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PAPAN TURAI GAWAI BATU: HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the cultural and historical significance of a two-piece mnemonic board possessed by the Iban community. Iban bards utilise *Papan Turai Gawai Batu* to recount pengap (rites) during a *Gawai Batu* or whetstone feast. The board has 25 hieroglyphs with each part accompanied by pengap. The board is historically significant on two grounds; first, it is a piece of evidence on Iban civilisation during the pre-history period; Secondly, the use of the board as a mnemonic device contributes to the sustenance of cultural practices of one of the largest ethnic groups in Borneo. The *pengap* contained rich data on the Iban's traditional belief system which is an entrenched part of their agrarian activities. It also informs about Iban's genealogy, ancestral figures, and contacts with the Malay, Bukitan, Seru, Maloh, and Kantu people in pre-historic times. These data sources trace the migratory history of the Iban from Kapuas to Batang Lupar and its tributaries. The *Papan Turai* depicts cultural practices that have survived through generations since pre-historic times. Although the *Gawai Batu* practice has declined tremendously over the years, parallel with the decline of the Iban's traditional occupation, i.e. paddy cultivation, the practice has persevered. It continues to be a significant part of the Iban's culture. The fact that the Iban *Papan Turai* as a mnemonic device can preserve the cultural practices of one of the largest groups in Borneo deserves regional, if not world heritage recognition.



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INTRODUCTION

The *Papan Turai* records the history of the civilisation of one the largest ethnic group in Borneo i.e. the Iban people. It also presents evidence of the migratory history of the Iban from the Kapuas region in Kalimantan to settlements in Sarawak and the genealogy (*tusut*) of the Iban people. The *Papan Turai Gawai Batu* (PTGB) or Whetstone Feast Board is a two-piece mnemonic board engraved with 25 hieroglyphs. Imban ak Kutak, an Iban *lemambang* (shaman) who migrated to Baram from the overcrowded Sri Aman created this mnemonic board to assist him in the recitation of *pengap* and *timang* during the *Gawai Batu* ceremony. PTGB was discovered in 1963 by Tom Harrisson and Benedict Sandin. Fortunately, they recorded the rites that accompanied each part of the hieroglyphs. It is a common practice among Iban bards during pre-historic times to engrave pictorial symbols on wooden boards to assist in recalling ceremonial rites. The mnemonic board is used by the Iban shaman to teach novices and is therefore intermediate between oral tradition and writing. The representations on the board are idiosyncratic, in that each shaman may have his conventions for what a particular figure represents (Sutlive, 2001). Nonetheless, recent interviews with two shamans in Miri have found the hieroglyphs are quite similar among the *lemambangs*, to a certain extent. The hieroglyphs and their representations might be conventional. This can only be confirmed through further research.

A *lemambang* is believed to be “chosen” for the task by a spiritual master who passed down the *pengap* (rites) commonly through dreams. Knowledge of the incantation and each step in the process of the *Gawai Batu* ceremony is said to be taught by the spiritual *lemambang*. A *lemambang* is the manifestation of his spiritual master. Before one can be entrusted with the role, a *lemambang* needs to undergo informal training, initially as an apprentice. He must be able to produce his hieroglyphs and recite the rites accurately. Fortunately, *lemambang* still exists in the community. The rites and their interpretation could then be recorded. In some communities, the meaning of mantras or rites may not be interpreted because of their sacred nature, and bards may not be willing to reveal the “secret” meaning of the rites.

Gawai Batu is one of the many *Gawai* practices of the Ibans, the purpose of which is to safeguard their paddy farms. This belief stems from the teachings of *Sempulang Gana* (Iban God of Earth). All the other gods and all human beings had to make offerings to *Sempulang Gana* to obtain his permission before farming the land. Rice cultivation is very ritualistic for the Ibans. Every step of their farming is like a

religious rite. Respect for the order of nature and the presence of a spiritual master is to be adhered to ensure successful cultivation. According to Sandin (1962, pp.392-408), *Gawai Batu* is so-called because the ceremony, first and foremost, asks for the blessings of the whetstone (or sharpening stone) so that the implements used are sharp and swift for cultivation and harvesting. The whetstone and the knife are the main implements the women place in their baskets of offerings.

DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND OF THE IBAN

The Iban is one of the largest ethnolinguistic groups in Borneo with a population estimated at 800,000. Regions with significant populations are Malaysia (753,500), Brunei (23,500), and Indonesia (19,978). According to Benedict Sandin (1968, pp. xix-xx), the Iban are referred to by different names, either as “Sea Dayak”, “Dayak” or “Iban”. The term “Iban” is a designation from the Kayan, and “Sea Dayak” was a term imposed by the Brooke government. The Iban in earlier times did not have a unified label for the group. Each group identified themselves by rivers – *Kami Undup*, *Kami Skrang* (we are the people of Undup, Skrang, etc.), or “*Kami Manoa*” – Menoa might refer to an entire river, or only to a territory of a longhouse.

Linguistically, the Iban language falls under the larger Proto-Malayic family of languages together with Malay, Kedayan, Selakau, and Ulu Kapuas Malay. Asmah & Norazuna (2022, p.177) further subcategorised the Iban as “Dayak Malayic” in contrast to “Malay Malayic”. The Iban language spoken by communities in Sarawak is quite homogeneous despite its widespread. The Iban people have managed to keep their culture uniform even in their geographical expansion. However, uniformity does not exist in languages, especially for spoken languages. Hence, Iban has several dialects such as Remun, Iban Kanowit, Iban Rejang, etc. (ibid, p.131). The Kalimantan variants are said to be more linguistically heterogeneous (Chong, 2006a, 2006b; Collins, 2004). The Iban varieties spoken in Sarawak as identified by Chong are Iban Balau, Remun, Sebuyau, Lemanak, Undop, Rejang, Skrang, and Iban Ulu Ai whereas Ibanic languages of Kalimantan are Mualang, Kantuk, Bugau and Ketungau.

Regarding ancestral lineage, accounts from oral tradition reiterated that the Iban originates from the Kapuas region in Kalimantan. They are believed to have migrated from the headwaters of the Kapuas River in the central highlands of Borneo and down into the coastal plains of present-day Sarawak in several waves, the first of which took place in the 17th century, about 400 years ago. Genetically, they are linked