

From Martial Art to Stage Performance: Modern Adaptations of Kuntau Among the Dayak Iban

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the transformation of kuntau, a traditional martial art of the Iban Dayak community. It traces its evolution from a symbol of male courage to its present role as a stage performance.”. The study is guided by the following research questions: (i) How have the functions and meanings of kuntau changed over time? (ii) How does the Iban community perceive the contemporary practice of kuntau? and (iii) What adjustments have occurred in the movements, rituals, and performance styles of kuntau as it transitions into staged forms? The objective is to examine changes in function, community perception, and adjustments in practice and performance. Guided by a constructivist-interpretivist philosophy, the research employed a mixed approach involving a questionnaire administered to 122 respondents from Kuching, Samarahan, and Sri Aman, alongside field observations and in-depth interviews with five kuntau teachers. Findings indicate that while traditional elements such as floral movements, techniques, and symbolic values are preserved, adaptations for stage performance have altered movement patterns, minimized ritual practices, and introduced choreographic elements. Concerns over authenticity emerge particularly because these staged adaptations emphasize entertainment and visual appeal, sometimes at the expense of ritual depth and original combat intention. The discussion highlights the need to balance tradition with adaptation to contemporary contexts to ensure sustainability. This study contributes to the discourse on intangible cultural heritage preservation by providing insights into how cultural practices can evolve without losing their core identity.

Keywords: Dayak Iban; kuntau; Sarawak; martial art; stage performance

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INTRODUCTION

Martial arts are recognized as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, n.d). They play a vital role in society, not only as mechanisms of self-defense but also as expressions of national identity, forms of sport and recreation, sources of education, and

even tourism products. Beyond their physical functions, martial arts nurture positive values such as discipline, obedience, responsibility, and perseverance. Across the world, martial arts manifest in diverse cultural contexts; for example, karate in Japanese society and kung fu in Chinese society. Within the Malay communities of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei, *silat* has been extensively studied, developed, and recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural product. According to the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, ICH encompasses “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2020).

Awareness and knowledge of martial arts from other societies are often shaped by exposure to popular culture, particularly films and blockbusters featuring martial arts, the establishment of martial arts training centers, as well as the dissemination of knowledge through information technology. This has contributed to the widespread recognition and popularity of martial arts such as karate and kung fu. However, this same mechanism of popular culture dissemination has not benefitted Iban *kuntau*, which remains largely absent from mainstream media, commercial training networks, and digital representation, therefore limiting public awareness of its existence and cultural significance.

In contrast, within contemporary Iban society in Sarawak, awareness and understanding of *kuntau* as a traditional martial art rooted in Iban self-defense remain relatively limited and underdeveloped. This is influenced by several factors, including the lack of scholarly research and publications on *kuntau* (Farrer, 2006; Facal, 2012), the minimal presence of martial arts activities at the community level, and the broader impacts of rapid socio-economic change. As social change increasingly shapes everyday life, *kuntau* has not been exempt from transformation. In recent times, its purposes and contexts of practice have shifted, particularly regarding the functions it serves and the spaces in which it is performed.

Given this context, the study seeks to address the central research objective: to examine how Iban *kuntau* has transformed from a functional martial art into a staged cultural performance, focusing on changes in its functions, community perceptions, and contemporary practices. For instance, in Sumatra, Indonesia, the organizational systems established by *kuntau* groups have enabled its survival and adaptation through latent functions, ensuring its continuity despite changing social dynamics (Lidiantari et al., 2023). Recognizing these regional parallels, our research team undertook a study of Iban *kuntau* in Kuching, Samarahan, and Sri Aman with the aim of documenting and contributing to its preservation.

