



## The Iban Traditional Religion: *Miring*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to discuss about the offering ceremony, which is one of the traditional cultures performed by the Iban in Sarawak. *Miring* is performed to give honor to their Gods (*Petara*), Holy Spirit (*Orang Panggau & Bunsu Antu*) and souls of their dead ancestors (*Petara Aki-Ini*) whom they invited to their various festivals. If the supernatural is not fed, they will not obtain the necessary kindness in which will cause disaster. The arrival of Christianity led to the fact that almost all the Iban left their pagan religion. At the same time, the Iban community today is less aware of the offering ceremony procedure. Fieldwork was carried out at several locations in Saratok, Betong, Sarawak. The data are collected through participant observation technique and through face-to-face interview with the informants. The interviewed informants were selected based on their expertise in the origins, customs and cultures of the Iban community. Results show that not all of the Iban perform the *miring* ceremony. Lack of ritual specialists and conversion to Christianity among the Iban are the causes of this ritual to be less performed. The Iban community today faces many challenges in maintaining and practicing the traditions inherited by their ancestors. Even though there are changes and differences of *miring* performed by the Iban community in Sarawak, their aims and needs remained the same, and that is to beg for the gods' protection and avoid unwanted or bad things to happen.

**Keywords:** *Ritual, miring, Iban, Culture, Changes*

### INTRODUCTION

Historically, the Iban originated from Kalimantan, Indonesia. Among the famous legends and history of ethnic inclusion is initially they entered through the Batang Ai, Kapuas, namely the Sarawak-Kalimantan border. Dayak Iban initial displacement is scattered in the North part of Lupar and Saribas River. Their displacement has occurred since the 19th century on the Hulu Batang Lupar through the Kalimantan border leading to the Rejang. Sri Aman has the biggest Iban settlements followed by Kapit, Kalaka (Saratok), Mukah, Miri, Betong, Baram, Song and Sarikei. Most of the Iban have converted to Christian. Although many have converted to Christian, they still maintain a traditional and spiritual ceremony such as "*Sandau Hari*", "*Gawai Batu*", "*Gawai Burong*", and "*Gawai Antu*". This ceremony is still practiced among the Iban. Among the types of *Gawai* that are celebrated by the Iban community is *Gawai Dayak*, *Gawai Burong*, *Gawai Antu*, *Gawai Tuah*, *Gawai Betambah Bulu* and *Gawai Batu*. *Gawai Dayak* is celebrated on 1<sup>st</sup> June every year, while *Gawai Burong*, is held to worship *Singalang Burong* as a God of war. *Gawai Mangkung Tiang* is held when the villagers had just moved into a new longhouse. *Gawai Kenyalang* is held to mark the success of a person in his life. *Gawai Betambah Bulu* is celebrated by the Iban who had travelled far and gained success.

The Iban community in Sarawak is one of the ethnic groups that is rich in culture and tradition inherited from their ancestors. One of the customs that is still in practice by the Iban community until now is the *miring* rite. *Miring* is a ceremonial offering or to pray to their god to bless or request and avoid from any threat. The real purpose of *miring* rite is to bless the people, protect, and bring happiness, peace and harmony to the society. Normally, *miring* is held before an important activity or after the occurrence of a disaster or mishap befalls longhouse. This research was conducted to investigate the relationship of *miring* ritual and Iban omen. The researcher studied the process involved in the *miring* ritual. Apart from that, the study also touched on changes of culture and obstacles in the offering ceremony.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

The data were collected using two main methods, through participant observation technique and through face-to-face interview with ten key informants. As a person that originates from a longhouse, I have witnessed and participated in many of offering ceremonies and scarifies. I have attended three *Gawai Burong* which was in 2010, 2014 and 2016 in Saratok, Betong Division. *Gawai Burong* in 2014 at my longhouse is mainly hosted by ill person who used the occasions to seek restoration of their health. Besides that, I have observed many offering ceremonies conducted on *Gawai Dayak*, *Belian* and *Ngintu Burong*. During the offering ceremonies, chants or *sampi* are uttered to invoke the deities, the spirits and the ancestors to ask for their assistance leadership and guardianship in their daily life. The qualitative approach used to carry out this research is used to ensure the data obtained is in line with the essence of the investigation. At the same time, researchers can connect with individuals or groups who are still implementing food offerings. This means that the findings of data from all interviewed informants are very important.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Gods of the Iban*

