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Symbolism and Cultural Economy: *Ngepan Skrang* as Heritage and Identity of the Iban Community in Sarawak

Alexander anak Chelum^{1*}, Rafeah Legino², Asrul Asshadi bin Mohamad Morni¹, Siti Shahida binti Kamel¹

***Corresponding Author**

¹Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 93400 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, MALAYSIA

²Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, MALAYSIA.

Email of All Authors: calexander@unimas.my, rafeahl@uitm.edu.my, masrul@unimas.my, ksshahida@unimas.my
Tel: +60149925911

Abstract

Ngepan Skrang, the traditional Iban attire adorned with antique coins, serves not only as personal clothing but also as a vital symbol of cultural heritage and the collective identity of the Iban community in Sarawak. This study explores the symbolic meanings and cultural-economic significance of *Ngepan Skrang*, positioning it as an artifact connecting aesthetic, historical, and socioeconomic values. Using a multidisciplinary approach that integrates historical analysis, ethnography, and material culture observation, the research reveals that *Ngepan Skrang* reflects the uniqueness of Iban culture while preserving collective memory, constructing identity, and strengthening the cultural economy of the Iban community.

Keywords: *Ngepan Skrang*, Cultural Symbolism, Iban Identity, Cultural Economy.

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1.0 Introduction

Ngepan Skrang stands as an enduring symbol of Iban cultural heritage, particularly in the Batang Skrang region of Borneo. This traditional attire, distinguished by the use of antique coins or ringgit as its principal adornment, transcends the purpose of ordinary clothing. It represents an intricate convergence of history, economy, craftsmanship, and cultural identity that is deeply rooted in the daily lives and social values of the Iban people. This study aims to explore the multiple layers of meaning embedded within *Ngepan Skrang*,

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including its origins, cultural importance, and the symbolic messages conveyed through each ornament. Collectively, these elements affirm the resilience, creativity, and adaptability of the Iban community in responding to social and cultural transformation.

The Iban people, as the indigenous inhabitants of Borneo, possess a rich cultural legacy closely intertwined with the land, rivers, and forests that have long sustained their way of life (Brown, 2010). Within this context, traditional attire serves not merely as a form of dress but as a visual expression of identity, social standing, and cultural pride (Wong, 2017). Among the various types of Iban traditional clothing, *Ngepan Skrang* is distinctive for its incorporation of antique coins that carry profound historical and symbolic significance (Koh, 2013).

From a historical perspective, the agrarian economy and river trading practices of the Iban community created a sophisticated network of exchange and interaction (Smith, 2012). The coins used within this system functioned not only as currency but also as visible markers of wealth, prestige, and social position. Their inclusion in *Ngepan Skrang* therefore represents more than an aesthetic decision; it symbolizes the community's deep connection with its economic past and its participation in regional trade networks that once flourished across Borneo (Lim, 2019).

Beyond its economic associations, *Ngepan Skrang* embodies rich layers of cultural symbolism. Each ornament that completes the attire, such as the *Sugu Tinggi* or *Sugu Pirak* (head bun) and the *Marek Pirak* or *Buah Puruk* (silver necklace), carries spiritual, social, and ceremonial meanings that reveal the spiritual and communal values of Iban society (Jones, 2014). For example, the *Sugu Tinggi*, decorated with antique coins and beads, enhances the grace of the wearer while also symbolizing social prestige and spiritual protection. Similarly, the movement of the *Marek Pirak* necklace when worn introduces a sense of vitality and rhythm that brings the attire to life, representing endurance, continuity, and the transmission of Iban traditions from one generation to the next (Tan, 2021).

2.0 Literature Review

The cultural importance of traditional attire in indigenous communities has long attracted scholarly attention, particularly within the Southeast Asian region. Traditional clothing is often more than a piece of fabric; it serves as a tangible expression of historical narratives, social hierarchies, religious beliefs, and systems of economic exchange. The study of *Ngepan Skrang* within the Iban community explores how material culture functions as a means of preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge and identity across generations. This review discusses previous studies on indigenous traditional attire with emphasis on three central themes: cultural symbolism, craftsmanship, and the socio-economic significance of traditional clothing.

2.1 Cultural Symbolism

The symbolism of traditional attire among indigenous societies has been extensively examined in academic discourse. Chan (2021) observes that traditional dress in Southeast Asia is deeply embedded with layers of symbolic meaning that convey social status, cultural identity, and continuity with the past. For the Iban community, *Ngepan Skrang* serves as a cultural emblem that reflects economic history through the use of antique coins, which represent wealth, prestige, and social position (Lim, 2019). This practice parallels that of other indigenous groups in Southeast Asia, where decorative and symbolic motifs are used to communicate spiritual beliefs and cosmological values (Tan, 2023).