METHOD AND APPROACHES

The approach in this research adopted the constructivism-interpretivism philosophy of inquiry which requires the investigator to examine epistemology, ontology and axiology in the formation of the science on *kuntau*. This approach aligns with the interpretivist and constructivist framework that underpins this research, highlighting the significance of participants' experiences by examining how individuals perceive and interpret their realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Burns et al. (2022), the manifestation of the constructivism-interpretivism inquiry philosophy influenced the data collection, data analysis and findings of the study. For example, the researchers and respondents engaged in knowledge building on *kuntau* during face-to-face interview sessions and using online forms (i.e., Google Forms) or questionnaire administration that took into account values such as ethics and social norms such as respect and cooperation. In other words, in an effort to build knowledge about *kuntau*, cooperation between researchers and respondents has been carried out. In the data collection of this research, the researcher used observation which included observation of *kuntau* exercises or demonstrations, conducting surveys involving respondents, and interviews with *kuntau* practitioners or teachers.

The administration of survey form involving respondents helped the researcher make generalizations about kuntau practiced in Kuching, Samarahan and Sri Aman, Sarawak while observation, interviews with kuntau practitioners and teachers resulted in comprehensive and holistic knowledge about kuntau. The survey form has been conducted online and through face-to-face methods especially for respondents who live in areas outside the city or who do not have access to the Internet. Probing questions contribute to effective data collection among large sample of individuals (Giddens and Sutton, 2013).

The overall number of respondents of this study was 122 and from that number only 36 individuals claimed to be good at kuntau (see Table 1). Step in recognizing respondents who are good at kuntau has been conducted with the cooperation of the *ketua kaum* (leader of the tribe) and the *ketua masyarakat* (leader of the community) in the area of study. From the total of 36 individuals, researchers has interviewed five kuntau teachers with three from Samarahan, one from Kuching and one from Sri Aman. All of the three divisions (refer to Map 1) were selected because active involvement in kuntau. Erickson (2011) argues that a holistic description with accuracy of facts is of paramount importance in research.

Data from the survey forms have been analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and demographic background of the respondents have been analyzed such as age, level of education, employment and monthly income.

TABLE 1: Number and percentage of respondents

Category of Respondents	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Able to perform kuntau	36	29.6%
Unable to perform Kuntau	86	70.4%
Total	122	100.0%

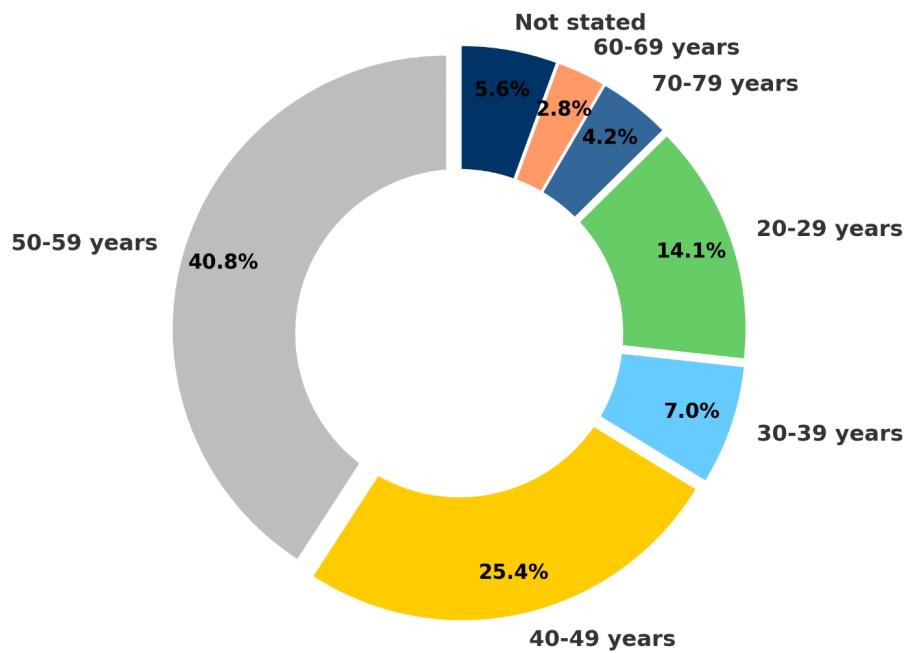


FIGURE 1: Age Categories of Respondents

In terms of age, the respondents ranged in age from 20 years to 79 years. 40.8% respondents were aged between 50–59 years, 25.4% were between 40–49 years, 14.1% were aged between 20–29 years, and 7.0% were between 30–39 years of age (Table 1). Refer Figure 1 for more information.

