

Rethinking “Dead” Objects: Baya Pandang and the Cultural Lives of Iban Artifacts in Sarawak Museum Collections

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ABSTRACT

Museums are among the most important institutions safeguarding indigenous cultural heritage. However, their colonial institutional origins have often obscured the original uses, values, and meanings that cultural materials hold for the indigenous communities who created and continue to claim them. This study examines three Iban cultural objects held in the Sarawak Museum that are widely assumed, within a Western museological frame, to have lost their significance once removed from their original cultural and social context. Drawing on Iban epistemology, and specifically the concept of *baya pandang*, this paper questions that assumption. In Iban cosmology, *baya pandang* refers to material items associated with the dead that are displayed as symbols of mortality rather than carried into the afterlife; read as a broader interpretive lens, it suggests that material culture can retain memory, personality, and spiritual significance rather than simply “dying” once its original symbolic or functional role has ended. The study draws on Jan Assmann’s theory of cultural memory, Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s decolonizing Indigenous methodology, and Theodor Adorno’s critique of the museum as tomb. The findings suggest that, within Iban cosmology, cultural objects retain much of their cultural meaning through their continuing connection to the community from which they came, so that meanings that have faded from everyday practice can still play an active role in the lives of those who engage with them. In doing so, the study contributes to museology from an indigenous standpoint, foregrounding indigenous cultural memory and voice in debates on decolonizing museums as sites for the reconstruction of ancestral culture. The study adopts a qualitative approach that combines literature review, museum collection analysis, fieldwork observation, and semi-structured interviews with Iban elders and cultural experts.

Keywords: Baya Pandang, Decolonial Museum, Indigenous Epistemology in Museums, Sarawak Museum, Iban Culture and Heritage.

INTRODUCTION

The material culture inherited and maintained by the Iban community of Sarawak reflects their social structure, cosmology, and shared memory within the longhouse system, a defining feature of their cultural identity across generations. Within Iban life, cultural artifacts extend beyond mere physical utility, serving as living repositories of knowledge, identity, and spiritual lineage passed from one generation to the next (Sellato, 2016). In indigenous material culture more broadly, the making and exchange of everyday objects is closely bound up with local understandings of the natural world, ancestral lineage, and dialogue with the supernatural (Miller, 2002; Cameron, 2024). For the Iban, material culture therefore extends far beyond a set of domestic goods; it also embodies the community’s spiritual needs and social identity (Tugang & Kiyai, 2022; Kiyai, 2026a).

Iban cultural materials such as *pua kumbu*, *duku ilang*, *tikai bebuah*, and wood carvings play a central role in the community’s traditions and customs. They serve as an important map and anchor, connecting history, cultural

memory, and oral tradition, reflecting Iban beliefs about the natural world and the great forces the Iban regard as protectors, rulers, and, at times, sources of disaster. This framework is reinforced by a mythology in which the world is imagined as an unblemished utopia known as *dunya panggau libau*, home to deities such as *Dewa Keling*, *Dewi Kumang*, and *Petara* (Gavin, 2004; Sellato, 2016; Kiyai & Tugang, 2021). This worldview is expressed not only through custom, ritual, and oral tradition, but also through the aesthetic and material dimensions of Iban culture, through art, craftsmanship, and creativity that sustain the networks connecting people, landscapes, ancestors, and belief systems.

The Iban cultural environment has changed considerably over the past two centuries. The arrival of colonial rule under the Brooke family (1841-1946) introduced elements of British culture and belief, including the spread of Anglican Christianity among the Iban through the British Empire (Jarvis, 2022). In Sarawak, Anglican mission work was first directed at the Malay community, but because that community was already firmly established in Islam (Osman, 1990; Koepping, 2002), missionary attention later turned to the Dayak ethnic groups, primarily the Iban, with the explicit aim of steering them away from the practice of *ngayau*, or headhunting, amid the wider political upheavals of James Brooke's rule (McDougall, 1882; Runciman, 1960; Kiyai, 2022).

The spread of Christianity contributed indirectly to a broader cultural integration of Iban tradition and colonial influence. As a result, many objects once central to Iban ritual and communal life gradually lost their original function and are no longer part of everyday Iban life: the *antu pala* relic, once a mark of pride from the battlefield; the *papan turai*, a medium for transmitting Iban oral tradition; and the *perau bangkong*, a vessel once used in both trade and the Iban war expeditions against colonial and rival forces. Although some of these practices have entirely faded from Iban community life, the objects themselves remain preserved in the Sarawak Museum Department's collection as recognized state and national heritage assets (Postill, 2000; Sim & Khan, 2014; Kiyai, 2026b).

This shift raises a difficult question about the role museums play in protecting indigenous heritage. Even though Sarawak has long been part of the Federation of Malaysia since 1963 (Milne, 1963; Bin Mansor et al., 2024), the loss of these objects' original function has drawn relatively little sustained attention, in part because museum practice in Sarawak still largely follows a Western curatorial model built around exhibition and visitor experience. This tension is captured well by the metaphor of the museum as a "tomb." Adorno (1981) argues that within the communities that made them, indigenous cultural objects are not merely items for display; they carry a form of life through their history, inheritance, and continued use. Separated from that context, he suggests, an object's "social meaning" is understood differently, and something of its life story is lost. Adorno argues that museums should move away from an object-centered approach and toward one that foregrounds the relationships between objects, communities, memory, and cultural practice. Similar concerns run through much of the literature on indigenous museum studies, where scholars have increasingly questioned the history of colonial collecting and argued for centering source communities in the interpretation and management of their own heritage (Clifford, 1997; McCarthy, 2007; Kreps, 2013).

