Jurnal Arkeologi Malaysia
April 2025, Vol. 38, No.1, hlm. 1- 13
ISSN 0128-0732 e-ISSN 2590-4302
Diterbitkan oleh Ikatan Ahli Arkeologi Malaysia

FROM THE BRITISH MUSEUM TO THE LONGHOUSE: RECLAIMING THE PUA KUMBU AND REVITALIZING IBAN CULTURAL IDENTITY

DARIPADA MUZIUM BRITISH KE RUMAH PANJANG: MENUNTUT SEMULA PUA KUMBU DAN MENJAGA SEMULA IDENTITI BUDAYA IBAN

Gregory Kiyai @ Keai

Abstract

Pua Kumbu is a type of woven cloth and a cultural object that has been a source of pride for the Iban people for generations. It holds great significance in Iban culture, to the point that Iban women are expected to master the craft at the highest level in order to place themselves in the highest social hierarchy within the longhouse community. However, this weaving art, rich in taboos, extraordinary stories about Iban gods and deities, and the Iban people's excellence in producing it through the environment, has become an object that was 'smuggled, stolen, and seized' by colonial powers and foreign researchers since the era of James Brooke in Sarawak and after the end of World War II. This powerful cultural object of the Iban people was handed over to The British Museum's collection and has never been returned to its place of origin. Therefore, this study discusses a selected collection of Pua textiles, based on its motifs, which are considered ancient motive and no longer produced in Iban weaving art in Sarawak after the cultural transformation of the indigenous people, especially following the formation and inclusion in the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, Iban culture, indigenous legacy, *pua kumbu*, traditional weaving

Abstrak

Pua Kumbu adalah sejenis kain tenunan dan objek budaya yang telah menjadi sumber kebanggaan bagi masyarakat Iban selama beberapa generasi. Ia memegang kepentingan yang besar dalam budaya Iban, sehingga wanita Iban diharapkan menguasai kemahiran ini pada tahap tertinggi untuk meletakkan diri mereka dalam hierarki sosial yang tertinggi dalam komuniti rumah panjang. Namun, seni tenunan ini, yang kaya dengan pantang larang, cerita luar biasa tentang dewa-dewa dan tuhan-tuhan Iban, serta kecemerlangan masyarakat Iban dalam menghasilkan kain ini melalui persekitaran mereka, telah menjadi objek yang telah 'diseludup, dicuri, dan dirampas' oleh kuasa kolonial dan penyelidik asing sejak zaman James Brooke di Sarawak dan selepas tamat Perang Dunia Kedua. Objek budaya yang berkuasa ini milik masyarakat Iban telah diserahkan ke koleksi Muzium British dan tidak pernah dikembalikan ke tempat asalnya. Oleh itu, kajian ini membincangkan koleksi terpilih Pua Kumbu, berdasarkan motifnya, yang dianggap sebagai motif kuno dan tidak lagi dihasilkan dalam seni tenunan Iban di Sarawak selepas transformasi budaya masyarakat

pribumi, terutamanya selepas pembentukan dan penyertaan dalam Persekutuan Malaysia pada tahun 1963.

Kata Kunci: *Warisan budaya, budaya Iban, warisan pribumi, pua kumbu, tenunan tradisional.*

INTRODUCTION

Pua Kumbu, which is a handwoven ikat textile belonging to the Iban people, represents the core of Iban culture. Depending on its design, it serves as a historical archive, a story of mythology or religion, or a personal narrative. It is a statement of the weaver's soul and her relationship with spirits. Throughout history, women have been inseparable from the art of textiles. Regardless of the materials used or the culture referenced, their involvement has always influenced, shaped, and developed various techniques in preserving the weaving art of the Iban people (Low 2008).

The "Kayau Indu" or women's war is a sacred concept in the Iban weaving tradition in longhouses. In the context of Kayau Indu, the term "war" does not refer to warriors fighting on the battlefield as men do, but rather to a term given to Iban women who are able to position themselves within the social hierarchy of the longhouse as "Indu Takar Indu Ngar," meaning women who are wise and versatile (Gavin 1991: Kiyai and Tugang 2023). There are various ways in which a woman can express her existence, differing from other women in the longhouse, one of which is through her skill and ability in weaving pua. Weaving pua is a local wisdom that is very important in the culture of the Iban people in Borneo. From the age of ten, girls are taught and trained to prepare themselves to become skilled weavers. The purpose is to prepare them for adulthood and marriage, bringing this weaving skill into the social fabric of the community (Kiyai et al. 2023).