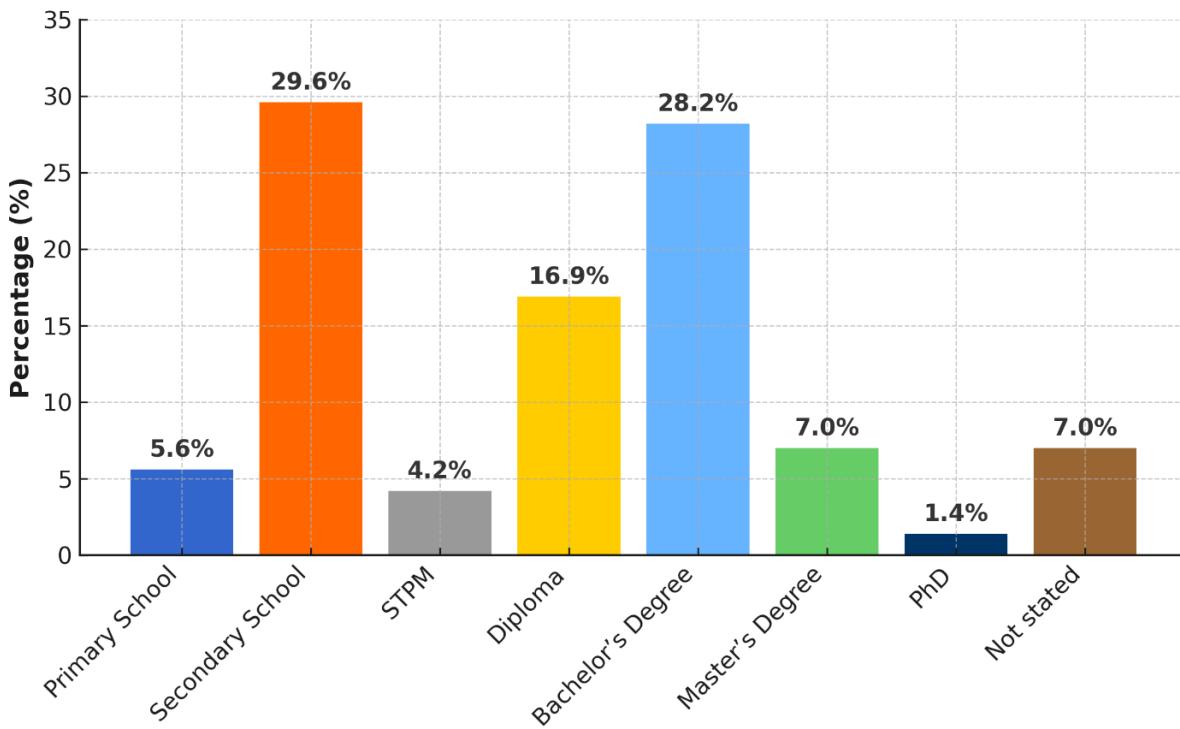


FIGURE 2: Level of Education

In terms of education, 29.6 % of the respondents had secondary school education, 28.2% had undergraduate education and 16.9% had education at the stage of degree. Details on the educational stage of the respondents are shown in Figure 2.