The concept of *baya pandang* offers an Iban epistemological alternative to this framing. Within Iban cosmology, cultural material is understood as a visible expression of the relationship between memory, lineage, and ongoing social presence. *Baya* refers to personal belongings that accompany the deceased's spirit to *Sebayan*, the Iban realm of the dead; *baya pandang*, by contrast, refers to objects displayed only as symbols of Iban mortuary custom rather than carried into the afterlife with the deceased, they serve as "views" signalling that the deceased no longer functions within the living social community (Varney, 2012; Tugau et al., 2020; Sather, 2021). This study uses *baya pandang* as an interpretive lens through which to read the Iban artifacts held at the Sarawak Museum: not as inert historical specimens but, from within Iban epistemology, as material relations that continue to mediate connections among the living, the ancestors, and collective memory. Building on this, the study aims to interpret Iban cultural materials that are widely treated as functionally and symbolically "dead" from the standpoint of Iban epistemology, using *baya pandang* as an alternative to the Western museological framework within which Sarawak's museums currently operate.

It is worth being explicit about where this study fits within existing scholarship. A substantial body of work has theorized the changing meanings of museum objects in general terms: Appadurai's (1988) account of objects' "social lives," Kopytoff's (1986) cultural biography of things, and Gell's (1998) attribution of agency to objects all show that material culture does not simply become static once it enters an archive or collection. What this literature does not do is engage with any Iban-specific framework for understanding how meaning can persist once an object's original function has ended. To our knowledge, no prior study has applied *baya pandang*, an epistemology rooted in Iban conceptions of death and remembrance, to the interpretation of museum collections. This is the gap the present study addresses, and it is also the paper's central contribution: rather than importing a general theory of object biography, it offers a culturally specific indigenous framework through which the Sarawak Museum's Iban collections, and potentially other indigenous collections facing comparable questions, might be reinterpreted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Material culture serves as an important mechanism through which collective memory is reflected across indigenous societies, functioning as a dynamic repository of a community's historical trajectories, values, and social knowledge. As Assmann (2011) observes, cultural memory depends heavily on symbolic frameworks, ritual practice, textual tradition, and material objects to preserve and communicate shared meaning across generations. In indigenous contexts, these material forms often become tangible expressions of the knowledge and social identity that communities have built up over generations.

Among the Iban, material expressions remain closely tied to oral history, mythology, and customary law (*adat*) (Kedit, 2009; Davenport, 2000; Gavin, 2019; Kiyai & Tugang, 2023a). These materials serve as physical expressions of social memory, connecting traditional communities to contemporary Iban life and their ancestral roots (Chalmers, 1997; King, 2017; Kiyai, 2021a). Their

Historically, museums have positioned themselves as neutral custodians responsible for preserving, curating, and interpreting material heritage. As Sandahl (2019) notes, this is not merely a conceptual claim but a foundational principle of global museum philosophy, ethics, policy, and practice. Twenty-first-century museums have gradually shifted from institutions focused on preserving objects to institutions that also promote community participation, diversity, social justice, and decolonization. This shift has reoriented much of the subsequent research on cultural heritage and on how museums represent indigenous communities, their rights, and their voice. Bennett (2013), for example, argues that museums function not simply as archives but as ideological spaces that shape cultural narratives through their selection, classification, and display choices.

Clifford (1997) shows how ethnographic collections often reflect histories of colonial acquisition, particularly where indigenous communities are concerned; seen this way, museum objects risk becoming detached from the practices, relationships, and epistemologies that produced them. Kreps (2013) responds with a framework of “appropriate museology” that calls for local knowledge systems to be built directly into the curatorial method, while McCarthy (2007), through her work on Māori collections, shows that source communities actively renegotiate the meaning of their material heritage even after institutional relocation. Museum artifacts, on this view, are not passive relics of a dead era but sites of ongoing reinterpretation and dialogue. Appadurai (1988) develops this further by describing objects as having complex “social lives,” with cultural value shifting as objects move across historical and social contexts; Kopytoff (1986) extends the point with his account of the “cultural biography of objects,” in which material things undergo repeated changes in meaning and identity across their lifespan. Gell (1998) goes further still, attributing a form of agency to cultural objects and arguing that they actively shape human action, perception, and social relations rather than functioning as passive instruments. Taken together, this literature shifts the focus from static material form toward the evolving relational and symbolic meanings objects generate over time, a shift particularly relevant to indigenous artifacts, whose significance rarely rests on functional use alone.

It is worth acknowledging that this relational, decolonial reading of museum objects is not the only position within museum studies. Classical museology and much of the heritage-conservation literature emphasize the museum's role in physically safeguarding fragile or historically significant material culture: providing stable environmental conditions, professional conservation expertise, and long-term public access to objects that might otherwise be lost, damaged, or dispersed (Sandahl, 2019). From this standpoint, museums are valued precisely for the institutional distance and expertise that allow them to protect heritage regardless of the political history behind their founding. This paper does not treat that conservation function as illegitimate or as in competition with the account offered here; rather, it argues that an indigenous interpretive framework such as *baya pandang* can operate alongside institutional conservation, adding a layer of meaning that a purely custodial approach does not provide on its own.

