

Traditional Handicrafts and Cultural Identity: The Case of Orang Ulu in Miri, Sarawak

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of traditional handicraft economic activities in sustaining the cultural identity of the Orang Ulu community in Miri, Sarawak. While extensive research has examined Sarawak's Iban and Malay crafts, Orang Ulu handicrafts remain underexplored, particularly within urban contexts where traditional practices are recontextualized for new markets. Addressing this gap, the study adopts a qualitative design framed by Cultural Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986) and Cultural Economics (Throsby, 2001) under an interpretivist paradigm. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and field visits with ten purposively selected artisans and traders. Findings reveal that handicrafts such as *Sabu* bead necklaces, *Tebilang* sashes, *Ta'ah* attire, and the *Sape'* lute operate as visual languages of clan histories and spiritual values, while simultaneously serving as economic goods within markets, exhibitions, and cultural tourism. However, artisans face structural challenges including scarcity of raw materials, rising costs, market imitations, and limited digital marketing skills. The study contributes to cultural economics and heritage studies by situating Orang Ulu handicrafts as both cultural capital and creative economy resources. It concludes that sustaining these traditions requires systemic interventions in ecological conservation, intellectual property rights, digital literacy, and cultural education. By highlighting the intersection of heritage and economy in an urban Malaysian context, this research extends debates on indigenous resilience and the negotiation of authenticity in global craft markets.

Keywords: Orang Ulu, Handicrafts, Cultural Identity, Qualitative Research, Creative Economy

Introduction

Cultural heritage embodies the accumulated traditions, knowledge, and artistic expressions of communities, forming both tangible and intangible records of identity and continuity. Scholars such as Smith (2006) and UNESCO (2018) emphasize that heritage is not merely a relic of the past but a living resource that informs identity, social cohesion, and creativity. For

indigenous societies, heritage connects collective memory with everyday practices, shaping how communities adapt to modernization and globalization (Byrne et al., 2019). In recent years, debates within social sciences have highlighted heritage not only as a cultural construct but also as a socio-economic resource, linking identity politics, sustainability, and creative economies (Kisić, 2021; Petrukhina et al., 2024).

In Malaysia, Sarawak represents one of the most culturally diverse states, home to numerous indigenous groups whose traditional knowledge and artistic expressions form an essential part of the nation's plural heritage. Among these, the Orang Ulu, meaning "people of the upriver," comprise more than twenty-six subgroups including the Kenyah, Kayan, Kelabit, and Penan. Their artistic traditions, particularly in handicrafts, serve as both cultural symbols and economic lifelines (Rosli et al., 2021; Ahmad Zamri et al., 2024). However, despite extensive scholarship on Iban and Malay crafts (Sellato, 2015; Suhaimi et al., 2023), research on Orang Ulu handicrafts remains limited, especially within urban contexts such as Miri where traditional practices are being redefined through tourism, exhibitions, and digital markets. This research gap has left underexplored how indigenous artisans negotiate authenticity, identity, and market adaptation in rapidly changing socio-economic environments.

The rationale for selecting this topic arises from these intersecting dynamics. First, traditional handicrafts serve as crucial vehicles of cultural identity, transmitting cosmological beliefs, social hierarchies, and community memory through material forms (Chan et al., 2021; Maxwell, 1990). Second, handicrafts have become vital components of the creative and cultural economy, reflecting global trends where traditional arts are mobilized for tourism, branding, and economic resilience (UNESCO, 2021; Throsby, 2001). Yet, few studies have examined how Orang Ulu artisans sustain cultural meanings while adapting to contemporary market forces. Third, this inquiry contributes to contemporary debates in social sciences on the commodification of heritage, cultural resilience, and the politics of authenticity in postcolonial societies (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009; Seel, 2020). Understanding this intersection between culture and economy is essential to advancing theories of cultural capital, indigenous entrepreneurship, and sustainable development.