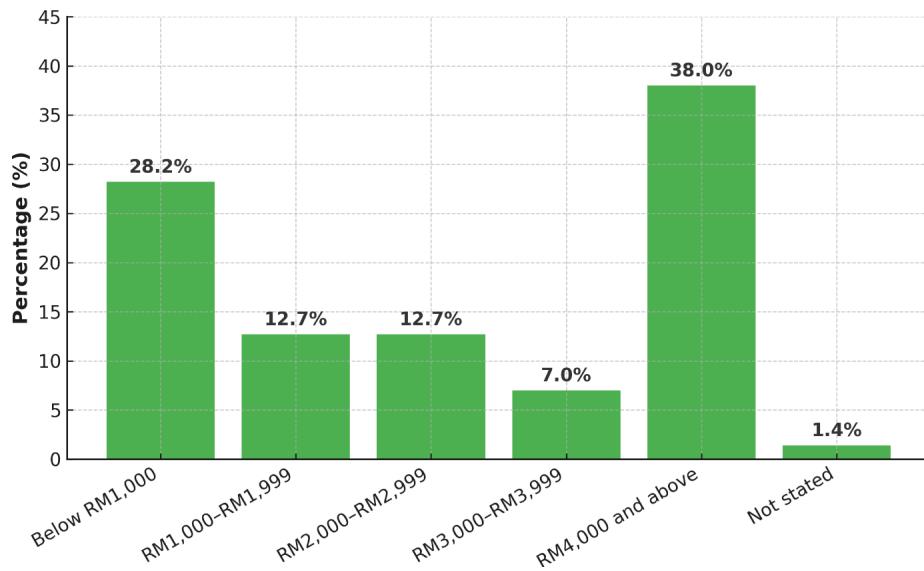


FIGURE 3: Monthly Income of Respondents

In the context of monthly income (refer Figure 4), 38.0% of respondents have monthly income of 4,000.00 Malaysian Ringgit (RM) and above, 28.2% had income of RM1,000.00 and below, 12.7% between RM1,000.00 to RM1,999.00 and 12.7% between RM2,000.00 and RM2,999.00. 39.4% of the respondents worked in the government (public) sector, 19.7% worked in the sector private, 19.7% self-employed, 7% are community leaders (*tuai rumah*), 5.6% students, 5.6% not working or retired, and 2.8% did not declare their occupation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scott (1956: 95) in his dictionary, "A Dictionary of Sea Dayak" defines kuntau as "Dayak boxing". This term is the earliest record used by western researchers about kuntau. The spelling of kuntau used by Scott (1956) is also used by researchers such as Facal (2012, 2017) and is also used in "A Comprehensive Iban-English Dictionary" (Ensireng, Salleh and Sutlive, 2016). Kamus Dewan Edisi Ketiga (2002) and Kamus Dewan Edisi Keempat (2008) suggested that kuntau may have been 'indigenized' based on local spelling and pronunciation. There are researchers such as Davies (2000) and Green (2001) who spelled the martial art of kuntau as kuntao. In the context of this study the term kuntau was used in line with the spelling used by the respondents.

Davies (2000) stated that kuntao has 4 classifications: first, regardless of origin, kuntao is a Chinese or Southeast Asian or other people's martial art; second, kuntao is a martial art of the Chinese orthodox; third, kuntao is a hybrid art or marginalise culture that combines Chinese martial arts with local methods, techniques and traditions in Southeast Asia; and lastly, kuntao is a pattern of Southeast Asian martial arts that is rooted in Chinese culture but has been fully integrated because indigenous culture is more dominant. In addition to Davies (2000), researcher such as Green (2001) also associate kuntao as the martial art of Chinese society in Southeast Asia. This is reinforced by Hernando and Siswantoyo (2018), who stated that the name kuntau or kuntao is also said to be originated from Chinese language, which means "fist path" as there is an influence of traditional Dayak martial art in Kalimantan Tengah and also countries like Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines and Indonesia.

The UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (n.d) categorizes martial arts as an intangible cultural heritage. Martial arts function as a method of self-defense, a representation of national identity, a source of sport and entertainment, an educational tool, and a source for tourism. Martial arts can promote discipline, obedience, responsibility, and perseverance. Karate in Japan, kung fu in China and Silat in Malaysia and are forms of martial arts. UNESCO characterizes Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills; along with the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated with them that communities, groups, and, in certain instances, individuals acknowledge as integral to their cultural heritage" (UNESCO, 2020).

Scholars have long noted that traditional martial arts often experience a process of transformation from their original combative functions to stage performance forms and it is a shift influenced by socio-cultural, political, and economic factors (Skowron-Markowska, 2021; Ciembrowniewicz, 2019). Due to international tourism, martial arts are slowly changing its way from self-defense to a stage performance for audiences. Therefore, this transformation caused the martial practices to be adapted to meet the expectations of audiences and the demands of cultural tourism.