Brown (2010) emphasizes that indigenous attire functions as a vessel of collective memory, where each element, including fabric, weaving technique, and accessories, embodies significant historical and cultural meanings. In the case of *Ngepan Skrang*, the incorporation of antique coins recalls the Iban community's participation in regional trade networks and their ability to adapt to shifts in economic structures (Smith, 2012). These coins are not only ornamental but also serve as enduring symbols of the community's attachment to its economic past and its interconnectedness with regional trade systems.

Koh (2013) adds that traditional attire contributes to the safeguarding of indigenous heritage by acting as a living artifact. Attire such as *Ngepan Skrang* preserves ancestral practices while simultaneously shaping contemporary identity. The wearing of *Ngepan Skrang* in cultural ceremonies and major celebrations reaffirms traditional values, transmits them to younger generations, and strengthens community cohesion (Jones, 2014). Thus, traditional attire functions not only as an object of aesthetic appreciation but also as a visual document that records and perpetuates a community's cultural narrative.

2.2 Craftsmanship

The craftsmanship involved in creating traditional attire represents another crucial aspect often highlighted in scholarly research. The making of traditional garments requires specialized skills transmitted across generations, transforming the production process into a vital channel for the preservation of artisanal knowledge. Ling (2020) notes that the production of *Ngepan Skrang* is a highly intricate process that demands technical mastery and an in-depth understanding of cultural symbolism. The coins, beads, and motifs incorporated into the attire are not merely decorative but are bound by symbolic conventions, making the production process both a technical and cultural reproduction.

Wong and Ling (2021) discuss how the role of craftsmanship has evolved within the context of globalization. Although the traditional skills required for production have been maintained, the social and economic environments surrounding them have changed

considerably. Global influences have introduced new materials and market pressures, compelling artisans to preserve authenticity while adapting their creations to contemporary demand, including the needs of tourism and private collectors (Lim, 2022). For *Ngepan Skrang*, artisans must achieve a delicate balance between maintaining traditional motifs and responding to the expectations of a modern audience.

Ling (2018) further argues that the craftsmanship of traditional attire is not simply an act of artistic creation but also a form of cultural preservation. Within the Iban community, artisans are regarded as cultural custodians entrusted with maintaining and transmitting the values, beliefs, and practices of their heritage through their craft. This view aligns with Brown's (2010) assertion that traditional artisans play dual roles as creators and educators, ensuring that indigenous knowledge and cultural identity continue to flourish within the community.

2.3 Socio-Economic Significance

In addition to its cultural and aesthetic functions, traditional attire plays a substantial socio-economic role. The making and selling of traditional garments provide important sources of income for artisans, particularly in rural communities where employment opportunities are limited. Tan (2023) and Chan (2021) emphasize the economic value of traditional attire, highlighting its contribution to local economies through job creation, the continuity of craft traditions, and its role in promoting cultural tourism.

Within the Iban context, the production of *Ngepan Skrang* sustains the livelihoods of local artisans who rely on the sale of traditional attire to support their families (Wong and Ling, 2021). The high demand for such garments during festivals, weddings, and ceremonial events also stimulates local economic activity, generating income for both artisans and traders (Lim, 2022).

The growing global interest in cultural preservation and heritage tourism has created new economic opportunities for indigenous communities. Koh (2013) explains that the commercialization of traditional attire through tourist and collector demand generates additional income streams. While this process poses risks such as cultural appropriation and the dilution of symbolic meaning, it simultaneously provides financial motivation for the continued production of traditional attire (Jones, 2014).

Nevertheless, Lim (2019) cautions that the relationship between economic incentives and cultural preservation is complex. The financial benefits derived from selling traditional garments often raise questions regarding authenticity and cultural integrity. Artisans face the challenge of preserving traditional practices while adapting to contemporary market conditions. In the case of *Ngepan Skrang*, maintaining the balance between cultural authenticity and economic sustainability is essential to ensuring the long-term vitality of this traditional craft (Tan, 2023).