The Iban traditional religion is based on the concepts of pantheon, soul and dream, ritual obligation and festivals, cults like paddy cultivation and healing, and the practices of the system of bird omen and augury (Kedit,1998). The realm of the gods, *petara* in Iban culture incorporates many benevolent beings that have power over the working of natural phenomena. They are the gods of the tree-tops (*Petara Puchok Kayu*), and gods of the earth (*Petara Tengah Tanah*). All of these gods are invoked during *gawai* festival in prayers (*sampi*) and incantation (*pengap*) or (*timang*). These deities are highly anthropomorphic and are perceived as having specialized functions and powers (Freeman, 1953). While the Iban Pantheon is complex, three main gods signify salient features of Iban cultural values: *Singalang Burong* as a god of war, *Simpulang Gana* (the principal god of the paddy) and *Selampandai* (creator of man). The concept of a ghost or *antu* refers to their God. In the past, *antu* or *petara* refers to the same thing as any other form of supernatural powers that can provide help and good will to men. *Petara* helps people in a lot of things. *Petara* can be worshiped with *piring* (food offerings) during the *miring* ceremony as an appreciation from human.

In Iban culture, the augural God is related to the Iban by marriage of *Singalang Burong*'s seventh daughter. It is the son in-law of *Singalang Burong* who revealed divination to the mortal Iban. *Pulang Gana* or *Simpulang Gana* is also known as God of the earth. *Petara* has a wife that is called *Endu Serentum Tanah Tumbuh Daya Chenalang Tanggi Buluh*. This God is the God of fertility of agricultural land to grow rice and is also said to have granted a good land to the Iban community so that they get a good crop. *Selampandai* or *Sempandai* is *petara* who created man, who lived in the land of *Perai Tinggal Teresai Ujan Ngerunung* which means a very fertile mountainous area. Humans communicate with supernatural powers through dreams. Dreams also have significant meaning in relation with *miring*. The dream is a place of meeting between people and their *petara* (Jensen, 1966). Supernatural powers manifest in the human dream in the supernatural to convey some indication or warning to mankind that they must be careful in every move. Iban has very strong beliefs about the existence of *Petara* and many other incredible powers. Dreams are one of the ways which human can

communicate with the realm of the spirits. They also can communicate with the spirit through ritual, festivals or *gawai*.

### **Omen**

Iban community is also guided by omens in carrying out their daily activities. The Iban omen birds are the seven son-in-laws of *Singalang Burong*. *Singalang Burong* is the highest deity and the god of war. In terms of seniority and authority, these omen birds are *Ketupong*, *Beragai*, *Embuas*, *Papau*, *Pangkas*, *Bejampung* and *Kunding*. *Ketupong* is married to *Endu Dara Tinchin Temaga*, *Beragai* to *Puchung Pengabas*, *Embuas* to *Endu Letan Berpulas*, *Papau* to *Endu Ketunsong Ngembai*, *Pangkas* to *Kechapong Pulas*, *Bejampung* to *Endu Kechapah Dulang Midong* and *Kunding* to *Dara Patri Langit*. Except for *Kunding*, all of these birds are day bird. Meanwhile *Kunding* is a night bird. The Iban regard the calls of these birds as an omen. The calls of these birds influenced the Iban daily farming activities and also when they are out on hunting.

The other omen bird is *Nendak*. *Nendak* lives in the same longhouse as *Singalang Burong* but he is not his son-in-law. The most feared of all the omen birds is *Ketupong*, the husband of *Dara Tinchin Temaga*. *Ketupong* is supernatural being taking the form of a bird. According to Roth (1980), *Ketupong*'s main task is to warn them of impending danger. For example, if *Ketupong* flies inside the house, the Iban must leave the house. In ancient times, the Dayaks will not start the headhunting expedition without consulting the omen birds. To do it properly, some of the leading men of tribe, men revered for their wisdom in interpreting signs and omens, are chosen to live in a detached hut some distance from the long house, and remain on watch, day and night to ascertain the first favourable omen, so that the war party may start without unnecessary loss of time. These tribal leaders in their jungle hut are on the alert as they listen for the cries of the omen birds.