Within Iban cosmology, *baya pandang* offers an alternative to both the relational-object literature discussed above and conventional museum classification. Rooted in Iban conceptions of death, in which certain possessions accompany the deceased to Sebaran, the concept holds that objects need not lose their meaning once their earthly function ends; rather, their significance shifts toward memory, lineage, and cosmic continuity. Read through this lens, the Iban artifacts held in the Sarawak Museum can be understood, from within Iban epistemology, not as inert historical specimens but as material relations that continue to mediate connections between the living, the ancestors, and collective memory.

It should also be said clearly that the meanings attached to these objects are not themselves fixed or timeless. The significance of *antu pala*, *papan turai*, and *perau bangkong* has shifted historically, from their original ritual, martial, or communicative functions, through the disruptions of colonial contact and Christian missionary influence, to their current status as museum-held heritage objects read through the *baya pandang* framework. The contemporary community interpretation documented in this study is therefore itself a historically situated reading,

shaped by the same processes of social and religious change that have also shaped the museum's own narrative, rather than a single, timeless, or uniquely authentic account of what these objects mean. We return to this point in the Discussion.

This study draws on *baya pandang*, alongside Assmann's theory of cultural memory and Smith's decolonizing methodology, to examine how this reinterpretation operates in practice across three case objects (Figure 1).

Assmann: cultural memory	Smith: decolonizing methodology	Adorno: museum as tomb (critique)
↓ converge on the Iban epistemological lens ↓		
<i>Baya Pandang</i>		
<i>Antu Pala</i>	<i>Papan Turai</i>	<i>Perau Bangkong</i>

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Three Theoretical Lenses Converge On The Iban Epistemological Concept of *Baya Pandang*. Which is then applied to interpret the three case objects examined in this study

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design that combines literature and archival reviews, museum collection analysis, field observations, and semi-structured interviews. It focuses on three Iban cultural objects held at the Sarawak Museum, namely *antu pala*, *papan turai*, and *perau bangkong*, and reads them through the framework of *baya pandang* (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than treating these objects as static museum specimens, the study asks how they are interpretively reconstructed, remembered, and given new context where institutional museum practice meets Iban ways of knowing. Fieldwork was carried out from January 2021 until March 2022 (15 months) at the Sarawak Museum Department, including the Borneo Cultures Museum's exhibition spaces and collection storage, and across the four community areas described below.

I write this as a member of the Iban community myself, raised in a longhouse for thirty-six years, fluent in the language, and exposed from an early age to the oral transmission of Iban cultural knowledge. That background opened doors: it gave me access to informants and material that might otherwise have remained closed to an outsider, and it shaped much of the interpretive work in this study, from the questions I thought to ask to the significance I was inclined to read into what informants told me. However, it cuts both ways. As someone inside the culture, I may be predisposed to see continuity and vitality in practices that others, whether outside observers or even some community members, might read quite differently. Wherever possible, I checked my interpretations against what informants themselves said. In the Findings below, I have tried to clearly mark where a claim rests on interview data, direct observation at the museum, or my own cultural knowledge as an Iban community member, rather than allowing these three kinds of evidence to blend into one another. This remains a limitation worth naming plainly, and I return to it below.

Participants were identified through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling: a total of fourteen individuals, seven men and seven women, whose direct knowledge of the objects and practices under discussion made them relevant to this study. Initial informants, purposively selected for their recognized authority on Iban customary knowledge, were in turn asked to recommend other elders and cultural experts, allowing the research to reach individuals who might not otherwise have been identified through purposive selection alone. Four were practicing *lemambang* (ritual bards), all men in their fifties to seventies. Four were female elders (*tukang sabak*, *indu piring*, and *pua weavers*) with comparably long involvement in producing Iban cultural material, particularly *pua kumbu* weaving and mat plaiting used in ritual contexts; several had also assisted the men during ceremonies and *adat*. A further informant was an Iban curator at the Sarawak Museum, offering an institutional perspective alongside the community one. The remaining five were older-generation Iban community members consulted for their recollections and lived experience of these objects. Participants came from four community areas across Sarawak: Miri (specifically the Baram area), Limbang, Lubok Antu, and Betong (formerly Saribas). It is from their recollections of ritual and material practice, rather than from any single fixed locality, that this study draws its references to the Batang Saribas and Baram traditions. This sampling logic followed Indigenous Research Methodology rather than statistical representativeness: recognized authority on adat and customary knowledge, together with trusted recommendation within the community, were treated as valid and sufficient grounds for inclusion (Smith, 1999, 2012).

Table 1. Summary of Data Sources and Locations

Data source	Category/participants	Location(s)
Museum collection analysis & observation	Ethnology collection, exhibition galleries, and collection storage; consultation with 1 Iban museum curator	Sarawak Museum Department (Borneo Culture Museum)
One-on-one interviews (purposive sample)	4 sessions: practicing <i>lemambang</i> (ritual bards) and recognized cultural experts	Long house: Miri (Baram), Limbang, Lubok Antu, Betong (Saribas), Sarawak
Group interviews (snowball sample)	4 sessions: female elders (<i>tukang sabak, indu piring, pua</i> weavers) and older-generation community members	Long house: Miri (Baram), Limbang, Lubok Antu, Betong (Saribas), Sarawak
Archival & secondary sources	Published ethnographic, historical, and museological literature on Iban material culture and Sarawak colonial history	Museum Sarawak

Fieldwork spanned several months at the ethnology section of the Sarawak Museum Department, including time in the Borneo Cultures Museum's exhibition spaces and collection storage. Alongside this observation, interviews were conducted in two formats: four one-on-one sessions with purposively sampled experts and two group sessions with purposively sampled informants. Each session lasted between thirty minutes and one hour, depending on how much each informant wished to share, and all were kept deliberately relaxed and informal rather than tightly structured, giving informants room to recall memories and stories at their own pace rather than under the pressure of a rigid question-and-answer format. All sessions were audio recorded. Interviews were conducted in the Iban language, transcribed into Bahasa Melayu, and then translated into English; Grammarly was used only at this final stage to refine sentence structure and grammatical flow, with the underlying ideas, interpretation, and narrative remaining the author's own throughout. Interviews centered on how participants understood the three case objects, their ritual and social histories, and the significance these objects continue to hold for the Iban community today. Archival and secondary sources on Iban material culture and Sarawak's colonial history rounded out this picture.