According to Green (2001: 533), the martial arts of kuntau and silat have distinct histories of development even if the communities practicing these cultures inhabit the same region or country. The element of confidentiality in the context of training may contribute to the developmental differences that manifest (Green, 2001). Farrer's (2006) studies in Singapore and Facal's (2012) in Brunei showed the generation of knowledge about kuntau was somewhat limited and kuntau development activities were somewhat lagging behind. Facal (2017) emphasizes that although the practice of martial arts in Southeast

Asia is rich in diversity, there are still streams of martial arts (e.g., kuntau) that receive less focus in the context of research (Facal, 2017).

Gerry and Osup (2021) also stated that the studies that have been conducted by researchers are more focused on the performances of kuntau internally but there is no holistic study conducted on kuntau. Therefore, Gerry and Osup (2021) recommend for future researchers to ensure the existence of reliable teachers to pass on the science of kuntau to the younger generation whether in the village or higher education institutions so that the martial art can be inherited to the younger generation. Although kuntau is slowly transforming itself from martial arts to stage performances, Ruswinarsih et al. (2023) suggested that further research regarding the development of traditional martial arts learning modules is necessary both at the community and school level for guaranteeing the development of traditional martial arts.

Despite its roots as a self-defense art, kuntau has increasingly adapted to modern contexts, transforming into staged performances shaped by cultural tourism and changing social functions. Yet, while existing studies have examined kuntau in broader Southeast Asian settings, little research has specifically explored its transformation within the Iban Dayak community. This study addresses that gap by focusing on the shift of kuntau from martial art to stage performance as a modern cultural adaptation.

FINDINGS

Overall, the survey and interview data consistently indicate that kuntau is undergoing a functional transition: from a practical martial art grounded in combat skills to a staged performance shaped by aesthetic expectations and cultural presentation. This shift forms the central pattern across respondents' experiences and perceptions, providing a clear empirical basis for discussing how kuntau is adapting to contemporary social contexts. The following sections elaborate on the specific forms of change namely; purpose, movement, understanding, and teaching practices.

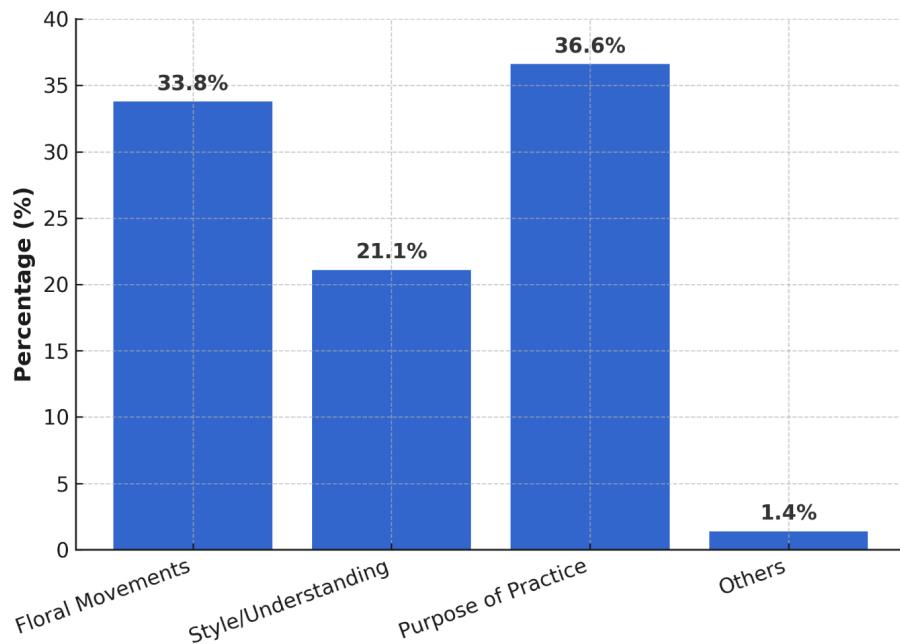


FIGURE 4: Forms of Change in Kuntau

The findings of the study show that kuntau Iban has undergone various forms of change in line with the circulation of time, social change, and external influences. The analysis of the survey found that the most obvious change is in terms of the purpose of kuntau practice which recorded the highest percentage of 36.6% as shown in Figure 4. Traditionally, kuntau was practiced as a single martial art skill that served to protect oneself and the community from physical threats. In the contemporary context, however, this function is increasingly turning to the purpose of performance or demonstration, especially in cultural ceremonies such as Gawai Dayak, state-ranking official events, or artistic performances on stage. This switching of functions suggests that although the symbolic value and cultural identity are still retained, the practical aspects of kuntau as a martial art are given less and less emphasis in daily life.

