

Moribundity of Iban Traditional Festivals: Impact on Traditions and Culture

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SYNOPSIS

Ibans are highly rich in their traditions and culture, encompassing their cumulative deposit of knowledge, beliefs, values, and material objects which are acquired and transmitted orally from generation to generation. Most of these cultural practices are directly related to their traditional festivals. However, over the years, there are signs showing that Iban traditional festivals are facing moribundity, as fewer and fewer Ibans are organizing or sponsoring the festivals. This article attempts to explain the various factors which potentially cause the moribundity of these traditional festivals and highlight the impacts they have on some aspects of Iban traditional knowledge and oral literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Ibans, like many other races, are highly rich in their traditions and culture which encompass their cumulative deposit of knowledge, beliefs, values, and material objects which are acquired and transmitted orally from generation to generation. Among the major categories of Iban culture includes the richness of their language; the spirit of cooperation and competition; hill rice farming; ritual or traditional festivals; arts and crafts; traditional marriage ceremony; longhouse dwelling; traditional songs (*pantun, jawang, ganu, sanggai*); and ritual chants (*sampi, biau, sabak, timang, renung*). However, over the years, there are signs showing that certain aspects of Iban traditions and culture are getting more and more endangered. One of these is Iban traditional festivals which is endangered and possibly moribund in the coming years. The number of Ibans who is still celebrating various types of traditional festivals is gradually decreasing over the years.

However, it must be made known that the Ibans, whether they are Christians or not, are still harmoniously celebrating their annual festival which falls on 1st June every year. This festival is officially known as Gawai Dayak or Dayak Festival. To the Ibans, their festivals, whether it is traditional festival or modern-day one is always enriched with Iban traditions and culture, making it a true manifestation of their ethnic identity.

2. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

2.1 Origin of the Ibans

According to researchers who have tried to trace the origin of Ibans in Sarawak, the Ibans migrated from Kapuas River into middle parts of Batang Lupar (River) during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Sandin 1967; Freeman 1970; Pringle 1970; Jensen 1974). From Batang Lupar, the Ibans migrated to other parts of Sarawak in three main directions, namely to the north-west, the north-east, and the east. Those who went north-west went down the Lupar River and settled at Bukit Balau before moving westward to Sebuyau, Sadong and Samarahan river basins. The north-east movement, as reported by Sandin (1956), was into the Saribas-Skrang river basins. The Ibans who moved eastward settled in the upper parts of Ulu Ai, Engkari and Lemanak river basins. The Ulu Ai Ibans who came from the Batang Lupar and the Kanyau (a tributary of Kapuas River in Kalimantan), then migrated into the headwaters

of the Katibas river basin in the Batang Rajang (River) areas (Freeman 1970:130; Pringle 1970:252). henceforth, they migrated to other parts of the upper Rejang areas such as Baleh and other tributaries of Rajang River.

The main reason for the Ibans to migrate to new areas in Sarawak was to look for new lands for their hill rice farming. However, in the process of their migration, some Ibans encountered resistance from the indigenous tribes thus leading to tribal warfare between them and the other tribes in the past.

Ibans were well-known for their keen interest in hill-rice farming for their livelihood. Thus, since the early days until early 21st century, Ibans have been involved in shifting cultivation of hill rice. Hill rice farming required the Ibans to move from one location to the other, seeking new and better land to be farmed. As a result, Ibans had managed to acquire large tracts of land in various places throughout Sarawak in the early days. These tracts of land are known as Native Customary Rights (NCR) land until today. Only the Ibans and other ethnic groups have NCR lands in Sarawak which they acquired through hill-rice farming prior to 1958.

3. IMPORTANCE OF IBAN TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS

In order to understand the importance of traditional festivals in the lives of the Ibans, it is useful to highlight their proceedings. Closely related to traditional festivals are the farming activities of the Ibans. Throughout their yearly farming circle, from June till April the next year, various types of traditional festivals are organized and celebrated with specific purpose and significance. Both of their traditional farming activities and traditional festivals are having numerous cultural significance to the livelihood of the Iban people. Their oral traditions, traditional knowledge and material culture are closely linked to their hill rice farming and traditional festivals.

Thus, if the Ibans are no longer celebrating their traditional festivals there will be greater endangerment to many of their oral traditions, their traditional knowledge and their material culture as these are directly related to the celebration of their traditional festivals.

There are many kinds of Iban traditional festivals, each with its own objectives which are important to Iban traditional communities. Traditional festivals are held not only to celebrate the end of the harvesting season and to thank God or *Petara* for the bountiful harvest, but there are other reasons as well, like seeking good health and a prosperous new year for members of the sponsoring family.

Among the main Iban traditional/ritual festivals are *Gawai Teresang Mansau* (Festival of the Red Bamboo Pole Receptacle); *Gawai Kelingkang* (Festival of the Offering Container); *Gawai Ijau/Ijuk Pumpung* (Festival of the 'Decapitated Gamuti Palm'); *Gawai Tangga Raja* (Festival of the Notched Ladder of Wealth); *Gawai Sempuyung Mata Hari* (Festival of the Conical Sun Basket); *Gawai Kenyalang* (Hornbill Festival); *Gawai Lemba Bumbun* (Ritual Festival of Warfare); *Gawai Nangga Medan* (Festival of Ascending to Medan); *Gawai Sandau/Sandung Liau* (Festival of Warfare); *Gawai Mapal Tunggul* (Festival of Cutting off the Stump); *Gawai Nangga Langit* (Festival of Building a Ladder to the Sky); *Gawai Lesung Nangga Hari* (Festival of the Mortar Ascending the Day); *Gawai Nangga Raja* (Ritual Festival of the Ruler's Ladder); *Gawai Tangga Meligai* (Ritual Festival of the Ladder to the Protected Place); and *Gawai Tuah Bungai Raja* (Festival of the Orchid of Good Fortune). Even though these festivals are having similar traditional and ritual significance to the Ibans in the early

days, there were also various differences in the proceedings of each of these respective festivals.