Accordingly, the research problem addressed in this study concerns the tension between preserving cultural authenticity and ensuring economic viability among Orang Ulu artisans in Miri. Despite their rich heritage, these artisans face material scarcity, generational disengagement, and market imitations, threatening both their livelihoods and cultural continuity. Yet, their participation in local and global creative economies demonstrates resilience and innovation, phenomena that remain inadequately theorized in Malaysian and Bornean contexts.

This study therefore aims to investigate how Orang Ulu handicraft practices sustain cultural identity while adapting to socio-economic transformations. It is guided by three objectives:

1. To identify the role of traditional handicraft activities in preserving Orang Ulu cultural identity.
2. To examine the challenges artisans face in producing and marketing handicrafts within modernization and globalization.
3. To explore how handicraft activities promote Orang Ulu culture to external audiences.

The study applies Cultural Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986) and Cultural Economics (Throsby, 2001) as its dual theoretical lenses, integrating symbolic and economic perspectives. Through this framework, Orang Ulu handicrafts are analyzed as both living heritage and creative economy resources, contributing to current discussions on cultural sustainability, indigenous resilience, and identity politics in Southeast Asia. By situating local narratives within global debates, this research responds to calls for more context specific empirical studies that highlight how indigenous artisans navigate modernity without eroding authenticity.

Literature Review

The literature on handicrafts and cultural heritage reflects the multidimensional significance of material culture for indigenous societies. Handicrafts function not merely as utilitarian objects but as vehicles of symbolic meaning, identity, and social continuity (Appadurai, 1986). For indigenous groups, such as the Orang Ulu in Sarawak, handicrafts also play an economic role, particularly in sustaining livelihoods through small-scale production and trade. The existing body of literature can be organized around four major themes: (1) handicrafts as cultural heritage, (2) handicrafts as an economic strategy, (3) challenges in sustaining craft traditions, and (4) comparative insights from regional and global perspectives.

Handicrafts as Cultural Heritage

Scholars emphasize that handicrafts are a repository of cultural knowledge and symbolic meaning. In the Orang Ulu context, handicrafts such as beadwork, rattan weaving, and woodcarving are imbued with cosmological and ancestral significance (Chin, 2003). The motifs employed in these crafts often carry narratives about the community's history, values, and relationship with nature. For example, the *aso'* (dragon-dog) motif is widely recognized among the Kenyah and Kayan as a protective symbol, reinforcing the intertwining of artistry and spirituality (Lian-Sage, 2019).

UNESCO (2003) has underscored handicrafts as a category of intangible cultural heritage that must be preserved due to their role in expressing identity and transmitting values across generations. The preservation of indigenous handicrafts is not merely about conserving material artifacts but about sustaining the knowledge systems and cultural expressions embedded within them.

In Sarawak, ethnographic research has consistently shown that handicrafts are essential in performing and expressing social identity. Beads, for instance, are not only decorative but also markers of status and kinship. Women artisans inherit techniques and symbolic meanings through matrilineal lines, transforming beadwork into an intergenerational dialogue (Sellato, 2015). Thus, handicrafts contribute to cultural resilience and heritage preservation.

Handicrafts as an Economic Strategy

Beyond their symbolic functions, handicrafts serve as a vital economic resource for indigenous communities. The integration of handicrafts into local and global markets has become a survival strategy amidst limited access to formal employment and modern industries. As Marshall (2018) argues, handicraft economies offer a form of "cultural entrepreneurship," where traditional knowledge is transformed into marketable products without entirely losing cultural value.

In Sarawak, Orang Ulu handicrafts are sold in cultural markets, tourist centers, and urban retail outlets, generating income while simultaneously promoting indigenous identity. Studies by Bujang and Jawan (2017) highlight that handicraft production contributes significantly to household economies, especially for women. These activities often supplement agricultural incomes, providing financial resilience in contexts of economic uncertainty.

Globally, the World Crafts Council (2017) reports that handicrafts represent a \$500 billion industry, with indigenous communities increasingly participating in global supply chains. While this integration creates opportunities, it also raises concerns about the commodification of culture and the loss of authenticity (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009). The balance between economic viability and cultural integrity remains a recurring issue in the literature.