Data were analyzed through an iterative, interpretive process. Transcripts and field notes were read and reread, recurring ideas and stories were grouped by theme, and these themes were carried forward into interpretation through three theoretical lenses: Assmann's (2011) theory of cultural memory, Adorno's (1982) critique of the museum as tomb, and Smith's (1999) decolonizing methodology. Together, these lenses structured the movement from empirical description toward the *baya pandang* framework set out in Figure 1, rather than functioning as a fixed coding scheme.

Throughout, fieldwork and interviews followed the reciprocity and community-protocol expectations central to Indigenous Research Methodology (Smith, 1999, 2012). Formal institutional ethics clearance was not sought for this study; ethical conduct instead rested on relational accountability to the community itself. All informants were told, before each interview, the purpose of the research, how their contributions would be used, and their right to decline or withdraw at any point, and interviews proceeded only with their verbal consent. This reflects Indigenous Research Methodology's broader emphasis on reciprocity, transparency, and respect for community protocol as the primary ethical framework, rather than reliance on formal institutional review (Smith, 1999, 2012). Except for Figure 5, whose informant gave explicit permission for the photograph to be published under their own attribution, all other informants are referred to using pseudonyms or generic descriptors (such as "Elder A" or "Lemambang A") throughout this study to protect their privacy, in line with standard practice for research involving Indigenous community members.

Research Limitations

Several limitations should be stated plainly. This study rests on three case objects and a purposively and snowball-selected group of fourteen elders and experts, so its findings are best read as a deep, situated account rather than a claim to represent Iban culture as a whole, or the Sarawak Museum's collections more broadly. Because participants were selected for their recognized customary authority, the sample leans heavily toward ritual specialists and elders; it does not include younger or more secular Iban community members, and the study cannot say whether these objects hold comparable meaning for them. Whether *baya pandang* resonates as strongly, or at all, outside this generation of custodians of adat is an open question this study does not answer, and one that future research, sampling younger and more secular informants specifically, would need to address directly. My own position as an Iban community member shaped both my access to informants and the interpretive lens I brought to the material; this almost certainly deepened the cultural reading offered here, but it also carries a real risk of interpretive bias, which I have tried to manage, though not eliminate, by checking my own readings against what

informants said, and by marking clearly, throughout the Findings, where a claim rests on interview data, direct observation, or my own cultural background rather than blending the three.

RESULTS

Reinterpreting “Dead” Cultural Objects Through *Baya Pandang*

Fieldwork data indicate that three Iban cultural artifacts held in the Sarawak Museum collection, the *antu pala* relic, the *papan turai*, and the *perau bangkong*, are not experienced by informants as “dead objects” once read through Iban cosmology. Although the practices that originally produced and sustained them are no longer widely observed in contemporary Iban life, informants described these objects as retaining cultural significance through collective memory, lineage identity, and the Iban cosmological framework. Read through the concept of *baya pandang*, this continuity offers what several informants described and what we take here as a strong alternative ontology for understanding the relationship between material culture, physical disuse, and symbolic continuity in Iban society. The account below draws on three kinds of evidence, which we distinguish throughout: interviews with named categories of informant (elders, *lemambang*, and the museum curator), direct observation of the objects and their museum display, and, where indicated, the author's own cultural knowledge as an Iban community member.

According to *lemambang* A, physical death in Iban cosmology is not an absolute end but a metaphysical transition from the mortal world to *Sebayan*, the world of the dead. In this understanding, a person is not truly gone even once their body is separated from the family and community lineage: through practices such as *ngangkat ka nama*, in which the names of deceased ancestors are given to grandchildren and great-grandchildren, something of their spirit and memory is said to remain in their descendants (Sather, 1982; Graham, 1987; Atkinson, 1989; Appell, 2001). Several informants drew a direct parallel with Iban cultural material: although an object's function may have been “buried” in community practice, its legacy, as informants described it, continues to be remembered and passed down as story across generations.

Elders A and B and *lemambang* B explained that *baya*, specifically, refers to the personal belongings of the deceased that are believed to accompany their spirit to the afterlife: clothing, tools, household items, woven textiles, and other possessions closely tied to the individual's worldly life. If the deceased were, for example, a skilled *pua* weaver, the cloth she wove during her lifetime would traditionally accompany her into the realm of death (Kiyai & Tugang, 2019; Tugau et al., 2022). On this account, an object's relationship with its owner does not end with physical death. Cultural objects, read this way, do not lose their meaning simply because their practical, worldly use has ended; instead, they undergo a shift in status while remaining part of the community's spiritual and social memory.