Among the Ibans who are practicing their traditional beliefs, there is a strong belief that all good things are derived through the benign nature of the gods, and man should reciprocate this benevolence by performing appropriate rituals and by making offerings (Masing 1997:23). Thus, among the Iban in the early days, the celebration of various traditional festivals, in which chants were sung and offerings made, was a very important post-harvest activity.

Traditional festivals are the most elaborate and sacred form of festivals celebrated by the Ibans who are still practicing traditional beliefs. Unlike modern-day festivals, traditional festivals may be celebrated or organized during any month of the year, as and when members of the families of a particular longhouse feel it appropriate or convenient for them to do so.

Thus, it is during the various proceedings of the traditional festivals, from the beginning till the end, that the Ibans displayed their mastery in various types of their oral traditions such as invocatory chants (*timbang*); *sampi & biau*; *renung*; *pantun*, etc. It is also during the festivals that major aspects of their traditional knowledge are being highlighted for their visitors to witness. It is also during the festivals that the products of the material culture, especially woven blankets (*pua' kumbu'*); woven jackets (*baju kebat or baju burung*); intricately-woven rattan mats and others are being used and displayed during the duration of their traditional festivals. It is also during the festivals that Iban's culture of generosity and kindness in entertaining their guests (*pengabang*) are openly displayed. Free flows of Iban traditional rice wine or rice beer is also a common act of generosity offered to the visitors throughout the festivals. Various kinds of food are served in large quantities during the festivals. In other words, during Iban traditional festivals, besides numerous rituals which are carried out, the atmosphere of the festivals are that of merry-making and traditional entertainment.

In the early days, Iban families regularly organized or sponsored traditional festivals in which ritual chants were performed to seek blessings from gods and spirits. Traditional Iban farming families believed that their luck in getting a good harvest from their paddy fields and becoming more prosperous could not always be guaranteed. Thus, they needed to seek divine intervention from their gods, particularly *Antu Tuah* (God of Fortune) and *Simpulang Gana* (God of Farming), through sponsoring traditional festivals.

The Iban, especially those who are still practicing their traditional ways of life, believe that rituals cannot be performed or have meaning without the presence of their gods (*petara*). However, the gods will not come to visit them unless they are invited through sacrificial offerings and chanted invocations. The invocation of Iban gods who are believed to live in the sky as well as in lands far across the sea demands a challenging voyage as the messenger spirits have to invite these deities to come and attend the traditional or ritual festivals as highlighted in the chanted invocations.

Ritual offerings are of great importance to the Iban while celebrating their traditional festivals. For instance, when they make their offerings on the gallery, as well as on the terrace of their longhouse during festivals, they are inviting their gods to come and assist them in various aspects of their lives. In addition, they are also making offerings to appease unfriendly spirits so that they will not disturb the smooth proceeding of the festival. In view of its ritual importance, the act of making the offerings has always been highlighted throughout festival proceedings and must be carried out in accordance with established

protocols. Jensen (1974:79) appropriately describes the importance of ritual offerings to the Iban when he writes “No ritual is ever observed without *piring*’ (*Nadai pengawa’ siti’ ke enda’ diintu’ enggau piring*).

The importance of Iban traditional festivals are further demonstrated in the elaborate process of preparing for these festivals. Iban traditional festivals require numerous preparations which need to be carried out in accordance with the cultural and religious practices of Iban society. Each activity has its own specific significance to the family as well as to the longhouse community as a whole. Despite variations between different regional settlements of Iban in Sarawak, there are certain procedures that are similar, if not exactly the same, that need to be followed while making preparations for major traditional festivals.

The decision to hold a festival may be made at the initiative of the organizers, or alternatively, it may be commanded by some spirit visitor. When members of the families feel that a major festival should be held, the heads of the families will hold meetings where they will discuss the proposed festival. Once they have agreed to hold a festival, they will decide on a suitable date for it. Then, various preparations will have to be carried out before the actual day of the festival. The importance of Iban cultural practices such as the spirit of cooperation, the display and usage of material culture, the concept of longhouse dwelling, and their oral literature which include their traditional songs (*lekamain lama*) such as *pantun*, *jawang*, *ganu*, *sanggai*; and their ritual chants (*lekamain asal*) such as *sampi*, *biau*, *timbang*, and *renung* are prominently demonstrated and highlighted during traditional festivals.

From the beginning till the end of traditional festivals, the importance of the above-mentioned culture is demonstrated and highlighted. However, over the years as more and more Ibans are no longer organizing or celebrating traditional festivals, some categories of their culture and traditions are not only endangered but in some instances going to be moribund. To support these observations, I have highlighted various categories of Iban cultural practices related to Iban festivals in this article. At the same time, I am discussing the endangerment and moribundity of each of the major aspects of these cultural practices in relation with the current practice of celebrating Iban festivals, namely Dayak Festival or *Gawai Dayak*.

(a) Traditional Knowledge of Rice Wine Making

In the early days when Ibans organized and celebrated their traditional festivals, it is a must for them to produce large quantity of rice wine or rice beer. Thus, prior to any traditional festival, an Iban family in the past had to brew large quantity of traditional rice wine (*tuak*). The glutinous rice used to make the rice wine had to be cooked in large quantity using sections of young bamboo stems (*ruas*). This task, called *ngepi*, involved rituals which we strictly followed. An eight-part offering (*piring kali’ lapan*) was placed on top of a stout bamboo pole receptacle (*teresang*) near the site where glutinous rice was to be cooked. This offering was very important to ensure that there would be no unfortunate incident happening to any member of our longhouse community before or during the festival.

The making of rice wine requires special expertise on the part of Iban women. Without proper knowledge, the women cannot produce good rice wine for use during major traditional festivals. From my observations, longhouse women in the seventies up to the nineties were generally capable of producing good rice wine to be used during their ritual festivals.

