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Southeast Asian Studies, 1-24 (in press).

How to Cite:

Kiyai, Gregory anak. Visual Narratives: Colonial Photography and the *Ngepan Iban* Cultural Shift in Borneo. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 2026, 1-24 (in press). DOI: 10.20495/seas.26010.

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Advance Publication
DOI: 10.20495/seas.26010

Visual Narratives: Colonial Photography and the *Ngepan Iban* Cultural Shift in Borneo

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This research examines the visual narratives and cultural transformation associated with the *ngepan Iban* in Borneo through the lens of colonial photographic imagery. During the colonial period various European powers undertook extensive documentation of Indigenous cultures, producing a rich repository of images that have since become critical sources for historical and anthropological analysis. This study explores how these colonial images influenced the representation and understanding of the cultural practices, social structures, and identity associated with the *ngepan Iban*. By analyzing a selection of historical photographs and illustrations, this research aims to uncover the ways in which colonial visual documentation has both reflected and shaped the perceptions of *ngepan Iban* culture, highlighting the intersections of colonialism, visual representation, and Indigenous identity. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the impact of colonial documentation on Indigenous cultural narratives and offer insights into the broader implications of visual representation in historical research.

Keywords: colonial photography, cultural transformation, *ngepan Iban*, visual representation, Indigenous identity

1 Introduction

The colonial era underwent significant changes when James Brooke extended his rule over Sarawak, reshaping its geographical, economic, political, and sociocultural landscape. His nephew Charles Brooke, who continued his family's legacy from 1868, concentrated on social development by researching, documenting, and inventorying Indigenous cultures and arts, particularly those of the Dayak people (Sather 2011). His efforts led to the establishment of Borneo's first museum to further understanding of Indigenous lifestyles. Charles Brooke's ideology regarding the Dayak ethnic group was elaborated on by O.C. Doering:

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Accepted: November 21, 2025 Advanced published online on J-STAGE: March 23, 2026
Southeast Asian Studies

> A successful colonial ruler needed to understand the local language, show respect for local chiefs, support indigenous institutions, and fully immerse themselves in native culture. Marrying into the local community was often seen as beneficial. This was particularly important at the District Officer level. (Doering 1966)

Charles Brooke's approach significantly benefited the historiography of Sarawak by ensuring that records were kept from as early as the eighteenth century. Such documentation is crucial for understanding the traditional ways of life and cultural landscape of Sarawak before its culture evolved into the dynamic form seen today. Studies by British officials and researchers such as Henry Ling Roth (1896) include *The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo*, which examined the role of chiefs in the Indigenous communities of Sabah and Sarawak. Similarly, Charles Hose and William McDougall—a colonial administrator and the first bishop of Sarawak—wrote extensively in the late 1800s (Hose 1894) and early 1900s about Indigenous life in Sarawak (Hose and McDougall 1912), often in collaboration with Francis Thomas McDougall, a British missionary. Their findings were published and archived in the *Sarawak Gazette*, the first academic journal in Borneo dedicated to documenting and publishing information about the culture and arts of Sarawak's Indigenous people (Pybus 1996; Morris 2020; Kiyai and Tugang 2021a; 2021b).

What is particularly intriguing in the research conducted by British officials is the collection of photographs showcasing the traditional Iban attire known as *ngepan Iban*. This attire is considered rare and provides an interesting subject for deeper exploration within visual arts studies, especially with respect to changes in it over time. Such an approach reveals the intricate relationships underlying ethnographic and colonial photography, leading to a reassessment of the colonial archives (Horn 2013). Critical examination of these archives has also raised questions about the ownership and ethical rights to the materials. Over the past 15 years, the debate over the ownership of colonial and ethnographic photographs has prompted efforts to repatriate visual archives and engage in discussions about these images with the communities they represent (Edwards 2021).

This study examines the visual representation of the *ngepan Iban* based on photographs taken during the colonial era in Sarawak. It aims to understand and analyze the transformation of the *ngepan Iban* in the present context.

2 Literature Review: Representation of Dayak People in Colonial Documentation and Photography

In the context of Southeast Asia, particularly Borneo, colonial-era photographs often presented Indigenous groups, including the Dayak, through a "primitivist" lens. This framed the groups as archaic or untouched by modernity, in line with broader colonial narratives justifying Western superiority. The photographs, which were frequently taken during colonial expeditions, were used both for documentation and as tools for constructing a visual knowledge base about Indigenous peoples and their customs (Appadurai 1997; Horn 2013). The images helped to portray Indigenous communities as static, unchanging, and often linked to dangerous or barbaric practices, such as headhunting.

Further exploration of Dayak representations can be found in the National Art Gallery of Malaysia's collection, which includes several paintings of the Dayak Laut and Iban people created by Western colonial artists. These works offer visual representations of Dayak communities, including their distinctive clothing, tattoos, and cultural rituals. Iban, in particular, are depicted as fierce and warrior-like, often portrayed in colonial narratives as headhunters, a stereotype that became closely associated with their identity during the colonial period. These colonial depictions, as seen in the visual arts and photographic records, frequently reinforce the image of Iban as "wild" and "untamed" peoples, often juxtaposed with the "civilized" colonial gaze (Tahir *et al.* 2015).

