International Journal of Engineering & Technology, 7 (2.29) (2018) 639-641

International Journal of Engineering & Technology

Website: www.sciencepubco.com/index.php/IJET

Research paper



The Function and Role in the IBAN Social Rank in their Communities

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Abstract

The Sea Dayaks, better known as the Ibans, inhabit nearly the whole of Sarawak. The Ibans belong to the Proto-Malay groups and historically, they were from the Kapuas Valley in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. They migrated to Sarawak about fifteen generations ago in the mid 16th century (the 1630s). They went to the state through the Kumpang Valley and inhabit Batang Ai and then split to several places in Sarawak (Morgan, 1968). Although the Ibans have a social status in their traditional belief, they do not have a hierarchy of social status such as the Orang Ulu. However, they have elevated the status so-called Pengulu, Tuai Rumah, Tuai Burung, Lemambang, Manang, Beliau, Tukang Sabak, dan Indu Takar. The era of modernization has led to changes to the knowledge of the young generation, especially the younger generation of the Ibans who lack knowledge about the function and role of each rank status in their communities. Therefore, this study was conducted qualitatively through an interview with expert informants, observation, and documentation. This research was hoped to contribute to the general knowledge of the Iban community and other communities in the preservation of the function and role of each social status in the Iban community.

Keywords: *rank status; function; role*

1. Introduction

The Iban or known as the Sea Dayak is the largest ethnic group in Sarawak. Almost the entire state is inhabited by the Iban community. The majority of this community live in groups in the Iban longhouse, typically located near the waterfront and close to the highway to facilitate daily activities and communicate with each other. There are four main settlements of the population distribution of the Iban community in Sarawak, namely Sungai Saribas, Skrang River, Sungai Batang Lupar, and Rajang River.

When James Brooke first came to Sarawak in 1839, most Iban people lived in the Second Division. However, at the end of the 19thcentury, they were in the whole state. One important aspect of their way of living is their unique longhouse, which until now remains a symbol of identity and solidarity, although, in some states, the Ibans are no longer living in the longhouse.

Thus, according to Jensen(1), in a meeting between the *Tuai-tuai rumah*, *Lemambang*, *Tuai Burung*, and *Penghulu* of Batang Lupar, Batang Ai, Saribas, and Batang Krian held in Harden (Sri Aman) in 1961 to discuss the customs, culture, and ritual of the Iban, they found that they agreed on many things with regard to customs, stories, and oral literature even during the time they were separated by distance and time and never met to discuss matters concerned. For instance, people who are similar to the Iban community in terms of language, religion, culture, and customs are the *Muallang Dayak* and *Dayak Desa* located in Kalimantan, Indonesia.

2. Literature Review

Ibans do not have a hierarchy of social status such as the Orang Ulu in their lives. However, they have elevated the status of *Pengulu*, *Tuai rumah*, *Tuai Burung*, *Lemambang*, *Manang*, *Beliau*, *Tukang Sabak*,and *Indu Takar* or *Gaar*.

The post of *Pengulu* (chief of administration) was created in 1883 during the reign of Raja Brooke. Among the responsibilities of the leader are to carry out administrative tasks, collect taxes, and administer several villages (2).

Ahmad et al.(3) examined the non-Malays and found that the indigenous people of Sarawak also have headmen. *Tuai rumah* is the person responsible for maintaining the safety and security in the region. In addition, he is also responsible for solving problems such as marriage, divorce, regulations, and celebrations. Two important ceremonies determined by the *tuai rumah* were appointing the date of Gawai harvest festival and celebration of '*Beranyai*'. Meanwhile, the responsibility to maintain the normative order for the Iban community centers in each domain consists of a longhouse chiefs (headmen) and chairman of other local community leaders (4).

In 2007, Christina studied the Iban community that found that they are rich with spirituality and faith which are delivered in an oral tradition. In the Iban community, some spiritual practices such as main *tuai burung* (forecasters, mainly associated with rice cultivation), *tuai rumah* (longhouse chief), *lemambang* (poet) and *manang* (shaman) are common. *Manang*, which is not a witch in the Iban community has knowledge of animism that can cure people affected by *Empa Ubat* (magic) and *tau tepang* (the evil eye). The beings in the spirit world faced by *manang* is *Petara* (gods) which is known as good-natured and well-disposed to human evil, while the *Panggau* (mythical hero) is believed to use their power to help the people who are elected. *Antu* is also believed as the spirits divided between good and evil.