Challenges in Sustaining Craft Traditions

Despite their cultural and economic importance, handicrafts face multiple threats that undermine their sustainability.

a. Raw Material Scarcity

Indigenous artisans often depend on natural resources such as rattan, bamboo, and wood, which are increasingly scarce due to deforestation, urbanization, and land use changes (Sather, 2016). For the Orang Ulu, the depletion of forest resources not only disrupts material supply but also severs symbolic ties to ancestral lands.

b. Decline of Intergenerational Transmission

Younger generations are less inclined to learn handicraft skills, perceiving them as outdated or economically unprofitable (Ahmad, 2019). This creates a generational gap that threatens the continuity of craft knowledge.

c. Market Pressures and Standardization

The demand for cheaper, mass-produced alternatives creates pressure on artisans to adapt, sometimes at the expense of authenticity. Studies in Southeast Asia show that artisans often simplify motifs or adopt synthetic materials to meet market preferences (Perkins, 2017).

d. Globalization and Cultural Appropriation

The global fascination with “ethnic” designs has led to cases of cultural appropriation, where motifs are reproduced without acknowledgment or benefit to the originating communities (Hafstein, 2009). For the Orang Ulu, this manifests in the replication of motifs by external producers, diluting cultural ownership.

Regional Comparisons: Southeast Asia

The challenges faced by the Orang Ulu resonate with broader trends across Southeast Asia.

- a) Indonesia: The Dayak communities of Kalimantan share close cultural ties with the Orang Ulu. Research by Madrah (2020) shows that Dayak beadwork faces similar issues of declining intergenerational knowledge. However, initiatives such as village cooperatives and government-backed craft fairs have partially mitigated these challenges by linking artisans directly with markets.

- b) **Philippines:** Among the Ifugao and T'boli peoples, weaving and beadwork are framed as both heritage and economic assets. Gaerlan (2019) reports that tourism initiatives have helped sustain weaving traditions but also created dependency on fluctuating tourist demand.
- c) **Thailand and Laos:** Hill tribe communities engage in handicraft production as part of eco-tourism initiatives. While this generates income, scholars note the risk of "museumification," where crafts are preserved as static symbols rather than living traditions (Cohen, 2000).

These cases highlight both shared vulnerabilities and innovative strategies, offering comparative insights relevant to Orang Ulu handicrafts.

Global Perspectives: Handicrafts and Cultural Identity

Globally, indigenous handicrafts are recognized as powerful tools of identity formation and cultural diplomacy.

- a) **Africa:** Among the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania, beadwork is central to gendered identity and cultural pride. Hodgson (2011) documents how Maasai women use beadwork both as a livelihood strategy and as a means of asserting ethnic distinctiveness in multicultural contexts.
- b) **Latin America:** In Peru, Quechua weavers sustain heritage through textile production, which has become a global symbol of indigenous identity. However, research by Meisch (2002) notes tensions between cultural pride and market demands, particularly regarding colors schemes and design alterations for Western consumers.
- c) **North America:** Native American crafts such as Navajo weaving and beadwork are marketed as heritage commodities. Scholars such as Simpson (2017) argue that while these practices generate income, they also involve ongoing struggles for cultural sovereignty in the face of appropriation and commercialization.

These global comparisons underscore the universality of the issues faced by Orang Ulu artisans. While the specific cultural symbols differ, the broader themes of cultural preservation, economic integration, and identity assertion are shared.