I was surprised when I accessed the main website of The British Museum's virtual collection, where I found more than 100 pieces of Iban pua textiles preserved by the museum since the 18th century. I discovered that the majority of these collections came from private collections and institutions entrusted to The British Museum. Most of these textiles were acquired in the 18th century from Iban settlements in Saribas (now Betong and surrounding areas) and Baleh (a place name in Kapit). Some were obtained after World War II, from the 1960s to the 1990s, when the Sarawak State Government still relied on foreign educators and researchers to study the culture of the state. This collection was then donated to The British Museum by three identified individuals: James Brooke, the Dunsmore couple, and Charles Hose.

Today, the Sarawak State Government takes this matter very seriously by introducing a research permit system known as the Sarawak Online Research Application System (SORAS). This regulation applies to both foreign and local researchers, including Sarawak residents. Although the new regulation has tightened research controls in Sarawak, we cannot deny or ignore that there are earth artifacts belonging to our ancestors that should be preserved and displayed in the state, specifically through the conservation efforts of the Sarawak Museum Department. Therefore, the focus of this manuscript is to discuss the collection of pua textile weavings stored in museums abroad and to highlight a collective effort regarding the meaning of decolonization between indigenous peoples and colonial legacies, aiming to reach an agreement without conflict in efforts to preserve and protect these cultural objects.

COLONIAL AND INDIGENOUS CULTURAL OBJECTS

In Sarawak, the colonial era began when James Brooke declared himself as the Rajah and Governor of Sarawak in 1841. During this period, the Brooke family expanded its power until it shaped Sarawak as it is today, continuing until 1941 (Andaya et al. 1982). Charles Brooke, who continued his family's legacy from 1871, focused on social development by researching, documenting, and cataloging the indigenous cultures and arts, particularly those of the Dayak people (Sather 2011). His efforts led to the establishment of Borneo's first museum to further his understanding of indigenous lifestyles. The

ideology of Charles Brooke regarding the Dayak ethnic group is elaborated upon in (Doering 1966) writings.

> *"A successful colonial ruler needed to understand the local language, show respect for local chiefs, support indigenous institutions, and fully immerse themselves in native culture. Marrying into the local community was often seen as beneficial. This was particularly important at the District Officer level"*

At the British Museum, there are cultural artifacts from the indigenous peoples of Sarawak that have been displayed as part of the museum's collection. The presence of these cultural objects from Sarawak is the result of collections made by British officers who served under the Brooke Rajahs in Sarawak. One such officer was Charles Hose, who served as a British Officer in the Baram District, Miri, in 1884. At that time, the Baram district was a Brunei enclave that was ceded by the Sultanate of Brunei to Charles Brooke, the Second Rajah of Sarawak, after his uncle, James Brooke. Hose's deep interest in the culture and way of life of the indigenous peoples, particularly in the district he was assigned to, was home to the Urang Ulu communities, including the Kelabit and Kayan ethnic groups, as well as several minority groups such as the Punan, Penan, Ukit, Kajaman, and Beketan. However, he was particularly fascinated by the culture of the Kayan people, and based on the records in his books, it appears that Hose had a close relationship with the Kayan, as documented in his books The Pagan Tribes of Borneo (1912), Natural Man: A Record from Borneo (1926), and The Field Book of a Jungle-Wallah: Being a Description of Shore, River, and Forest Life in Sarawak (1929). These books document and explain the culture, history, and customs of the Kayan people through Hose's empirical research and that of McDougall during their time in Sarawak and Sabah.

The relationship between Hose and the indigenous people, who trusted and welcomed him into their communities, allowed him to collect and place indigenous cultural artifacts from Sarawak in various museums, including the British Museum, Cambridge, and Oxford, as part of his personal collection. In his interest in collecting what he considered interesting and exotic cultural objects, Hose also stimulated and motivated the Kayan people living in the Baram River and Tinjar River areas to continue carving and producing cultural artifacts of their ancestors to meet the high demand for such exotic items, particularly in Europe. At that time, having rare collections from colonial countries was a hobby for British officers in Europe, as it was a way to showcase their power, fascination with the way of life of indigenous peoples—whom they saw as wild and "other" compared to the white race—and as a manifestation of their status as nobility and intellectuals (Steven Alpert 2021).