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Anna (5) stated that the *tuai burung* refers to the people who have a very high knowledge and expertise in the science of animism. *Tuai burung* can get in touch with the supernatural as the spirit of ghosts, gods, and goddesses or the fine is believed to live in the supernatural called *Panggau Libau* and *Gelung Nakung*. *Tuai burung* can hold sacred rituals associated with the spirit of ghosts, dream cartilage (nightmare) or a bad omen. Sometimes *tuai rumah* can be a *Tuai burung* if his knowledge of animism is high.

"Semina kami ke manang aja tau meda enggau nangkap semengat, kita ke Iban enda tau"(6)) .

The above statement means that only *manang* can capture subtle spirit or soul. Regular Ibans are unable or prohibited to do it. This is so because *manang* has high knowledge of animism and areable to communicate with spirits.

".... *manang* are shamans or medicine men and *lemambang* also the poet. *Timang* or *Pengap* will be done by *lemambang* especially during Gawai celebration ritual .... both of them will say prayers and give way to the world after death " (7).

During *Gawai Antu*, *Tukang Sabak* involves in the act of mourning which aims to call all the spirits of the dead in this world. Although researchers have described the background of a slate as a 'spirit guide', which is completely a non-aesthetic role, it actually involves sailing a life. On the other hand, *manang* focuses exclusively on the role of death. Due to this, *lemambang* and *manang* are correlated with death, while the back slate is not allowed to provide special (*melah dekuh*) for manang during the normal healing ceremony (8).

According to an informant, Evelyn Anak Majit, *semengat* (soul) is in cooperation with the body. *Semengat* can switch the body spirit through a dream. The death of *semengat* is believed tomake time unrestricted in age, (the dead), and then spread into the fog that eventually will be absorbed into the rice. Only *manang* can view and control the movement of an individual's *semengat*. Regular Iban community does not have the ability to control them or *semengat* in dreams. Their dreams can be controlled by the gods and are considered revelations and messages. The Ibans interpret dreams as a guide in developing their way of life. In this way, a dream can bring innovation and change to an Iban's life, which will hold a new ritual and reinterpret the spiritual world.

Besides that, those who are skilled in the field of traditional Iban medicine are known as *Beliau*. *Beliau* also have the knowledge in fortune-telling (seers) and ability to cure the sick as exposed to artificial persons.

Anna (5) explained that *Beliau* can cure people affected by man-made (black magic), diseases caused by violation of rules or taboos such as weaving, carving, and weaving motif that are characterised by the animal within the community (smoked) like a tiger. In addition, a *Beliau* is also believed to have knowledge of making people strong, brave, and triumph (science merciful) so that they can fall in love and compassion to people who use drugs or medication that involves incantation charms. Accordingly, *Beliau* also hold a charm firewall and repellent. The amulet firewall is a kind of talisman that can protect a person from the exposed witchcraft, while *Sakang* is capable of pushing back the evil to the person who creates it.

Other than that, women are also given a status in Iban community. While men are known for their courage and bravery in *ngayau* (head hunting) expedition, the Iban women who are highly skilled in crafts such as weaving and weaving are known as *Indu Takar* or *Indu Gaar*. This statement is equivalent to the opinion of the researchers who played the (9). He said that before the title *Indu Takar*, the Iban women should undergo a ritual related to the art of weaving or equivalent to the level of headhunting.

According to West of Lars Krutak(10), a cultural anthropologist and archaeologist in his book titled The Tattooing Arts of Tribal Women, the injured are believed to be the host of saints. This is in relation to many aspects of the traditional culture of the Dayak Iban, especially in the seances, spiritual ceremony, and reception for heads of enemies.

Lars Krutak (10) found tattoo as a major symbol in the Iban community. It is a token of appreciation in the investment activities of decapitating the enemy to defend the area disturbed or invaded by the enemy. Therefore, a tattoo motif counted at the bottom of the thumb is known as *tegulun*. In addition, the one who manages to cut the enemy's head is eligible for *tegulun* tattoo as a symbol of victory and splendor. Severed heads will be hung in front of his door in the house for a long period of time to upgrade his social status in society. If he is part of the Iban community, he will be held as a *Bujang Berani*.

For the Iban women, only women who are skilled and have the expertise in weaving and weaving activities are recognised in the Iban community. This means only women who are capable of weaving *pua kumbu* and weaving *Tikai Buah* are worth having a tattoo-called *Pala Tumpa*. Motivated tattoo *Kala* (scorpion) and *Kemebai* (Centipede) will be carved from the wrist almost to the elbow but (Figure 1). Even tattoed with *Kemebai* and *Kala*, both motifs are known as *Pala Tumpa*. Normally, *Pala Tumpa* is counted by descent derived from grandmother to mother and to her virginity, with conditions that weaving activities are also passed on until she is proficient and becomes an expert. Iban girls with a tattoo *Pala Tumpa* have a higher social status than the regular Iban women who are also known as a *Indu Takar* or *Indu Gaar*.