Theoretical Frameworks in Handicraft Studies

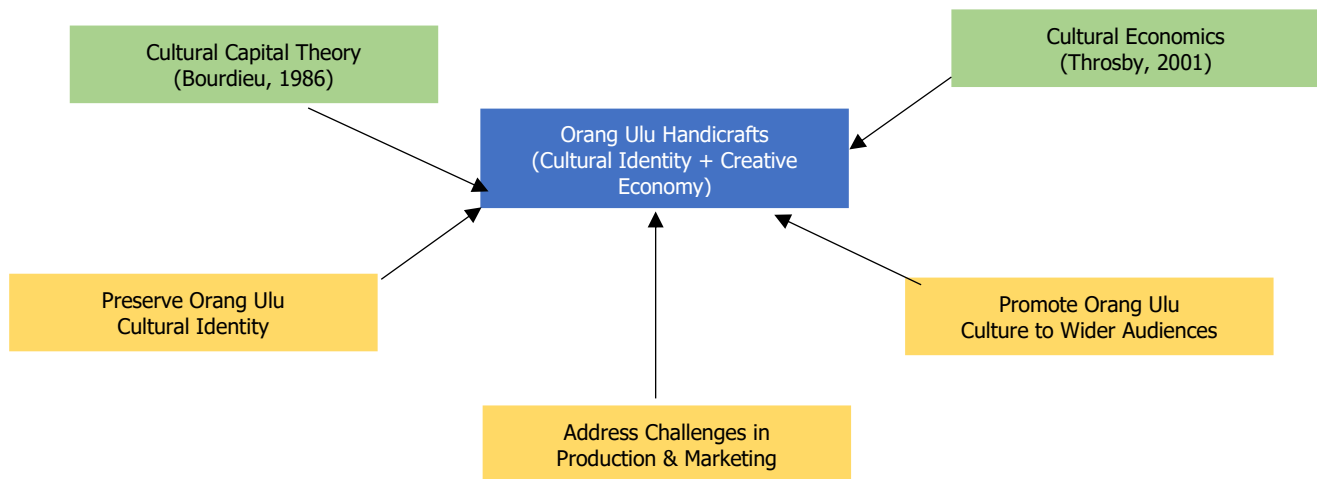
Several Theoretical Perspectives Inform the Study of Handicrafts

- a) **Cultural Economy:** This framework highlights how cultural products embody both symbolic and economic value. Scholars argue that handicrafts are simultaneously heritage and commodity, with artisans navigating the tension between cultural authenticity and marketability (Throsby, 2010).

- b) **Postcolonial Theory:** Postcolonial critiques emphasize power dynamics in global craft markets, particularly the marginalization of indigenous voices and the exploitation of cultural heritage by dominant groups (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007).
- c) **Sustainability Studies:** From an ecological perspective, handicraft production raises questions about resource management, environmental change, and resilience (Pretty et al., 2009). This is particularly relevant in Borneo, where deforestation threatens both livelihoods and cultural continuity.

Applying these frameworks to Orang Ulu handicrafts enables a nuanced understanding of their dual role as cultural heritage and economic strategy, situated within broader political and ecological contexts.

Figure 2. Conceptual framework of Orang Ulu handicrafts, illustrating four interrelated dimensions: handicrafts as cultural heritage, handicrafts as an economic strategy, challenges in sustaining traditions, and comparative/global perspectives.



The conceptual framework (Figure 2) connects the study's analytical lens with its objectives. Cultural Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986) explains how handicraft skills, motifs, and practices constitute intangible cultural capital that affirms identity and sustains heritage. Cultural Economics (Throsby, 2001) positions handicrafts as cultural goods possessing both symbolic and market value, emphasizing their dual role in identity-making and economic survival. These theories converge on the research focus on Orang Ulu handicrafts and directly inform the three objectives: (i) to examine their role in preserving cultural identity, (ii) to assess challenges in production and marketing, and (iii) to explore how handicrafts promote Orang Ulu culture to broader audiences. This framework demonstrates how theoretical insights are operationalized in guiding empirical investigation.

Despite Extensive Scholarship on Handicrafts Globally, Several Gaps Remain

1. Limited focus on Orang Ulu handicrafts compared to Iban or Malay craft traditions in Sarawak.
2. Insufficient attention to urban contexts (such as Miri), where handicrafts are recontextualized for markets beyond their traditional settings.
3. A lack of studies examining how artisans negotiate authenticity in response to modern consumer demands.

4. Need for more comparative research that situates Orang Ulu handicrafts within broader regional and global dynamics.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative design under the interpretivist paradigm to explore how Orang Ulu handicraft activities sustain cultural identity in Miri, Sarawak. This approach emphasized lived experiences, symbolic meanings, and cultural narratives, aligning with the study's aim to capture artisans' and traders' perspectives.