Movement Changes and Their Sociocultural Correlates

In addition to changes in the purpose of the practice, the forms of the kuntau movement also underwent modifications. A total of 33.8% of the respondents reported changes to floral movement (*bunga*), which are movements that are aesthetic in nature and symbolic elements in kuntau offerings. In comparison, traditional kuntau emphasizes more on the *buah* which is the attack and defense techniques that are practical and effective in real combat situations. In contrast, contemporary kuntau tends to accentuate *bunga* for the purpose of a visual performance that captures the attention of the audience. This prioritization of the aspect of *bunga* paralleled the need for stage performances that emphasized choreography, regularity of movement, and aesthetic appeal over combat effectiveness. Responses indicate that younger participants (especially those aged below 35) were more likely to identify changes in *bunga* than older practitioners. This suggests that younger generations engage with kuntau primarily through cultural performances and social media rather than in combat-oriented contexts.

Changes in Understanding and Transmission of Kuntau

The next form of change involved the flow or understanding of kuntau, which was noted by 21.1% of respondents. These changes refer to the way kuntau is understood, taught, and practiced by the current generation, which may differ from the traditional approach. Traditional kuntau is usually taught through a process that is closed in nature and full of elements of secrecy, while contemporary kuntau is more open to the general public, especially through lay performances and social media. These changes also reflect the adjustment of kuntau to modern realities where the openness of access to knowledge and exposure to various other forms of martial arts influences the style of teaching and practice.

Respondents with higher awareness levels towards the high level of security and peace were more likely to report changes in teaching styles and openness. These shifts were most frequently noted among respondents who perceived their environments as safe and stable, suggesting that higher awareness of social security correlates with greater acceptance and recognition of openness in kuntau teaching practices.

Perspectives from Kuntau Teachers

The results of the interview with kuntau teachers revealed that traditional kuntau practitioners tend not to be forthcoming about their skills and knowledge. This is done to avoid being tested by parties who have ill intentions or want to challenge their abilities. An experienced kuntau teacher, who had studied with several teachers, affirmed that hiding one's expertise gave one a sense of safety to move freely outside one's residential area without attracting unwanted attention. This humble and conscientious attitude reflects an ethical value in kuntau that prioritizes the use of knowledge at a reasonable time and not for mere display purposes. This ethical stance reflects a core traditional value: kuntau is to be used responsibly, and never

for unnecessary display. Such perspectives contrast with modern performance-oriented practices and reinforce tension between authenticity and visibility.

Cultural Exchange and Multicultural Influences

Interestingly, a small number of respondents who were Iban and lived adjacent to the Malay community admitted to having studied *silat* from teachers of Malay ethnicity. It is aimed at increasing their martial skills alongside knowledge in *kuntau*. This phenomenon suggests that although the respondents appreciate *kuntau* as a Dayak Iban heritage, they are also open-minded towards martial arts of other communities such as Malay *Silat* and Chinese martial arts. This state of affairs reflects the process of cultural exchange that prevails inherently within the plural society in Sarawak.

Respondents who learned *silat* or Chinese martial arts were predominantly from border zones between ethnic communities. These crossover participants were more likely to perceive *kuntau* as “evolving” rather than “declining,” perhaps due to their broader exposure to martial arts diversity.

Strategies for Sustaining Kuntau

To overcome the challenges and changes in *kuntau* practice, *kuntau* teachers and practitioners are involved in various initiatives. Among the steps taken include trying to maintain the traditional form of *kuntau*, providing awareness to the younger generation about the values and history of *kuntau*, as well as engaging in community discussions to maintain the rules of *Kuntau* practice based on traditional values. These efforts are important for ensuring that even as *kuntau* undergoes adjustments to modern contexts, its foundational values as a martial art of Dayak Iban heritage are maintained and passed on.