Ghee Gay Tan (2009) provides a critical reflection on these colonial representations of Iban, offering insight into how such images shaped both academic and popular perceptions of Indigenous groups in Borneo. Tan recounts how his understanding of Malaysian ethnic groups was limited to the Malay, Chinese, and Indian populations until his exposure to Iban people during his anthropology studies in Australia. He notes that Iban were often depicted in colonial photographs as tattooed headhunters, reinforcing their stereotype as "wild" and "savage." Tan's subsequent research, particularly his analysis of historical photographs of Iban in Sarawak, led him to a deeper understanding of this group's complex cultural identity. Contrary to the image of Iban as primitive or backward, Tan argues that their textiles represent a rich fusion of Indigenous traditions and modern influences, illustrating the adaptability and resilience of the Iban culture despite colonial pressures.

3 Iban through the Colonial Gaze

This article draws on visual and cultural theory to examine the appropriation of images as a form of analysis. It argues that the rise of photography has prioritized the visual sense over others in Western culture. Photography, initially seen as a tool for scientific representation, was regarded as a reliable medium that conveyed an objective "scopic regime," which gave the viewer the belief that they were seeing exactly what was being represented. Furthermore, the medium's association with automatism and objectivity minimized the risk of subjective interpretation. Photography was viewed as an exact copy, and this perception of its accuracy reinforced its perceived truthfulness (Clifford 1997; Grimshaw 2001).

4 *Ngepan Indu*: Traditional Clothing of Iban Women

Fig. 1 offers a valuable glimpse into the traditional attire of Iban women from Saribas, an area within the Betong Division, which encompasses the Paku and Layar regions. The Iban people of this region refer to themselves as Urang Saribas, a name reflecting their connection to the valleys of the Saribas and Sakarran (now Skrang) Rivers. These valleys are not only geographically significant but also culturally rich, having been home to many renowned Iban warriors, such as Linggir, Orang Kaya Pemacha Dana, and Rentap, who played pivotal roles in the resistance against the colonial forces of the White Rajah, James Brooke (Low 1968). The Saribas and Skrang River valleys are revered in Iban oral history and memory as sites of valor and historical conflict. This context of resistance and identity shapes the cultural fabric of the Iban community in the region, influencing everything from their social structure to their traditional clothing, as depicted in Roth's photograph.

Fig. 1 shows a group of Iban women from the Saribas region adorned with the *rawai*—a rattan coil worn as a corset and used as an accessory in traditional Iban attire. The simplicity of their *ngepan*, specifically the *ngepan Saribas*, is notable. While understated, this outfit is still distinctive enough to be recognized as originating from the Saribas River valley. These women pair their *ngepan* with *pua kumbu*—also called *tenun pua kumbu*—a woven cloth that serves as a skirt, and the *kelambi*, a long tunic woven in a similar fashion to *pua kumbu*.

The visual representation reveals that during the colonial era, Saribas women did not wear excessively ornate accessories; their clothing was primarily practical, designed for daily use within the longhouse setting. This aligns with the notion that

Fig. 1 Saribas Iban Women Wearing *Rawai*
Source: Roth 1896

luxury or ostentation was not a priority in their everyday attire; rather, their clothing was functional and suited to the demands of daily life. Interviews with cultural informants, such as Edmund Langgu, reveal that owning elaborate silver jewelry or accessories was not common among Iban during this period, primarily due to their prohibitive cost. Consequently, the women depicted in Roth's 1896 photograph are likely to have come from the middle-class segment of Iban society—those with limited access to the more expensive trappings of wealth and status. This contextualization offers insights into the material culture of Iban, suggesting that their dress, while culturally rich and significant, was also shaped by practical considerations and economic realities rather than a desire for ostentatious luxury.

Fig. 2 shows an Iban woman engaged in the intricate process of weaving *pua kumbu* using the *ngepan Saribas* technique. The woman in the image is identified as Tianga Babu Pipit, the wife of Charles Hose—an important figure in the early documentation of the sociocultural history of Indigenous communities during the colonial period (Hose and McDougall 1912). However, there is no definitive evidence to authenticate this claim. The account diverges slightly from the interpretation presented by Lukas Straumann:

> Professor Rodney Needham said: "Charles Hose was wrong when he called the Penan 'punan,' which he did because he had a Kayan Woman as a lover. The Kayan use that name for the nomads living in the same region, but Penan with a schwa [Pa-nan] is what they always call themselves." (Straumann 2014)

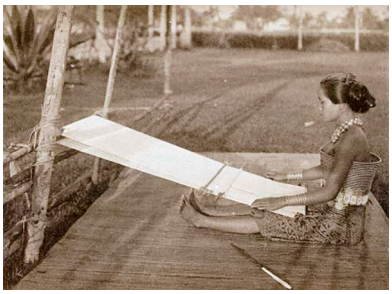

Fig. 2 A Saribas Iban Woman Weaving *pua kumbu*
Source: Hose and McDougall 1912

Hose's misidentification of the Penan or Punan as a minority ethnic group sparked controversy and highlighted his perceived insensitivity to the cultural complexities of Borneo's Indigenous groups. Despite Hose's connection to the Kayan, part of the larger Urang Ulu community, the error raised concerns about his understanding of the region's ethnic divisions. Urang Ulu, for example, have distinct sub-ethnicities such as Penan and Punan, each with their own identity. The controversy deepened when Charles Hose's descendant Colin Hose revealed that the former had been involved with an Iban woman, Tianga Babu Pipit, contradicting earlier claims of his close ties to Indigenous Bornean communities. This incident underscored the broader tensions between academic discourse, personal relationships, and the realities of Indigenous cultures.

