

# Reviving Heritage: The Cultural Significance of *Pun Ranyai* in Iban Gawai Tradition and Festival

Gregory Kiyai

*Visual Arts Department, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 50603, Malaysia*

(Corresponding author's e-mail: [gregory.kiyai@um.edu.my](mailto:gregory.kiyai@um.edu.my))

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## Abstract

The *pun ranyai*, a central practice and ritual of the Iban community in Sarawak at Rumah Bujang Rantau Kiran, Nanga Medamit Limbang, serves as both a spiritual medium and a repository of cultural memory, connecting ancestral history, social ethics, and collective identity. Traditionally performed to honor deities and commemorate historical events, it embodies intergenerational knowledge and moral values. Contemporary pressures—such as globalization, urban migration, changing youth engagement, and religious influence—have modified or abbreviated key ritual elements, reducing its performative and symbolic potency. Fieldwork reveals that while the ritual continues, it is often enacted ceremonially, signaling a shift from active to passive cultural memory. At the same time, increased inclusivity and social adaptation highlight tensions between authenticity and survival. Using Assmann's cultural memory framework, this study critically examines these dynamics, emphasizing the balance between cultural continuity, local agency, and the preservation of symbolic meaning.

**Keywords:** Pun Ranyai, Iban, Cultural memory, Ritual adaptation, Reviving heritage, Heritage preservation

## Introduction

According to Assmann (2011) cultural memory, sometimes called collective memory, is the shared recollection of a community's past. It is carried in the stories people tell, the songs they sing, the rituals they perform, and the objects they treasure. These memories can be tangible, like heirlooms and sacred sites, or intangible, like proverbs, taboos, and seasonal celebrations. Together, they shape how a community understands time, history, and its place in the world. For the Iban of Sarawak, this memory has long been carried in the spoken word—through stories told by elders at the *ruai*, chants that mark the seasons, and the careful passing down of ritual knowledge—sustaining a worldview in which life is inseparable from the land, the spirits, and the bonds of community (Osup, 2019; Chalmers, 1997). My own time in the longhouse, through interviews and quiet observation, affirmed that these oral traditions are not merely fragments of the past; they are living currents of cultural life, shaping

identity and guiding daily practices in the longhouse communities of Sarawak.

To revive heritage is not simply to dust off an old custom—it is a conscious act of remembering. In cultural studies, heritage revival is understood as a living process: communities, elders, and cultural custodians breathe fresh meaning into practices that risk slipping into obscurity. These revivals rarely replicate the past exactly; instead, they adapt it. Traditions are often “re-invented” to meet the needs of the present (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012). Heritage revival is thus a balancing act—between keeping faith with ancestral meanings and making space for new interpretations, between guarding identity and opening it to wider audiences (Smith, 2006).

The Iban, the largest indigenous group in Sarawak, number 878,065 people, or 30.2% of the state's population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). The term Iban, meaning “human,” (Sandin 1969;

1977) reflects their self-identification as the original inhabitants of Borneo, whose settlements span the length of Sarawak from Kuching to Lawas. Traditionally, they lived in communal longhouses (*rumah panjang*) and practised subsistence hill rice cultivation (Sather, 1996), later transitioning to commercial crops such as oil palm, white pepper, rubber, and cocoa—particularly following the implementation of the New Economic Policy after 1963 (Madeline, 2003; Ibrahim, 2013). The Iban language, a branch of the Austronesian family (Sercombe, 1999; Appell, 2001; Fox, 2006), remains the primary medium of communication in daily life, ritual, and oral tradition. Historically, the Iban were renowned as formidable seafarers and warriors, known to Europeans as “Sea Dayaks” for their war boats and headhunting expeditions. Communities in regions such as Skrang and Saribas fiercely resisted colonial encroachment under leaders like Rentap and Linggir, before eventually being subdued by the Brooke administration (Sandin, 1964; Vayda & Vayda, 1976; Helbling, 2021; Kiyai & Tugang, 2023). After the end of World War II, the Iban, along with other communities in Sarawak, became part of British efforts to form the Federation of Malaysia as a strategic measure to contain communist insurgencies in Southeast Asia. These political transformations, alongside earlier military defeats, fractured Iban unity and marked a profound turning point in their cultural and social trajectory (Tilman, 1964; Chee-Beng, 1997; Postill, 2000).

Amid these transformations, one enduring tradition is the *pun ranyai*, central to the Gawai Festival. In Iban cosmology, it is the “tree of life,” symbolizing abundance, the connection between the living and the dead, and the cycles that sustain the world (Sather, 2012). Yet, in contemporary Sarawak—shaped by rural-to-urban migration, economic change, and global cultural influences—its meaning is no longer fixed. For elders, it retains its sacredness; for others, it has become a colorful emblem of festivity, stripped of some spiritual significance.

