

# The Art of 'Bungai Jarau' in Iban Culture

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**Abstract.** The focus of this research is to understand and interpret descriptively the cultural object of Iban community namely Bungai Jarau in the production of traditional art using qualitative methods by doing fieldwork and collecting data from informants (in-depth interview and focus group interview) based on three settlements of the Iban community in Sarawak. The studies have established that Bungai Jarau is not limited to merely a heritage legacy for the Iban in Sarawak, but has significant extended aesthetic value within tradition, art, culture, and civilization. Although it nowadays has more contemporary roles in the Iban culture, it is still widely accepted as an icon, ritual object, identity and relevant as traditional art shared by many. Through this research, it is hoped to help preserve the traditional art, local knowledge, and the significant of the making of Bungai Jarau as an Iban cultural icons, ritual object, and identity at Sarawak.

**Keywords:** culture, Iban, traditional art, Bungai Jarau, message tool, cultural object, decoration, cultural change

## 1 Introduction

Cultural manifestations are one of the basic understandings in understanding the social and way of life of an ethnic group. The culture of a society is a view of a group of ideas and habits that are learned, possessed, and inherited from generation to generation [1]. Moreover, culture has three existences [2]. First, it exists in a complex of ideas, norms, rules, and the like; the latter exists as a complex of patterned behavioural activities of humans and society; all three exist as objects of human work [2]. Cultural learning is through learned experience, gained through society living together daily [3]. Cultural transitions can be transferred formally and informally i.e., through verbal, non-verbal, or personal examples.

The culture of a society can be interpreted or translated through activities and the use of cultural materials such as dance, customs, clothing, and even food. For the State of Sarawak, the existence of a multi-ethnic group through a long history has formed a dynamic and progressive mixed culture. The majority of them are of the Iban, Bidayuh, Orang Ulu, Malay, and Chinese make Sarawak is rich in traditional art are the original, esthetic and rich culture and tradition of Borneo. The Iban Traditional Art such as Bungai Jarau, Ceramic, Pua Kumbu, and Parang Ilang have become quite synonymous and become the main tourist attraction to the state.

For the Iban community, heritage culture such as Bungai Jarau is one of the cultural elements that exist created as a symbol and identity to differentiate themselves from other groups or individuals. This traditional art heritage was created to meet the needs of life and also the cultural philosophy of the Iban community in carrying out customary ceremonies and religious rituals. Bungai Jarau a type of traditional art made of wood has become the traditional Iban art since antiquity. Treats are often found or presented as traditional identity during the Gawai Dayak in Sarawak and used as a ritual object ceremony (ritual feast) to *Petara* (God). It is clear that the heritage culture of Iban Bungai Jarau has a significant cultural manifestation in terms of the heritage and traditional wisdom of the Iban community in Sarawak.

## **2 Literature Review**

Bungai Jarau is a traditional art found in the Iban culture and society in Sarawak. The traditional art of Bungai Jarau is made from a type of wood known as Kayu Purang. Bungai Jarau Art is a man-made product that uses skillfully arranged materials to voice the human experience. If you look at the use of Bungai Jarau, this is one of the mediums of communication in the Iban society's tilt ceremony [4].

Traditional art is the whole of knowledge, experience, attitude and behavioral patterns that are habits owned and inherited by members of a certain society [5].

Bungai Jarau is placed in front of the longhouse to prevent evil spirits from entering the space of the longhouse of the Iban community, [6]. The history and tradition of Iban community life in the longhouse is seen as impressive and very beautiful because it is filled with the traditional customs and life of the Iban community during Rajah Brooke's colonial era, [7]. There are various skill activities, but the art is very special. Special art has an international demand because it has a message that will move us deeply and be a new awakening into the human realm. In this context, wood carving of the Iban community is considered an art form that carries various meanings and specific functions in daily life activities, [8].

## **3 Data Analysis**

Bungai Jarau is a message tool or an intermediary tool, a letter sent by the Iban people in the past to ask for help or inform of urgent news that befell the longhouse of the Iban community once upon a time. This Bungai Jarau will be produced if the enemy wants to attack a long house, then they will put chicken blood on this Bungai Jarau and then send it to other long houses to ask for help as soon as possible. In relation to that, the other purpose of Bungai Jarau is on Gawai festivals such as Gawai Sandau Ari and Gawai Kenyalang. Usually, every celebration or performing an intention such as birding or bertingam, the Iban community is obliged to use Bungai Jarau. This is because the use of Bungai Jarau is a symbol of a ceremony or that is being carried out and it is believed to welcome the arrival of the Pangau Libau People (Super Natural Power) such as Keling and Bungai Nuing to the longhouse of the Iban people.



