

**Re-appropriating our history**  
**Reframing identity based on traditional knowledge**  
**Field research among my Dayak Ngaju people**  
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Since the late 19th century – and through the 20th century incorporation of Borneo into the Indonesian and Malaysian nation-states, alongside Brunei's consolidation – Dayak communities have been compelled to situate themselves within a 'new Borneo'. In Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo), where many groups maintain coherent systems of land-based knowledge, livelihood, and belief rooted in riverine and forest ecologies, they were repeatedly subordinated to modernisation agendas and labelled 'primitive', with limited political leverage and minimal institutional access to negotiate with the state. Colonial images – headhunting foremost – and even fantastical tropes such as the so-called 'tailed people' persisted into the national imagination. In contemporary, multicultural Indonesia, the term 'Dayak' too often still operates as a shorthand for poverty or lack of cultivation, thereby obscuring the diversity, skill, and resilience of these communities.

Geographically an island, politically a mosaic, Borneo is partitioned among Indonesia (Kalimantan), Malaysia (Sarawak and Sabah), and Brunei. Within Indonesia, state policy and infrastructure have long concentrated on the Java–Bali corridor, positioning Kalimantan as peripheral, even as its timber, minerals, and plantations have fuelled national growth.

Despite these enduring histories of marginalisation, Dayak communities have maintained distinctive practices and identities. In recent decades the Indonesian state has moved—unevenly but materially—to acknowledge the country's multicultural character, support minority well-being, and promote intercultural dialogue. Dayak cultural heritage plays a vital role in recentring these histories, challenging prejudice, and restoring dignity.

Among Dayak groups, the Dayak Ngaju – my own community – practise Kaharingan, an indigenous religion. Under the New Order regime in the 1980s, when Indonesia officially recognised only five religions (Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism), Ngaju leaders negotiated a pragmatic arrangement whereby Kaharingan was incorporated into the state framework as *Hindu Kaharingan*. This enabled civil registration and religious education while allowing Ngaju communities to preserve their own doctrine and ritual practice. After the fall of President Suharto in 1998, which marked the beginning of Reformasi and Indonesia's democratic reforms, Confucianism regained recognition (2000). Subsequent regulation enumerated six official religions, and in 2017 the Constitutional Court permitted adherents of indigenous faiths (*kepercayaan*) to record their affiliation on national identity cards.

As these openings took shape, the *Majelis Adat Dayak Nasional* (National Dayak Customary Council, MADN) was founded in 2006 to coordinate customary councils, preserve culture, and strengthen representation. Since 2013, state-supported cultural festivals have presented Dayak identity nationally and internationally, forming part of broader efforts

through which Dayak communities re-appropriate their history and reframe identity on their own terms.

Concurrently in Europe, as an independent Dayak Ngaju researcher and collaborator based in Switzerland, I worked with the Museo delle Culture (MUSEC), Lugano, on Borneo-focused research and public engagement projects. In 2008 I helped establish collaboration between MUSEC, the Government of Central Kalimantan, and community representatives in Indonesia contributing to the formal partnership that supports and presents Dayak cultural traditions. This cooperation has resulted in three exhibition projects at MUSEC, a national conference hosted by the Lontar Foundation (Jakarta), and an international conference at the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac (Paris). In 2016, MUSEC established a further institutional collaboration with the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, deepening research exchange and co-organisation of an international scholarly seminar. Collectively, these initiatives have created sustained platforms for dialogue, object-based inquiry, and scholarly reflection.

In addition, three field research projects were conducted: on Ngaju traditional medicine, on Ngaju ceremonial plaited arts (Fig. 1), and on Dayak edged weapons (Fig. 2). They were developed with the agreement and support of local communities and their representatives, including ritual specialists and masters of plaited arts (Figs. 3–4), who sought active roles in safeguarding, validating, and transmitting their cultural knowledge.