This is where the *baya pandang* framework departs most clearly from a conventional museum classification of these objects. Read through a colonial curatorial lens, cultural materials such as *antu pala*, *papan turai*, and *perau bangkong* are treated as obsolete once the practices that produced and sustained them are no longer widely observed. The *baya pandang* framework, by contrast, suggests that the end of a practice does not, in itself, empty an object of cultural memory or meaning. Rather than becoming passive historical fragments, informants argued, these objects continue to function in museum collections as active carriers of memory, community identity, and ancestral connection, much as communities themselves keep such objects alive within their own narratives.

This parallels how such objects are treated within Iban longhouses, where items such as *antu pala* are kept on permanent display as sacred family heirlooms, or *pesaka* obtained from war expeditions such as *ngayau* (headhunting). *Lemambang* C emphasized that these objects serve as tangible reminders of ancestral bravery, courage, and inherited social standing. On this account, the contemporary value of *antu pala* rests less on its physical presence than on the oral history, genealogical lineage, and memory it helps to anchor. Elders in longhouses, according to Elder C, routinely draw on such heirlooms as memory aids when recounting the deeds of legendary warriors, ancestral migration routes, territorial defense, and other events that continue to shape the longhouse's contemporary identity. In this account, then, even though the original ritual and social context of *antu pala* has largely disappeared, its cultural biography continues to be extended through oral storytelling and intergenerational transmission.

Taken together, these objects function, in informants' accounts, as material anchors of memory that connect personal biographies to broader communal histories, an interpretation consistent with Assmann's (2011) argument that material forms, alongside oral history and written archive, help sustain cultural memory over long periods. Read this way, what has “died” is only an object's original practical or productive function, not its cultural significance for the community that made it. *Antu pala*, *papan turai*, and *perau bangkong* continue, on this account, to carry meanings of courage, prestige, and historical identity in contemporary Iban life, sustained by their place in ongoing networks of memory, kinship, storytelling, and practice. An object may no longer move through the

material world as it once did, but informants suggest it retains an active presence through the stories it provokes and the identities it helps sustain.

The *baya pandang* lens developed in this study, therefore, repositions these objects: rather than as institutional “dead objects,” they are, from within Iban epistemology, living cultural entities that continue to speak through memory, oral history, and indigenous ways of knowing. Even confined to glass cases or climate-controlled storage, *antu pala*, *papan turai*, and *perau bangkong* continue, in this reading, to live on in ancestral history and in the distinct ways the Iban community understands and transmits knowledge. Their cultural life cycle, in other words, continues through memory, indigenous interpretation, and the ongoing relationship that present-day source communities maintain with their material heritage, a relationship in which the original function of the object is one important part of the story, not its final word.

Antu Pala: The Power of Courage in Iban Oral Tradition

The empirical material gathered for this study suggests that the *antu pala* relic shown in Figure 2 should not be read simply as a cultural fragment that ceased to function once Iban headhunting was suppressed. Historically, it served as a symbol of a victory trophy, comparable in informants' framing to a kind of “holy grail” around which inter-ethnic warfare in the region was concentrated, given its association with power and influence within the wider history of Dayak warfare in Borneo, including the geopolitics that now spans Sabah, Sarawak, Brunei, and Kalimantan. Before colonial rule, inter-ethnic warfare was widespread on the island, and headhunting expeditions against weaker communities were an established custom that generated fear and vigilance among neighboring groups (Jessup & Vayda, 1988; Andaya, 2004; Kiyai, 2021b).



Figure 2. *Antu Pala* (a skull regarded as a victory trophy by Iban warriors in the past), preserved and displayed in the ethnological collection of the Borneo Cultures Museum, representing the history of *ngayau* warfare and ritual objects that remain significant in Iban war history. (Source: Sarawak Museum Department, used with permission)

Beyond signaling the power and courage of Iban warriors, *antu pala* also featured in customary ceremonies and rituals, particularly those associated with hill-paddy cultivation. Iban society is agrarian, and rice holds a central place in Iban cosmology, custom, and ritual (Sather, 1980). According to *lemambang* D and A and elders A, B, and C, *antu pala* obtained through *ngayau* was understood as far more than a war trophy or a marker of individual courage: it was treated as a spiritual node capable of protecting the longhouse, supporting agricultural fertility, and anchoring healing rituals (Nyvak & Dunn, 1906; Perham, 1878). As Barrett and Lucas (1993) similarly observe, the meaning of ritual objects in Iban society stems from complex social and symbolic relationships rather than from their physical form alone.

James Brooke's intervention in Dayak, and particularly Iban, social structures contributed to a decline in the practical use of *antu pala* in social life. Between roughly 1841 and 1850, Brooke led a series of anti-piracy operations with several European officers, including Captain Edward Belcher, Captain Rodney Mundy, Captain Henry Keppel, Captain Farquhar, Lieutenant R. N. Wade, and Sir Thomas Cochrane (Ali, 2013; Kiyai, 2022), using warships such as HMS Dido and HMS Phlegethon against Iban communities that Brooke, drawing an explicit comparison to Viking raiders, labelled as pirates, particularly the Iban of Skrang and Saribas involved in the 1849 Perang Beting Marau (Beting Marau War) (Ali, 2019; Gin, 2025). Brooke's opposition to these practices, and the broader political changes it set in motion, contributed to the decline of the war traditions Iban warriors had once taken pride in, which in turn affected the practical role of the *antu pala* relic (Runciman, 2011). According to *lemambang* A and C,

the Iban community nonetheless continued to regard *antu pala* as a loyal guardian, believed to protect elders during hardship and to ward off harmful forces, and as a means of calling for rain during prolonged dry spells that threatened rice crops. This resonates with Freeman's (1955) classic study of Iban rice cultivation, which similarly documents the close relationship between agricultural practice and objects such as *antu pala*.