(b) Inviting Guests

In the past, the tradition of inviting friends and relatives from other longhouses (*bepadah ngabang*) had always been practiced as it enabled local communities to maintain close rapport and communal relationship with each other. Thus, members of a longhouse community who were organizing a festival would send out invitations to their relatives living in different longhouses in the same riverine area or in other parts of the district. They had to go personally to invite their relatives and friends to come to their longhouse for festive celebrations.

As such, when Ibans were celebrating their traditional festivals, they did not celebrate their festivals on the same date or at the same time. For example, along a certain stretch of a riverine system, there were normally a few longhouse settlements. After harvesting season, the Ibans from different longhouses along the same riverine areas would liaise with each other in order to fix the dates for their festivals. Each longhouse would organize their traditional festivals at different dates, usually at intervals of a few weeks or months. This is to enable their relatives and friends to come in big number to join them in their celebrations. By doing this, the Ibans in the past had always been able to have close rapport with each other.

(c) Culture of Co-operation (*besaup & beduruk*)

In the early days, traditional festivals were held over a duration of few days whereby lots of meat and fish, besides other forms of jungle produce, were needed to be served to a big number of guests coming from other longhouses. According to the Iban culture, food and drinks must be abundantly served to guests throughout the duration of the festival. Moreover, some of the smoked wild meat and fish were not only for human consumption, but also for ritual offerings (*miring*) throughout the festival. In view of this, it was mandatory for longhouse men to go to the jungle to look for supplies of wild meat and fish. The Iban term for this activity is *begiga*, which literally means 'foraging'. In the actual sense, it refers to an organized hunting and fishing trip to the jungle by a group or groups of men a week or even earlier from the date of the festival. By adopting this cultural practice of cooperation in looking for wild meat and fish, the Ibans in the early days could always maintain close rapport among members of the community while at the same time could ensure that all families in the longhouse concerned were having enough supplies of meat and fish for use during the festival.

(d) Spreading the Mats

The culture of spreading the mats during major traditional festivals is of great importance to the Ibans who organize them. A few days prior to the festival, longhouse families must spread (*nganchau*) their big mats (*bidai*) throughout the gallery of their longhouse. The grander the festival is, the longer is the period required for the laying out of their big mats in the gallery of their longhouse. For instance, during the Ritual Festival of the Red Bamboo Pole Receptacle (*Gawai Teresang Mansau*), five days are allocated for the laying out of mats before the actual festival begins. During the Hornbill Festival (*Gawai Kenyalang*), which is one of the most important Iban ritual festivals, eight days are needed for laying out the big mats throughout the gallery before the actual festival begins. The reason for this is because of the ritualistic significance which Iban families who organize the festivals have to observe.

During major festivals, not only human guests are invited to the festivals, many friendly as well as unfriendly spirits are also coming to join the celebration. Thus, longhouse galleries (*ruai*) must be properly covered with rattan mats as sign of respect to human as well as spirit

guests. These mats must not be folded throughout the festival duration. Mats could only be folded a few days after all the proceedings of the festival have been completed, or after a week in the case of major festivals.

(e) Welcoming the Guests

During traditional festivals, the term of 'welcoming the guests' (*ngalu pengabang*) has more than just its normal meaning of welcoming and receiving guests. It is believed that the Iban gods (*bala sida Keling, sida Laja, sida Kumang, sida Lulung*) are also around and they need to be welcomed properly to the festival. They are among the most important guests (gods and spirits), besides human beings, and need to be accorded a proper welcoming ceremony. For this reason, all the guests who have already arrived earlier in the longhouse are asked to go out from the longhouse and be given an official welcoming ceremony, accompanied with ritual offerings by family members who are organizing the festival.

The Iban elders who are assigned to carry out certain responsibilities during the festival will be given priority throughout the welcoming ceremony. Dressed in full traditional costume, they are invited to enter the longhouse first, followed by other guests. The gods are believed to be among the human beings and will enter the longhouse after being accorded a formal welcoming ceremony. When they enter the longhouse, the leader of the entourage will be asked to spear a domesticated pig which has been placed at the entrance. They are also asked to throw prepared eight part offerings (*piring tembu sekali lapan*) from the staircase, in addition to the offering of drinking rice wine while entering the longhouse.

The cultural importance of the traditional practice of welcoming all the guests to our house during festivals is that we are always giving equal recognition to our visitors who are visiting us during our festivals, irrespective of who they are. Today, even though the Ibans are still observing the tradition of welcoming visitors to their houses during their festivals but the concept is different from the past, especially among those Ibans living in the urban areas.

(f) Erecting the Ritual Shrines

In traditional festivals, the cultural practice of erecting ritual shrines has to be properly observed and carried out by all households in the longhouse. To the Ibans who are still attached to their old belief (*pengarap lama/asal*), ritual shrine are having great cultural and ritual significance to them, thus they took great care in making sure that their shrines are properly set up at the middle parts of their open galleries (*ruai*). The following are brief description of the ceremony while setting up the ritual shrine.

As soon as the welcoming ceremony is over and all the guests have been seated, erecting the altar or ritual shrine (*pandung*), the ritual centre for the celebration, takes place at the middle of the gallery or verandah (*ruai*). Each family sets up their own shrine (*ranyai*) in the middle of their own verandah. A ritual shrine includes items such as a bamboo frame, a basket containing the offerings, a trophy head (if there was any), a coconut, a cordyline plant, a spear, a basket of charms, a vine, a sword, a mat and a woven cloth (*pua' kumbu'*) to be wrapped around the shrine, areca nuts, and *isang* (split young shoots of jungle palm).

During the setting up of the shrine, a ritual offering is carried out. The thirty part offering (*piring kali tiga puluh*) is prepared and placed inside a gong (*bebendai ke ditelentang*) at the base of the shrine. This is called an offering for the setting up of the shrine (*piring tanam*). Another offering of fifteen part (*piring tasak puak- kali lima belas*) will be placed inside an

offering basket (*kelingkang*) and hung in the middle of the shrine. The shrine is erected with offerings inside it, as well as other ritual items for which a blessing is sought. Thus, this ritual shrine has great significance to the families who are celebrating their traditional festival.