These shifts raise critical questions: How has the symbolism of the *pun ranyai* evolved in contemporary Iban society? In what ways does it continue to function as an essential aspect of Iban identity? And how is that identity negotiated between the demands of tradition and the realities of modern life? This paper takes the

*pun ranyai* as a lens through which to explore cultural memory, situating it within wider debates on heritage revival and identity. By examining how one enduring symbol has been preserved, adapted, and reinterpreted, it seeks to understand how the Iban remember their past and carry it forward into the future.

### Literature review

The study of *pun ranyai* requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates material culture, cultural ecology, and indigenous custom as three interrelated domains. In anthropology, material culture refers to physical objects that serve as mediums for representing a society’s values, memory, and cosmological structures (Hodder, 2012; Tilley, 2006). *pun ranyai*, constructed from areca banana tree or palm oil trunks, coconut leaves, cloth, food, and ritual items, is a material entity laden with symbolism. Sather (2012) classifies it as the “tree of life” in Iban cosmology, yet it differs from the archetype of the cosmic tree in other cultures because it is not merely a symbol of creation or fertility, but also encapsulates the narrative of the soul’s journey to the realm of *Sebayan*. Unlike *Yggdrasil* in Norse mythology or *Kalpavriksha* in Hindu–Buddhist traditions—which emphasise a universal link between the mortal and the transcendent realms—*Pun Ranyai* embodies a two-way relationship: the spirits send “fruits” or gifts to the living, signifying a reciprocal continuity between dimensions (Russell, 1981).

From a cultural ecology perspective, the form and materials of *pun ranyai* reflect adaptation to the tropical ecosystem of Borneo, aligning with Steward’s (1968) view that cultural organization and ritual technology are shaped by resource availability and the environment. The selection of areca palm trunks, coconut leaves, and local plants is not merely utilitarian but also carries symbolic connotations within the Iban cosmological ecology: areca palm as a symbol of fertility and social interaction; coconut as a protector and demarcator of sacred space; cloth and food as signs of abundance and social ties. These elements illustrate what Ingold (2011) calls “material entanglements,” where natural materials are not only used but are lived within a web of human–nature meanings and relationships.

Indigenous custom (*adat enggau penti pemali Iban*) serves as the normative framework ensuring that *Pun Ranyai* is built, decorated, and used according to

sacred protocol. Freeman (1970) explains that Iban adat not only regulates social relationships but also binds humans to the cosmos and ancestral spirits. Clifford (1994) describes indigenous custom as “lived law” transmitted through direct practice rather than codified text. In the context of Pun Ranyai, each decoration, object placement, and ritual sequence is the enactment of cosmological law as inscribed in adat, making it a form of “material jurisprudence” readable through its structure.

These three frameworks—material culture, cultural ecology, and indigenous custom—converge to position pun ranyai as a “material mnemonic” (Halbwachs, 1992) that preserves Iban collective memory. Comparative analysis shows that although it shares cosmic functions with global traditions, its local specificity arises from its symbiosis with the Bornean ecology and the epistemology of Iban adat. Within a postcolonial framework, pun ranyai can be read as a cultural strategy for sustaining Iban epistemic agency amid the forces of globalisation and the homogenisation of cosmic symbols.

In contemporary anthropological discourse, studies of material culture have shifted from seeing objects as mere symbols to recognising their “agency.” Latour (2005), through Actor–Network Theory (ANT), argues that objects are actors that help shape social networks. Pun Ranyai is not merely a symbolic medium between humans and spirits but also a network node that connects multiple actors: the family who prepares it, natural materials like areca palm and coconut that carry their own properties, ancestral spirits as symbolic senders and receivers, and the ritual space itself, transformed from profane to sacred. Ingold’s (2011) dwelling perspective emphasises that humans and objects exist in co-evolutionary relationships. Pun Ranyai emerges from a way of dwelling grounded in ecological knowledge, manual skill, and cultural memory. The choice of materials is not purely aesthetic but reflects a taskscape—an interconnected set of daily activities shaped by seasons, natural resources, and adat. Thus, pun ranyai forms part of a living landscape encompassing humans, plants, land, and cosmos.

The combination of ANT and the dwelling perspective allows pun ranyai to be seen as an “agentive assemblage” (Bennett, 2020)—a gathering of human and non-human agents that shape its meaning, function,

and sacred power. This dissolves the material–immaterial dichotomy, as in Iban epistemology, matter, meaning, and spirit are inseparable. From a postcolonial lens, it may also be interpreted as a form of “epistemic sovereignty,” preserving cosmology and human–nature relationships outside the dominance of global symbolic frameworks.

Among the Iban of Sarawak, pun ranyai is a living bridge between the human world and the spirit world. In Saribas, Sather (2012) describes it as a “tree of life” that grows in Sebyan, bearing fruits sent by ancestral spirits as talismans for wellbeing, healing, and renewal. This exchange is not merely symbolic but reflects a worldview in which life and death are continuous within the same cycle (Assmann, 2011). The symbol also permeates the sacred textile art of pua kumbu, where motifs of tiang ranyai, and ranyai sebyan are legacies of the goddess Kumang to selected weavers (*indu ngar indu takar*) (Heppell, 2006). In Gawai Burong, pun ranyai appears as a decorated pole surrounded by pua kumbu, displaying twin Ranyai motifs adorned with enemy heads, the face of the spirit Nising, and other mythical emblems (Kedit, 2009).