The decline of its original ritual function, however, has not erased the memory of *antu pala* from Iban community life. This is what informants described through the concept of *baya pandang*: an object may no longer serve its original function, yet it remains present in memory, in story, and in the value the community continues to place on it. Several elders and *lemambang* interviewed for this study spoke with evident pride about their ancestors' courage, describing *antu pala* as tangible proof of the skill of Iban warriors, a proof that, in their telling, underpins the collective philosophy captured in the phrase *agi idup, agi ngelaban*, meaning that as long as life remains in the body, the fight continues. Informants suggested that this philosophy continues to shape motivation and cultural identity, including within the modern Malaysian armed forces more broadly. From this Iban epistemological standpoint, then, informants argued that the object is not simply dead within Iban material tradition: it remains part of living memory, even where museum curators may understand it primarily as a marker of the past whose original function has ended.

Papan Turai: Preserving the Lemambang's Knowledge System in Visual Pictographs

According to *lemambang* B, and as shown in Figure 3, the *papan turai* functions as more than a memory aid for the *lemambang*. In this account, it operates as a kind of archive within Iban oral tradition and knowledge, akin to a large repository within the Iban indigenous knowledge system, recording not only prayers but also genealogies spanning thirteen generations across the Iban diaspora in Borneo, alongside the deities of the heavenly realm known as *panggau libau*, expressed through myth and folklore. Informants described this as an important means of ensuring the continuity of Iban culture. Although the board itself is used specifically by *lemambang*, the cultural knowledge it embodies, as informants explained, guides the wider Iban community across generations: even once parents or ancestors are no longer present, that cultural philosophy is carried forward through the *lemambang's* role as custodian of Iban socio-cultural life in the longhouse.



Figure 3. *Papan Turai* on Display at the Borneo Cultures Museum. Its original owner was a *lemambang* (bard), Imban anak Kutak of Baram; Tom Harrisson and Benedict Sandin later collected the board in the 1960s for the Sarawak Museum Department's collection. The board is associated with the *Gawai Batu* ritual, where it served as an aid to help the *lemambang* recall prayers, spells, and oral tradition. (Source: Sarawak Museum Department, used with permission)

Lemambang A and C likewise described how the visual, symbolic, and abstract pictographic elements of the *papan turai* allow the *lemambang* to reconstruct ancestral memory from oral tradition, transforming what is passed down collectively in the longhouse into a linguistic art form. This is valued, in their account, not only for its aesthetic qualities but for the historical values, guidance, and inspiration it offers, including stories of war and of powerful deities such as *Aki Lang Sengalang Burung*, the god of war who protects the Iban people, and *Ini Andan*, the moon goddess associated with healing. The *papan turai*, in this reading, serves as more than a mnemonic device; it also helps maintain ritual and spiritual propriety in traditional Iban society (O'Connor, 1975).

In the present day, the growing presence of Christianity, whether Roman Catholic or Anglican, has in many places taken over functions once held by the older Iban faith, rooted in animism and ancestral practice and known to informants as *pengarap lama*. This shift has altered the role of the *papan turai* within Iban life, particularly in helping the *lemambang* coordinate rituals and customs such as *mengap*, *timbang*, and *sampi*, which are part of the oral tradition long practiced in the longhouse. Some informants described this cultural material as effectively “dead”

in practice, since few *lemambang* today fully occupy the role as originally understood; some who describe themselves as *lemambang*, in their accounts, recite oral tradition without what informants characterized as the deeper spiritual grounding the role once required. Drawing on interviews with Iban *lemambang* and elders who continue to practice traditional Iban religion, one description offered was that a genuine *lemambang*, called by *antu* (spirit), is someone chosen for the spiritual strength needed to carry out Iban customs such as *Gawai* without error. On this understanding, the *lemambang*'s role extends beyond memorizing and chanting: it requires broad expertise in Iban custom and culture in the longhouse, since *lemambang* also serve as a point of reference for interpreting events, offering prayer, and giving guidance on matters affecting the Iban community (Freeman, 1961; Jensen, 1974; Kiyai, 2026a).

Within the museum's own curatorial framing, objects such as *papan turai* are generally presented as historical artifacts rather than living tools, limited to display for visiting audiences. This raises a genuine question the study takes seriously: is a “dead” *papan turai*, in the museum's terms, also dead within the Iban community's own framework of memory and meaning? Harrisson's (1966, 1970) earlier studies offer relevant context here, documenting how the Iban *papan turai*, particularly in the period before literacy became widespread in Iban communities toward the close of the nineteenth century, when Brooke-era schools began teaching reading and writing to local communities (Doering, 1966; Gin, 1990; Pawi et al., 2021). It is precisely this tension between a museum framework, in which the *papan turai* is understood as historical and inactive, and an Iban framework, in which its memory, meaning, and role in the community persist, that the concept of *baya pandang* is intended to illuminate.

Perau Bangkong: A Vessel of War Logistics in Iban Cultural Memory

The *perau bangkong* Sarawak's river system (Kiyai & Tugang, 2023b). Although inter-ethnic conflict was common in the Saribas region, there was also a political relationship between Iban and Malay communities: as Osman (1972) and Durin (2014) note, Malay officials of Arab descent, such as Sherif Usman and Sherif Mullah, held considerable influence in Skrang and Saribas by appointment of the Brunei Sultanate, which governed Sarawak before it passed to Brooke rule (Gordon, 1938; Tarling, 1992). Informants B and C, drawing on community memory, described these officials as having played a significant role in encouraging the *ngayau* (headhunting) practices already present in Iban culture, in turn motivating Iban warriors and contributing to their later opposition to Brooke's authority in Sarawak, led in the Skrang area by Rentap and in Saribas by the *Orang Kaya Pemancha* Dana and Linggir. This account suggests that *ngayau* practices were shaped not only by internal Iban dynamics but also by external political influences, helping to explain their scale prior to colonial rule.