However, this matter is not the focus of this study, which goes beyond mere aesthetic descriptions to a deeper understanding of the *ngepan Iban* and its cultural significance. In contrast to the simplicity seen in Fig. 1, the *ngepan* of the Saribas people in Fig. 2 is more elaborate and is accompanied by luxurious silver accessories, including the *rawai perak* (silver necklace) and *lampit* (a silver belt). These intricate adornments indicate the woman's high social status: only a woman from a wealthy family would be able to afford such fine silver jewelry. The woman in Fig. 2 also wears an elegant silver chain around her neck and a *tumpa bentuk*, a silver bracelet, around her wrist, further showing her affluence.

The fabric she wears is *tenun pua kumbu*, a traditional Iban handwoven textile with motifs that reflect a complex interplay of aesthetics, spirituality, social hierarchy, ancestral continuity, and Indigenous knowledge. The woman's hairstyle, known as *sanggul seri mua*, is another cultural symbol of Iban identity. The intricately styled bun is not just a beauty practice but a representation of the mythical and revered

Fig. 3 Modern Version of *Ngepan Saribas* (Author's personal collection, 2019)

figure Kumang in Iban folklore. The *sanggul seri mua* is believed to enhance a woman's beauty, elevating her presence and marking her as an embodiment of the spirit of Kumang—an idealized female figure representing purity and mysticism.

This analysis of the *ngepan*—from the fabric and accessories to the symbolic representation through hairstyle—offers an insight into the rich cultural practices of Iban. It shows how clothing, adornments, and appearance are imbued with deeper meanings that reflect social status, identity, and connection to mythological figures. Iban's intricate understanding of beauty, as expressed through their dress and personal adornments, is not merely aesthetic but a profound narrative that ties the individual to the collective cultural and spiritual heritage of the community.

In 2019 my cousin shared with me a photograph (Fig. 3) from her wedding, where she was wearing the *ngepan Saribas*, a traditional Iban bridal costume. Upon seeing the image for the first time, I was struck by a sense of awe. The *ngepan indu*, as it is known in Iban culture, was different from the attire I was familiar with growing up in a longhouse in Ulu Medamit, Limbang, an area in the fifth district of Sarawak. While my ancestral roots trace back to the old settlement of Nanga Spak, Ulu Layar, where my forebears lived before migrating to Ulu Medamit, I had rarely encountered the *ngepan Saribas* in my community.

What stood out to me about my cousin's *ngepan Saribas* was its unique design as well as the accessories that were worn with it. Unlike the more commonly worn *ngepan* in longhouses, which is a simpler form of traditional dress, this *ngepan Saribas* was intricately designed and embellished with silver accessories. The use of silver created a visually dramatic effect, which made the outfit stand out. The headpiece, known as *sugu tinggi*, for example, was adorned with heavy silverwork rising in layers,

while the *rawai* (necklace) was festooned with hanging coins.

As I reflected on the photograph, I found myself pondering a deeper question: Had the modern *ngepan Saribas* undergone an excessive transformation, particularly in its use of silver adornments, or was this simply a natural evolution in Iban fashion, a shift from the original, more minimalist style of the colonial era? In earlier representations of the *ngepan Saribas*, particularly during the colonial period, the attire appeared more understated and modest, with less focus on heavy ornamentation. The lavishness of the modern *ngepan*—particularly this wedding *ngepan*—seemed to reflect a significant departure from the earlier simplicity.

To explore this further, I reached out to Edmund Langgu, a respected authority on Iban history and customs, who has a deep understanding of the cultural and historical evolution of Iban attire. Through his insights, I hoped to gain a clearer understanding of what drove these changes in the design and adornments of the *ngepan*, and what they signified within the broader context of Iban cultural transformation and identity.

During the colonial period several variations of the traditional *ngepan indu* were captured through the lenses of colonial photographers in Sarawak, offering valuable insights into the cultural practices of Indigenous communities. One such example is the *ngepan* from Batang Ai (Fig. 4), a traditional outfit worn by Iban people in Lubuk Antu, Engkelili, and Ulu Engkari. What sets the *ngepan* of Batang Ai apart is its elaborate use of silver accessories, which play a central role in the garment's overall aesthetic. An iconic photograph taken by Wong Ken Foo—a local photographer commissioned by the colonial firm Hose and McDougall to document the sociocultural life of Indigenous peoples—shows an example of this distinctive *ngepan*.