Vernon Kedit (2017) in his writing A Chief's Caveat, A Rajah's Gift, A Museum's Treasure: Journey of A 19th-Century Iban Textile Called A Lebur Api From Borneo To The British Museum tells the story of how Orang Kaya Pemancha Dana presented a gift of a pua sungkit textile. According to the oral history of the Iban Saribas, Orang Kaya Pemancha Dana Bayang (OKP), the recognized leader of the Iban Saribas, gifted the sungkit textile known as lebur api to Rajah Sir James Brooke during the Saribas treaty of 1849, when OKP agreed to submit to Brooke after the Iban's severe defeat at Beting Maro. Brooke later presented the textile, known for its lebur api motif, to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, which was then transferred to the British Museum. According to Kedit's research, this textile is the only lebur api motif in the British Museum's collection of Iban textiles, and it is still on display to this day.

PUA TEXTILE IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM COLLECTION

The findings reveal that the collection of Pua textiles stored in The British Museum has not been well documented. Today, the institution of colonial national museums continues to reflect the colonial foundations from which they originated. In an era when all power was in the hands of white people, European countries not only dominated territories worldwide—from Africa to Asia and the Americas—but also seized these places, bringing back all kinds of precious resources that seemed endless. They established museums to showcase their power and the profits that came from their colonial endeavors. At the same time, they not only destroyed cultures but were also busy creating a darker and grim version of "art that gives life."

Since the end of World War II, museums and cultural collections have undergone profound transformations in their development as a field of knowledge, rather than just serving as exhibitions and collections as done by royalty and aristocracy in Europe in the concept of a "cabinet of curiosity." However, certain controversial aspects of the museum trade have not yet been fully resolved. Critics and researchers are still debating with museums about the right and wrong ways to display history. They argue over what should be exhibited as cultural objects or human artifacts. I categorize it and discuss the art, local history, and functions based on the cultural perspective of the Iban people.

The Pua donated by James Brooke

Image 1 shows the Iban textile 'pua' sungkit, classified as a 'lebur api,' stored by the British Museum under the category of ikat weaving used in ceremonial and ritual contexts. This collection was a gift from Orang Kaya Pemancha Dana to James Brooke as a symbol of peace from the Iban people in Saribas following their defeat in battle against Brooke's forces during the Beting Maro skirmishes in 1849. These battles sparked controversy in England at the time, as Joseph Hume, a human rights activist, claimed that James Brooke's actions amounted to genocide against the "savage people," referring to the Iban from Saribas and Skrang involved in the series of confrontations. Joseph Hume, a radical leader in the London Peace Society and the Society for the Protection of Aborigines, condemned Brooke's brutal actions. Hume and his supporters argued that the Dayak pirates did not actually exist. The Dayak people in Saribas and Skrang were unaware of the use of firearms and did not threaten European ships. They described Brooke as a "butcher" who killed the "savages" to make them submit to him (Irwin 1955).

In 1852, Horace St. John wrote about Captain Keppel's brutal assault on Sekrang, stating: "A conflict broke out, thousands fought from both sides – hundreds of boats surrounded the ship, while the Dayaks fought amongst themselves, with dismembered and decapitated bodies scattered in all directions in a confusing scene. The outcome of this operation was devastating" (Irwin 1955:181). In his Memorandum on Piracy dated July 31, 1852, Brooke responded to Hume's statement by saying that piracy could only be eradicated through oppression. Three elements—knowledge, punishment, and persuasion—needed to be combined to achieve its effect. As a result of this attack, many Dayaks in Saribas and Sekrang were reported to have abandoned their piracy traditions in favor of farming (Irwin 1955:182). In his personal letter to Jack, Brooke stated:

> "*The case is very simple. The enclosed sketch will show you the river, and I may remark that Lingga is not a piratical tribe, but, at feud with Serebas and Sakarran, and only restrained by my influence, from continuing the "intertribal war", but I allow no intertribal wars*" (Brooke 1853).

Therefore, to end the conflict, the pua kumbu with the "lebur api" motif was used as a peace offering. The "lebur api" motif is one of the sacred motifs in traditional Iban art. The term "lebur api" translates to "white hot" or "white heat" in Iban, referring to the unique feature of the textile, where the supplementary weft is predominantly white and un-dyed. The "white flames" represent intense heat, symbolizing spiritual heat, which gives the textile its ritual name. Traditionally, the "lebur api" was used to receive newly taken trophy heads, a significant achievement for Iban men. The act of taking a trophy head was considered the highest form of accomplishment up until the Second World War. In some Iban communities, this practice continues to hold ritual significance, with men who have served in the army or police force and have killed in combat being honored as modern "warriors" during grand festivals and gaining high status (Gavin 2003; Vernon Kedit 2017). In Batang Ai, the design is 'antu pala beringka gitang bedilang Antu Gerasi' - 'heads hanging in their baskets above Antu Gerasi's hearth.' In Saribas, the design is 'Antu Gerasi berayah' - 'Antu Gerasi performing a victory dance.' "Lebur api" was woven to receive severed heads (Heppell 2006). The pua lebur api collection in the British Museum (Figure 1) was made around 1800 to 1860, during the traditional period of Sarawak, when the Iban people still lived by and held firmly to their ancestral beliefs. This collection was then transferred to the British Museum in 1866, based on information provided on its website.