Academic Discussion: Functional Changes And Adaptation Of Iban Kuntau

Like other aspects of social life such as language use, diet, and social interaction, the martial art of *kuntau* is no exception to the currents of change spurred by historical, socioeconomic, and cultural factors. This change can be seen in three main elements namely the purpose of practice, the form of *bunga* movement, and the flow or understanding of *kuntau*. The most significant factor that influenced the change in the function of *Kuntau* was the existence of a safety in Sarawak as a result of the success of the police and army in maintaining security and safety. This situation has reduced the need for practitioners to practice *kuntau* in the context of actual self-defense. In addition, the reduced functional need for combat has opened space for *kuntau* to be reinterpreted in forms that are more publicly visible and culturally valuable, particularly in performative settings.

As a result of these changes in surroundings, most *Kuntau* practitioners have channeled their skills into forms of stage performance and demonstration activities that serve as cultural symbols. *Kuntau* is now often presented in events such as the opening of cultural ceremonies, Gawai Dayak festival, or official state-level events. This phenomenon is in line with the findings of the study by Ruswinarsih et al. (2023) in the context of the Ngaju Dayak ethnic group in Indonesia, where *kuntau* is better known as a traditional martial art that is often presented in traditional wedding ceremonies. This performance serves as an obstacle-breaking ritual, with the hope that the bride and groom can face all the challenges of life in the future. Although the practical purpose of *kuntau* as a self-defense tool is diminishing, the value of *kuntau* as a cultural heritage does not remain significant in fostering Iban ethnic identity. In the contemporary context, *kuntau* performance also become part of a narrative of cultural tourism that highlights the richness of local traditional art to a wider audience. The preference for stage performance can further be understood through the lens of cultural commodification, where visually appealing traditions are increasingly packaged for

festivals, tourism, and state-sponsored cultural showcases. Such performances also function as expressions of identity politics, allowing the Iban community to assert cultural visibility within Sarawak's plural society.

However, the transition to stage performances and demonstrations does not mean kuntau has completely lost its original function. Martial arts, whether traditional or modern, are not only self-defense skills, but also self-development tools that contribute to increased self-confidence, personal discipline, and mental resilience (Gerry & Osup, 2021). Therefore, although rarely used for actual fighting purposes, kuntau is still relevant as a medium of physical and spiritual education, especially if taught while retaining elements of its original ethical traditions and values.

These changes also reflect the concept of cultural adaptation whereby communities adapt their practices to current circumstances while trying to retain aspects of heritage that are considered important (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; UNESCO, 2020). Precisely, the main challenge for the Iban community is to find a balance between maintaining the authenticity of tradition and meeting contemporary needs so that kuntau can be inherited by future generations without losing its symbolic and technical value. This balancing act is crucial because excessive emphasis on performance risks reducing technical depth, while strict preservation without adaptation may reduce relevance in modern cultural and economic contexts.

The preservation of kuntau martial arts requires a strategic approach involving multiple parties rather than individuals and communities, also extended to government agencies at the state and national levels. Based on the findings of the study, there are several basic steps that need to be taken to ensure the survival of kuntau as an intangible cultural heritage of the Iban Dayak community.

Firstly, the effort needs to start by identifying Kuntau teachers and individuals who still have these skills at the village or regional level. This skills inventory is important not only for documentation purposes, but also as a foundation for developing the next generation of successors. The collection of information on the number, location, and stage of proficiency of Kuntau practitioners allows training design and knowledge transfer to be carried out in a more orderly manner.

Secondly, it is important to examine the role that can be played at each level. At the individual level, kuntau practitioners can become mentors or trainers to teach the basics of kuntau to young people. At the household level, parents can encourage children's participation in kuntau activities as part of value-based and discipline-oriented education. At the community level, Kuntau associations or clubs may organize classes, workshops, and competitions to attract community interest. While at the state level, government agencies may provide incentives, funds, and stage performance platforms for promoting the prestige of kuntau at the national and international levels. Such multilevel involvement is essential because the contemporary visibility of kuntau increasingly depends on public cultural platforms, festival circuits, and tourism-driven programming rather than everyday functional use.