The key decorative element of the *ngepan Batang Ai* is the silver girdle known as

Fig. 4 A Batang Ai Iban Woman (K.F. Wong Collection, Sarawak Museum, 1960)

rawai ringgit, which in the past was decorated with European silver coins. These coins were skillfully repurposed and pierced with metal to serve as ornaments adorning the wearer's waist and symbolizing both wealth and cultural identity. However, during Gawai celebrations in Pakan in the 1950s or early 1960s, the British colonial authorities imposed a ban on the use of British silver coins for jewelry. This ban had far-reaching consequences: the once-valuable silver coins were now rendered worthless, as they were no longer regarded as legitimate currency due to their having been perforated for ornamental purposes.

In response to the colonial ban, Iban silversmiths sought alternative materials for *ngepan* adornments. They turned to rupiah coins from Kalimantan, Indonesia, which were more readily available and easier to work with. Unlike the British silver coins, which were hard and difficult to pierce, rupiah coins proved much easier to manipulate and shape into jewelry. The Memaloh people of Kalimantan, renowned for their silversmithing skills, became key players in this new exchange. They regularly engaged in cross-border trade between Sarawak and Kalimantan, using land routes through border crossings such as Badau in Lubok Antu, Batu Lintang in Sri Aman, and Entikong in Tebedu. These cross-border traders long relied on a barter system, exchanging silver jewelry for rice or traditional textiles such as *pua*.

This system of barter gradually gave way to a more formalized economy, particularly after the introduction of a currency-based system in Sarawak. The Malaysian ringgit, with its greater stability compared to the rupiah, began to dominate trade. Seizing the opportunity, the Memaloh people began to use the ringgit in place of the rupiah. Today the price of silver *rawai* jewelry, once a symbol of local currency and trade, reflects the ongoing influence of modern economic systems. A contemporary trader of *ngepan Iban* accessories during my 2019 fieldwork noted that a silver *rawai* piece was priced at RM 2,800 (approximately USD 639), while a *rawai ringgit*, with its less intricate design, cost RM 950 (approximately USD 217).

The shift in material culture and economic practices reflects not only the adaptation of Indigenous communities to colonial economic systems but also the resilience of traditional craftsmanship, which continues to thrive amidst changing socioeconomic landscapes. The transformation of *ngepan* adornments—from British silver coins to Indonesian rupiah and then the Malaysian ringgit—serves as a poignant reminder of the ways in which Indigenous practices evolve in response to external pressures yet retain their cultural significance and artistic integrity.

The exploration of Iban people's traditional attire, particularly the *ngepan Iban*, offers a fascinating glimpse into cultural practices of the past, especially when viewed through the lens of colonial documentation. Early photographs taken by Western colo-

Fig. 5 Three Dayak Girls Dressed in Finery to Attend a Feast
Source: Gomes 1911

Fig. 6 Iban Women Dancing with the Heads of Enemies at a Festival
Source: Haddon 1927

nial photographers, such as those in Figs. 5 and 6, showcase how Iban women once wore their traditional garments—often with the chest area exposed. At the time, this was not seen as inappropriate or shameful; rather, it was a reflection of the Iban's distinct cultural values and social norms. For the Iban communities living in longhouses, clothing was not a focal point of daily life. Women typically wore simple textiles such as the unadorned *kain kangan* or batik fabric, often traded by Malay and Chinese merchants. Garments made of these textiles served the practical function of covering the body without drawing much attention to the act of dressing itself.

The cultural significance of clothing, or the absence thereof, becomes clearer when examined through the framework of nakedness and colonialism. Exposure of the body—especially in Indigenous societies—has long been intertwined with complex social, religious, and symbolic meanings. Bodily adornment, whether in the form of clothing, body paint, tattoos, or jewelry, communicates status, identity, and cultural

affiliation. In climates where clothing is not a necessity, Indigenous cultures often used body modifications to fulfill the same social roles that clothing would serve in other contexts (Bastian 2005). Iban, like many other Indigenous peoples, employed body adornments to convey social meanings; and their attire—or lack thereof—was a reflection of these values.

One particularly revealing aspect of Iban culture is the exposure of the chest, a symbol deeply tied to concepts of fertility and femininity within the Iban animistic belief system. This symbolism can be traced back to ancient depictions of female fertility, such as the Venus of Willendorf, a Paleolithic limestone figure dating between 25,000 and 21,000 BCE. The exaggerated features of this figure—particularly the enlarged breasts and hips—suggest an association with fertility, as these physical attributes were historically seen as markers of reproductive health. Similar representations are found in the ancient world, such as in the figure of Ishtar, the Babylonian and Assyrian goddess of fertility, love, and sexuality. Ishtar, often depicted with exposed breasts, was a symbol of fertility and love, and her image, like the Venus figurines, reflects the deep-rooted cultural connections between female form and the concept of generative power (Marcovich 1996).

In the Iban context, breast exposure carried a similar meaning. It was not merely a fashion statement but a visible marker of health and fertility, attributes highly valued in Iban society. For Iban people, who placed great importance on the continuation of their family lines, a woman's physical health—indicated in part by her appearance—was crucial. A healthy woman was valued not only for her ability to weave cloth but also for her potential as a mother and caretaker within the community. Exposure of the chest was thus part of a broader cultural understanding of beauty and fertility, and it was not seen as indecent.