As a result, the Iban community is very concerned about the bird omens. They believe in all types of sign or omens which are considered as a form of warning to humans. Normally the Iban believe in omens that exist in their lives. Any sign should be celebrated with *miring* rite, which gives offerings to their god. The purpose was to defuse or neutralize the situation prevailing between humans and their gods. By doing so, the Iban believes it will bring luck, happiness and wealth to their lives. According to Noria (2011), even though the animals carry a good sign, it must also be greeted with *miring* so that people get a double luck. However, if its ill will or well, it cannot be called bad, but should be greeted with offering ceremonies. The Iban believe if it's a bad omen, if celebrated with the *miring* ceremonies, it will turn into a good sign. Something disastrous happens if people do not follow the instructions from *petara* in which they obtained through dreams or not inclined to hold the offering ceremony when they get good or bad omen from *petara* or other supernatural powers. Thus, the Iban community must worship their *petara* by having offering ceremonies to calm the situation.

### **Miring Ceremony among the Iban**

Iban in Saratok believe that offering ceremony is a way to give thanks to god for their blessing and help apart from to avoid unwanted incident. The purpose of *miring* ceremony is to bless the people, protect, and bring happiness, peace and harmony to the society. In ancient times, the ritual was held before a group of men go down for a fight or known as *ngayau* expedition or when Iban want to explore new areas to be built a new longhouse. Ritual was held before important activities were held or after the occurrence of the disaster or unwanted things happen to the longhouse.

Depending on the significance of the ceremony, the number of attendee for a *miring* can be up to thousands, involving several communities. Normally, grand *miring* is performed during the *Gawai Dayak* and *Gawai Antu*. In modern times, *miring* is conducted to welcome important guests such as government minister or dignitary. Sometimes it involves pig slaughtering as a sacrifice to the gods and the spirit during the *miring* ceremony. Usually the pig's legs are tied onto a wooden pole or placed inside a gunny sack. The Iban will use a spear or warrior sword to cut off its throat. Instead of using the whole pig as offerings, only a small amount of the pig's blood is placed in a plate together with other offerings such as rice and egg. Then the offerings are placed on top of a temporary altar usually made from

bamboo. The slaughtered pig normally became a meal for feast for the people instead of throwing it away.

The celebration of all *gawai* involves a general pattern of rites. First is sacrificial offerings (*piring*) are made and followed by a *bebiau* which involves invocation and rooster-waving. Lastly, the most important part of the festival is the prolonged chanting of the sacred texts (*Timang* and *Pengap*) by ritual experts or bard (*lemambang*) (Kedit, 1993). *Petara* can manifest in people's lives, whether through human dreams or through signs made by living organisms, such as animals, birds and insects or through certain natural phenomena.

Preparing the *piring* also requires some skill and experience too. The *piring* consists of white glutinous rice, black glutinous rice, white rice, banana, tobacco, boiled eggs, betel leaf, areca nut, and salt, cooking oil, pop rice and rice wine. Usually the Iban worship or present food to the extraordinary power by placing it on a *piring*. In this context, worship means to perform a ritual, for example offerings ceremony and the Iban uses a special blanket called *Pua Kumbu* which serves as a symbol or emblem to indicate that the Iban have been performed or worshipped the extraordinary powers. Iban communities in Sarawak mostly choose to settle along the main rivers. This contributes to the differences in food resources available and subsequently used to provide offerings. The ingredients found in food offerings is vary according to the place of different river systems in Sarawak. In Saratok, Betong, the food offered includes betel leaf, areca nut, salt, tobacco, white rice, glutinous rice, bananas, eggs, *penganan iri*, rice, cooking oil and rice wine (*tuak*). *Penganan iri* is made by frying a mixture of flour and sugar into hot oil. At the end of the offering ceremonies, the popped rice (*letup*) will be thrown in all directions. The popped rice will be cleaned after the end of ceremony. The ritual expert will pronounce a chant (*biau*) while waving a roaster over the offerings. According to the beliefs of the Iban, *petara* (god) is a supernatural power that exists in this world. It is to be worshiped and adored by *miring* ceremony (offering of foods), *Pengap* and *Timang* (incantation) are always executed during religious rituals. Therefore, the worship ritual and for the Iban community is a religious ritual in which is the time to appeal, intent, desire or prayer to *petara* and other supernatural powers.