Research Site

Miri, Sarawak, was chosen for its sizeable and diverse Orang Ulu population (e.g., Kenyah, Kayan, Kelabit), its role as a handicraft hub, and its accessibility for fieldwork. The city provided a dynamic setting for observing production, trade, and cultural promotion.

Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling recruited ten participants (five artisans, five traders) with at least three years' involvement in handicrafts. They represented diverse roles and genders, reflecting community patterns in beadwork, woodcraft, and rattan weaving. This balance captured both cultural production and commercial dimensions.

Data Collection

Data were collected through:

- I. **Semi-structured interviews** (45–90 minutes each) covering craft practices, meanings, and challenges.
- II. **Non-participant observation** in workshops, markets, and exhibitions, documenting processes and interactions.
- III. **Field visits** to material sources, home workshops, and markets, situating practices within social and ecological contexts.

Data Analysis

Data were thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, supported by NVivo 12 for coding, theme development, and systematic comparison.

Ethics and Trustworthiness

Informed consent, anonymity, and cultural sensitivity were ensured. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation, member checking, thick descriptions, an audit trail, and reflexivity, following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria.

Results and Discussion

This section integrates both the results of fieldwork and the broader discussion that situates these findings within regional and global scholarly debates on indigenous handicrafts, identity, and economic sustainability. The voices of Orang Ulu artisans, gathered through interviews and observations, are combined here with theoretical insights and comparative examples to illuminate the multifaceted role of handicraft practices. The analysis is presented thematically, moving from cultural identity to economic significance, challenges, innovation, and intergenerational sustainability.

Handicrafts as Anchors of Cultural Identity

The research revealed that Orang Ulu handicrafts are deeply intertwined with notions of identity and belonging. Informants frequently emphasized that handicrafts such as Sabu bead necklaces, Tebilang sashes, rattan baskets, Ta'ah ceremonial attire, and the Sape' musical instrument serve as tangible markers of their heritage.

Sape'



Figure 3

Sabu Bead Necklaces



Figure 4

Tebilang Sashes



Figure 5

Ta'ah ceremonial attire



Figure 6

Orang Ulu Rattan Baskets

Figure 7

As one practitioner explained:

"Bagi Kayan-Kenyah, identiti kami ada pada Sabu, pakaian Ta'ah, topi rotan, Beteng, Tebilang, dan motif tradisi. Motif ini semua ada makna, menunjukkan siapa kita."

This perspective illustrates Bourdieu's (1986) idea of embodied cultural capital: cultural knowledge and practices carried in everyday materials and embodied skills. Similarly, Chan et al. (2021) argue that indigenous motifs operate as "visual languages" encoding historical, spiritual, and social narratives. For the Orang Ulu, beadwork and woven designs are not merely decorative but are visual genealogies, inscribing clan origins and cosmological beliefs. The findings resonate with comparative cases such as the Navajo in the United States, whose weaving traditions encode clan stories and cosmologies (Kahlenberg, 1985), or the Dayak Iban of Sarawak, whose *Pua Kumbu* textiles serve as ritual objects and social identifiers (Gavin, 2003). Thus, Orang Ulu handicrafts represent a materialized cultural archive, constantly performed and reinterpreted in contemporary contexts.

Intergenerational Transmission of Knowledge

Artisans also highlighted handicraft-making as a vehicle for transmitting cultural knowledge to the younger generation. One practitioner noted:

"Kita wariskan identiti kepada generasi muda. Kalau mereka tak didedahkan, mereka akan lupa. Mereka kena terlibat dalam aktiviti macam buat manik, pakai pakaian tradisi, supaya kenal budaya sendiri."

This underscores the dual role of handicrafts as both skill and pedagogy. UNESCO (2015) has emphasized the importance of embedding intangible heritage into educational curricula to ensure continuity. Comparative examples include Māori weaving schools (*whare pora*) in New Zealand (Puketapu-Hetet, 1989), which explicitly link artistic practice to cultural transmission. For the Orang Ulu, the intergenerational teaching of beadwork, weaving, and instrument-making ensures that identity is not frozen in the past but adapted through practice.

