materials that exist near their habitat areas. Based on the Iban sources of inspiration for nature, it also becomes part of the development of ideas for creating and producing various motifs, patterns, and designs that have aesthetic value in the creation of traditional handicrafts in their culture. The artistic elements applied to the creation of traditional handicrafts are based on cultural philosophy, shapes and forms, and patterns that are felt to have high aesthetic value in the Iban culture.

The local indigenous of the Iban towards reading, observing, evaluating, and interpreting the forms and properties of nature has led them to be able to make nature a symbol and a source of philosophy, which is translated through the creation of traditional handicrafts as material culture. Based on the creation of traditional handicrafts, it shows the art of symbolism, namely the Iban imitating something that can be seen and obtained from nature. This is because the creation of traditional handicrafts is not intended to challenge God's creation but as an emanation from that creation to be a reflection and lesson about the existence and oneness of God as the supreme creative power. In this regard, the idea of creating traditional handicrafts inspired by nature will be composed and adapted to current needs, creativity, and Iban culture.

In addition, the Iban understanding of the concept of local indigenous in the creation of traditional handicrafts that look at nature has been able to make them 'artistically literate' citizens. This is because the creation of traditional handicrafts is not seen in specific forms, but it is widespread. It means that everything done by the Iban that uses the power of thought from internal intuition, which is then expressed through actions, is considered art. In this regard, it will indirectly increase the level of intellectuality and the height of civilization and shape the cultural philosophy of the Iban itself.

Manifestation

Local indigenous are a manifestation of the ability of the Iban to develop their way of thinking, lifestyle, civilization, and culture. For the Iban as a group of people, their existence is seen as having a level of ability to interpret all the contents of nature, which is important for the prosperity of the nature they live in. In this context, the Iban are blessed by God with all the necessary equipment to carry out various actions against nature to preserve their lives. When all actions are carried out, they are indirectly carrying out their duties as builders of civilization. It can be explained that the duties of the Iban as a group of people in their lives on this earth, along with various capabilities and equipment, function as agents of the formation of civilization.

The construction of the Iban civilization was also based on their local indigenous people, namely by making war logistics and security through traditional handicrafts such as the Ilang machete and shields, a manifestation of their culture and art. This is because, in ancient times, traditional handicrafts were basic objects created through the utilization and use of materials from nature to meet all daily needs in the Iban. At the same time, traditional handicrafts were also used by the Iban as tools and equipment to defend themselves from attacks by wild animals and threats from hostile parties. Furthermore, given that life at that time was quite tense and competition for main resources, the Ilang machete was used as one of the important weapons. It was always carried with them when outside the Iban settlements area. The creation of traditional handicrafts created in ancient times by the Iban were simply to meet basic daily needs, such as felling, chopping, slashing, cutting, hunting, farming, and fishing. When the Iban opened their minds to the existence of a very large and supernatural creative power through ideas and thought frameworks, they combined logical and mystical elements to make traditional handicrafts into a certain classification, namely either in sacred or non-sacred forms.

In addition, traditional handicrafts were also created that were used as logistical tools for the Iban war, such as the Ilang machete and shield in the headhunting expedition, which is seen as a manifestation of custom in Iban culture. Along with the transition of time and era, the minds of the Iban began to develop a level of ability and creativity in making war logistical tools through traditional handicrafts as a manifestation of their own culture and art. It clearly shows that the Iban has made improvements to the function of creating traditional handicrafts, which is seen through its practicality in the culture, which includes customs, rituals, ceremonies, symbols, and their identity. Meanwhile, from an artistic perspective, traditional handicrafts are seen as the result of the art and craft of jewelry, handicrafts, and blacksmithing. In this regard, it can be seen that through the traditional wisdom of the Iban, they have made the creation of traditional handicrafts a manifestation that is in line with the transition of time and cultural needs.