However, most earlier studies stop at describing its traditional functions, without examining the transformation of its meaning in modern contexts—urban migration, schooling, religious change, and tourism. Hobsbawm and Ranger (2012) assert that tradition can be “re-invented” to serve the needs of new generations, while Smith (2006) reminds us that authorised heritage discourse shapes the meanings that are prioritised. In a global comparison, the Kalpavriksha in South Asia has undergone similar changes: from a mythical tree that grants all needs to an art motif, tourism icon, and ecological campaign symbol (Amirthalingam, 2020). This trajectory mirrors the shift of pun ranyai from sacred ritual emblem to a flexible cultural marker. This study addresses the gap by tracing pun ranyai in both ritual and non-ritual contexts, and by examining how its image and meaning are negotiated in contemporary Iban society—not as a relic of the past, but as a living symbol that continues to branch out in the landscape of memory, identity, and heritage and to fill that gap, tracing the pun ranyai in both ritual and non-ritual settings, and exploring how its image and meaning are negotiated in contemporary Iban life—not

as a relic of the past, but as a living, branching symbol in the landscape of memory, identity, and heritage.

### Material and methodology

This study employs an ethnographic approach integrating participant observation, oral history, and visual documentation within the Iban community, and frames the analysis through Assmann's concept of Cultural Memory to capture both the lived experience and symbolic dimensions of the pun ranyai tradition. While the fieldwork was conducted specifically in 2022 rather than over an extended long-term period, the researcher's insider position as a member of the Iban community provides an emic perspective that enriches the interpretation of adat and ritual practice in their lived context<sup>1</sup>.

The study is grounded in Jan Assmann's (2011) concept of Cultural Memory, which frames collective remembrance as an active process in which communities reproduce shared identities through symbolic acts, narratives, and material forms. Cultural memory is not a passive repository of the past; it is a socially mediated practice, embodied in rituals, artefacts, and performances that bind the community across generations. Within this framework, material culture is positioned as both a vessel and an agent of cultural memory. Following Hodder (2012) and Tilley (2006), material objects are understood as mediators between the tangible and intangible, capable of storing, transmitting, and reactivating shared meanings. The pun ranyai—as a constructed ritual object composed of forest-sourced materials—operates as a material archive, embedding ecological knowledge, mythological symbolism, and social values.

Ecological knowledge, particularly the Iban community's expertise in sourcing and preparing ritual materials from the surrounding forest, is conceptualized as an integral dimension of cultural memory. This knowledge is not merely utilitarian; it is embedded in oral narratives, customary law (adat), and ritual prescriptions, forming an environmental ethos that sustains both the forest and the cultural system. The pun ranyai serves as the focal point where these

dimensions converge. It functions as a living manifestation of cultural memory, enacted through ritual performance, sustained by ecological knowledge, and materially embodied in crafted forms. By situating the pun ranyai at the nexus of these interrelated domains, the study captures how Iban cultural identity is reproduced through the interplay of memory, materiality, and environment.

The fieldwork was conducted in 2022 at Rumah Bujang, Rantau Kiran, Ulu Medamit, in the Limbang district of Sarawak—the village where the researcher was born and raised. This longhouse was selected for its sustained performance of the pun ranyai ritual, its recognised status as a repository of ecological and cultural knowledge, and its location in a remote interior environment where ritual materials are sourced directly from the surrounding forest.

A purposive sampling strategy identified key informants whose authority and expertise are central to the pun ranyai. These included the tuai rumah (longhouse chief), a lemambang (ritual bard), and senior elders responsible for sourcing and preparing ritual materials. Their roles ensured that the data reflected both historical continuity and contemporary adaptations. The researcher resided in the longhouse during the ritual cycle, engaging in participant observation and contributing to communal activities. This included two days of direct involvement in the pun ranyai's preparation: accompanying community members to the forest to select and cut the tree, documenting the crafting of ritual ornaments, and assisting in the arrangement of offerings. The culmination of this process was the ceremonial event in which the pun ranyai was central, allowing for observation of its social, performative, and cosmological dimensions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the Iban language and later translated, with all translations verified by the informants to ensure accuracy. These interviews explored the symbolic and cosmological significance of the pun ranyai, its ecological knowledge base, and the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission. Photographic and video documentation recorded each

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<sup>1</sup>This study does not claim to represent long-term ethnography. Fieldwork was carried out during the 2022 ritual cycle only. However, the researcher's identity as an Iban insider from the

studied village provided deep familiarity with adat, ritual practice, and local oral traditions, strengthening the emic dimension of the methodology.

stage of the ritual process, capturing the sequence of actions, the spatial configuration, and the aesthetic composition of the *pun ranyai*. To contextualize the primary data, relevant ethnographic accounts, historical records, and academic studies on Iban cosmology and ritual practice were consulted. This multi-source triangulation enhanced the analytical depth of the study, ensuring that the findings are grounded in both lived experience and broader scholarly discourse.