Elders A, B, C, and D described the *perau bangkong* in Figure 4, as more than a means of transport in wartime: its significance, by their account, extends to the technological ingenuity it represents in navigating the Sarawak River, with its complex and, in places, narrow estuary and valley routes, and the fast-moving currents of Borneo's rivers more broadly. Irwin (1955) similarly records that Captain Henry Keppel's 1843 observations of Iban settlements along the Saribas River and Batang Lupar, communities then labeled as pirates, noted numerous *perau bangkong* along the riverbanks. Warren (2002) further notes that the vessel's speed and durability occasionally allowed it to outpace larger British ships operating in Sarawak waters.



Figure 4. *Perau Bangkong* on Display at the Borneo Cultures Museum. This boat belonged to a *tuai rumah* (community chief) named Dundang, who acquired it from a Malay trader, Ati of Sungai Rambas, in 1912 for fifty silver dollars; local accounts suggest the boat is now over a century old. (Source: Sarawak Museum Department with permission)

According to elders A, B, C, and D, the *perau bangkong* was not an ordinary vessel: its structure allowed it to be opened quickly for escape if surrounded, and its light weight meant one or two warriors could carry it. The example held in the museum collection, informants clarified, was not itself used in war but served as a trading vessel; Figure 5, shared by an informant with permission to publish, shows the type of *perau bangkong* actually used in *ngayau* expeditions in Tanu Betong, in the Sungai Saribas area. Together, these accounts point to the *perau bangkong* as a significant feat of Iban engineering, developed for wartime logistics. Lewis (2024) similarly argues that Iban warfare was governed by established social and cultural norms rather than being unstructured violence; within that framework, the *perau bangkong* served as a key technological medium enabling movement and tactical maneuver across difficult terrain, and, in informants' accounts, embodies the shared values and historical experience of the Iban community.



Figure 5. The Original *Perau Bangkong* Used in Iban *Ngayau* Expeditions in Tanu Betong, in the Sungai Saribas area. (Source: author's collection, shared with the informant's permission)

Although the *perau bangkong* no longer serves its original function in contemporary life, its historical significance remains prominent within the broader indigenous war culture of Southeast Asia, and its capabilities continue to be discussed in both domestic and international scholarship. Its memory, informants suggested, persists not only in Iban oral history and cultural memory but also in this wider scholarly attention. Read through *baya pandang*, the *perau bangkong* offers a way of engaging with the object's past significance through memory, appreciation, and inspiration, rather than through its original practical use alone. Several informants suggested that this framework has particular relevance for younger Iban who may be less familiar with this history, offering, in their view, a way to reconnect with a cultural identity rooted in the *ngayau* tradition of an earlier era; whether this is in fact how younger, less ritually engaged Iban read these objects is, as noted above, a question this study's sample cannot answer, and one worth pursuing directly in future research.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Across the three cultural materials examined here, each treated within a colonial museological frame as “dead,” “buried,” or “lost” in function and meaning, this study suggests that their significance is better understood through the epistemology of *baya pandang*, so that their memory and continuing relevance can be recognised on their own terms rather than only through a colonial lens that treats museum material as static and lifeless. Although these objects have largely ceased to serve their original practical function, informants' accounts suggest that something of their significance persists in memory, personality, and cultural trajectory within contemporary Iban life. *Antu pala*, *papan turai*, and *perau bangkong* may no longer fulfill the ritual or historical roles that first gave rise to them. Even so, informants suggested, they remain dense expressions of ancestral vision, historical experience, and shared memory. What appears to end, in other words, is the object's original arena of function, not necessarily its cultural

significance to the community. This pattern, evident across all three case studies and read through the *baya pandang* lens, suggests that functional obsolescence does not, by itself, extinguish an object's capacity to anchor memory, narrative, and community identity. This has implications for the broader debate in critical museum studies concerning institutional curation and the protection of indigenous heritage. The *baya pandang* framework challenges the assumption that museums function only as archives of a lost past; the case studies presented here suggest instead that cultural artifacts can retain an active social and cultural biography well after their transfer from the longhouse to the museum.

On this reading, Iban cultural material held at the Sarawak Museum Department need not be understood solely through a Western frame in which the museum functions as a tomb. In this space, objects are permanently laid to rest yet also serve as a site of ongoing dialogue between the Iban community and its cultural artifacts, sustained by historical memory and a cosmological worldview. This creates space for newer generations to bring a more indigenous and arguably more equitable interpretive lens to bear as they negotiate, decolonize, and reinterpret this material on their own terms.

It is worth being direct about a genuine tension the fieldwork surfaced: as an Iban researcher, my own reading of these objects as retaining a form of life sits in some contrast with the museum's institutional framing of them primarily as historical specimens. The argument advanced here is best understood as advocating for Iban epistemology to be given a more central role in the curation and interpretation of these collections, rather than as a neutral, external description of how the museum currently operates or as a claim that the museum's own staff share this reading. Indeed, the Iban curator interviewed for this study offered a view that, in places, aligned closely with community informants' emphasis on memory and lineage, and in other places retained a more conventional, historically framed account of the objects' significance; the two perspectives converge more than they conflict, but they are not identical, and this study does not treat the museum's interpretation and the community's interpretation as interchangeable.