Identity and Heritage

According to informant 10, every community, including the Iban, has an identity and heritage based on the values of the local indigenous. For the Iban, identity is seen as a marker and sign of their identity towards other communities. Meanwhile, heritage is something left over from generations and symbolic of developments and events that occurred in a certain chronology of time that have an impact on the Iban. Heritage also portrays the identity of the Iban, reflecting their unique customs, rituals, and beliefs that have been passed down through the ages. This intertwining of identity and heritage not only fosters a strong sense of belonging among the Iban but also serves as a foundation for preserving their culture in the face of modern influences, which keeps a significant treasure in their culture.

Furthermore, heritage is something that has cultural significance that shows the aesthetic, historical, scientific, social, intellectual, thought, and spiritual values of the Iban. These values are reflected in their traditional practices, art forms, and communal rituals, which are meticulously maintained and celebrated. By engaging younger generations in these customs, the Iban ensure that their rich cultural tapestry continues to thrive and evolve, resilient against the challenges of globalization.

Heritage is related to things that are received and inherited from generation to generation from previous generations for all communities, including the Iban. Based heritage not only reflects the identity of the Iban but can also restore the collective memory of their previous way of life. Furthermore, it can reflect the level of civilization, culture, and local indigenous of the Iban. In addition, heritage, as the identity of the Iban, is a primitive art treasure that is closely related to the people's need to strive to improve their standard of living over time. In Iban culture, this need is also seen from a spiritual perspective since they strongly adhere to the belief in heritage and cosmology. Therefore, the creation of traditional handicrafts by the Iban is greatly influenced by the source of dreams, signs, and markers and is guided by signs to obtain goodness in their lives since it is a spiritual journey that intertwines their cultural identity with their daily practices. This deep connection to their spirituality not only fosters a sense of belonging within the community but also reinforces their commitment to preserving their unique traditions for future generations.

Globalization, Tourism, and the Commodification of Culture

The visibility of Iban handicrafts in urban markets and cultural tourism circuits highlights broader questions of commodification and heritage politics. As Appadurai (1996) argues, cultural objects acquire new meanings as they circulate in global “scapes,” often detached from their original ritual contexts. In Sarawak, objects such as the Pua Kumbu or Tajau jars shift from being ritual intermediaries to commodities displayed in exhibitions, shops, and international fairs. This recontextualization creates tension between authenticity and market demand, as artisans negotiate how much of the sacred or symbolic can be revealed without diminishing its cultural depth.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) emphasizes that heritage often emerges not as an unchanging tradition but as a performance for new audiences. This is evident in craft festivals where Iban artisans adapt motifs to appeal to tourists while maintaining links to ancestral cosmologies. Such practices exemplify what Tsing (2005) calls “friction”: the creative, sometimes uneasy encounters between local epistemologies and global economic logics. Rather than erasing tradition, these interactions reshape it, producing hybrid forms that reflect both resilience and adaptation.

Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) further suggest that ethnicity and heritage increasingly function as forms of capital. In this sense, Iban handicrafts do not only preserve memory but also become strategic resources in economic survival, cultural branding, and national identity projects. The commodification of craft, therefore, is not merely an external imposition but a process through which communities assert agency, redefine value, and engage global audiences on their own terms.

Comparative Perspectives

The Iban experience resonates with other Indigenous communities where handicrafts embody both cultural resilience and economic adaptation. For example, Māori artisans in New Zealand have revitalized weaving traditions not only as aesthetic practices but also as acts of cultural sovereignty (Smith 2012). Similarly, Dayak communities in Kalimantan employ handicrafts to assert ethnic identity in the face of resource exploitation and land encroachment (Sellato 2016). Such comparisons highlight that handicrafts are never merely objects of heritage but are situated at the intersection of political economy, identity formation, and cultural survival.

Alternative Modernities and Decolonial Perspectives

The negotiation between tradition and modernity in Iban handicrafts also contributes to anthropological debates on alternative modernities. Mbembe (2001) and Smith (2006) argue that postcolonial societies do not simply absorb Western models of modernity but generate plural forms of cultural and social futures. The case of the Iban illustrates how local indigenous knowledge can coexist with urban markets, producing what might be called a “Borneo modernity,” where cosmology and ritual coexist with entrepreneurial innovation.