(g) Welcoming the Spirits (*Ngalu Antu*)

Literally, *ngalu antu* refers to the welcoming of the spirits, in particular the powerful ones, who can bring prosperity to the Iban if they are properly welcomed to the festival. However, these spirits can also be unfriendly if they are wrongly or inadequately welcomed during traditional celebrations. One of these spirits is the legendary King of the Tigers, *Raja Remaung*. In view of this, the welcoming ceremony for *Raja Remaung* has to be carried out in accordance with ritual protocols that need to be precisely observed by all of those taking part.

This welcoming ceremony is carried out in the late afternoon, around 3.00 to 4.00pm, on the terrace of the longhouse (*tanju*). During the ceremony, various rituals have to be performed by Iban elders specially selected to perform them. Besides ritual offerings to the spirits, the ritual chant (*renung ngalu antu*) is chanted by an experienced bard (*lemambang*) for a duration of half an hour or so. In this chant, the bard narrates the invitation and the procedure of welcoming *Raja Remaung* for the family which organizes the festival. Before the bard begins, all of those nearby are told not to make unnecessary noise or do things not related to the ceremony, otherwise they may get cursed by the spirits.

In accordance with Iban traditional belief, various types of food such as meat, fish and fruits have to be offered uncooked to *Raja Remaung* as soon as he arrives at the longhouse. The spirit of *Raja Remaung* is believed to be around during Iban ritual festivals after being properly welcomed, bringing luck and wellbeing to members of the longhouse community. The ceremony of welcoming the spirits is not only having its ritual significance to the sponsoring family, but the ritual chant (*renung ngalu antu*) is being narrated by the bard using poetic language which is highly rich in its meanings and wordings.

(h) The Chanting of Invocatory Chants

Throughout the proceedings of traditional festival, invocatory chant is chanted by the bards and Iban elders who have deep knowledge of rituals related to traditional festivals. Invocatory chants, besides having great ritual significance, they also reflect the unique cultural identity of the Iban as a community.

In fact, during all major Iban traditional festivals, such as *Gawai Teresang Masau*, *Gawai Kelingkang*, *Gawai Kenyalang* and many others, it is mandatory for invocatory chants to be chanted by the bards for a certain duration of days, depending on the scale and type of ritual festival. The Iban, especially those who are still practicing their traditional beliefs, believe that rituals cannot be performed or be meaningful without the presence of their gods (*Petara*). However, their gods will not come to visit unless invited through sacrificial offerings and chanted invocations. The invocation of Iban gods who are believed to live in the sky as well as in lands far across the sea demands a challenging voyage as the messenger spirits shall have to invite these deities to come and attend the ceremony. The chanting of the chant is directly connected to the proceedings of the festival carried out by members of the organizing family.

The bard, together with his two or three assistants (*orang ke nyagu*), dressed in their traditional costume, such as the bard's tunic (*baju lemambang*), or Iban traditional shirt (*baju burung*), shall begin the chanting around 6.00pm inside the living room of the host family. Before they begin, a ritual offering is performed there. This is to appease the spirits and seek blessing for the chants to be chanted. The invocatory chant is chanted for half an hour or so before the bard and his assistants proceed to the gallery (*ruai*). The chanting of the invocatory chant takes place on the gallery of the longhouse where the bard and his assistants walk slowly from the gallery of the host family to each gallery of the other members of the longhouse community, then back to the host family gallery, back and forth, back and forth until all the galleries in the longhouse have been 'connected' to the host gallery throughout the whole proceedings of the festival.

As mentioned above, various proceedings related to the festivals are carried out simultaneously with the chanting of invocatory chants throughout the festival. During the proceedings, ritual offerings (*miring*) are carried out as directed by the elders of the host family. These proceedings are of great importance to the sponsoring family.

So, when Ibans are no longer organizing or celebrating traditional festivals, then there is less recitation of invocatory chants during their festivals. When there is less need for the chants, they also do not need bards. Without the bards, there would not be many chants being chanted thus we are losing the beautiful poetic language and words from our oral traditions.

(i) "Snatching" -Ngerampas

Towards midnight there was an important ritual called *ngerampas*, literally, 'snatching'. This ritual was carried out by the head of the sponsoring family. This activity symbolizes the act of snatching the "head trophies" by the Iban in the early days when they fought against their enemies. The details of this act of snatching are highlighted and narrated by the bard in his invocatory chant. In the festival, coconuts hung with strings by the side of the shrine are symbolically regarded as head trophies and are snatched and cut off by the head of the host family during the act of 'snatching'. The verses of this ritual chants of *ngerampas* are also highly rich in their meanings and significance. Without traditional festivals these ritual chants are no longer being chanted. So, this particular type of ritual chant is soon forgotten from the practice of Iban oral traditions.

(j) Receiving & Praising the Head Trophies

In accordance with Iban traditional practice during the early days, head trophies obtained by the men who came back from their war expedition had to be ritually received by the women as soon as the men arrived at the longhouse. While receiving the head trophies, the women, dressed in their woven skirts (*kain kebat*) could use only a certain kind of woven textiles such as *Rang Jugah*, *Gajah Meram*, *Sempuyung* and a few others. The act of receiving (*nyambut*) and praising the head trophies, as well as praising the brave acts of the warriors was carried out by a few selected women. This act was symbolically performed for about half an hour, after midnight, on the first day of the festival whereby Praise Song for Head Trophies is chanted.

(k) Welcoming the Arrival of the God of Good Fortune

In certain kinds of traditional festivals, such as the Ritual Festival of the Offering Container for Good Fortune (*Gawai Kelingkang Tuah*), a large portion of the proceedings is allocated to the

invocatory chant and rituals related to the seeking of charms for good fortune from the god of good fortune (*Antu Tuah*) who is believed to be living in a land far across the sea.