However, the arrival of colonial powers in Sarawak marked a shift in Iban clothing practices. With Western influence, especially following the end of World War II in 1946, Iban women began adopting new styles of dress that closely resembled Western fashions. The shift from traditional attire to Western-style clothing represented not only a change in dress but also a deeper transformation in cultural identity (Kiyai 2023). The adoption of Western clothing signified the imposition of new values, norms, and ideas about propriety, altering how Iban women presented themselves in public spaces. The colonial encounter, with its complex legacies, thus reshaped the ways in which Iban women, once confident in their traditional dress, began to negotiate their identities in the face of Western expectations.

5 *Ngepan Laki*: Representation of a Brave Iban Warrior Spirit

The *ngepan* worn by men (Fig. 7), or the *ngepan laki*, is not just a piece of clothing but a symbolic representation of the warrior spirit, deeply rooted in ancestral traditions. The *ngepan* is typically portrayed as a warrior's attire, signifying readiness for battle, a visual embodiment of bravery and strength. Accessorized with a *lelanjang*—a traditional hat decorated with bird feathers—and a *sirat*—a long piece of cloth wrapped around the waist—the outfit reflects the Iban man's connection with his warrior ancestors.

The *sirat*, often mistaken by outsiders for a loincloth, is far more significant. It is a ceremonial cloth wrapped around the waist to cover the lower body, not to be confused with modern-day underwear. This garment serves a vital role in protecting and honoring the body, embodying the cultural and spiritual values of Iban people.

The *ngepan* for Iban men also visually invokes their deities, particularly the warrior gods of Panggau Libau, such as Keling and Sengalang Burung. These deities, celebrated in Iban oral traditions, are revered for their courage, strength, and supernatural abilities in battle. They are often depicted as invincible, their powers exemplified through feats of combat and their invulnerability to harm. For Iban men, these gods were more than mere mythological figures; they were living symbols of the qualities every warrior aspired to embody. This cultural representation was especially significant among those who participated in *ngayau*, the Iban practice of headhunting, which carried both spiritual and martial importance. The *ngepan* thus served not only as a protective garment but as a means of connecting the wearer with the warrior legacy

Fig. 7 A Sea Dyak in Extra-Fine War Costume
Source: Roth 1896

Fig. 8 Dayak Iban from Skrang
Source: Roth 1896

and embodying the strength, bravery, and sacred duty of Iban people in their pursuit of honor and prowess in battle.

Around 1830 the Malay scholar and traveler Munsyi Abdullah, who was of Jawi Peranakan descent—the mixed heritage of Malays and Indians, a community largely concentrated in the Straits Settlements of Penang and Melaka—recorded an intriguing encounter with Iban people during his journey to Kelantan. In his writings, Abdullah described Iban as a small-statured but strong and courageous group, fearlessly navigating the rough seas in their traditional boats, called *bangkong*. One such depiction, shown in Fig. 8, echoes Abdullah's observations of Iban, highlighting their use of *sirat* and the distinctive tattoos adorning their bodies. The image, captured by the British colonial official and photographer Sir Hugh Charles Clifford Roth (Roth 1896), portrays a group of Iban men from the Skrang region—a place that came under the scrutiny of the British colonial administration due to the anti-piracy campaigns led by James Brooke.

Headhunting was central to the Iban way of life and sparked considerable controversy in colonial discourse. To Indigenous Iban, it was perceived as a form of self-defense, a way of asserting their strength and securing their place in a turbulent world. However, to the British colonizers, it was a barbaric and unlawful act that disrupted not only the local peace but also the safety of the British trade routes in the South China Sea and Borneo waters. Western historians such as Henry Keppel (1846) and James Francis Warren (2007) referred to Iban as "Sea Dayaks" or "Vikings of the Eastern Seas," casting them as a fierce threat to passing ships. According to Keppel, Iban were notorious for raiding British trading vessels along the Sarawak River, and they instilled fear among traders not only because of their piracy but also because of

their ritual of collecting human heads as trophies of war—symbols of conquest and power (Ali 2019).

6 Iban Traditional Wedding Attire: Melah Pinang Ceremony

Fig. 9 shows the Melah Pinang ceremony, a pivotal aspect of Iban marriage customs that stands as a living testament to the cultural heritage and ancestral practices of the Iban people. Central to this tradition is the *ngepan*, a ceremonial dress worn by the bride and groom that symbolizes the sacredness and gravity of their union. In Fig. 9 a couple is captured in the midst of their Melah Pinang celebration, radiating joy and pride. The *ngepan* in the photograph are distinctive to the Iban of Batang Ai, showcasing the rich diversity of regional variations in Iban dress.