Figure 1. Pua weaving, Lebur Api, was presented to the British Museum by James Brooke in 1866. It is believed that this pua was created between the years 1800 and the 1860s (early). Dimensions: Length: 173 cm, Width: 43 cm (Collection Source: Trustees of the British Museum).

This is one of the most sacred pua kumbu. It was woven for a ceremony called encaboh arong, which is the first stage of the most important Iban festival, Gawai Burong. During this ritual, it was customary for the wife of the war leader to receive the trophy head brought home by her husband from the war, along with other warriors from the longhouse, on the pua lebor api textile. This particular example has been a family heirloom for seven generations. The characteristics of lebur api include the deep blood-red color, dyed in a mandian dulang (weaving place) using the dew process, and the sungkik weaving technique, which involves the use of supplementary threads, creating a tapestry-like design. The motif woven in the center of this pua is unique to the era in which it was woven and may also be specific to the weaver, making it difficult to interpret by modern standards. It must be left as a secret and history because only the weaver understood the concept of this art.

On the border (anak), there is a bird motif, which is significant in Iban thought, representing the manifestation of spirits on earth or an omen, acting as an intermediary between the mortal world of humans and the realm of spirits in the unseen world. The punggang or horizontal border consists of typical lebur api designs, such as the leku sawa, a moving snake. This refers to Keling, the archetypal Iban hero known for his strength, courage, and handsome appearance, who often appears to humans in the form of a snake.

The Pua donated by John and Susi Dunsmore.

The second collection is a Pua textile from Baleh, Kapit. Image 2 shows a Pua Kumbu known as "Pua Kumbu Kechil," which was obtained by Susi Dunsmore in 1990 from its seller, Sylvester Juan, who worked with Susi's husband, John Dunsmore, when he was the Director of Research at the Department of Agriculture in Sarawak. In 2013, Susi donated this Pua textile to the British Museum in memory of her late husband, John Dunsmore. In 1958, Susi Dunsmore served as a lecturer at Batu Lintang Teachers College (BLTC), a teacher training college in Sarawak. Her interest and education in arts and crafts led her to develop a passion for collecting cultural objects of the indigenous communities in Sarawak, especially the Iban people, which were considered unique in their practices and representation of cultural identity. In 2013, this Pua textile was donated to the British Museum in honor of the memory of her late husband, who shared a similar passion for the textile arts of the indigenous people in Asia, not just in Sarawak, but also through their foundation in Nepal, the John Dunsmore Nepalese Textile Trust, which supports, empowers, and assists, especially women in Nepal, who produce indigenous crafts (The Guardian 2017).

Figure 2. Pua from Balleh- This collection of objects was donated to the British Museum by Susi Dunsmore in memory of her husband, John Dunsmore in 2013 (Sources: Trustees of the British Museum)

I believe that the title 'kechil' is not the actual name or term for this pua weaving. The word "kechil" refers to something that is of a small and moderate size, so it is possible that Dunsmore or Juan made a mistake regarding the real name of this pua weaving. The naming or titling of a finished pua kumbu weave is something commonly done by weavers as a signature and expression of their weaving beliefs, which are deeply connected to their spiritual beliefs in deities. The titles given to pua weavings are often very long and carry implied meanings that praise and reveal who or what is represented in the motifs woven into the pua (Goro Hasegawa 2014). Therefore, by looking at the pua weaving in Image 2, it is clear that the dominant motif in the artwork composition is the human figure. The human figure motif in Iban art can be seen in two forms: (i) the mensia (human) motif, which refers to the real world and is connected to their life in the longhouse, and (ii) the antu motif, which refers to intangible entities such as deities, spirits, and creatures they believe in, such as antu, gerasi, or engkeramba. These motifs are considered sacred and are specifically used in Iban ceremonies and rituals.