Towards the morning of the second day of the festival, after the slaughtering of the first pig on the terrace (*tanju*) of the longhouse, the ritual ceremony of welcoming the arrival of the god of good fortune was carried out in the living room of the host family. As soon as the god of good fortune and his entourage entered the longhouse in the early morning, they were given a warm and rousing welcome by members of the sponsoring family as well as other members of the longhouse community.

The bard described this important episode with various poetic and classical words through his *Renung Ngalu Antu Tuah*, praising *Antu Tuah* for his willingness to visit the Iban family during the festival. *Antu Tuah* reciprocated by thanking the Iban family for giving him a warm welcome and for taking so much time in preparing for the ritual festival. *Antu Tuah* then took out all the potent charms and assortment of properties which he had brought along with him. These were symbolically delivered to the Iban family during the welcoming ceremony. Here again, the bard used poetic words in chanting responses from *Antu Tuah*. This ceremony took about an hour in the living room of the Iban family. It was held in the early morning of the last day of the main part of the festival. There were various activities being performed at the same time while the bard chanted his chant. Among them were the performance of sacrificial offerings and the slaughtering of the pig whose liver was read and interpreted by experts who could predict the future well-being of the family. Guests, other family members and relatives who were present during the ceremony were asked to be attentive and not to do other things, until the whole proceeding had been completed.

After the ritual ceremonies of welcoming the God of Good Fortune and other related ceremonies of the festival had been completed, the main parts of the ritual festival were considered almost complete or near an end. Thus, the ceremony of dismantling the ritual shrine was carried out after all the guests had been served breakfast. In certain festivals, the shrine which had been set up was not completely dismantled as their structures were still left intact in the middle of the gallery for the next few days. This was because the invocatory chants for the festival would not be completed for another two days.

(I) *Pantun* (Iban Traditional Songs)

During festivals and social gatherings, in the past and continuing to the present, Ibans have entertained their friends and guests through an oral tradition called *Pantun*. *Pantun* are traditional Iban songs which are very entertaining and employing poetic and classical Iban words while communicating various forms of subtle messages to friends and guests. Embedded in these entertaining communications are various hidden objectives which are regarded as sensitive and inappropriate to present, using normal forms of verbal communication.

Among the objectives are (i) praise and honor for a person for his/her achievements in life; (ii) information about the hardships and difficulties the singer is facing with the hope that other people can help to lessen her/his burden, (iii) inspiration for a person who is already well known for his bravery or social status in the society to achieve greater success in life; and (iv) advice to a person so that he/she can have a more exemplary character in life. *Pantun* are normally sung to important guests or visitors during festivals and social gatherings.

Pantun also are sung by women to men and vice versa, after all the important proceedings of a festival have been completed. At such time, the spirit is one of playfulness, couched in poetry and idiom in *Pantun* which do not carry real or actual meanings or objectives. For example, through a *Pantun Sayau* or *Pantun Keran*, a woman pours out numerous words or phrases informing the man that she likes and interested in him. She also can tell the man that it is too late for them to fall in love as both of them are already having families of their own. However, what she communicates in her *pantun* should not be taken seriously by the other person or other people who are listening to her *pantun* as what she says are just for jokes. In other words, *pantun* are also being sung in order to create jokes with friends and guests so as to make the festival and social gatherings more merrier for those who are present.

(m) Calling Back a Wandering Soul

During any ceremony in which the bard sings invocatory chant, he has to recall his own soul to the Land of the Living at the end of the chant. This is necessary as it is believed that during the singing of the chant, the soul of the bard is also travelling together with the messenger spirits to various places in the world of the deities and spirits. The Iban believe that these places are not only inhabited by the deities but also by spirits which are not friendly to human beings. And, the bard wants to make sure that his own soul has returned safely to this world. Failing to do so would endanger his health after completing the singing of his chant.

The following is a chant for recalling the soul as sung by the priest bard, *Kumbang*, after he completed the chanting of his invocatory chant during one of the ritual festivals held in Kapit in the 1980s:

*“Enti’ sema’ daun penyindang enggi’ de’ mensuli’ aki’ agi’ bedau,
Asuh anjung ini’ Megi’ ke ngibun tali pesara.
Pulai semengat kitai, pulai ngagai jalai besai saka’ raya.
Ngambi’ semengat kitai beserambat pulai ke menua,
Ngambi’ semengat kitai ulih datai di serarai rapi’ uma.
Semengat kitai pulai ke ai’ endur kitai mandi’ besungga’ ngela
Ada betegana’ semengat kitai dibai’ Nyala’ niki’ tangga’ begeran sempana.
Betegunu’ semengat kitai dibai’ niki’ ke tanju’ pandang gunggu’ bulan segala.
Beiring-iring semengat kitai dibai’ Bekaing nuntung di timbung perening naga.
Laju semengat kitai dibai’ Megu lalu diulu ke anak China.
Nya’ baru semengat kitai betegana’ tama’ lalu dikurung ini’ Lambung,
Di tengah tajau menaga, ditudung enggau ubung gung Jawa.
Nya’ baru semengat kitai mimpi berimbai enggau indai Sempandai Dara,
Semengat kitai udah berimbai enggau Jawai Dara Inya.
Baru semengat kitai mimpi bebanding enggau Keling seduai Laja
Udah ditepang ini’ Manang enggau bintang betungku’ tiga.*

*Semengat kitai udah ditanggung manang Lambung ke punjung rabung penama.
Gayu semengat dibai’ Mampu nguan menua.
Gerai semengat kitai dibai’ Sempandai selama iya.”*

English version of a chant for recalling the souls:

“If your leaves for signage are still available dear grandfather,
Let us ask *Ini’ Megi’* who looks after our lifeline to send it back,
Let our souls go back to the junction of our main road,
So that our souls shall slowly go back to this world,
So that our souls can reach the edge of our paddy field,
Let our souls go back to the river where we used to take our bath,
Walking steadily, our souls being escorted by *Nyala* (deceased relative),
climbing a staircase.
Walking steadily, our souls being escorted,
climbing to a drying platform of a longhouse.
Walking back in bee-line our souls led by *Bekaing* (deceased relative),
reaching our homeland.
Walking fast, our souls being escorted by *Megu’* (shaman),
and led by the Chinese youths.
Soon our souls arrive at our home and are kept safely by shaman *Lambung*,
inside a heirloom jar, covered with a brass gong.
Then our souls shall have a dream of being seated next to *Sempandai Dara*,
Our souls have been seated with the legendary heroine, *Jawai Dara Inya* .
Then our souls shall have a dream of being together with the legendary heroes,
Keling together with *Laja*.
Already blessed by the old shaman with three bright stars.
Our souls have been uplifted by shaman *Lambung*,
to the top of a well-known mountain.
Long life, our souls are protected by shaman *Mampu* in this world.
In good health, our souls are protected by *Sempandai* forever.”