This last point is worth separating on its own terms. Documenting how the Iban community understands *antu pala*, *papan turai*, and *perau bangkong* is not the same thing as the museum, or this study, adopting Iban cosmology as its own metaphysical position. A museum can accurately record, interpret, and display what these objects mean within Iban belief without thereby committing itself to the truth of that belief, much as an institution can present the theological claims behind a reliquary or an icon without endorsing them. What *baya pandang* asks of curatorial practice, on this view, is not that museums treat Iban ontology as their own analytical framework, but that they represent it accurately and give it real interpretive weight, alongside, rather than in place of, the museum's own historically framed account of the same objects, keeping this distinction explicit matters for readers approaching the study from disciplines outside museology, where the difference between describing a belief system and adjudicating its truth is not always foregrounded.

This reframing also suggests a role for *baya pandang* as a curatorial resource rather than only an analytical one. Previously, Iban cultural material of this kind has tended to be represented in static form, as an ethnographic specimen set apart from the community that produced it. The concept of *baya pandang* serves as a reminder that such material remains part of a living, ongoing cultural continuum: a repository of the history, values, and experiences of earlier generations that continues to resonate with Iban communities today. This also offers younger generations a platform from which to engage with and reclaim ancestral knowledge on their own terms, though, as noted above, this study's sample of elders and ritual specialists cannot itself confirm how strongly younger or more secular Iban feel that resonance. This study introduces an indigenous framework that may be useful to museum and heritage discourse more broadly. Where Assmann's (2011) theory of cultural memory maps the role material forms play in archiving the past, *baya pandang* goes further by foregrounding an ongoing, reciprocal relationship between material culture and living source communities: on this account, cultural objects do not simply survive as historical evidence but remain active in the continuing production of local memory, identity, and knowledge. Read as a curatorial resource, *baya* offers museums a basis for reinterpreting indigenous material culture through an indigenous lens, treating such material as a continuous expression of a living culture. This would ask museums to move beyond a purely custodial role toward one that actively sustains connections between living heritage, present-day communities, and indigenous knowledge systems, engaging directly with the legacies of colonial history rather than setting them aside. In this sense, the museum can become a space of continuing cultural activity rather than a monument to cultural loss, alongside, rather than instead of, its established role in physical conservation.

This reading also has a genuinely difficult implication that deserves to be stated openly rather than set aside. Contemporary debates on the restitution of museum objects to source communities often rest on the argument that, once removed from their original cultural, ritual, and social context, objects lose the ability to fulfill their original function, and that this loss is part of the case for their return. The account developed in this study, in which objects such as *antu pala*, *papan turai*, and *perau bangkong* retain meaning and continue to function within memory and

community practice even after entering a museum collection, could, in principle, be used to argue the opposite: that because these objects retain cultural vitality regardless of location, there is less urgency to return them physically. We want to be clear that this is not the argument being made here. Recognizing that an object's meaning can persist despite physical displacement is not the same as endorsing that displacement, or suggesting that continued symbolic life is an adequate substitute for community control over, or physical access to, these objects. Cultural continuity and restitution are not, in our view, mutually exclusive positions, and a *baya pandang* reading of an object's ongoing significance is compatible with continuing to support its return to source communities where that is what those communities want. This study does not resolve this tension between interpretive continuity and the politics of restitution, and we think it warrants dedicated attention in future research.

A further question, beyond what this study's sample can answer but worth raising directly, is how far this way of reading museum objects might extend to indigenous collections beyond the Iban case. The claim being made here is not that *baya pandang* itself transfers intact to other contexts: it is a specifically Iban concept, tied to particular beliefs about death, memory, and Sebayán, and importing it wholesale into, say, a different Dayak group's collection or an unrelated indigenous tradition elsewhere would flatten the cultural specificity this study has tried to honor. What may travel is the underlying method rather than the concept itself: reading objects that a Western curatorial frame treats as functionally obsolete through the source community's own cosmology of memory, personhood, and continuity, instead of assuming that the end of an object's practical function marks the end of its cultural life. Whether that method yields comparable insights for other ethnographic collections, and where it would break down, for instance where a community's own account of continuity after death or disuse looks quite different from the Iban case, is a question this study can raise but not settle; answering it would require dedicated fieldwork with the specific communities and collections concerned, rather than analogical extension from this one.

In conclusion, this study suggests that the Iban cultural artifacts held in the Sarawak Museum collection are not well described as "dead objects." Read through the indigenous framework of *baya pandang*, material forms such as *antu pala*, *papan turai*, and *perau bangkong* appear, in informants' accounts and in this analysis, to retain meaningful cultural resonance as repositories of historical memory, indigenous knowledge, and community identity. Although the ritual and practical contexts that originally produced these objects have changed substantially over the past two centuries, their significance remains embedded in the memory, oral history, and lived experience of contemporary Iban society. Rather than the museum inevitably functioning as the kind of cultural tomb that Adorno's critique, discussed in the Introduction, warns against, this study suggests that museums are well placed to move beyond that framing: modern institutions can, in this view, serve as spaces for cultural continuity, providing infrastructure through which material heritage, shared memory, and ancestral connection can continue to be transmitted across generations, in dialogue with, rather than in place of, their existing conservation role.

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ETHICAL DECLARATION

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