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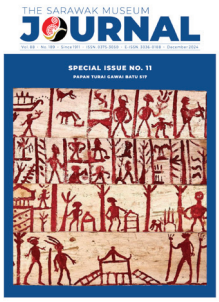

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ART AND AESTHETICS IN THE *PAPAN TURAI GAWAI BATU*

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ABSTRACT

The *Papan Turai Gawai Batu* is a cultural material owned by the Iban community in Sarawak for the purpose of documenting memories in the oral history of the indigenous culture. The existence of the *Papan Turai Gawai Batu* in this study belongs to a *Lemambang* from Baram named Imban Kutak, whom he used to remember the verses of incantations in the ritual and ceremony of Gawai Batu. This research is qualitative in nature and employs the explanatory research method to explore, analyze, and understand the art of the *Papan Turai Gawai Batu*. Erwin Panofsky's iconographic interpretation model (1955) theory was used to analyze the data, and the findings indicate that the *Papan Turai Gawai Batu* holds significant value, especially for the *Lemambang* who serve as guides in ceremonies and rituals in the longhouses. Therefore, through this study, it is hoped to have a progressive impact on the civilization of indigenous communities in the Malay Archipelago in general, and the Iban community in particular.

Keywords: Art aesthetics, Gawai Batu, Iban culture, memorial board, indigenous art

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INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, humans have innovated art and formed motifs within their cultures for social, political, and economic purposes. Early artistic works produced by ancient humans can be traced back to discoveries in cave paintings found worldwide. For example, in El Castillo Cave in Spain, Chauvet Cave in France, and ancient caves around Southeast Asia such as in Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam (Permana, 2019). The existence of paintings in these caves proves that ancient humans had a high imagination to record, document, and narrate what they saw every day based on natural phenomena, daily activities such as hunting and fishing, records of their journeys, and most significantly, they were able to create sacred images considered as gods and extraordinary powers (Schaafsma, 2018; Kiyai, 2023).

In Sarawak, there is an ancient cave that has existed in the Borneo Islands for thousands of years. Based on archaeological research data, it is estimated that ancient humans inhabited the Niah area about 50,000 years ago (Pyatt *et al.*, 2005). In the Niah Cave, there is an ancient painting painted on the wall surface that shows prehistoric cave art using natural materials such as rocks and soil as painting media to form art. The depiction of paintings in the cave illustrates abstract art forms such as zoomorphic, anthropomorphic shapes, and lines (Kimwah *et al.*, 2018). Zoomorphic forms refer to images resembling animals such as monkeys, birds, chickens, tortoises, snakes, crocodiles, with anatomical features such as horned heads, four-legged, and identifiable frond feathers in prehistoric animal painting images in the Niah Cave (Kimwah *et al.*, 2020). While anthropomorphic forms are figurative images produced with dynamic styles and shapes. In anthropomorphic art found in the Black Cloth Cave, Niah, it is related to the lifestyle and beliefs of prehistoric communities at that time. Images of humans can be analyzed to understand what they reveal about social roles, hierarchy, and other identities, as well as perceptions determined by culture about human relationships with the natural environment and the supernatural world. It is suggested that the portrayal of diverse human subjects is related to ideology and religious practices in indigenous community traditions (Schaafsma, 2018).

The discovery of artistic elements in Gua Kain Hitam, Niah has had a significant impact on the art forms found within the indigenous cultures of Sarawak, particularly in terms of their appearance and style. Among the ancient artifacts that reflect this influence is the Iban *Papan Turai*. *Papan Turai*, or memorial boards, serve as crucial cultural artifacts for preserving community memories through symbols and art, especially among the *Lemambang* (priests) across generations within Iban customs and culture. To understand *Papan Turai*, it is important to consider Sarawak's

history, as archaeological findings reveal evidence of prehistoric human activities that shaped and advanced art on cave and rock surfaces. This ancient art has notably influenced the aesthetics of indigenous crafts, including wood carvings, weaving, and textile patterns.

The Iban community incorporates these influences into their material culture, seen in items such as *pua kumbu* weaving, *tikai bebuah*, and carvings on *Papan Turai* (Kiyai, 2023). *Papan Turai* functions as a memory board for the Iban people, used to record and recall events, incidents, oral traditions, and genealogies across multiple generations. This research seeks to examine and explore the artistic aesthetics and cultural significance of *Papan Turai* within Iban culture in Sarawak, with a specific focus on the *Papan Turai Gawai Batu* utilized by *Lemambang* during the *Gawai Batu* ceremony. *Gawai Batu* is one of the various *Gawai* rituals practiced by the Iban people, aimed at protecting their *padi* farms. This tradition, rooted in the teachings of God of *Sempulang Gana*, is not held annually but rather at intervals of several years, typically when there is a noticeable decline in production or harvest.

RESEARCH ISSUES

The Iban community in Sarawak has experienced a notable decline in the traditional practice of creating and using *Papan Turai* as part of their *Lemambang* ceremonies, a decline which can be attributed to two primary factors: the introduction of Christianity and the forces of globalization. James Brooke, the first White Rajah of Sarawak, left a lasting mark on Borneo's history, particularly through his influence on the Iban people. Arriving in the early 19th century, Brooke sought to modernize the region, and in doing so, he made significant changes to Iban customs and practices. His efforts were focused on eliminating what he saw as outdated traditions, most notably the practice of head-hunting, and introducing Western systems of governance, economic practices, and cultural norms (Walker, 2020).

As a result, the Iban community has lost crucial documentation and historical records about important cultural artifacts like the *Papan Turai Gawai Batu* (Kiyai, 2023). While some British colonial writings from the Brooke era mention the *Papan Turai*, they mainly focus on describing the object rather than exploring its deeper significance. Similarly, Western scholars such as Harrisson and Gill, who wrote after Malaysia gained independence (Harrisson, 1965; Gill, 1967), also just recorded details about the *Papan Turai* without delving further. This study seeks to explore the *Papan*