From a decolonial perspective, recognizing Iban artisans as theorists of their own practice challenges hegemonic narratives that position Indigenous knowledge as static or peripheral. Instead, handicrafts become sites where cosmology, aesthetics, and economy converge, offering insights into how communities navigate the pressures of globalization without erasing their epistemic sovereignty. This perspective reframes Iban handicrafts not as remnants of the past but as critical contributions to contemporary anthropological theory.

Since the Iban is well known throughout the world through the creation of traditional handicrafts, it has become a historical material and a symbol of cultural heritage identity that needs to be preserved. The creation of traditional handicrafts is not only one of the treasures of native culture and primitive art but also evidence of the local indigenous of the previous Iban in creating their identity and cultural heritage through the existence of nature. Furthermore, the creation of traditional handicrafts of special value is proof of civilization, local indigenous civilization, and culture, and it reflects the superiority of the Iban culture from ancient times until now. Therefore, the creation of traditional handicrafts remains immortalized as one of the symbols of identity and heritage in the culture of the Iban in Sarawak.

Based on the discussion of this study, it can be seen how the previous Iban developed local indigenous people by creating traditional handicrafts. It is very interesting that the field of knowledge that exists today is only a development resulting from the process of past progress. Furthermore, the current development and existence of global knowledge is rooted in local indigenous knowledge that was developed according to the needs and times. Therefore, as the saying goes, if there was nothing in the past, then there is nothing now. In addition, local indigenous people also contribute to the art of expertise and craftsmanship that is still traditional. This is because there are still individuals who practice the art of expertise and craftsmanship traditionally. Furthermore, these individuals are very concerned with the aspect of psychological expression in the art of expertise and craftsmanship that they pursue. In this regard, these individuals are eligible to be given certain recognition, such as the title of Adiguru, as a sign of appreciation for venturing into the field of the traditional handicrafts industry.

By examining handicrafts within the framework of social transformation, the study highlights how indigenous practices adapt to modern contexts while sustaining cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the cultural resilience, creativity, and social significance embedded in Iban traditional handicrafts through the lens of indigenous knowledge systems. These crafts are not only practical artifacts but also expressions of collective memory and cultural identity that continue to evolve in response to wider processes of social change. As Iban handicrafts increasingly appear in urban spaces such as exhibitions, craft festivals, and tourism markets in cities like Kuching, their meanings are reshaped through interaction with broader audiences. Rather than disappearing, Iban indigenous knowledge adapts to modern conditions, negotiating between rural traditions and global urban markets.

Recognizing these urban trajectories is essential for understanding how Indigenous heritage remains vibrant and dynamic within evolving social landscapes. At the same time, acknowledging the foundational role of local wisdom and heritage ensures that these transformations strengthen, rather than dilute, the Iban’s contribution to Malaysia’s plural cultural narrative. Handicrafts thus emerge not only as heritage but also as active instruments of adaptation, agency, and social transformation.

Policy Implications and Future Directions

The findings suggest that sustaining Iban handicrafts requires more than cultural recognition; it demands institutional support and policy frameworks that enable social as well as cultural sustainability. Policies that protect intellectual property rights of Indigenous motifs, provide artisans with fair-trade platforms, and integrate traditional crafts into cultural education could strengthen both livelihoods and social resilience. Collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and local communities would ensure that handicrafts are preserved as living practices capable of adapting to changing socio-economic and cultural conditions.

Theoretical Contribution to Cultural Sociology

Beyond documenting the continuity of Iban handicrafts, this study contributes to cultural sociology and social change studies by demonstrating how indigenous material practices are embedded within wider processes of modernization, identity negotiation, and globalization. By situating Iban artisanship within both local epistemologies and global circuits of commodification, the analysis reframes handicrafts as sites where social

transformation is enacted. Rather than treating Indigenous practices as passive remnants of the past, this approach highlights their role as active, adaptive, and intellectual contributions to contemporary debates on resilience, modernization, and social change.

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