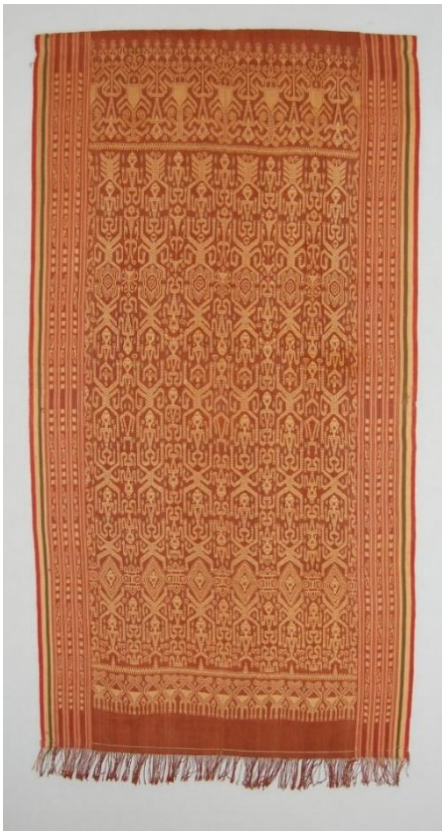

Figure 3. Pua weaving featuring the Engkatak motif. Dimensions of the pua kumbu: 100 x 200 cm, Material: cotton, handspun single yarn; both natural and dyed colors. The red color is derived from engkudu (or mengkudu) Morinda citrifolia, with the brownish-red tone suggesting the use of engkerbai (Psychotria viridiflora). The blue color comes from Tarum (Indigofera). Commercially dyed yarn may have been used for the selvedge border stripes. (Sources: Trustees of the British Museum)

The third image also depicts a Pua textile that was obtained by the Dunsmore couple from Sarawak in 1997, though the exact origin of this Pua is unclear. According to information from the British Museum's collection inventory, this Pua was acquired by the Dunsmore from Murray Dickson, who had previously served as the Director of Education in Sarawak from 1947 to 1966. After retiring, he returned to England with this Pua, which was later purchased by the Dunsmore. Based on the identifiable motifs in the Pua, it is in the form of figures, but not representing humans. Instead, these figures are representations of their gods and goddesses, referred to as engkeramba. In this textile, the weavers have immortalized the engkatak (frog) motif, which is an ancient and sacred motif.

Many people mistakenly associate the engkatak motif in Pua Kumbu weaving with the deity Selempandai, a god skilled in forging and creating metal. However, it does not represent this deity, as the gods and goddesses are sacred, and the image of a frog is not considered comparable to them. The term is used by weavers as a euphemism or metaphor to refer to offerings of food to spirits of a lower rank, who are nameless and referred to as antu by the Iban people (Kedit 2009).

The Pua donated by *Dr Charles Hose*

Figure 4. A pua weaving known as "Bali Belumpong", featuring the motif "anak burung" (young bird). Length: 196 cm, Width: 93 cm (Collection Source: Trustees of the British Museum).

Image 4 shows a Pua woven textile obtained by Dr. Charles Hose from Saribas, which is believed to have been made in the 19th century. The material used for this Pua textile consists of threads known as taya and natural dyes, such as mengkudu (Indian mulberry). The technique used in its creation is a form of ikat weaving, which can only be done by skilled women who were believed to be endowed with talent by their ancestors. These women were known as Indu Ngar and Indu Takar, versatile and expert weavers of Pua.

What is fascinating about this textile is its motif, which is very rare and no longer found in modern Iban textiles. This motif is called buah lama, featuring the bali belumpung design, which is very famous in Saribas. Apart from being recognized as a sacred motif, it was specifically used for welcoming the head of an enemy brought by Iban warriors from their Ngayau (head-hunting) expeditions. If we look closely at Image 4, the center of the Pua textile is left empty of patterns, and the composition of the design does not connect, unlike typical Pua motifs. The purpose of this is to place the enemy's head in the area without a motif. The Pua textile is then bordered with pinggai tuai (ceramic plates with dragon carvings) and placed on top of a pua bali belumpung or anak burung (baby bird) textile, as shown in Image 4, by beautiful women at the head of the longhouse steps before being paraded into the main room known as ruai. These women are usually those who are destined to become the wives of the Iban warriors or those who already are their wives.