The literature on indigenous traditional attire underscores its multifaceted role as a preserver of cultural identity, a foundation for community economies, and a conduit for the transmission of intergenerational knowledge. For *Ngepan Skrang*, previous studies affirm its value as both a cultural artifact and an economic asset. The symbolic use of antique coins, the refined artistry of its craftsmanship, and its socio-economic dimensions illustrate the complexity of its role within Iban society. Therefore, future research should examine how globalization and modernization influence the production, perception, and meaning of traditional attire, particularly in regions such as Borneo where cultural preservation and economic development remain deeply interconnected.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology designed to examine in depth the cultural, historical, and socio-economic dimensions of *Ngepan Skrang* in the Batang Skrang region. The qualitative approach is considered the most appropriate, as the research questions require a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of the local community.

As a foundation, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to understand the Iban cultural context, the diversity of traditional attire, and the historical significance of antique coins within the community's material heritage. Subsequently, ethnographic research methods were employed through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with artisans, elders, and other members of the Iban community. This approach allowed the researcher to participate directly in cultural activities, rituals, and daily life associated with the wearing of *Ngepan Skrang*, thereby gaining contextual and authentic insights.

In addition, archival research was undertaken to examine historical documents, photographic collections, and museum artifacts related to *Ngepan Skrang*. These sources provided valuable perspectives on the historical evolution of the attire and its role within regional trade networks during the nineteenth century (Smith, 2012). A triangulation method was applied to integrate ethnographic data, archival findings, and academic literature in order to enhance the credibility and validity of the study's outcomes.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was used to identify patterns of meaning and major themes such as cultural symbolism, craftsmanship, and the socio-economic functions of *Ngepan Skrang*. Data gathered from interviews and observations were compared with historical sources and existing literature to strengthen the interpretation.

This methodological approach provides not only a holistic understanding of *Ngepan Skrang* as a cultural artifact but also reveals how it functions as both a symbolic medium and an economic asset within the life of the Iban community.

4.0 Findings

The findings of this study reveal the multifaceted cultural, historical, and socio-economic dimensions embodied in *Ngepan Skrang*. Through ethnographic observation, interviews, and archival analysis, it becomes evident that this traditional Iban attire serves as more than a form of clothing. It functions as a living record of collective memory, an artistic expression of craftsmanship, and a representation of social hierarchy and spiritual belief. The data gathered illustrate how *Ngepan Skrang* continues to play a vital role in preserving cultural identity and sustaining the local economy, while also reflecting the community's resilience and adaptation to social and economic change across generations.

4.1 Cultural Significance and Historical Context

Ngepan Skrang is a cultural artifact that reflects the history, spirituality, and socio-economic status of the Iban community. The most distinctive feature of this traditional attire is the use of antique coins, known as *ringgit*, that are intricately woven into the fabric. These coins symbolize the community's participation in traditional trading networks and the economic systems of the past.



Figure 1. Antique Coins (*Ringgit*) Used in *Ngepan Skrang*

Photo source: Harry Francis Lutau

These antique coins are not merely decorative elements but also serve as historical markers that convey narratives of trade, wealth, and prestige (Lim, 2019).



Figure 2. Ngepan Skrang Adorned with Coins, Symbolizing Trade and Wealth

Photo source: Josh Angga

Many of these coins have been inherited across generations, symbolizing the endurance and adaptability of the Iban community (Smith, 2012). The practice of weaving coins into the attire materializes the community's economic legacy in a tangible form, aligning with broader Southeast Asian traditions in which material objects serve as markers of historical memory (Tan, 2021).



Figure 3. The Practice of Weaving Coins in the Iban Community

Photo source: Mimi Helmi Steven Patrick

In addition to coins, other ornaments such as the *Sugu Tinggi* and the *Marek Pirak* necklace further enhance the cultural symbolism of the attire.



Figure 4. Sugu Tinggi as a Symbol of Spiritual and Social Status

Photo source: Louis Wesly

Table 1. Key Symbols in Ngepan Skrang and Their Cultural Meanings

Ornament	Symbolism	Cultural Meaning
Coins (Ringgit)	Wealth, history of trade, social prestige	Reflects the historical economic relationships of the Iban community
Sugu Tinggi	Social and spiritual status	Worn during ceremonies, symbolizing authority and dignity
Marek Pirak	Spiritual vibration, dynamism	Used in rituals, signifying connection with ancestral spirits

4.2 Craftsmanship and Aesthetics

The creation of *Ngepan Skrang* is an intensive and complex process that requires a high level of technical skill and a deep understanding of cultural symbolism.



Figure 5. An Iban Artisan Creating Ngepan Skrang

Photo source: Louis Wesly

The coins must be arranged in specific patterns that reflect the wearer's age, status, and social role (Ling, 2020). This meticulous placement preserves the symbolic integrity of the attire.