MUSEC's first project on Borneo – devoted to Dayak culture and art – culminated in two major exhibitions: the first in Lugano in 2007 and its re-staging in Arcore (Milan) in 2008. The former was accompanied by the booklet *Patong. Le grandi figure scolpite dei popoli del Borneo* (*Patong. The Great Carved Figures of the Peoples of Borneo*), while the latter was accompanied by the volume *Patong. La grande scultura dei popoli del Borneo* (*Patong. The Great Sculpture of the Peoples of Borneo*). This international project represented a substantive step towards clarifying the meanings, values, and functions of Dayak art within its cultural contexts.

The exhibitions presented thirty-nine Dayak works in wood from the Brignoni Collection, largely monumental statuary from the museum's founding bequest. The thematic analysis addressed:

- Monumental sculpture in the Barito region (see, e.g., cat. nos. 1, 2, 74, 133).
- Ngaju secondary burial (*tiwah*) ceremonies.
- The Iban hunting wand (*tuntun*) (cat. nos. 46–49).
- The history of Dayak collections in Indonesian museums.
- The challenges of identification and interpretation in Dayak art history.
- The scope and limits of the label *hampatong* for Bornean statuary.

These exhibitions also provided a platform to confront enduring stereotypes: they highlighted the vitality of ongoing practices, dispelled exoticising misconceptions – particularly the notion that headhunting persists – and foregrounded the ceremonial, social, and aesthetic significance of Dayak art.

Building on MUSEC's first Borneo project (Lugano 2007; Arcore 2008), the 2011 Lugano exhibition – presented alongside the volume *Sapuyung. Cappelli cerimoniali del Borneo* (*Sapuyung: Ceremonial hats from Borneo*) – shifted the programme from monumental statuary to women's plaited arts and offered the first systematic typology of large, decorated ritual hats made by Ngaju masters of plaited arts (Fig. 5). Focusing on function, technique, and transmission, the exhibition established the general framework for understanding these hats, now summarised in the catalogue entries (cat. nos. 61–64).

At the heart of the project are the *sapuyung daré*: large ceremonial hats produced by women masters of plaited arts who transmit their knowledge through selective apprenticeship to promising youths. The tradition remains active but endangered, as the number of recognised masters of plaited arts continues to decline.

The exhibition comprised about thirty ceremonial hats, together with related Dayak Ngaju material culture – including ceremonial poles, heirloom jars, and tools used by ritual specialists and masters of plaited arts – to contextualise their use and practice.

Documented functions include:

- Protective (apotropaic): covering the cranial vertex (fontanelle region), regarded as a point of spiritual vulnerability, the hat functions as a shield against harmful influences.
- Divine presence: in healing rites, donning on the *sapuyung daré* marks the onset of trance or mediumship and signals a divine presence assisting the rite.
- Social linkage: forging ties between communities, symbolised by passing the hat between groups in formal rites (e.g., *potong pantan*) and in non-ritual settings.

These represent among the study's key findings. Overall, the project underscored the centrality of the *sapuyung daré* as an identity marker in Dayak Ngaju society. Their plaited ornamentation encodes mythic and healing knowledge, riverine geographies, human–ancestor relations, human–earth relations, and connections to other domains of material culture.

The research further showed that the *sapuyung daré* are not merely complex artefacts but among the most emblematic objects of Dayak Ngaju tradition, opening new lines of inquiry into traditional healing and mediumship, as well as into the evolution of women's roles and authority in ceremonial life. These findings did not remain confined to scholarly study; they entered public discourse. In Indonesia, national coverage broadened recognition: *The Jakarta Post* highlighted the richness of Dayak Ngaju traditions, and Metro TV broadcast a nationwide interview with the author—news that circulated rapidly across Kalimantan and was received with pride within Dayak Ngaju communities.

This momentum carried forward into 2013, when promotion of Dayak identity continued with *Festival Seni Anyam: Adi Kriya Kalimantan at Bentara Budaya Jakarta* (27 March

2013–7 April 2013) organised by the Lontar Foundation in collaboration with partner institutions and presented alongside the launch of Bernard Sellato (ed.), *Plaited Arts from the Borneo Rainforest*. A programme of talks and demonstrations examined Bornean plaited arts in depth, including a lecture on *sapuyung daré*. Present at the opening were Agustin Teras Narang – then Governor of Central Kalimantan, President of MADN, and an advocate for the collaboration with MUSEC – together with institutional partners.

