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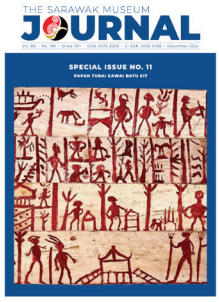

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DOCUMENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE *PAPAN TURAI GAWAI BATU* 517

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ABSTRACT

The *Papan Turai Gawai Batu* 517, collected by Tom Harrisson in 1963, reveal its role as a pivotal artefact illuminating Iban proto-writing traditions intertwined with ancient rites, an intersection of cultural practices and agricultural rituals of Borneo's pagan heritage. This investigation employs dual analytical frameworks: a pictorial analysis alongside a composition analysis of the artefact itself. Findings indicate that this artefact encapsulates the identity and resilience of the Iban community, affirming its status as an essential piece of documentary heritage vital to Sarawak's historical evolution. The study emphasizes the urgent need for cultural preservation, advocating for the appreciation of these crucial traditions within a rapidly shifting socio-cultural landscape.

Keywords: Sarawak, *Papan Turai, Gawai Batu*, documentation, preservation, museum

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INTRODUCTION

During the Brooke and colonial periods, there was a significant lack of documentation on the Iban writing system related to the *Papan Turai*. To tackle this, Tom Harrisson, curator of the Sarawak Museum (Figure 1), assisted by Benedict Sandin (Figure 2) initiated a vital research from 1963 to 1966 to investigate Iban writing heritage. The efforts to collect intensified, resulting in the documentation of several *Papan Turai* from various locations across Sarawak. These efforts revealed a diverse range of texts (Figure 3), each with varying levels of authenticity. This work was crucial, as the *Papan Turai* from various regions illuminated the fact that this form of writing was once central to the practices of Iban *Manang* and *Lemambang*.

By the 20th century, the prominence of these *Papan Turai* had significantly declined. This decline reflects broader changes within Iban society, including shifts in cultural practices and the influence of modernization. Evidence of these changes is found in some of the collected *Papan Turai*, which incorporate modern elements and terms not native to the Iban world, highlighting the blending of old and new. This blending reflects the challenges faced by the Iban community and their creativity in preserving cultural heritage amidst rapid societal changes.

Figure 1: Tom Harrisson, curator of the Sarawak Museum (1947-1966). (Source: Sarawak Museum Department)

Figure 2: Benedict Sandin.

Malaysia was officially formed on September 16, 1963, marking the conclusion of British rule in Sarawak. Tom Harrisson, who dedicated much of his career to the Sarawak Museum, retired in 1966, with his research on *Papan Turai* serving as one of his final