(n) Rolling up the Mats (*Ngiling Bidai*)

A few days after the end of the festival, a ritual ceremony of *Ngiling Bidai* or *Ngiling Tikai* is carried out. The ceremony of *ngiling bidai* requires an eight part ritual offerings and the slaughtering of a chicken to appease the spirits. The ceremony is performed by the host family, together with other members of the longhouse community. The ritual ceremony of *ngiling bidai* does not necessarily mean the actual act of rolling up the mats, as it may be just a symbolic act with a specific objective. The objective of *ngiling bidai* is to let the god (*Petara*) and the spirits (*Antu*) know that the festival hosted by the longhouse community has ended. By doing this, the unfriendly spirits who might be still wandering around the longhouse know that the human beings have ended their festival, thus prompting them to leave and subsequently enabling the longhouse community to live peacefully thereafter.

It has to be noted that just before the ritual ceremony of *ngiling bidai* takes place, the longhouse chief will look for the augury stick (*paung burung*) of *burung Nendak*, usually along a riverbank. The reason for using the augury stick obtained from *Nendak* is because this bird has always been associated with good health and prosperity by Iban families. The augury stick shall be used to sweep all remnants left on the galleries of the longhouse after the festival, thus making the environment more habitable for members of the longhouse community.

4. CONCEPT AND CHARACTERISTICS OF IBAN FESTIVAL TODAY

After highlighting the proceedings of the traditional festivals above, it is appropriate also to highlight the current concept and characteristics of Iban Festival in order to assess the extent of endangerment affecting Iban traditional festivals today. The idea for modern-day festival, known as Gawai Dayak or Dayak Festival was first mooted in 1957 by a few Iban leaders. However, the British colonial government during that time, in fact until 1962, refused to recognize the Dayak Day, as it was known during that time. They thought that the Dayak communities (comprising of Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu) could become politically motivated to oppose the British colonial rule.

When Sarawak gained independence through the formation of Malaysia in 1963, Gawai Dayak was officially gazetted on 25th September 1964, and it was first celebrated on 1st June 1965, by all Dayaks, whether they were Christians or still attached to their traditional beliefs. Since then it became a symbol of unity, aspiration and hope for the Dayak communities. Today, it has become an integral part of Dayaks social life.

For the Ibans, it is homecoming for their family members who work in towns or on adventures and employment-seeking sojourns domestically or overseas, and a reunion with family members after being separated all year long.

For those who are still involved in farming, it is a thanksgiving day marking a bountiful harvest. It is a time to showcase Iban's hospitality, traditional costumes, traditional foods and drinks, and cultural presentations. Gawai Dayak is generic in nature and meant to mark the festive season for all Dayaks regardless of their tribes and religions. For the Ibans who still maintain their traditional beliefs, they celebrate the festival in customary ways by giving offerings to their deities, benevolent spirits and ancestral spirits. The Christian Ibans who are increasing in number celebrate their Gawai (festival) on 1st June with prayer sessions with their family members as well as other members of their longhouse community, if they still live in longhouses. They also attend church services during Gawai Day to fulfill their customary obligations by giving prayers to God Almighty.

The concept of modern-day Dayak or Iban festival is certainly very dynamic to suit the current trend of livelihood of the Iban people in this multi-racial society. It is a manifestation of Dayak identity, not only for the Ibans but also for other Dayak groups, that comes in the forms of ceremonial procedures, hospitality, traditional costumes, foods and drinks, as well as cultural performances. Despite the increasing endangerment to Iban traditional festivals, visitors, from far or near, who are visiting Sarawak are still assured of being able to witness various cultural performances, experience Iban hospitality, and enjoy Iban food and their unique dishes. However, there will be very few cases whereby Ibans are still celebrating traditional or ritual festivals.

5. FACTORS THAT LEAD TO THE MORIBUNDITY OF TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS

From what have been discussed and highlighted above, there are clear indications to show that Iban traditional festivals are getting more and more endangered today. In fact, it is facing a great potential to be moribund in the near future. One of the main factors, as mentioned above, for it to be heading towards moribundity is the changing trend of livelihood among the Ibans today. This changing trend is not only having direct impact on traditional festivals but also on other aspects of Iban cultural practices and their oral literature. Among the main factors that lead to the demise of Iban traditional festivals are as mentioned below.

The present trend of rural-urban migration among rural communities in Sarawak has also increased the prospect for endangerment of traditional festivals among the Ibans today. For the past 30 years or so, increasing number of Ibans are migrating to town centers looking for off-farm employment due to lack of employment opportunities in rural areas. As a result, those Iban who are settling down in urban centres are gradually losing interest practicing their own culture, including losing interest in observing traditional festivals. When Ibans settle down in the towns, various forms of cultural practices are gradually discarded, including the need for organizing traditional or ritual festivals.

The Ibans who are still attached to their traditional beliefs are getting fewer and fewer today. The younger generation of Ibans prefer to have new religion, especially becoming Christian. Being Christians they are no longer celebrating traditional or ritual festivals, instead celebrating the normal Gawai Dayak on 1st June every year. However, many of them still value the traditional concept of their festival whereby they showcase their traditional costumes, traditional foods and drinks and cultural performance amidst the influence of modern entertainments and contemporary food culture.