In contrast to the Rejang River valley area, Iban Betong communities do not use *rendai* and *tumpi* (rice or sago cakes made by pressing the flour into the hot pan) in their offerings. On the other hand, the sago (*sagun*) is a very important ingredient for offerings in Saratok. However, eggs are the main ingredient needed in offerings ceremony. This is because the egg is a symbol of fertility and the beginning of every human life. In some areas such as in the Batang Rajang basin, an entire egg is used in the offerings. While for Iban Saratok, they only need to slice the eggs into small pieces, but the concept is still the same.

In the Batang Rajang basin, if the offerings are nine-fold (*piring turun sembilan*), nine eggs will be offered in every nine plate. Most of the offerings are three-fold (*piring turun tiga*). For example, an offerings ceremony made among family members only prepare three-fold offerings. But offering ceremonies which are performed in the hall (*ruai*), it requires a five-fold (*piring turun lima*). Each offering of more than one should have a plate of *indu piring* (main plate of offering) and it must be placed on a metal tray called *Tabak*. Metal tray containing the offerings will be wrapped in traditional Iban blankets (*Pua Kumbu*).

Research by Kedit (1993) showed that before a man leaves for *bejalai*, *miring* rite will be conducted for three nights consecutively. The ritual followed the usual pattern of using seven sets of sacrificial food items. One set of plates was placed above their sleeping place and was covered with a ritual blanket (*Pua Kumbu*). However, Iban nowadays are inclined to hold ritual to invoke the aid of extraordinary powers to get wealth, good health, protection and happiness in life. Thus, it is essential to perform the ritual.



*Figure 1. The ingredients used to make the Piringareplaced on top of Tabak*



*Figure 2.PiringTurunLima*

Based on the results of the research conducted, offering ceremony is an essential requirement for the Iban community. In addition, offerings ceremonies are also performed when there are certain requirements, for example, if the Iban community gets signs or addresses that show the customs of the Iban culture and society. This is because it is very important to ensure that the aspirations and desires of the Iban community are met by extraordinary powers. Despite changes or differences in offerings ceremony in a particular area, however, the ritual still has the same goal of communicating with extraordinary powers. The changes that occur in *miring* ceremony is due to the modernization. There are some changes such as current needs, location, time, use of *Pua Kumbu* and ingredients for offerings. However, changes in the offerings ceremony do not impede the customs of the cultural world to continue in the culture of Iban society.

There are several factors that prevent the Iban community from continuing the customs of food offerings. Among them are the arrival of Christianity, the knowledge of the young generation on the supply of food, modernization, change of time and lack of ritualists like *lemambang*. Many ritualists including *lemambang* and *manang* have died. This affects the aspect of management and the implementation of offering ceremony as it requires the role of ritual experts to control the ritual. Therefore, the role of ritualists is very important to encourage the younger generation of Iban society to recognize and study about their culture. The role of ritualists like *lemambang* does not just head over a ritual of offerings ceremony, but it is necessary to pass on all the knowledge they possess so that the customs will not extinct in the future.

## CONCLUSION

The offerings ceremony in Iban society is not only worshipping the existence of extraordinary powers to solve the various crises or problems faced by humans, but it is also used as a meeting place for the Iban community. It aims to exchange opinions, to brainstorm ideas, share thoughts and experiences as well as secrets to gain a better life. In today's times, offerings ceremony is still performed by the Iban people who inherit the heritage beliefs. In addition, there are also Iban people who have professed Christianity but are still doing the offering ceremony because they are very effective. This is because every problem or crisis that occurs in the life of Iban society can be solved through offering ceremony done in the standard fairs. Furthermore, they can also take advantage of all the benefits or add to the existing good through the ritual of offerings ceremony made in the traditional festival.

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