The groom exudes strength and elegance with his dark-colored *sirat*—a traditional garment that signifies his role as the protector and head of the new family. The bride's attire is a striking display of cultural wealth, embellished with an array of intricate jewelry made from pure, heavy silver. These adornments are more than mere accessories: they carry the weight of ancestral legacy, often passed down through generations from mothers or grandmothers, thereby connecting the bride to her family's lineage and cultural history. In traditional Iban society, marriages were often arranged by families with the objective of maintaining strong familial bonds. Marrying within the extended family network was common, ensuring that kinship ties remained unbroken. The ceremony itself was shaped by the economic means of the families

Fig. 9 Iban Wedding in a Longhouse (K.F. Wong Collection, Sarawak Museum, 1960)

involved—wealthier families could afford more lavish celebrations, though simpler weddings were equally significant culturally.

One of the most striking elements of the Melah Pinang ceremony is the prominence of *tenun pua kumbu*, a handwoven textile that plays a central role in Iban cultural life. *Pua kumbu* is not merely an aesthetic object; it holds profound spiritual and cultural meaning. It is believed to be a conduit for communication with the gods and spirits and is used in a variety of ceremonies, from birth rites and rituals to marriages and funerals. In Fig. 9 the *pua kumbu* backdrop acts as both a physical and a symbolic platform for the couple's vows. The presence of this sacred textile underscores the spiritual dimensions of the wedding, linking the ceremony to Iban ancestral beliefs.

Tenun pua kumbu is woven by women who are believed to have been chosen by the deities through dreams. These women are regarded as sacred custodians of an ancient art form, entrusted with the ability to weave not just fabric but also the spiritual essence of the Iban people. This practice elevates *pua kumbu* beyond its practical use as clothing or decoration; it becomes a vessel of divine communication and protection. As such, *pua kumbu* is more than a cultural artifact—it is a symbol of the ongoing relationship between Iban people and their gods, a reflection of the sacredness that infuses every aspect of Iban life from birth to death—and, in this case, to marriage (Linggi 1998; Gavin 2004).

7 The Changing Identity of the *Ngepan Iban*: From Colonial to Contemporary Times

The traditional *ngepan* worn by women in longhouses has undergone significant transformation, particularly in terms of its embellishment and materials. The changes reflect broader shifts in the community's cultural practices and societal roles. Historically, the *ngepan Iban* was documented by colonial officials as a simple, functional garment. However, today it has evolved into a more vibrant and ornate form. Modern *ngepan*, as shown in Fig. 10, feature bold and bright colors such as yellow, red, and orange, contrasting sharply with the more subdued hues of their colonial-era predecessors. This colorful shift is paired with intricate beadwork, particularly around the chest area, known as *tang'o* or *marik empang*. The word *marik* refers to beads, while *empang* signifies a circle, a design that evokes the image of people joining hands in a traditional dance or a "bead circle." A *marik empang* consists of circular patterns created with flat beads, a significant cultural marker of Iban women's traditional attire. The craftsmanship, color choices, and motifs used in these beadworks help to distin-

Fig. 10 Contemporary *Ngepan Iban*
(Author's personal collection, 2019)

guish Iban from other ethnic groups in the region.

The modern *ngepan* is often worn with a thin undergarment that covers the chest, symbolizing a subtle yet important shift toward gender equality within Iban society. This change, largely driven by women who received formal education, reflects a broader cultural shift that began with the introduction of Christian missionary schools in Sarawak. Educated Iban women, having gained exposure to new ideas and values, began to embrace a more contemporary style—not only in their fashion but also in their attitudes and social roles. Traditionally, Iban women were positioned as second-class citizens within their society, relegated to domestic duties and dependent on male authority. However, with education came empowerment. Women who were educated in missionary schools broke away from these traditional constraints, forming social organizations and advocating for greater gender equality, challenging the entrenched gender hierarchy in their communities.

One such trailblazer was Barbara Mendu Bay, an iconic figure in Iban cultural history. Active in the 1940s, a time when few women dared to assert themselves publicly, Barbara Bay stood out not only as a wife and mother but as a feminist who engaged with social issues beyond the confines of the home. Her role was particularly significant given the post-World War II climate of profound social and political change

in Sarawak. Barbara Bay was a founding member and the first president of the Sarawak Dayak National Union, a non-political organization that brought together women from different Iban communities across the state. Her mission was to unite these diverse groups, fostering mutual support and solidarity in a society that was still largely patriarchal (Isnin 2014).

Another notable aspect of the evolving *ngepan* is the change in materials used in its accessories. Traditionally, Iban women adorned themselves with jewelry made of genuine silver, but today many opt for aluminum, a much lighter and more affordable material. The easy availability of aluminum has made it a practical choice for creating accessories like *sugu tinggi* (necklaces), *tumpa bentuk* (pendants), *rawai tinggi* (headpieces), and *tali mulung* (belts). Aluminum is easier to work with, more accessible, and significantly less expensive than silver, which makes it popular among contemporary Iban women. Interviews with *ngepan* accessory sellers at local markets reveal that aluminum has become the material of choice, especially since skilled silversmiths are now rare in Iban communities. In the past Iban men learned the art of silver working from Malay blacksmiths, but with the advent of modern technology and economic shifts such traditional skills have faded. My father often recounted how, after World War II, many Iban men who had not been enlisted as soldiers sought work in the burgeoning logging industry that had taken root near Iban longhouses. From the 1960s, many logging companies employed Iban workers, capitalizing on their deep knowledge of the jungle. While not as prevalent today, the legacy of the Iban logging tradition remains an important part of the community's cultural fabric (Fidler 1978).