**Fig. 1.** Prang wood that has been dried is ready to carving  
Source: Fieldwork Study

In the olden days, the function of Bungai Jarau was known as a messenger letter and it was a messenger of emergency news or an emergency messenger letter that happened in the long house of the Iban community. Bungai Jarau that was sent to the longhouses of the Iban community to ask for help in times of emergency was very important once upon a time, because in the era before technology developed as it is today. Therefore, the era, way or method of using Bungai Jarau is the same as sending an important message or order. In this context, symbolic objects and human energy are very necessary to succeed in the process of delivering important news to the Iban community in an Iban longhouse in Sarawak. Human energy in this context is that it refers to the energy of single men to carry Bungai Jarau which is a medium or symbol of the said message.



**Fig. 2.** Bungai Jarau that has been produced.  
Source: Fieldwork Study

An interesting thing about the whole process of sending Bungai Jarau is that the Iban community in the past used *temuko tali* or in simpler terms, the use of calendars. This *Temuko* rope is the rope that represents the whole day that the single man sends Bungai Jarau. For example, a long rope is cut every day after one day has passed. It is to mark the complete a day journey of a single man carrying the Bungai Jarau on a mission to spread news or news in times of emergency situation.

However, at present, not many young generations know this Bungai Jarau due to the lack of ritual ceremonies and the practice of using Bungai Jarau in certain festivals such as *Gawai* and *Miring*.

In the olden days, the Iban community usually put Bungai Jarau in the middle of their *bendang* or paddy field for the purpose of worshiping or tilting the rice paddy ritual in the middle of the *bendang*. Usually Bungai Jarau is placed on the edge of the plate. Certain mantras need to be recited so that the paddy field is free of disturbance from animals or unwanted insects that interfere with the growth process of the paddy. Likewise, for the Iban people who intend or want to full fill their wishes, then they will produce this Jarau flower first. However, the Iban community used to have a forgiveness ceremony or better known as *ngampun* (offerings).

This forgiveness ceremony is performed after a death in a long house or when there is an outbreak of a dangerous disease or a bad dream that is believed to bring disaster to the Iban community in the long house. The *ngampun* ceremony aims to protect the residents of the long house from any calamity that befalls them and this ceremony is usually performed by the head of the village himself. The plates that have been arranged will be placed in a small hut or skip of forgiveness built at the main entrance leading to the long house or placed on a bamboo container known as *teresang*. This adoration ceremony or offerings ritual is done so that the rice fields of the Iban community can produce a good rice harvest.

This forgiveness plate will be placed in the hut overnight and during that period, any guests are strictly prohibited from entering the longhouse area and local residents are also prevented from entering and exiting the longhouse area until the next day. In addition, the main road to the village will also be covered with *purang* wood and Bungai Jarau. Any invasion that occurs whether it is a guest or a local resident, then a customary law will be imposed on that person.

In addition to neutralizing the chaos in the longhouse, using Bungai Jarau can be used as a material to start a fire or self-sustain in the jungle if the Iban community is in the middle of the wilderness. This is because in the olden days the Iban community used this Bungai Jarau which was cut to be used as a source of fuel because it was easy to burn with its heat. It is very clear that this Jarau flower has many functions and its own meaning.

Bungai Jarau is a traditional art that has been the pride of the Iban community in Sarawak for generations. This traditional art of Bungai Jarau has been handed down from generation to generation until today by the ancestors of the Iban community. As a result, it is the role of *Tuai Rumah* and his men in the long house to jointly preserve the use of Bungai Jarau. This is so because the longhouse of the Iban community led by *Tuai Rumah* (head man) still maintains Bungai Jarau in the longhouse. To produce good and high quality Bungai Jarau, the Iban people use a type of wood known as *purang* wood because this wood is not hard and it is easy to chisel. In the Iban culture and society, before performing a celebration or a ceremony, it is important for the residents of the longhouse to hold a *baum* or known as a meeting first to set an important date to complete the celebration or ceremony. In the meantime, the use of Bungai Jarau is one of the important objects because it is the original traditional art of the Iban community and it has a high value and was appreciated by the Iban community in the past. However, nowadays, Bungai Jarau produced in longhouses still maintains its traditional value and authenticity, but its function has changed to the point that it is used as an object of decoration in longhouses.



**Fig. 3.** Po Ai Longhouse Melugu, Sri Aman, Simanggang, Sarawak, that has been decorated with Bungai Jarau

Source: Fieldwork Study

For this reason, it is very important for the young generation, especially the young people of the Iban community, to continue to appreciate the traditional art of Bungai Jarau so that they continue to enjoy the beauty and aesthetics of the traditional art of the Iban community.