Figure 5. Pua weaving with the "Bengkang" animal motif. This pua was acquired by Dr. Charles Hose in Sarawak. Length: 233 cm, Width: 87 cm. (Collection Source: Trustees of the British Museum)

In Image 5, there is an error noted by Dr. Hose regarding the name of the fruit motif on the pua weaving that he obtained from Batang Rajang and submitted to the British Museum in 1905. The British Museum's inventory labels the pua as "bungkang," but in fact, it should be "buah bengkang," which refers to the Iban fruit motif originating from the Skrang area. Bengkang refers to a type of exotic animal that lives in Southeast Asia, known as the slow loris. The bengkang animal lives in high trees and is only active at night. It feeds on fruits and small insects. In Iban belief, if the bengkang animal enters a longhouse, it is considered to bring bad omens and harm, because this animal is not typically found living with humans like dogs or cats. This is called mali (taboo), and if it happens, a ritual using a plate must be performed to seek forgiveness and safety from Petara (God). However, in pua weaving art, depicting the bengkang animal motif is not considered mali (taboo), but this motif can only be woven by senior weavers with the titles of Indu Ngar or Indu Takar to prevent any bad luck or misfortune (alah bulu, alah ayu).

Figure 6. "Kelikut". Length: Length: 223 cm, Width: 100 cm (Sources of collection: Trustees of the British Museum)

Image 6 depicts a pua textile obtained by Dr. Hose from Saribas, along with other pua textiles in his collection. According to the information from the British Museum, this pua textile was produced in the 19th century by the Iban people using the ikat weaving technique. The textile measures 223 cm in length and 100 cm in width. It was then donated to the British Museum as a collection from Borneo in 1905. The motif featured in the pua is known as kelikut, a pattern characterized by lines. This abstract, linear design is considered a high-ranking motif in Iban weaving art, as it does not represent figures, plants, or spirits. The motif can carry deep meanings based on the weaver's knowledge and dreams. In Iban belief, all unique and rare motifs in pua textiles are inspired by dreams given by deities in Panggau Libau. In this image, the kelikut motif represents a blazing fire, although it is not a full fire motif, which is a high-ranking design symbolizing a powerful, burning flame.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of museums is to preserve, study, and display artifacts and art that reflect the history, culture, and achievements of humankind. Their main function is to provide a space for the public to learn about different cultural heritages, promote understanding between cultures, and enrich people's experiences and knowledge of the world. Museums also serve as a platform to connect us with the past, providing important context regarding the development of societies and cultures. However, a major issue that arises is the influence of dominant values from Western countries, particularly in museums in Europe and America. Although the cultural artifacts on display may originate from pre-colonial times in Asia and Africa, the way these artifacts are curated and framed is often influenced by Western art movements. This causes these objects to frequently be viewed as "primitive sources" that mainly inspire Western visitors or artists, rather than being appreciated for the value and meaning they hold within the indigenous communities from which they originate. The

narrative surrounding these objects tends to deny or overlook the intrinsic value possessed by the original communities, thus perpetuating the cycle of cultural colonialism.

This situation makes it difficult to achieve equality in terms of gender, race, and skin color, especially when organizations like ICOM and UNESCO have yet to change the dominance of white supremacy that still underpins many museum practices worldwide. Often, minimalist art exhibitions and installations in museums, which adopt a Western approach, reinforce stereotypes and sustain colonial historical narratives that have oppressed indigenous communities. To achieve equality in this context, we must recognize that the most reliable sources of knowledge about any culture come from the communities themselves. As Cuk (1997) suggested, no single human culture is universal, but cultural diversity enriches the survival and innovation of humanity as a whole. Therefore, in order to enrich and develop a culture that encompasses all of humankind, indigenous communities must be recognized as the primary custodians and interpreters of their cultures.

The act of removing or smuggling indigenous cultural objects from their communities and environments is a long-standing 'crime' that was carried out by colonial officers in the Nusantara and Southeast Asia since the colonial period and after the post-World War II era. This issue is not new in academic discussions, but awareness and its importance within the indigenous communities themselves, particularly the Iban people in Sarawak, is still limited. Some are even unaware of the existence of their ancestral cultural objects, which are housed in museums like the British Museum. In contrast, indigenous communities in Africa have fought tirelessly to reclaim their cultural artifacts from European museums. During the colonial rule in Africa, thousands of cultural artifacts were seized. African countries want these artifacts returned, and major museums in Europe have agreed to lend the famous Benin bronzes back to Nigeria. The Benin Bronzes, which are actually made of brass, are a collection of finely crafted sculptures and plaques that decorated the royal palace of Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi in the Kingdom of Benin, which was later incorporated into Nigeria under British rule. They were carved from ivory, brass, ceramics, and wood. Many of these artworks were created for the altars of ancestors of past kings and queens. In 1897, the British launched a punitive expedition against Benin in retaliation for an attack on a British diplomatic expedition. In addition to the brass statues and plaques, many royal objects were taken as spoils from this mission and are now scattered around the world (Ashley Lime 2018).