### Conceptual framework

This study interprets the *pun ranyai* ritual as a living bridge between the Iban past and present. At its heart, the ritual serves as a vessel of cultural memory, carrying stories, symbols, and practices that connect communities with their ancestors, spiritual beliefs, and shared history (Assmann, 2011). The *Ranyai tree*, central to the ritual, embodies this connection, functioning not only as a sacred symbol but also as a space where moral values, social cohesion, and identity are enacted and experienced. Participation in the ritual

transforms memory from an abstract concept into a lived reality. Through offerings, communal preparation, and ceremonial practices, younger generations directly engage with ancestral knowledge, ensuring continuity and reinforcing collective identity. This is what Assmann describes as “active” cultural memory.

At the same time, the ritual is not immune to change. Contemporary pressures—urban migration, globalization, shifting youth priorities, commercialization, and evolving religious or ethical values—have influenced how it is performed. Certain elements are shortened, adapted, or even omitted, gradually moving the *pun ranyai* toward “passive” memory: a symbolic form that preserves tradition but risks losing its depth and experiential meaning. The framework thus positions the *pun ranyai* at the intersection of memory, identity, and contemporary transformation, highlighting that its continuity depends on striking a balance between tradition and adaptation, and between spiritual integrity and social relevance.



**Figure 1** Conceptual framework

This framework allows the study to examine both the internal dynamics of ritual practice and the external pressures that shape its evolution, providing a comprehensive approach to understanding cultural

memory, identity, and heritage preservation among the Iban.

## Finding and result

The chance to attend a wedding in 2022, held at a longhouse in the rural heartland of Sarawak—specifically at Rumah Bujang in Rantau Kiran, Limbang—sparked the inspiration for this paper. This longhouse is not just a place I visited; it is where I was born and raised. Coincidentally, it was also during the festive season, so I seized the opportunity to return home after being away in the city for a long time. Little did I know that this visit would lead to a serendipitous encounter. The groom's family had decided to raise a pun ranyai—a tradition rarely seen in longhouses these days, particularly those that have embraced Christianity and distanced themselves from their animistic roots. Although I am of Iban descent, a fourth-generation Iban to be exact, this was my first time witnessing the ranyai ceremony firsthand. Watching the process unfold—the tree being decorated and the community coming together to celebrate—was a deeply meaningful and eye-opening experience. It became a living, breathing example of the traditions and values that this community holds dear, offering me a wealth of insights into this study.

The Iban community lives collectively in longhouses led by a Tuai Rumah Bujang. The tuai rumah refers to the head of the longhouse, who is responsible for all matters concerning the community, such as serving as a judge in disputes, presiding over traditional customs and rituals, acting as a trusted advisor, and serving as an intermediary between the community and the Sarawak State Government or the Government of Malaysia in matters of development and the welfare of the longhouse residents. Based on an interview with a tuai rumah, it was stated that to this day, there are estimated to be more than 300 Iban individuals living in the longhouse, comprising around 50 families. On average, each household consists of approximately six to seven members. Most of them are farmers who cultivate oil palm as their main source of income, while others engage in small-scale farming, hunting forest produce, or seek employment in towns as government servants or factory workers. The Iban language is predominantly used in daily communication, although the younger generation who have received education at the primary, secondary, and even university level is fluent in Malay and English.

The longhouse has been the traditional settlement of the Iban people since ancient times. Although its construction materials have shifted from timber to concrete, its architectural design and spatial functions remain the same. The longhouse represents a unique indigenous architectural form that exists only in Borneo, namely in Kalimantan (Indonesia), Brunei Darussalam, and Malaysia (in Sabah and Sarawak). In the past, according to informants, longhouses were built on stilts supported by large pillars; however, in line with modern needs, many longhouses today are built as landed structures. In Sarawak, these longhouses can still be seen and visited, particularly in villages and rural areas. The Iban continue to preserve and uphold this ancestral legacy to the present day.

The decline in the practice of pun ranyai is intertwined with broader shifts in Iban cultural landscapes. One major turning point was the suppression of headhunting by James Brooke in 1849 during his anti-piracy operations, culminating in the defeat of Iban warriors at the Battle of Beting Marau (can refer to Avé, 1969; Lewis, 2019; Walker 2020). This marked a decisive break from the traditional warrior ethos, leading to transformations in social identity and ritual life. Over time, the adoption of Christianity replaced many animistic practices, further diminishing the ritual context in which pun ranyai thrived. Additionally, subsistence rice cultivation—once the cultural backbone of Iban life—gave way to commercial agriculture, severing an important economic and symbolic foundation of the ceremony. These changes were compounded by rural–urban migration, the pursuit of formal education, and the influence of globalisation, all of which have reshaped the rhythms of community life and reduced the frequency of collective rituals such as pun ranyai.