In Iban culture and society, Bungai Jarau is very important in miring ceremonies or festivals such as *Gawai sandau ari*, *Gawai kenyalang* and *Gawai Batu*. Usually, *Gawai Sandau ari* is held for certain ceremonies such as when the Iban community has a bad dream, dreaming together with people in Pangau Libau, *Ngintu Pengaroh* (Champ), predicting fate (through divination of pig's heart). This ceremony is carried out during the day from early morning until noon. When this ceremony is carried out, Bungai Jarau is also produced and placed in every corner and around the *ruai* and verandah up to the porch of the longhouse and then the tilting event will be carried out in this Gawai. In the olden days, when an Iban man wanted to go down for military training, he needed to hold a *Gawai Sandau ari* to bless him to go through the training safely and succeed perfectly.



**Fig. 4.** Pandung that shows has been wrapped with pua kumbu  
Source: Fieldwork Study

While this Gawai Kenyalang is carried out before and after the Iban men are successful or successful in the *Ngayau* expedition field in the past and aims to avoid accidents and any oaths from the enemy and also to get good results. Gawai kenyalang is also one of the biggest *gawai* for the Iban community in the past because usually this *Gawai Kenyalang* is held for seven days and seven nights. *Gawai Kenyalang* is held to call and ask for help from the Pangau Libau people, namely, Keling and Bungai Nuing when entering the battlefield. Bungai Jarau is also placed together or next to the Carved Firefly Statue to be used as a symbol of this ceremony. This is because the Iban community who want to start planting *huma bukit* paddy and swamp paddy also use Bungai Jarau in the Gawai Batu ritual ceremony. In the stone device ritual, this *pandung* will be filled by three *lemambang* (bard) people while they surround the *pandung*. *Mengap* is one of the ways of delivering holy verses at that time to ask for blessings from supernatural forces throughout the process of the rice planting season. In conjunction with the device day, the extraordinary powers that are worshiped and invoked are Raja Sempulang Gana, Raja Kirai Raja Sua and Aki Lang Sengalang Burung will be summoned to bring luck and good fortune as well as provide protection and safety to the rice plantations and be able to produce a good rice harvest good at harvest time. In the past, this Gawai Batu was not celebrated every year, but it was done approximately every six to seven years or when the harvest was dwindling. When this gawai is carried out, the whetstones and all the equipment that will be used during *bumai* or *berhuma* will be gathered together in a *pandung* (altar) (a *pandung* wrapped in pua kumbu/spiritual blanket) and placed in the *ruai* (veranda) along with the Jarau Bungai as a symbol of the greatness of the Gawai Batu.

According to Iban culture, if someone sends this Bungai Jarau, it means that there is something important to convey. Bungai Jarau is sent as a message or communication tool. There are messages conveyed through Bungai Jarau for example, *ngayau*. Bungai Jarau was sent to every nearby longhouse to ask for help to attack the enemy. It is more like a messenger and brings exciting news to the previous Iban community. This Bungai Jarau is also produced if there are relatives who are dying, for example they will put a *luntik* and further spread that the Bungai Jarau they brought came from the longhouse.

Likewise, if the Iban longhouse holds a *gawai* ritual, they need to put a sign (*tambai*) together with Bungai Jarau earlier as a sign that the Ibans are holding a *gawai* ritual. In the Iban culture, usually finding the rope is used to calculate the date or the number of days that the Bungai Jarau is sent from one place to another. According to the Iban people, Bungai Jarau is important and must be present in certain *miring* and *gawai* rituals. If the former Iban community wanted to intend, then they used this Jarau Flower as a sacred symbol in this ceremony. In the Iban community, there is also a belief of seven betel nut syrups. There is also Bungai Jarau in the skip of forgiveness. An *agung* doll or a stunner, "we're waiting for you, you're messing with us, you're waiting for us, you're the one who wants to mess with us, you're the one who's trying to mess with us, you're the one who is *lemi*, *lunti*, *alah tumhang*, *tullah bunsung lunggu*". This means that a statue that is deliberately made or produced is believed to be able to ward off the power and evil spirits or repel the forces that want to attack a person or the longhouse in the Iban community. There are three types of *purang* wood namely, *balang purang*, *ruman purang* and *temenua purang*. However, it is still in the category of *purang* wood.