Moreover, the involvement of Iban in hill rice farming, which is closely related to the celebration of traditional festivals, is also sharply declining. Rough estimate puts it as not more than 50 per cent of the Iban are still actively involved in hill rice farming today. Even then, those Ibans who are still involved in hill rice farming are using their own convenient Christian method of praying while invoking blessings for their farming activities. Thus, their post-harvest festivals are no longer traditional in nature.

With rapid encroachment by and stiff competition from both electronic and print media for various forms of cultural products attractive to a wide spectrum of Iban audiences, Iban cultural practices, which is impermanent by its very nature, is in imminent danger of vanishing. One of these is the celebration of traditional festivals. The moribundity of traditional festivals has major impact on other aspects of Iban culture and oral traditions.

6. IMPACTS OF THE MORIBUNDITY OF TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS ON THE IBANS

From the information which have been highlighted above, it is evident that some aspects of Iban culture and traditions are increasingly endangered, as a result of the moribundity of Iban traditional festivals. There are a number of issues affecting the Iban people today as a result of the increasing endangerment which shall lead to the moribundity or extinction of traditional festivals.

6.1 Problems in Preserving and Disseminating Knowledge on Iban Cultural Practices and Oral Literature

Ibans today are facing increasing problem of trying to preserve and disseminate the knowledge of Iban cultural practices and their oral literature to the younger generation of the Iban people, be they living in the longhouses or already settling down in urban centres throughout the State or even in other parts of the country. As a result of the impending demise of traditional festivals, many aspects of Iban cultural practices and oral traditions which are related to traditional festivals are no longer being chanted or used by the Ibans who are celebrating their modern-

day festivals. Thus, this valuable knowledge is gradually forgotten, especially by the younger generation.

The major aspects of these cultural practices and oral traditions which are greatly endangered as a result of the impending demise of traditional festivals are as highlighted below:

(a) Traditional Knowledge of Rice Wine Making

Today, unfortunately many younger Iban women, especially those who have migrated to urban areas, could not make good rice wine. Worse still, some of the young women just do not know how to make rice wine. So, what is the implication of this to Iban culture of using rice wine while celebrating festivals? To the Ibans it is mandatory to have rice wine to be used while making offerings to the Gods and spirits as well as to be served to the guests during their traditional or ritual festivals. However, some of the Iban households in urban areas find it convenient to buy beer and other alcoholic drinks which are readily available from the shops in all the towns throughout Sarawak. To some Ibans, it is a symbol of status to be able to buy and serve branded alcoholic drinks to their guests during festivals. Unfortunately, they are not aware that by serving and consuming other alcoholic drinks, without any rice wine, is defeating the idea of celebrating Iban festivals.

(b) The Cultural Practices of Inviting Guests During Festivals

Nowadays, the cultural practice or the tradition of inviting guests (*ngambi ngabang*) during festivals is no longer being widely followed by the Ibans in the rural areas. The Ibans tend to celebrate their festivals with members of their respective longhouse only. Moreover, all the Ibans are celebrating the modern-day festival, called Dayak Festival or Gawai Dayak on 1st June every year. During this festival, the culture of visiting relatives and friends in the different longhouses are not conveniently practiced as each longhouse is having their own festival on the same day. It is also not always possible to visit others living in different longhouses which are far from their own longhouse on the same day.

This cultural practice is important to the Iban community but it is increasingly endangered. This culture is important, as it enables local communities to maintain close rapport and communal relationship with each other.

(c) Culture of Co-operation (*Besaup & Beduruk*)

Today, the situation related to the culture of cooperation among the Ibans has changed drastically. Most members of the longhouse community prefer to buy their supplies of meat from the towns during their Gawai celebration on 1st June every year. Those who can afford shall have more meat and other supplies for use during the festival. On the other hand, those who could not afford shall be contented with the minimum supply of meat and other necessities. It is common today to see the Ibans, even in the longhouses, are more individualistic, caring for their own families instead of sharing food supplies with their relatives or other members of their community.

(d) Spreading the Mats

The culture of spreading the mats during major ritual festivals is of great importance to the Ibans who organize them. During major festivals, not only human guests are invited to the festivals, many friendly as well as unfriendly spirits are also coming to join the celebration. Thus, longhouse galleries (*ruai*) must be properly covered with rattan mats as sign of respect to human as well as spirit guests. These mats must not be folded throughout the festival duration. Mats could only be folded a few days after all the proceedings of the festival have been completed, or after a week in the case of major festivals.

Today, during modern-day Gawai festival, either held in the longhouses or in individual houses in urban areas, the cultural practice of spreading the mats (*nganchau bida*) is no longer being carried out using proper rituals and tradition.

(e) The tradition of welcoming the Guests

The cultural importance of the traditional practice of welcoming all the guests to our house during festivals is that we are always giving equal recognition to our visitors who are visiting us during our festivals, irrespective of who they are. Today, even though the Ibans are still observing the tradition of welcoming visitors to their houses during their festivals but the concept is different from the past, especially among those Ibans living in the urban areas.

(f) Cultural Practice of Erecting Ritual Shrines

During modern-day festival, the concept of erecting the shrine or *ranyai* is entirely different from those carried out in the early days as mentioned above. Today, no doubt Ibans are still erecting shrines during their festivals but their shrines are no longer perceived as having ritual significance. Their shrines are just symbolic in nature, for entertainment purpose only. It is very common to see only food items are being hung around the shrine. There is hardly any farming or cultural artifacts being placed or put inside or even around the shrine.

From the Iban cultural perspective, it is appropriate to set up a ritual shrine depicting the Iban traditional practice of farming, at the very least, in a symbolic form. In this way, the meaning of celebrating the festival shall be reflective of the Iban cultural heritage whereby traditions are always adhered to properly. There should be more cultural representations of traditional harvest festival being highlighted during the festivals. After all, we are calling the festival which is celebrated annually by the Ibans as their harvest festival to celebrate the end of their harvesting season and seek greater fortune in the coming years.

g) The Knowledge of Invocatory Chants

Throughout the proceedings of traditional festival, numerous ritual or invocatory chants are chanted by the bards & Iban elders who have deep knowledge of rituals related to traditional festivals. Ritual chants, besides having great ritual significance, they also reflect the unique cultural identity of the Iban as a community.