Therefore, this study's findings focus on documenting and analysing the process of constructing and celebrating pun ranyai within the Iban community of the longhouse, paying close attention to the material preparations, ritual sequences, and communal participation that give meaning to the practice in its contemporary form.

### Local wisdom and the *Pun Ranyai* tradition

From my position at the *ruai*, I observed that the *pun ranyai* preparation began well before dawn, when

the longhouse was still shrouded in mist and the air was cool with the scent of damp earth. The men had already gathered outside, their voices low but steady as they discussed which tree would best serve as the *ranyai*. Eventually, they agreed upon a young palm oil tree with wide, vibrant leaves—chosen not merely for its availability, but because its lush foliage was believed to symbolise fertility, prosperity, and communal abundance. In other contexts, an oil palm tree might be used, but in this instance, the banana tree was deemed more suitable for its aesthetic and symbolic qualities.

I followed them as they walked to the edge of the village, carrying machetes (*parang*) and lengths of rope. The cutting of the tree was swift, accompanied by light-hearted banter that masked the careful, deliberate nature of their work. Once felled, the trunk was stripped of excess leaves and debris, leaving only the canopy

intact. The men then measured the *ranyai* pole, ensuring it would stand securely in the centre of the longhouse's *ruai*—the communal gallery where feasts, dances, and rituals take place.

By the time the tree was brought inside, the *ruai* had begun to stir with activity. Women were sweeping the floor, children darted between doorways, and elders watched from their verandas, occasionally offering quiet advice. The central placement of the *ranyai* was clearly intentional: it transformed the *ruai* into the symbolic heart of the celebration, a place where all eyes and movements would eventually converge. As I stood there taking notes, I realised that this act of positioning the *ranyai* was not merely practical but deeply symbolic, reaffirming the longhouse's collective identity through the careful arrangement of space. (See figure 2).



**Figure 2** Measuring the Ranyai Pole

**Source:** Fieldwork conducted by the Researcher at Rumah Bujang Rantau Kiran (June 5, 2022), Limbang District, Sarawak

Once the *ranyai* pole had been secured, the tree itself was carefully erected, following the exact measurements of the prepared wooden base. As shown in Figure 3, this process involved more than two men working in close coordination, exchanging instructions and providing physical support to ensure that the *ranyai* stood firmly and stably. Their movements were deliberate—some holding the trunk upright, others steadying the base—until the tree was perfectly vertical in the centre of the *ruai*.

Only after its position was deemed secure did the decorating begin. Various items were hung from the leaves and branches—fruits, food, and small objects—adding a burst of colour and a festive atmosphere to the communal space. From my observation, this moment strongly resembled the practice of decorating a tree for Christmas or Chinese New Year, where the act of adornment serves as a visual announcement of the celebration to come. In the context of the longhouse, the decorated *ranyai* acted as a symbolic signal, drawing community members and guests together in

anticipation of the festivities, a shared marker that the season of joy, feasting, and reciprocity had begun.

After the *ranyai* tree was firmly set in place, the longhouse community gathered around to begin the adornment. Decorations that had been prepared in advance were now brought forward—woven baskets, strings of colourful paper, and small parcels wrapped neatly in bright plastic. The first items to be placed were several coconuts, carefully positioned among the leaves. These coconuts carried a potent symbolic meaning: in the past, they represented the severed heads of enemies taken in battle, a visual echo of the headhunting era that once defined Iban warrior culture.

Following this, community members—both young and old—hung small packages filled with snacks and wrapped candies, each dangling invitingly from the branches. The aroma of food mingled with the lively chatter and laughter of the decorators. Near the base of the *ranyai*, a large earthen storage jar was positioned and filled with *tuak*, the traditional fermented rice wine. This would later be shared generously among guests, symbolising hospitality, unity, and the communal spirit of the celebration. (See Figure 4).

After the initial decorations and symbolic items were placed, additional foods were brought forward and arranged beneath the *ranyai* tree. These typically included the head and meat of a roasted pig, along with a variety of other dishes prepared for the occasion. The task of arranging the food neatly and properly was usually undertaken by the women of the longhouse, who moved with care and attention to ensure that each item was respectfully positioned.

The placement of food under the *ranyai* carried both practical and symbolic significance: it marked the tree as the centre of the communal feast and embodied the generosity, reciprocity, and social bonds of the community. Once the ceremony concluded and the *ranyai* tree was taken down, these offerings would be shared and enjoyed by all members of the longhouse, reinforcing a sense of collective participation and belonging. Figure 5 illustrates the careful arrangement of food beneath the *ranyai* tree, highlighting the collaborative effort that underpins this ritual practice.

The food and offerings beneath the *pun ranyai* were carefully wrapped in *bemban* mats, with two mats typically used to cover the entire tree. The mats were then securely tied with ropes to ensure that they

remained in place and did not slip or fall during the ceremony. This wrapping served a dual purpose: it protected the offerings while also creating an element of mystery, concealing the contents from view much like presenting a gift and inviting others to guess what lies inside. This sense of playful anticipation is one of the distinctive features of the *ranyai* ritual.