Extending this momentum, in 2017 MUSEC and the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac co-organised the one-day conference *Bornéo. La dernière terra incognita?* (Paris, 8 September 2017), convened to reframe Dayak identity by foregrounding its historical, artistic, and anthropological complexity. The revised papers from the conference are published in this volume.

That conference prepared the ground for MUSEC's third exhibition project in Lugano (2019): *Dayak. L'arte dei cacciatori di teste del Borneo* (*Dayak. The art of Borneo's head-hunters*), held at Villa Malpensata and accompanied by the scholarly volume *Arte dayak* (*Dayak art*). Expanding both scope and corpus, it presented nearly two hundred Bornean objects (Fig. 6), drawn from Swiss museums and European private collections, and interpreted through two complementary perspectives: etic (Western reception histories) and emic (Dayak values and functions). The exhibition represented Benuaq, Bentian, Tunjung, Luangan, Ngaju, Ot Danum, Bahau, Modang, Kenyah, Kayan and Iban traditions, each with distinct stylistic features and ritual contexts.

In the Katingan River area, Central Kalimantan – where my Dayak Ngaju family originates – I have seen these projects not only rebuild confidence but also explicitly valorise Dayak Ngaju knowledge. Through sustained dialogue, we set community-defined terms for how knowledge is studied and shared, prioritising authorship, credit, and consent.

At the outset of fieldwork, stereotypes and earlier misrepresentations bred caution: ritual specialists declined to be identified, carvers were difficult to trace, and healers withheld discussion. Over time, as aims and methods were clarified and results were returned locally, trust deepened. I brought the published volumes *Patong* and *Sapuyung* back to Katingan and presented them to ritual specialists and masters of plaited arts (Figs. 7–8). This gesture acknowledged their knowledge and was received with pride, reinforcing their role as custodians of Dayak Ngaju heritage. As trust grew, people re-engaged, contributed accounts and materials, and chose to participate based on protocols defined by the community. In this sense, the work forms part of *Re-appropriating Our History*: recentring interpretive authority and public recognition within the community itself.

The emphasis placed on tradition through these cultural platforms has had tangible returns for Dayak Ngaju communities – above all by recognising the authority of women masters of plaited arts as custodians, teachers, and ritual specialists. Observed outcomes include:

- Renewed commissioning and authority of masters of plaited arts. Appreciation for *sapuyung daré* plaited arts – previously at risk – has grown. Where families once rented hats for ceremonies, they now commission new pieces from women masters

of plaited arts (within household budgets), strengthening both the makers' economic standing and the apprenticeship lineage they oversee.

- Identity affirmation across religions. Community members who have adopted other religions increasingly display a *sapuyung daré* at home and lend it for ceremonies, acknowledging Ngaju roots while maintaining present affiliations – often sourcing pieces directly from, or through, women masters of plaited arts who hold custodial knowledge.
- Protocol and representation. In visits and public events, the *sapuyung daré* features in welcoming rites and as a token of alliance; women masters of plaited arts and ritual specialists help set protocols for display, lending, and exchange.

These forums for dialogue enable fuller mutual understanding, strengthen our roots, and affirm our dignity. As a Dayak Ngaju author–researcher, I hope the path we have begun continues, advancing the conservation, transmission, and valorisation of Borneo's rich cultural heritage, shared by my Ngaju people and other Dayak communities. In this way, the work is not simply about safeguarding tradition but about *Re-appropriating Our History*: reclaiming interpretive authority from outsider narratives that have long defined us, restoring dignity denied through misrepresentation, and reframing identity on terms set by the community itself. These terms arise from our own categories and meanings, even as any translation into other languages and academic frameworks inevitably shifts meanings across cultural contexts and is necessarily interpretative. The contrast is sharp and the shift is clear: where history was once written about us, it is now spoken with us and, ultimately, told by us.