The Iban Pua weave, when cultural objects like this are displayed in museums or galleries, outside of their community context—i.e., outside the Iban community and Sarawak—Pua weave undergoes a metamorphosis, a significant change in its meaning, ideology, and cultural philosophy. An ethnographic object is no longer viewed in its original cultural context; its meaning shifts to become merely 'art'. This transformation, in many ways, elevates the object, but in some cases, it strips away the essence of the object, replacing it with the superiority of a culture often foreign to that of the object. The object is detached from the social construct of its maker, and even from the spirituality and religion once associated with it. This change places the object in a category that demands respect and distance, referred to as 'appreciation' (Welsh 1991).

Cultural objects belonging to indigenous peoples, like the Pua Kumbu textile of the Iban, are seen as detached from their original cultural context when they are removed and treated as commodities or works of art in the Western context, particularly in the British Museum. Pua Kumbu, which was originally an essential element in the social and spiritual life of the Iban people, loses its role as a symbol of identity and a tool for cultural communication when it is made into a museum collection. In this context, the statement refers to how indigenous cultural objects are treated as 'art' in the European sense, which is far removed from their original use and meaning. The Pua Kumbu, which is typically made for religious ceremonies, rituals, and social identity, has been taken from the Iban community and placed in a space where it no longer carries the same significance. In the British Museum, it is displayed and valued no longer as an object functioning within the Iban community but as an art piece that must be appreciated in accordance with Western concepts of art, where the cultural context and its use are often overlooked.

This transformation is a form of cultural colonization, where cultural objects from non-Western societies are not valued in their original context but instead are placed within a universal

cultural history space that often marginalizes the history, values, and identity of the object's original community. The Pua Kumbu, which once had a role in the life of the Iban people, is now displayed as an art piece considered 'empty' of its original existence, only regarded as an artifact that can be admired in ways that its makers never envisioned. This phenomenon reflects how colonialism occurs not only in political forms but also in the interpretation and assessment of art, where the original cultural values are diluted and adjusted to fit Western paradigms. In this case, the Pua Kumbu is an example of how cultural objects are treated as materials to be admired without fully understanding their meaning and position in the original society.

The role of curators is crucial in exploring ideas and creativity to create specific spaces in museums that present cultural objects with the aim of achieving justice and social harmony. Through this approach, curators can influence diverse visitor perspectives in interpreting and understanding not only cultural objects but also the social experiences of past societies. The creation of such varied spaces also strengthens the relationship between the museum and the communities that are experts in their cultures, ensuring that this process remains sustainable.

This effort aims to redefine the museum not just as a place for storing artifacts but also as an institution that can serve as an agent for healing, particularly for nations still traumatized by the stigma of the past, oppression, and the loss of identity and culture due to colonization. Museums, as social institutions that preserve cultural heritage, have the potential to contribute to healing past traumas and ultimately aid in social reconstruction. The Iban Pua Kumbu, taken by the colonizer James Brooke during his time in Sarawak and later handed over to the British Museum, exemplifies how colonialism seized and displayed cultural objects without considering the value and meaning they held for the original community. This process not only denies the Iban people their right to their heritage but also erases their identity and history. Therefore, through reforming how cultural objects are presented and understood in museums, we can create space to heal historical wounds and restore appreciation for original cultures.

To break the stereotypes in museum institutions, the first step is to make museums more than just places for storing historical artifacts. Museums need to act as agents for socio-cultural development in their communities, playing an active role in challenging narratives that support colonialism and providing space to appreciate cultural diversity. This means that museums should take steps to decolonize their spaces, including through repatriation—returning cultural heritage to its original communities and recognizing the legitimate values and philosophies within those cultures.

Museums should also maximize their function to challenge distortions, ethical violations, and rights violations by using proper labels and terminology. This will ensure that the historical context, heritage, and functional significance of cultural objects are presented accurately, without being clouded by prejudice or distorted interpretations. For example, the Iban Pua Kumbu, taken by the handed colonial James Brooke during his time in Sarawak and later over to the British Museum, illustrates how this cultural object has been detached from its original cultural context. Pua Kumbu, which was an integral part of the spiritual and social heritage of the Iban people, has been displayed in a context that fails to appreciate its value and meaning within the community. By returning objects like the Pua Kumbu to the Iban community, museums can acknowledge and respect the profound meaning contained within them.

Hannah Manson (2020) in her TED talk titled *Museum in Progress: Decolonizing Museum* stated:

> "…and if our government can't use its power to reconcile with the legacy and the trauma of colonialism, why not Museum? As products of colonialism, as community and these educational spaces that have power, I believe acknowledgment in museum can lead to social healing and ultimately social reconstruction."