After the *ranyai* was fully wrapped in *bemban* mats, it was further adorned with a final layer of *pua kumbu*, the traditional Iban woven cloth. The *pua kumbu* added not only a decorative flourish but also carried cultural and spiritual significance, linking the tree to ancestral traditions and the longhouse's collective identity. With this final touch, the decoration of the *ranyai* was complete, transforming it into a central symbol of the community's celebration and shared heritage (see figure 6)

#### ***Pun Ranyai* in Gawai tradition and festival**

According to interviews with informants such as *Tuai Rumah* Mudan from Lubok Injin, Kurap Kabo, and *Tuai Rumah* Lipa from Tanu, Betong, the *pun ranyai* was traditionally erected during the Gawai Burung festival. This celebration is held to honor *Sengalang Burong*, the Iban war deity, and his seven sons-in-law, represented by the seven types of Iban *Mali* Birds: *Ketupung*, *Beragai*, *Bejampung*, *Pangkas*, *Tauka Kutok*, *Embuas*, *Papau* or *Kelabu*, and *Nendak* (Sandin, 1977). According to Iban folklore, *Sengalang Burong* and his sons-in-law reside in a mystical realm called *Tansang Kenyalang*.

The *Gawai Burung* serves multiple purposes, but its primary goal is to seek blessings from *Sengalang Burong* for good fortune, prosperity, fame, and any other benefits that would contribute to the success of the Iban people. Informant Jennifer Empiang shared that in Pakan, *Gawai Burung* is performed to mark the birth of a male child. A male child is believed to bring wealth, good fortune, and success to the family, with hopes that he will grow into a prominent figure who will protect the family's ancestral land. *Gawai Burung* is also integral to the *mudas menua* ceremony, in which uncultivated land is blessed before the rice planting season begins. Informant Chermai Iri explained that this ritual is performed by the *lemambang* (ritual specialist) and *tuai burung* (ceremony leader) before

cultivating hill rice. These individuals are highly skilled in Iban customs. As informant *Lemambang Usat* stated;

*“A skilled lemambang has deep knowledge of Iban customs and can perform all rituals and ceremonies flawlessly through prayers and chants.”*

During the *Gawai Burung* celebration, a tree called the *pun raya* is erected in the longhouse. The type of *Pun Raya* used depends on the specific *Gawai Burung* being celebrated. According to Sandin (1971), nine types of *Gawai* are documented, including *Gawai Kalingkang*, *Gawai Sandong Kenyalang*, *Gawai Batu*, *Gawai Antu*, *Gawai Burung* and *Gawai Nama Ka Tuah*, each type of *Gawai* has its own *pun raya*, carrying unique cultural significance for the Iban people.



**Figure 3** Setting up the ranyai tree

**Source:** Fieldwork conducted by the Researcher at Rumah Bujang Rantau Kiran (June 5, 2022), in the Limbang district of Sarawak



**Figure 4** Decorating the *pun ranyai*

**Source:** Fieldwork conducted by the Researcher at Rumah Bujang Rantau Kiran (June 5, 2022), in the Limbang district of Sarawak



**Figure 5** Placing food beneath the *pun ranyai*

**Source:** Fieldwork conducted by the Researcher at Rumah Bujang Rantau Kiran (June 5, 2022), in the Limbang district of Sarawak



**Figure 6** The ranyai tree after being fully decorated

**Source:** Fieldwork conducted by the Researcher at Rumah Bujang Rantau Kiran (June 5, 2022), in the Limbang district of Sarawak

In the Iban *Gawai Antu* ritual, practiced from Saribas to the present day, a *ranyai* tree—known as Ranyai Sebayan—is erected. *Tuai Rumah Jaga* from Ulu Kerian explained that *ranyai sebayan* is guarded by the deceased's family and longhouse residents throughout the night until morning. The ceremony features traditional Iban dances, such as *ngajat*, and performances with gong and *taboh* music. Family members of the deceased take turns circling the *ranyai*, removing food offerings hung on the tree. The tree is decorated with traditional Iban cakes-*penganan*, *tuak* (fermented rice drink), and other foods. This process

continues until all offerings are removed, and the final person performing the *ngajat* dance while circling the *ranyai sebayan* fells the tree before sunrise, symbolizing the conclusion of the *gawai antu* celebration.

The story of the *ranyai* is also recounted in the *leka sabak* of the *Gawai Antu*, a chant sung by the *lemambang*. In this story, the *lemambang* guides the soul of the deceased from *Batang Mandai* (the Iban death realm) back to the longhouse. Along the journey, the soul passes through several realms, including those of spirits and gods, before reaching the ancestral home in *Sebayan*. Here, the spirits encounter the *pun ranyai*

*nibung* or *ranyai ensurai ranjing*, filled with sacred items that only brave warriors or skilled women weavers can take. These items are then given to the

deceased's relatives as they visit the living during *Gawai Antu*. The *ranyai* used in these ceremonies honors the arriving spirits.