Thirdly, this study emphasizes the need to examine the current challenges faced in efforts to sustain kuntau. Among the main challenges are the lack of interest among the younger generation, the lack of active teachers, funding constraints, and the negative perceptions held by certain segments of the community towards elements of the tradition such as *Miring* rituals. Without a clear strategy for dealing with these challenges, preservation efforts risk being stalled midway. To ensuring the effectiveness of the strategy, the approaches that have been used need to be assessed. This assessment includes an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of existing programs, whether they involve community classes, stage performances, or outreach initiatives. Successful programs may be expanded, while weaknesses need to be addressed through enhancements or adaptations.

In addition, some practical recommendations may be implemented to strengthen this effort. First, integrate kuntau in formal education, for example as a co-curricular activity in primary and secondary schools. This approach not only encourages early interest among students but also integrates kuntau into the process of character formation and self-discipline. Second, increase the demonstration of kuntau stage performances in official government events, cultural festivals, and official ceremonies that have a high community presence. Such exposure can raise public awareness and strengthen the image of kuntau as a symbol of Iban cultural identity. Without systematic collective action, kuntau risks becoming merely a cultural artifact that only manifests in documentation, rather than as an active practice in community life. Strengthening its role in stage performance, however, may continue to be the most practical pathway for visibility and survival, particularly within cultural tourism economies and contemporary identity expression.

SCOPE AND LIMITATION

This study examines the transformation of the traditional martial art of kuntau among Dayak Iban communities in Kuching, Samarahan, and Sri Aman, with a focus on the change in function from martial art to stage performance, the community's perception of kuntau as an intangible cultural heritage, as well as modern forms of adaptation prevailing in techniques, rituals, and delivery. Findings were obtained through a review of inquiry questions involving 122 respondents, field observations, and in-depth interviews with five Kuntau teachers.

This study is limited to three parts of Sarawak and only 36 respondents practice kuntau, therefore the findings do not represent the entire Iban community. The study period (2019–2021) included a phase of the COVID-19 pandemic that required direct observation, while all Kuntau teachers found were 60 years old and above, limiting the perspective of the younger generation. Cultural and religious sensitivity factors also hinder the exposure of some traditional rituals.

CONCLUSION

This study has documented and analyzed the transformation of kuntau, a traditional martial art of the Iban Dayak community, from its original function as a self-defense skill and marker of male courage into a staged cultural performance. Drawing on survey data, field observations, and in-depth interviews with practitioners, the findings show that while symbolic values, floral movements (bunga), and certain technical aspects are preserved, the emphasis has shifted toward choreographed, aesthetic presentations for cultural ceremonies, festivals, and official events. This adaptation reflects broader socio-cultural changes, including the decline in everyday self-defense needs, the influence of inter-ethnic exchange, and the openness of practice in the contemporary era. By focusing specifically on Iban kuntau, an area with minimal prior research, this study contributes new empirical insight to the scholarship on Bornean martial arts and expands theoretical discussions on cultural adaptation within intangible heritage studies.

Although concerns over authenticity remain, kuntau continues to be regarded as an important intangible cultural heritage that reinforces Iban identity. Its evolution demonstrates the processes of cultural adaptation and hybridization described in scholarly literature, where communities retain core traditions while modifying form and function to suit present-day contexts. The study underscores the need for strategic preservation efforts involving practitioners, households, communities, and government agencies, with initiatives ranging from skills documentation and mentorship to integration into educational and tourism platforms. Among these, the most critical and feasible recommendation is the systematic documentation and identification of existing practitioners, as this forms the foundation for transmission, curriculum development, and long-term preservation planning.

Ultimately, sustaining kuntau requires balancing tradition with innovation by ensuring that its performative adaptations do not erode its historical depth, technical integrity, and cultural meaning. By recognizing kuntau as both a living heritage and a dynamic art form, stakeholders can support its continued relevance and transmission to future generations while safeguarding its identity in the face of modern change. In doing so, this study provides a framework that may guide future research on how marginalized or lesser-known martial traditions adapt, survive, and remain meaningful in rapidly transforming societies.

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