This statement emphasizes that if the government cannot use its power to reconcile with the legacy and trauma of colonialism, then museums, as products of colonialism and powerful educational spaces, must take a role in the process of social healing and reconstruction. By doing so,

museums can not only decolonize the history of the past but also give recognition to the creativity and spirituality that continues to live within cultural objects. By returning heritage to the original communities, museums have the opportunity to restore cultural identity and play a role in building a more just society that values diversity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

All images are owned by the Trustees of the British Museum collection. Please note that these images are solely intended for academic research purposes and not for commercial use. Additionally, I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. Jerry for sharing valuable insights about the Pua Kumbu, particularly regarding the 'ancient' motifs that are no longer produced in Iban culture

REFERENCE

Andaya, B.W., Andaya, L.Y., Andaya, B.W. & Andaya, L.Y. 1982. *The heritage of the past: A history of Malaysia*, pp. 7-36. London: Palgrave

Alpert, S.G. 2021. The Charles Hose Collection at the British Museum. *Arts of Ancestor* 12(1):1-19. Retrieved from https://www.artoftheancestors.com/blog/charles-hose-british-museum

Brooke, J. 1853. *The private letters of Sir James Brooke, KCB, Rajah of Sarawak, narrating the events of his life, from 1838 to the present time* (Vol. 3). London: R. Bentley.

Cuk, N. 1997. Carrying the battle into the form: Repatriating First Nations' cultural artifacts. *Dalhousie Journal of Legal Studies* 6: 157-177.

Doering, O.C. 1966. Government in Sarawak under Charles Brooke. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 39(2): 95-107.

Gavin, T. 1991. *Kayau Indu—the warpath of women: A Ngar ritual at Entawau, Baleh in October 1988*. Kuching: Semasa Press.

Gavin, T. 2003. Names as titles. In *Iban Ritual Textiles*, pp. 79-168. Leiden: Brill Publisher

Heppell, M. 2006. Women's war: An update of the literature on Iban textiles. *Borneo Research Bulletin* 37: 182-193.

Hasegawa, G. 2014. Label, title, and juluk: The naming system for weaving designs of Iban ritual fabric. *Borneo Research Bulletin* 45: 190-205.

Hose, C., & McDougall, W. 1912. *The pagan tribes of Borneo* (Vol. 1). London: Macmillan and Company, Limited.

Hose, C. 1926. *Natural man: A record from Borneo*. London: Macmillan and Company, Limited.

Hose, C. 1929. *The field-book of a jungle-wallah: Being a description of shore, river & forest life in Sarawak*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Irwin, G. 1955. *Nineteenth century Borneo: A study in diplomatic rivalry*. Martinus: Nijhoff.

Kedit, V. 2009. Restoring Panggau Libau: A reassessment of engkeramba'in Saribas Iban ritual textiles (pua'kumbu'). *Borneo Research Bulletin* 40: 221-248.

Kedit, V. 2017. A chief's caveat, a rajah's gift, a museum's treasure: Journey of a 19th-century Iban textile called a Lebur Api from Borneo to the British Museum. *Borneo Research Bulletin* 48: 210+. Retrieved from Gale Academic OneFile, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A545085225/AONE?u=anon~8ad348b2&sid=googleScholar&xid=221b3cca

Kiyai, G. & Tugang, N. 2023. Artifak sakral dalam budaya Iban di Sarawak. *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies* 41(1): 311-335

Kiyai, G., Tugang, N., Halabi, K.N.M. & Ismail, N.H. 2023. Wanita dan kolektif memori: Pendokumentasian dalam pembuatan penganan Iban di Sarawak: Women and collective memory: Documentation in the making of penganan Iban in Sarawak. *Sains Insani* 8(1): 25-40.

Lime, A. 2018. A guide to Africa's 'looted treasures'. *BBC News Africa*. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45406557

Low, A. 2008. Social fabric: Circulating pua kumbu textiles of the indigenous Dayak Iban people in Sarawak (Doctoral dissertation). Australia: University of Technology Sydney

Welsh, P.H. 1991. Repatriation and cultural preservation: Potent objects, potent pasts. *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 25: 837-859.

Susi Dunsmore obituary. 2017.. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/feb/17/susi-dunsmore-obituary (February 17)

Gregory Kiyai @ Keai, Ph.D
Jabatan Seni Visual,
Fakulti Seni Kreatif,
University Malaya
Email: gregory.kiyai@yahoo.com

Received: 18th December 2024
Accepted: 2nd January 2025
Published: 30th April 2025