**Figure 7** The Iban in the longhouse dance around the *pun ranyai*, using a machete called *duku ilang* to remove all the decorations hanging from the tree

**Source:** Fieldwork by the Researcher at Rumah Bujang Rantau Kiran (June 5, 2022), Limbang, Sarawak



**Figure 8** The ritual and ceremony of felling down the *pun ranyai*

**Source:** Fieldwork by the Researcher at Rumah Bujang Rantau Kiran, (June 5, 2022), in Limbang, Sarawak

In the past, when Iban communities strictly adhered to traditional beliefs, the *ranyai* could not be erected without being first blessed by the *lemambang* through chants and rituals, accompanied by a pig's blood offering to the gods and spirits—both ancestral and supernatural. These offerings were often arranged on seven or nine plates of food. When the *ranyai* was erected, enemy heads captured in warfare were also placed on the tree as symbols of victory. Various

amulets and weapons, such as the *ilang* (headhunting weapon), would be hung on the *pun raya* to request blessings from the gods for continued success and power in headhunting expeditions (*ngayau*). According to informant *Tuai Rumah Mudan*, ceremonies involving the *pun ranyai* are highly complex, requiring skilled individuals who are *jelai rita* (respected and recognized in the community)—brave warriors and expert ritual specialists—who can conduct the ceremony properly.

These individuals are regarded as symbols of honor, wisdom, and knowledge, serving as role models for the longhouse community.

According to informant Pengulu Ayum, the *pun ranyai* erected during ceremonies—whether for Gawai or a wedding—also serves as a traditional means of collecting donations or contributions from the community. This practice is known among the Iban as “ngulih ka mata duit tauka igi mudan”, which can be translated as offering a financial contribution to those who set up the *pun ranyai*. The phrase “igi mudan” originally referred to an enemy’s head taken in battle but has since evolved to symbolize money, reflecting the ritual’s adaptation to contemporary social and economic contexts.

During the celebration, community members actively participate in the *ngajat*, the traditional Iban dance, circling the *pun ranyai* while cutting down its branches. As the tree is gradually felled, participants cheer and express their joy, demonstrating appreciation for the event organized by the hosts. This practice reinforces social cohesion, collective generosity, and communal participation, linking the symbolic significance of the *ranyai* with tangible support for the longhouse community.

The felling of the *pun ranyai* marks the official start of the ceremony and celebration at the longhouse. During interviews with my informants, several taboos associated with the *pun ranyai* were highlighted. These taboos pertain to both the creation and execution of rituals involving the tree and are summarized as follows.

The *pun ranyai* that has been erected must not be left standing overnight in the *ruai* (the central communal area of the longhouse) due to a cultural taboo. The tree is required to be felled on the same day as the ceremony, symbolizing the commencement of the festivities. Secondly, the *pun ranyai* must always be filled with food and offerings; it cannot be left empty. Its primary purpose is to provide sustenance for both the guests and the deities invoked by the *lemambang* (ritual leader) through *leka timang* (chants or prayers). The Iban believe that during the ceremony, deities and departed loved ones visit the longhouse, bringing blessings and protective charms for their descendants. Lastly, every ritual involving the *pun ranyai* must be overseen by a *Tuai Gawai*, the individual responsible

for organizing and ensuring the smooth conduct of the ceremony. The presence of the *Tuai Gawai* guarantees that all procedures are followed correctly, conflicts are resolved, and the celebration proceeds as intended, reinforcing both communal order and cultural continuity.

Summary from my observation, I witnessed the *pun ranyai* come alive in the longhouse, not just as a tree but as a symbol of the community’s heart and spirit. The villagers worked together, carefully erecting the tree in the center of the longhouse. Men handled the measurements and placement, while women arranged plates of food, *tuak*, and small wrapped gifts beneath its branches. The air was filled with laughter, chatter, and the rhythmic sounds of preparation—it felt like the longhouse itself was breathing with excitement.

Elders shared stories as they worked, explaining how the *pun ranyai* connects the living with their ancestors. One *Tuai Rumah* told me that each branch and offering carries the memory of past victories, the bravery of ancestors, and the gratitude of the community. Another described how the Iban resisted colonial forces, recalling the heroism of figures like Rentap and the tragedies of Beting Marau war in 1849. These memories are kept alive each time the tree is raised, offering young and old alike a sense of continuity and identity. As the ritual began, the *Lemambang* and *Tuai Burung* chanted *leka timang*, their voices weaving through the longhouse. I could see how everyone listened intently, knowing that these sacred words guide the spirits and deities who are believed to visit during the ceremony. Children peeked around corners, elders smiled knowingly, and everyone seemed to share a quiet understanding that this was more than just a celebration—it was a living connection to their past.