For Iban families who still possess genuine silver *ngepan* accessories, these items are considered *pesaka*, or heirlooms, and represent a deep connection to their ancestors and cultural heritage. Such heirlooms include not only silver jewelry but also other valuable items such as gongs, *pua kumbu* (woven cloth), and pottery. These items are typically passed down to daughters who continue to live in or maintain the family home, ensuring the continuation of the family's legacy. However, if a daughter marries and moves to her husband's household, *pesaka* may be passed on to whoever continues to care for the ancestral home. This practice of inheritance highlights the Iban community's deep respect for familial continuity and the preservation of cultural traditions.

Genuine silver *ngepan* accessories that remain in Iban families today are regarded as rare cultural treasures. These heirlooms are cherished as both personal and collective symbols of the family's Iban identity. They are usually worn only on special occasions, such as weddings or the Pekit Kumang (Iban beauty pageant competition), events that celebrate Iban culture and beauty. I recall my late grandmother,

Fig. 11 Silver Accessories Destroyed in the Fire at the Longhouse (photo by Gregory Kiyai, 2019)

Biah anak Anji, owning a collection of original silver *ngepan*. I had the privilege of holding these items, and I remember them as heavy and robust; their designs were not as refined as those of modern jewelry, reflecting the thicker, sturdier nature of silver. Fig. 11 shows the collection that was passed down to my mother but tragically lost in a devastating fire that destroyed our longhouse in January 2023, just days after the Chinese New Year celebrations. This loss marks a poignant moment in the life of my family, as the destruction of such heirlooms symbolizes not only the passing of time but also the fragility of cultural legacies in the face of modern challenges.

The tragic loss of Biah anak Anji's collection of accessories, along with the dozens of *pua kumbu*—intricate woven textiles—she had created and accumulated over the years, as well as those made by her late mother and grandmother, serves as a poignant reminder of the vulnerability of cultural heritage. The fire not only consumed these invaluable cultural artifacts but obliterated the memories and stories tied to their creation and ownership. This loss highlights a deeper issue within Iban society: the destruction of cultural artifacts in fires is not a recent problem but rather a long-standing one that has plagued the community for years. Despite the importance of preserving these treasures, little has been done to address the issue either at the community level or by the Sarawak state government.

The destruction of cultural objects speaks to a larger gap in the preservation of Iban heritage, underscoring the urgent need for greater awareness and action. The Iban community must recognize the importance of safeguarding artifacts not only as physical objects but as vessels of history, memory, and identity. Without dedicated efforts to protect and preserve these cultural treasures, the continuation of Iban culture—and

the stories it carries—remains at risk.

In the evolving landscape of Iban cultural attire, the transformation of men's traditional dress (*ngepan laki*) mirrors the changes seen in the women's version (*ngepan indu*). One of the most noticeable shifts is the introduction of additional accessories that embellish the garment. This shift raises an important question within Iban cultural discourse: does the incorporation of new elements compromise the traditional integrity of the attire, or is it a natural evolution of the dress to suit modern sensibilities? The answer, perhaps, lies in the diverse perspectives held by Iban themselves. For some, the addition of extra adornments could be seen as a departure from the original, unembellished aesthetic that reflects the values and practices of their ancestors. In this view, the authenticity of the *ngepan* is best preserved when it remains faithful to the design passed down through generations, remaining untouched by the tides of modern fashion. From this standpoint, less is more, and the attire should be presented in its purest form—just as it was worn by the Iban forebears.

However, an alternative perspective acknowledges the impact of contemporary materials and craftsmanship on the Iban dress. Access to new fabrics, textures, and decorative elements opens up a creative space where designers and makers of *ngepan* can experiment with different forms of embellishment. This is not necessarily an attempt to erase tradition but rather an effort to enhance and reinterpret it for the present day. In this light, the introduction of new materials can be seen as a way of honoring the past while simultaneously adapting to the present. For example, the traditional thread used in the construction of the *ngepan* might be replaced with luxurious silk, offering a richer texture and appearance. Similarly, the use of aluminum in place of silver to create accessories does not strip the outfit of its cultural significance; instead, it reflects the availability of new resources that can contribute to the aesthetic beauty of the attire. These changes should not be viewed as a radical transformation but as a thoughtful adaptation—an act of cultural innovation that balances respect for tradition with the possibilities offered by modernity.

8 Revival of *Ngepan Iban* in the Gawai Festival: A Cultural Reclamation

Iban, like many other Indigenous groups, face challenges in preserving their cultural practices, which are at risk of being lost or transformed due to external pressures. R.M. Figueroa (2011) has observed that cultural loss exists in an odd balance for Indigenous peoples. It can occur through assimilation, when dominant societies push for cultural change, often justified by a belief that such changes are improvements. On

the other hand, cultural loss can also arise from self-initiated transformations driven by a desire for change, though such shifts may be motivated by historical events and experiences of colonial domination.