Figure 6. An Artisan Crafting the Sugu Tinggi Headpiece

Photo source: Louis Weslly

Artisans do not merely create attire but also serve as cultural custodians, ensuring the continuity of tradition while allowing space for individual creativity (Ling, 2018).

4.3 Socio-Economic Dimension

Beyond its cultural and aesthetic values, *Ngepan Skrang* also plays an important role in the socio-economic structure of the Iban community. The production of this attire serves as a major source of income for artisans in Batang Skrang, particularly during festive seasons, weddings, and cultural ceremonies (Tan, 2023).

Table 2. Economic Activities Related to the Production of *Ngepan Skrang*

Economic Activity	Description	Impact on the Community
Craftsmanship	Production of traditional attire as a source of income	Supports the local rural economy
Cultural Ceremonies	High demand during festivals and weddings	Strengthens cultural identity and social bonds
Cultural Tourism	Exhibitions and collections that attract tourists and collectors	Expands market opportunities and increases income

The cultural tourism market in Sarawak has expanded marketing opportunities for *Ngepan Skrang* beyond the local community (Chan, 2021). Although the commodification of traditional attire poses the risk of diminishing its cultural meaning (Koh, 2013), its socio-economic benefits remain significant as it helps sustain traditional craftsmanship, strengthen community cohesion, and foster a sense of pride in Iban identity (Wong and Ling, 2021).

5.0 Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that *Ngepan Skrang* is not merely a form of traditional attire but a cultural artifact encompassing the symbolic, historical, and socio-economic dimensions of Iban society. A deeper analysis of the attire reveals its relationship to theories of material culture, cultural economy, and the discourse surrounding heritage commodification.

5.1 *Ngepan Skrang* as Material Culture

Material culture functions as a physical medium through which identity and collective memory are preserved and transmitted within a community (Miller, 2005). In this context, *Ngepan Skrang* is not simply an aesthetic object but an artifact that documents the narratives

of trade, social relations, and spirituality within Iban society. The use of antique coins, passed down through generations, demonstrates how material value can evolve from a mere economic function into a profound symbol of cultural identity.

Tan (2021) asserts that material objects within Southeast Asian societies often serve as markers of history and cosmology. This is clearly reflected in Ngepan Skrang, where coins and other ornaments such as the Sugu Tinggi and Marek Pirak function not only as decorative elements but also as symbols of social status, spiritual protection, and the continuity of tradition.

5.2 Cultural Economy and Heritage Commodification

The study also shows that Ngepan Skrang occupies an important position within the cultural economy of the Iban community. The craftsmanship involved in producing this attire not only sustains the livelihood of artisans but also strengthens the local economy through its association with festivals, weddings, and cultural tourism. According to Hesmondhalgh (2013), the cultural economy refers to the process by which artistic and cultural products become part of economic activity with commercial value, without necessarily losing their role as expressions of identity.

Nevertheless, the commodification of heritage presents certain challenges. Koh (2013) notes that when traditional clothing enters external markets, there is a risk of diminishing its original symbolic meaning. However, in the Iban context, this process also creates new opportunities for the continuity of craftsmanship. This aligns with Appadurai's (1986) perspective that cultural objects exist within a "social life of things," moving between symbolic, ritual, and economic domains.

5.3 The Role of Identity and Community Cohesion

The wearing of Ngepan Skrang during ceremonies such as Gawai, weddings, and rituals demonstrates how traditional attire functions as a tool for constructing collective identity. It reinforces social hierarchy, strengthens community relationships, and ensures that cultural values are transmitted to younger generations. Jones (2014) describes traditional attire as a "living document" that unites communities through visual symbolism.

In the context of globalization, the preservation of identity through Ngepan Skrang has become increasingly important. The Iban community faces the challenge of maintaining cultural authenticity while adapting to the demands of modern markets. In this regard, the role of artisans as custodians of cultural heritage is vital. They are not only creators of art but also educators and preservers of cultural values (Ling, 2018).

Overall, the findings of this study affirm that Ngepan Skrang represents both cultural symbolism and cultural economy within Iban society. It serves as a medium of historical memory, a marker of identity, and an economic resource for the community. Although commodification introduces challenges related to authenticity, it also provides financial incentives that ensure the sustainability of this heritage. Therefore, Ngepan Skrang should not be viewed solely as traditional clothing but as a dynamic cultural entity that continues to shape the historical, social, and economic narrative of the Iban community in Sarawak.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study affirms that Ngepan Skrang is not merely a form of traditional attire but a cultural artifact that reflects the deep interconnection between symbolism, identity, and the cultural economy of the Iban community in Sarawak. The use of antique coins, inherited through generations, demonstrates the Iban people's enduring ties to their history of trade and agrarian economy, while also symbolizing prestige, social status, and spiritual protection. Ornaments such as the Sugu Tinggi and the Marek Pirak add further ritualistic and aesthetic dimensions, transforming Ngepan Skrang into a living document that bridges the past and the present.