The festivities included the traditional *ngajat* dance, with participants circling the tree and cutting down its decorated branches. Villagers contributed donations, a practice called *ngulih ka mata duit tauka igi mudan*, where the spirit of generosity and care for one another was evident. Even though the meaning of *igi mudan* has shifted from enemy heads to gifts and contributions, the act remains a moment of shared joy and solidarity. Throughout the day, I noticed how the *pun ranyai* brought everyone together. It was a celebration, a memory keeper, and a symbol of identity

all at once. Elders expressed hope that this tradition continues each year, allowing the younger generation to experience the same sense of belonging and pride. Watching the community in action, it became clear that the *pun ranyai* is not just a ritual object—it is the beating heart of the longhouse, connecting people across generations through joy, gratitude, and shared history.

### Discussion and conclusion

The *pun ranyai* ritual is a cornerstone of Iban cultural identity, historically performed as a ritual dedicated to deities to seek protection, blessings, and guidance. Beyond its spiritual purpose, the ritual preserves historical memory, particularly regarding Iban resistance against James Brooke and tragic events like Beting Marau war (Tarling, 1972; Kiyai, 2022). Here, the *ranyai* functions as informal historical education, reminding younger generations of ancestral courage and sacrifice. Assmann (2011) emphasizes that cultural memory does not merely preserve historical facts but shapes collective identity through symbolic recollection and ritual. In this sense, the *ranyai* connects the community with their land, culture, and identity, while helping to heal historical trauma caused by colonialism.

The ritual also acts as a medium of communication with ancestral and divine spirits, with offerings believed to bring blessings such as protection, prosperity, and fertility. Interviews with Tuai Rumah and *lemambang* highlight that these offerings are not mere formalities; they function as instruments for maintaining social well-being, strengthening communal solidarity, and reinforcing collective identity. Assmann's concept of cultural memory is evident here: symbols, rituals, and physical objects—such as the *ranyai* and ritual offerings—link history, memory, and contemporary social reality (Lyons and Marshall, 2014; Brockmeier, 2002). Through repeated enactment, the ritual transforms memory from abstract knowledge into lived practice, enabling the community to negotiate continuity and change while sustaining a coherent sense of identity.

Despite its enduring significance, the *pun ranyai* faces serious challenges in the contemporary context. Globalization, urbanization, and changing lifestyles have reduced youth participation in traditional rituals

(Sather, 2011). Modern education and religion have modified or eliminated certain ritual elements, such as blood offerings or symbolic depictions of enemies, raising concerns about maintaining the ritual's symbolic integrity. Migration to urban areas and the monetization of rural life have further reduced communal involvement in ritual preparation. Fieldwork indicates that many longhouses now perform the *pun ranyai* merely as a ceremonial formality, with essential rites abbreviated or omitted. According to Assmann (2011), this shift reflects a movement from "active" to "passive" cultural memory, where the ritual survives in form but loses its performative and educational potency.

Alongside these challenges, the *pun ranyai* has also evolved socially. It is now celebrated not only by the Iban but also by neighboring ethnic groups, shifting from an elite ritual to a broader social platform emphasizing unity, gratitude, and togetherness. While this adaptation promotes inclusivity, it raises questions about whether the ritual's original symbolic and spiritual values are maintained (Assmann, 2011). Interviews suggest that the ritual's social and symbolic dimensions continue to reinforce collective identity, but the erosion of full ritual practice highlights the tension between adaptation and preservation. Building on these ethnographic insights, the potential for heritage recognition, such as Malaysia National Heritage inscription, can be considered. It is crucial to frame this not as a speculative policy intervention but as a case grounded in empirical findings: The *pun ranyai* remains a local Iban practice, rarely performed in its complete form, and thus benefits from documentation, revitalization, and careful advocacy. International recognition could offer economic, tourism, and cultural benefits, but such initiatives must balance external incentives with the preservation of spiritual and symbolic meaning. The *pun ranyai* is more than material heritage; it is social, spiritual, and cultural heritage that unites the community through collective experience, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and ritual practice.

### Conclusion

The *pun ranyai* stands as a vivid expression of Iban cultural memory, interweaving cosmology, ecological knowledge, and intergenerational relationships. Its survival depends on sustaining

community engagement, maintaining symbolic integrity amidst social change, and adopting adaptive strategies that remain rooted in local realities. This study recommends embedding pun ranyai education into school curricula—through storytelling, craft-making, and oral history—to bridge generational knowledge gaps, alongside organising village, district, and state-level cultural events that provide respectful public platforms for its performance. Institutional support from agencies such as the Sarawak Ministry of Tourism, Creative Industry and Performing Arts, in partnership with cultural organisations like the Tun Jugah Foundation, could include micro-grants, training, and documentation assistance for custodians of the tradition. Once a strong local safeguarding framework is in place, broader heritage recognition—such as an Intangible Cultural Heritage nomination—may be pursued, ensuring the process remains community-led and culturally grounded. By aligning preservation strategies with ethnographic evidence and community priorities, the pun ranyai offers not only a testament to the resilience of indigenous cultural memory but also a practical, locally driven model for safeguarding intangible heritage in the face of global change.

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