

# THE CONFLUENCE OF POLITICS AND TRADITIONAL RELIGION AMONG THE IBAN IN ELECTIONS IN SARAWAK

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## ABSTRACT

The longhouse symbolizes the livelihood strategy of the Iban and acts as the custodian of the community's values, norms, *adat* (custom), system of belief, tradition and culture. The Iban strictly follow their *adat* when undertaking new initiatives or adopting new livelihood strategies like embarking on a *bejalai* or a journey of fortune. Before embarking on or adopting a new livelihood strategy, the Iban will perform a *miring* (process of giving offering) and a blood sacrifice ceremony where chants are uttered asking the *petara* (god) to guide them in their new endeavour as they seek happiness and fortune. The *miring* ceremony is to prevent the person from encountering bad omen, to appease the *petara* (god) and to boost his confidence. At the end of the *miring* ceremony and after the sacrifice is done, the *piring* (offering) will be smeared with the blood of a rooster, as usually a rooster is sacrificed. Amulets and charms too will be smeared with the blood of the rooster. *Miring* ceremony can be performed for virtually any significant activities that the Iban wish to undertake such as before starting a new padi season. Today, many Iban politicians adopted the practices in their political activities.

**Keywords:** Invocation, Offering, Sacrifice, Deity and Politician

## INTRODUCTION

One of the things that the Iban peoples of Sarawak always do when they embark on a new enterprise like adopting a new livelihood strategy is to perform the *miring* ceremony where chants are uttered before and after the ceremony. The one that is said at the beginning of the *miring* ceremony is just to inform the *petara* (god) that the *miring* process is about to begin, and the one that is said at the end of the *miring* ceremony is to invoke god to ask for help. The Iban believe that the *petara* could become upset if he is not informed beforehand of what they intend to do, particularly in respect to land use and in the clearing of forest for farming activities or for building a longhouse. The *miring* ceremony in this case is performed in order to appease the *petara*. A significant event in the life of an individual is when he enters politics. Becoming a candidate in an election is one example of significant changes that take place in one's life. The Iban candidates often perform the *miring* ceremony on nomination nights.

The Iban traditional religion is based on the concepts of pantheon, soul and dream, ritual obligations and festivals, cults like padi cultivation and healing, and the practices of the system of bird omen and augury (Kedit, 1977 and 1988). The Iban cultural values and social sanctions are derived from their conception that all objects have souls (Kedit, 1988, p. 24). Two of the most important Iban gods are Singalang Burong (the god of war) and Simpulang Gana (the god of padi). Singalang Burong is also the god that oversees the general welfare of the Iban. The highest rank Igan God is Singalang Burong. Sutlive and Sutlive (2001, p. 442) claim that Singalang Burong "is older than the oldest, bolder than the boldest, stronger than the strongest, mightier than the mightiest deity". Singalang Burong "is the white and brown hawk so frequently seen in this country; mythologically he is a great *antu* (spirit), the presiding power of war and inspirer of bravery (Roth, 1980,