From the perspective of craftsmanship, the production of Ngepan Skrang is an intensive process that demands both technical expertise and a profound understanding of cultural meaning. Artisans serve as custodians of cultural heritage, ensuring the continuity of tradition through symbolic reproduction that aligns with community standards. At the same time, this process creates space for individual creativity, illustrating how Iban culture remains dynamic and adaptable within the forces of modernity and globalization.

From a socio-economic perspective, the making and wearing of Ngepan Skrang have a direct impact on the livelihood of the community, particularly in rural areas of Batang Skrang. The demand for this attire during festivals, weddings, and cultural tourism has created an economic ecosystem that sustains local artisans and small-scale entrepreneurs. Although commodification presents the risk of diminishing cultural meaning, the economic benefits derived from it play an essential role in safeguarding the long-term sustainability of this traditional craft.

Overall, Ngepan Skrang can be understood as a symbol that operates on three primary levels:

- i. A cultural and identity symbol, preserving the historical memory and spiritual values of the Iban community.
- ii. A product of craftsmanship, requiring the intergenerational transmission of technical skills and cultural knowledge.
- iii. A cultural economic asset, providing income and new opportunities through tourism and heritage-based industries.

Therefore, Ngepan Skrang should be recognized not only as traditional attire but also as a dynamic cultural heritage that continues to shape identity, preserve tradition, and support the economic development of the Iban community in Sarawak.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to ensure the preservation and sustainable development of Ngepan Skrang as a living cultural heritage:

- a) **Documentation and Archival Preservation**
There is an urgent need to systematically document the techniques, materials, and symbolic interpretations of Ngepan Skrang through digital archives, video ethnographies, and museum collaborations. Such efforts will safeguard artisanal knowledge and make it accessible for future generations and researchers.
- b) **Community-Based Training and Knowledge Transfer**
Training programs and workshops should be developed within local communities to encourage young artisans to learn traditional craftsmanship while integrating modern design and marketing skills. This approach can strengthen cultural continuity and empower the younger generation economically.
- c) **Integration with Cultural Tourism**
Cultural tourism programs should include Ngepan Skrang as part of heritage-based activities and exhibitions, ensuring that artisans receive fair compensation and recognition. This initiative can increase visibility while maintaining cultural authenticity.
- d) **Government and Institutional Support**
Policy makers and cultural institutions should provide financial and infrastructural support for artisans through grants, cooperatives, and heritage preservation schemes. Collaboration between government agencies, universities, and local communities is essential to promote innovation without compromising tradition.

Further studies should explore the impact of globalization, heritage policies, and digital economic transformation on the production, meaning, and transmission of Ngepan Skrang. Comparative studies with other indigenous attire in Borneo and Southeast Asia would also enrich understanding of shared heritage dynamics in the region.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes significantly to the field of cultural heritage and indigenous studies by providing an in-depth analysis of Ngepan Skrang as a cultural artifact that embodies symbolic, historical, and socio-economic dimensions of Iban society. The study bridges the gap between material culture research and the emerging discourse on the cultural economy by demonstrating how traditional attire functions simultaneously as a symbol of identity, a vessel of collective memory, and a sustainable economic resource for local communities.

From a theoretical perspective, the study advances the understanding of material culture theory within the Southeast Asian context by illustrating how tangible cultural objects such as attire can serve as repositories of intangible heritage, linking past traditions with contemporary expressions of identity. Furthermore, it integrates perspectives from cultural economics and heritage commodification, offering a balanced view of how economic value and cultural meaning coexist within indigenous craft traditions.

Practically, this research provides a valuable reference for policymakers, cultural practitioners, and researchers working on heritage preservation, community-based tourism, and indigenous entrepreneurship. By situating Ngepan Skrang within broader global discussions on cultural sustainability, the paper emphasizes the importance of supporting traditional artisans through inclusive economic models and educational initiatives.

Overall, this study deepens scholarly understanding of the intersection between culture, economy, and identity while contributing original insights into how indigenous attire such as Ngepan Skrang can serve as both a living tradition and a catalyst for sustainable cultural development.

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