**Fig. 5.** An informant is making Bungai Jarau from *Purang* Wood  
Source: Fieldwork Study

According to the Iban community, Bungai Jarau has a symbolic meaning in the *mengai* tradition which is performed as a *leka timang* (mantras) played as a story or journey of a spirit or spirit of a person who has died. This Bungai Jarau is a symbol or a message tool of the Iban community in the past because this Bungai Jarau is sent from one place of the longhouse to another place of the longhouse to deliver important news or breaking news of an emergency that happened in a longhouse. Like the idiom of the Iban people "Bungai Jarau *tali temuko kena ngangau ka bala rumah panjai*" or Bungai Jarau as communication medium to call during an emergency situation in the Iban long house.



**Fig. 6.** Bungai Jarau  
Source: Fieldwork Study

In Iban culture, Bungai Jarau also needs to be placed on *Antu Pala*. *Antu Pala* that is placed on the roof of the long house with its *ringka*, *seluk* and *bengkung* (basket). This *ringka* is a rattan made to store the heads of enemies that were found from expeditions of *ngayau* in the past. While *seluk* is a tool that looks like a basket to store dishes in. Next, the *bengkung* is a circle with Bungai Jarau wrapped around the *bengkung*. In addition, Bungai Jarau was also used as a stick as a messenger letter in ancient times. Therefore, Bungai Jarau is very special and has a high meaning and philosophy and has a unique and distinctive meaning in the Iban culture and society in Sarawak.



**Fig. 7.** This picture shows the Antu Pala in the Ringka, Seluk and Bengkung together with Bungai Jarau  
Source: Fieldwork Study

Apart from the Iban community, the Orang Ulu community also has Bungai Jarau. Bungai jarau in the Orang Ulu community has four specific meanings. Bungai Jarau in their community is called Penghut. The meaning of the first Penghut is Penghut Lurai Aru Pungun and it is the longest Bungai Jarau once carved and produced. It is usually placed at the mouth of the river or in front of the longhouse of the Ulu people. Its purpose is to mark the arrival of guests who visit their home.

The second Jarau Bungai is Penghut Aru Ito Telo. This Jarau Bungai is also long but it is produced with three layers of Jarau Bungai. The purpose of this Bungai Jarau is produced as a symbol of unity in a community of Ulu people who represent three social classes, namely Maren, Hipui and Panyin, which means the upper class, the middle class and the lower class.



**Fig. 8.** Bungai Jarau are hung on the ceiling.  
Source: Fieldwork Study

Bungai Jarau of the third category is Penghut Lurai which means maintaining bonds and well-being in the longhouse of the Ulu people. The next Bungai Jarau is the Penghut Ting category. This Penghut Ting is always placed under the roof of the longhouse and tied together from the first door of the longhouse to the end of the longhouse. The meaning is that the cohesion and unity that needs to exist in the local community needs to be preserved and maintained forever.

#### **4 Findings and Discussion**

Factors that cause the traditional art of Bungai Jarau to be increasingly forgotten are of great concern to the Iban community. This is because not many young people know the meaning of using Bungai Jarau. The younger generation is less exposed to the production and use of Bungai Jarau due to the lack of curiosity from the younger generation themselves. The prohibition for young people and only men to pluck Bungai Jarau is seen as a great limitation and constraint in preserving the traditional art of Bungai Jarau. Advances in information and communication technology are growing rapidly at this time. Seen as a big challenge because games in the form of information technology attract the attention of young people more than Bungai Jarau. The cold attitude of the Iban community is also seen to have affected the traditional culture of Bungai Jarau art. Overall, after analyzing the data from the research findings, it was found that the traditional art factor of Bungai Jarau is increasingly being forgotten by the Iban community due to the current of modernization and the lack of exposure about Bungai Jarau.

Encourage the youth, especially the Iban community, to learn to produce this Jarau flower in every cultural event of the Iban community in Sarawak. In addition, it is necessary to hold a competition to rake to produce Bungai Jarau. In addition, it is necessary to hold workshops and tutorials in the general public such as at a large cultural event to give exposure and production skills of Bungai Jarau. It is the role of parents and the Iban community itself that should apply knowledge about the traditional art of Bungai Jarau. Next, the Iban community needs to be exposed to the importance and existence of the traditional art of Bungai Jarau such as exhibitions, campaigns and also education in the subject of the Iban language.

The difference and function of Bungai Jarau that was produced in the past and now needs to be given serious attention. This is because the function of Bungai Jarau in the present time has changed a lot as a result of the clash of big cultures with small cultures. Bungai Jarau nowadays only functions as an ornament or used as an interior design for art and cultural events in Sarawak. However, the production and use of Bungai Jarau still maintains its unique and distinctive aesthetic and performance characteristics.