Fig. 1: *pala tumpa*

The findings by Lars Krutak(10) showed that the tattoo as a symbol of the Iban community is associated with social status and expertise in looming and weaving activities of the Iban women.

3. Methodology/Materials

Awang (11) explained that fieldwork is a pillar of cultural research. Fieldwork is also the researchers' cultural personal experience of living together with members of the community they want to study. It is done as a scientific research science where the study is very much dependent on the notes and descriptions that the researchers have gathered. Time, environment, and personal factors of the researchers influence the experience and involve almost all life activities of members of the community studied.

In this study, the research methodology used by the researcher was a qualitative study. The quantitative method was not used as this study was more focused on data collection through interviews, observations, and documentation.

The targeted group in this study were the younger generations of Iban people aged 12 to 30 years old. This is because the younger generations of the Iban community have no widespread knowledge of the function and role of social status in their own society. Interviews were conducted with twenty young people, ten of whom were young and residing in urban areas, while the rest were young people living in the village.

In Sarawak, there are many younger generations of Iban communities. However, only twenty people were chosen for this study. This selection was done based on the ability of an individual's knowledge in explaining, listing, and clarifying each social status that exists in the Iban community. However, as a whole, the majority of their answers were their own general knowledge. This means that although they know the names of each social status, they have no knowledge background in explaining in detail of the function and role of each social status stated.

4. Results and Findings

After conducting a field study, it was found that Iban young people are less knowledgeable about their own social status in traditional belief. The majority of the young informants only knew the names of social ranks and did not have the knowledge about the function and role of each social rank status.

Time was the main factor for the young Iban people not being well-informed and having less interest to know the status of the social rank of their own society, especially the younger generation who are born and raised in the city. Compared with younger informants who live in villages and are raised in the Iban longhouse, they were able to identify the name of each rank status, function, and role. This is because they are being exposed to an environment revolving the culture and heritage for generations. Table 1 presents the data for the knowledge of the 20 young Iban informants on the social status in their traditional belief.

Table 1: Interview results of 20 young Iban informants regarding their knowledge about social status in traditional belief.

Informants number	Able to list social status correctly	Able to explain the function and role of each social status
1.	√	√
2.		
3.	√	√
4.	√	√
5.	√	
6.		
7.	√	
8.		
9.	√	√
10.	√	√
11.		
12.		
13.		
14.		
15.		
16.	√	
17.		
18.		
19.	√	√
20.	√	

Apart from that, most young people are unaware of the social status the Iban women have, which are *Indu Takar* or *Indu Gaar*. Here are the results of a study which found that *Indu Takar* still exists in parts of Sarawak.



Fig. 2: *pala tumpa*
(Source: Field work, 2013)



Fig. 3: *pala tumpa*
(Source: Field work, 2013)

According to an informant, Robert Mayau who also practices the traditional tattoo in the Kapit area, the tattoo motif representing *Indu Takar* known as *Pala Tumpa* can be identified by counting the wounds on both wrists.

Therefore, this study is very important in contributing to the knowledge, not only to the younger generations of the Iban community but also other people who are interested to learn more about the power status of the Iban community.

5. Conclusion

Each rank status contained in the Iban community has distinct roles and functions since the reign of Brooke. Each rank status, duty, and responsibility are fairly and equitably regulated according to the laws written in the indigenous Iban community. In addition, Ibans do not entirely dependent on the men in their duties. In fact, their women also contribute their function and role in the society. However, to be selected in a group of women who have elevated status, one must have skills in the art of weaving handicrafts and looms. The women who have the status in the Iban society can easily be identified by looking at the tattoo motif on their wrists. In contrast with the men, they were chosen to be the head when the chief of the village was killed during the *Ngayau* (head hunting) expedition in order to defend the threatened village by their enemy.

Although time has changed, the younger generation should be exposed to the knowledge of the social status power in their communities. This is because this culture should be maintained so that it will not fade away and eventually disappear. Therefore, this study aimed to preserve the Iban culture that has the elevated status in society. Through documentation and publications on the roles and functions of each Iban rank status, the Iban culture allows maintenance to be eternal and as a source of knowledge, especially for the younger generation of the Iban community in the future.

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