So, when Ibans are no longer organizing or celebrating traditional festivals, then there is no more recitation of invocatory chants during their festivals. When there is no more need for the chants, they also do not need bards. Without the bards, there would not be any chants being chanted thus we are also losing the beautiful poetic language and words from our oral traditions. Thus various ritual chants and traditional songs which reflect the identity of the Ibans as a community were widely presented during traditional festivals have been discarded. Thus, during modern-day festivals, these chants and songs should not be forgotten, instead should be chanted and sung as this gives the Ibans their unique cultural identity. There are a number of useful traditional songs and ritual chants which are increasingly endangered with the impending demise of traditional festivals. Among them are ***pantun*** (Iban traditional songs), ***sampi, biau*** and ***renung*** (ceremonial oratories and traditional prayers). As an Iban traditional song, *pantun* is indeed a form of communication which can be effectively used to entertain guests and friends besides acting as a medium for imparting various messages on love, friendship, development and problems faced by the Iban society. *Pantun* experts are still in great demand, not only during festive celebrations but also during other social gatherings and functions.

Sampi, biau and renung are not only important because they are needed for invocation during traditional festivals but also because of the richness of language used in the chants. However, the celebration of Iban traditional festivals has been getting less common nowadays thus the performance of important rituals, including ritual chants, is also getting less and less. The language used in ritual chants is also going to be endangered in the coming years.

(h) Rolling up the Mats (*Ngiling Bidai*)

A few days after the end of the festival, a ritual ceremony of *Ngiling Bidai* or *Ngiling Tikai* is carried out. Today, during modern-day Gawai festival, either held in the longhouses or in individual houses in urban areas, the tradition of folding the mats (*ngiling bidai*) is no longer being carried out like it was done in the past. In many instances, the concept of *ngiling bidai* had often been wrongly interpreted to the extent that this ceremony was conveniently and ceremoniously used by certain longhouse residents as official functions while welcoming politicians to their longhouses, even though the date of 1st June for celebrating Gawai has long been over. In some instances, even after more than a month of the celebration on 1st June, the ceremonies of *Ngiling Bidai* are still being carried out. This is not the procedure for any ritual festival organized by the Ibans who are still attached to their traditional belief.

6.2 Efforts in Teaching Iban Oral Literature in Schools

Efforts to teach Iban oral literature in schools, from primary right up to the institutions of higher learning, are facing various obstacles. For example, relevant materials written for text books or as reference materials for those who are teaching Iban language as well as for the students who are taking Iban language as an elective subject in schools or colleges are still lacking, as reported by some teachers when contacted over the matter.

Teachers who are teaching Iban language and those who are training to be teachers, are likely to face problems of trying to learn the sounds and actual lyrics of Iban oral

literature because those Ibans who are expert in these knowledge are getting fewer and fewer nowadays. The younger Ibans are not keen to learn the knowledge from their elders. As a result, traditional knowledge on Iban oral literature is getting less and less, more so, with the demise of Iban traditional festivals.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

From the above article, there are clear indications to show that Iban traditional festivals are heading towards its demise in the near future. As a result of the impending demise of traditional festivals, other aspects of Iban culture have also been gradually endangered over the years. The changing trend in livelihood, effects or impact of modernization and constant contact with other communities, has made it unavoidable for the Ibans to be subjected to cultural adaptation, leading to the discarding of certain aspects of their culture.

- 7.1 Despite this trend of development, ideally, certain aspects of Iban culture which are good and important for their identity as a race should be preserved. However, the question to be posed and asked to members of the Iban community is how should endangered Iban culture be better preserved for the benefit of future generations? To many of us, the Ibans must coordinate efforts to further preserve their culture, irrespective of whether they are still practicing their traditional beliefs or already embracing Christianity.
- 7.2 The Iban NGOs or other interested parties must play more active roles in preserving and disseminating endangered Iban culture. A more coordinated and sustainable approaches must be adopted by Iban non governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Sarawak Dayak National Union (SDNU), Sarawak Ibans Association (SADIA), Sarakup Indu Dayak Sarawak (SIDS), etc. Besides concentrating on organizing and sponsoring Kumang and Keling Gawai competitions during Dayak Festivals on 1st June every year, these NGOs should also organize competitions for reciting and chanting of various categories of Iban oral literature. The main objective of such competition is to inculcate sustainable interest among the younger groups of Ibans to learn and appreciate Iban culture and oral traditions.
- 7.3 The religious beliefs of the Iban traditional society pervaded every aspect of their lives, and religion became a principal medium in which social and moral behaviour found expression. These facets of Iban traditional society and culture must be appreciated if a proper understanding of their history is to be preserved for the benefit of future generations. One of the ways by which this can be done is through the publications of recorded research materials on Iban cultural practices and oral traditions so that they can be assessable to younger generation.
- 7.4 As years have gone by, as with other communities, various changes have taken place among the Iban. While only a small number of Ibans are still organizing or sponsoring traditional festivals, there are increasing numbers of Iban families who are Christians are celebrating Iban festivals in a modern way. Today, all Ibans are celebrating their festival which is called *Gawai Dayak* on 1st June every year.

Since traditional festivals are directly related to Iban traditional beliefs and traditional hill rice farming, the practice of hosting and sponsoring traditional festivals is getting rare among Iban communities in Sarawak today. However, it is important that a record of the proceedings of traditional festivals is preserved to enable the younger generations of Iban to have a proper appreciation and understanding of why these traditional festivals had a great cultural importance in the past.

- 7.5 More importantly, the authorities tasked to plan and implement syllabus for the teaching of Iban language in schools and institutions of higher learning must continue to be productive and effective in ensuring that Iban cultural practices, especially Iban oral traditions are not seriously endangered in the coming years.

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