In the olden days, the purpose of producing Bungai Jarau was Bungai Jarau as the Official Messenger Letter of the Iban community to deliver important messages in times of emergency in the long house. The difference between the production of Bungai Jarau before and now is that in the past more use of *purang* wood was used, but nowadays various types of materials and wood are used in the production of Bungai Jarau. In fact, its function has changed until now it is more used as a decorative tool such as interior and exterior decoration of the long house and is considered a traditional art that has a very high value look and soul.

In Iban culture and society, the use of Bungai Jarau does not have certain taboos and there is also no taboo in producing Bungai Jarau. However, it needs to be respected because it is believed to be one of the sacred traditional arts and is very important in large-scale ceremonies in Iban culture and society. After using the Bungai Jarau according to the importance of the ritual ceremony or *Gawai* involved, for example three days and three nights or seven days and seven nights, then you can open or take back this Bungai Jarau. After taking the Jarau flower, it should not be thrown anywhere, instead it should be placed at the edge of the garden or in the home store because it still has a high value and importance in the Iban community. The *teresang* produced also uses Bungai Jarau on the edge. During the former Brooke colonial era, brave warriors or Rentap also used this Bungai Jarau in asking for help such as Bejalai Ka Bungai Jarau. Rentap is an Iban warlord who lives in Ulu Sungai Skrang. Rentap who was the leader of the Iban people had opposed Brooke's rule because Brooke planned to crack down on the practice of tax collection by local chiefs who were considered pirates by him, while it was a traditional source of income for local chiefs.

Brooke also interfered with the traditional way of life of the Iban people who practice the activity of cutting or beheading enemies with several reforms. Therefore, in 1853, Rentap together with his forces attacked the forts in Sungai Skrang. The British were ambushed by the Rentap people. Then there was a fierce battle between the two sides. As a result of the battle, a son-in-law of Rentap named Layang killed Alan Lee with his spear. Rentap immediately brought his team back to Ulu Sungai Skrang. Rentap was a true fighter because he never submitted to Brooke's rule until the end of his life. To this day, the tomb of the Rentap warrior has been restored by the Sarawak state government to commemorate his services. In the battle, the British retreated to the Merak base and this caused Rentap to be respected by his followers. However, Brooke's followers destroyed and burned 20 longhouses where Rentap lived. With that being said, Rentap has retreated and built a residence in the Lang river, which is in Ulu Sungai Skrang. However, Brooke's forces successfully attacked Rentap's longhouse and he and a number of followers retreated and built a fort on a hill called Bukit Sadok. Bukit Sadok fortress is difficult to conquer because it is strengthened by a cannon known as Bujang Timpang Berang. Starting from 1875, the Brooke government made three attempts to capture Rentap. However, it was only in 1861 that they managed to control Bukit Sadok after bringing several cannons known as Bujang Sadok.

Offerings ritual or *Beburung* or *Beburung* are believed to have meaning for the Iban community. For example, the Iban community used to believe that if they saw an animal such as a deer in the paddy field or in their garden, they should return to the longhouse because it was feared that disaster would befall them as long as they were outside the longhouse of the Iban community. The same is the case with a dream experienced by someone who is believed to bring a good or bad sign of something that will happen. In this case, this dream is related to the gods of the Iban community who warn that something is possible and will happen in the near future. The current generation is less aware of the existence of Bungai Jarau because of the cultural shift and each has now embraced a certain religion such as Christianity. The traditional art of Bungai Jarau needs to be continued and needs to be preserved so that it does not disappear due to the current

of globalization and modernization. A special message to the younger generation, that they need to appreciate and preserve the traditional art of Bungai Jarau for future generations to see.

## 5 Conclusion

The traditional art of Bungai Jarau is a cultural heritage that is a reflection of the high civilization of the nation and culture and the Iban community in Sarawak. One of the characteristics of a great and advanced nation is a nation that is able to appreciate and preserve traditional arts such as Bungai Jarau art. In Iban culture, the traditional art of Bungai Jarau is a heritage art that has been passed down from generation to generation. Clearly in this context, the traditional art of Bungai Jarau is an art that has become an identity and an icon in Iban culture and society. This is because the art of Bungai Jarau becomes the identification of Iban people with extraordinary power. Therefore, the more traditional art of the past is preserved, then it is inevitable that the cultural relics will be appreciated more and more. Therefore, it is hoped that the traditional art of Bungai Jarau will continue to be a treasure of the Iban nation's unique and distinctive cultural heritage. Bungai Jarau art is a work of creation, at the same time an art of high taste, and a result of the culture of the Iban community that is produced by itself or the result of interaction and communication with other cultures throughout the history of existence and continues to develop until now.

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