However, the preservation of Iban cultural identity today is a choice made by the community, not an imposition of external forces. Unlike the colonial era under the Brooke Dynasty, when Iban traditions were suppressed or marginalized, today's cultural revival is driven by a conscious effort from within the community to reclaim and reinterpret their heritage. For many Iban living in longhouses, traditional practices remain an integral part of daily life, though perhaps adapted to contemporary realities. These practices serve as reminders of a shared history and cultural continuity. Yet, for those who have migrated to urban areas or who live in mixed marriages, the connection to traditions becomes more tenuous. The challenge is not only to preserve the cultural forms themselves but to ensure that the practices continue to be meaningful and relevant in a rapidly changing world.

Gawai Dayak has emerged as an essential platform for Iban to assert their cultural identity. The annual celebration of Gawai, which is now officially recognized as being on June 1, represents a fusion of the past and present, honoring the community's ancestral practices while adapting them to the modern context. Central to this celebration is the *kumang gawai* beauty pageant, where young women don the *ngepan Iban* in a competition that is far more than a beauty contest. Kumang, Lulong, and Selinggar Matahari—three legendary women from Iban mythology who embody idealized virtues such as wisdom, strength, and artistry—are invoked in this pageant, serving as both inspiration and ideal for Iban women today. The qualities these figures represent—intelligence, grace, beauty, and exceptional craftsmanship—are embedded deeply in the Iban cultural consciousness. Through the *kumang gawai* contest, young women not only compete for titles but also participate in a cultural ritual that reaffirms their connection to the past while shaping their role in the community's future.

The *ngepan Iban* itself is a crucial symbol of this cultural reclamation. Woven with intricate patterns and dyed with symbolic colors, the *ngepan* serves not only as a traditional dress but as a physical manifestation of Iban's connection to their ancestral heritage. By wearing the *ngepan*, contestants in the *kumang gawai* pageant do more than showcase their beauty—they embody the artistry and spiritual essence of their people. The resurgence of the *ngepan*, along with the wider cultural revival of Iban traditions, represents a reclamation of identity, an act of cultural resistance against the forces of modernization that threaten to erase Indigenous ways of life.

This revival also highlights the broader significance of Gawai Dayak as a national holiday not only for Iban but for Malaysia as a whole. The recognition of this festival

serves as an acknowledgment of the diverse cultural fabric of the nation and Malaysia's commitment to preserving the rich heritage of its Indigenous peoples. It marks a shift from the past, when such cultural expressions were either marginalized or undervalued, toward a more inclusive understanding of the nation's history and identity. In this way, Gawai Dayak has become a celebration of Malaysia's multicultural heritage, embracing the values of unity, cooperation, and respect for diversity.

The importance of cultural preservation is underscored by the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003), which emphasizes that cultural practices, knowledge, and traditions are living forms of heritage constantly recreated by communities in response to their environments and histories. These practices not only provide a sense of continuity and identity but also foster respect for human creativity and cultural diversity (Scovazzi 2015). The celebration of Gawai Dayak, with its focus on the *ngepan Iban* and other cultural expressions, is a vivid illustration of this principle. The festival offers a dynamic space for the Iban community to assert their cultural identity, ensuring that their traditions are not only preserved but also revitalized and adapted for future generations.

9 Conclusion

In reflecting on the journey through colonial photography and its impact on the *ngepan Iban* in Borneo, this study reveals how historical images have shaped both the cultural narratives and identity of Iban people. During the colonial era, photographs were not just tools for documenting Indigenous life—they were often shaped by colonial powers to define, categorize, and control. Through these images, Iban people, like many other Indigenous communities, were often reduced to symbols, their rich traditions and complex social structures distilled into static representations that were more reflective of the colonial gaze than the lived experiences of the community itself.

The findings underscore the need to approach historical narratives with a critical and decolonizing perspective. While colonial-era photographs continue to influence how the Iban community is perceived both within and outside Borneo, they also offer a platform for reimagining Indigenous identity in ways that are not confined by colonial definitions. The study serves as a reminder of the power of representation and the necessity of giving voice to Indigenous communities in their own storytelling, allowing them to reclaim their heritage and reshape their place in history on their own terms.

Looking ahead, Indigenous communities like the Iban will increasingly take control

of their own stories, challenging the colonial narratives that have long shaped their identities. This shift will be driven by more inclusive research approaches, the use of digital tools, and a growing cross-cultural dialogue. As Iban and other Indigenous peoples gain greater authority in how their histories are told, they will reshape the way their cultures are portrayed, moving away from the stereotypes of the past toward more accurate and empowering representations. These changes will not only transform academic discourse but will influence how Indigenous cultures are understood and respected in the broader global context, allowing Indigenous communities to define and represent themselves on their own terms.

Acknowledgments

I extend my sincere appreciation to all the informants who generously shared their time, knowledge, and experiences throughout this research. Their insights were invaluable in shaping the depth and clarity of this study. Every image included in this work has been credited to its source, and all visual documentation is used solely for academic and research purposes, with no commercial intent.

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