Economic Value and Cultural Pride

Findings revealed that many artisans frame handicraft production as both a livelihood and a platform for cultural visibility. As one trader expressed:

“Jual kraftangan ni bukan sekadar nak dapat duit. Kita nak orang luar kenal budaya kita, tahu keunikan hasil kerja tangan Orang Ulu.”

This aligns with Throsby’s (2001) notion of cultural goods, which carry both market and symbolic value. For Orang Ulu artisans, selling handicrafts is not merely economic activity but a form of cultural diplomacy. Abdul Gapor et al. (2024) similarly documents how handicraft microenterprises among Penan and Bidayuh communities generate income while also showcasing heritage.

These finding echoes research on the Quechua of Peru, where weaving cooperatives both sustain rural economies and preserve traditional motifs (Howard, 2003). Similarly, Maasai beadwork in Kenya is sold to global tourists while simultaneously serving as a marker of age, gender, and social role (Hodgson, 2005). In all cases, handicrafts act as “glocal” products, rooted in local identities yet circulating in global economies.

*Challenges in Production and Marketing**a. Resource Scarcity*

One recurring theme was the shortage of natural resources, particularly *Sega* rattan, prized for its durability and aesthetic qualities. As one practitioner lamented:

“Rotan Sega paling bagus, makin lama makin berkilat tapi sekarang susah dapat. Lepas pembalakan, susah nak cari.”

This reflects broader ecological disruptions in Sarawak due to logging, consistent with Ling et al. (2015), who show that deforestation undermines the material base for traditional crafts. Similar challenges are documented in Indonesia, where the supply of pandanus leaves for weaving has declined due to land conversion (Kusnadi, 2015). Without sustainable raw material management, artisans face both cultural and economic precarity.

b. Rising Costs

Another challenge relates to the rising cost of imported materials such as Japanese beads:

“Dulu manik Jepun RM80 satu paket sebelum COVID, sekarang dah RM150. Modal makin tinggi.”

This cost escalation reflects global supply chain disruptions during the pandemic. It parallels findings in the Philippines, where T’boli artisans noted increased dependency on imported beads, raising concerns about economic viability (Flores, 2019).

c. Market Competition and Imitation

Informants also cited competition from mass-produced imitations:

“Banyak kraftangan moden sekarang, ada yang tiru corak kita. Harga mereka jauh lebih murah daripada hasil tangan kita.”

This reflects a key intellectual property issue. WIPO (2017) notes that unprotected indigenous motifs are vulnerable to exploitation. Comparative cases include Ghana’s Kente cloth, where imitation by foreign manufacturers prompted legal protections through Geographical

Indications (Boateng, 2011). A similar framework could protect Orang Ulu designs, ensuring cultural and economic justice.

d. Limited Digital Marketing Skills

Some artisans use Facebook and WhatsApp for promotion, but managing platforms like Shopee was considered too time-consuming:

"Saya guna Facebook, WhatsApp untuk promosi. Shopee tu bagus, tapi saya kerja sorang, susah nak pantau setiap hari."

This reflects a digital skills gap also noted in Sri Lanka (Dissanayake & Weerasinghe, 2020), where rural artisans struggled to adapt to e-commerce platforms. Addressing this gap through structured training could expand market reach while preserving cultural authenticity.

Handicrafts as Cultural Promotion and Diplomacy

Exhibitions as "Living Museums"

Artisans stressed that exhibitions were not just sales venues but platforms for storytelling:

"Kalau pameran, kita bukan sekadar jual barang, kita cerita pada pelawat tentang maksud motif dan bahan yang kita guna."

This reflects Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1998) concept of heritage as a "metacultural production," where cultural expressions are reframed for display. Exhibitions transform artisans into cultural ambassadors, and craft-making into a performative pedagogy.

Tourism and Global Engagement

Tourists were described as particularly drawn to the stories behind the designs:

"Pelancong suka tahu cerita di sebalik hasil kerja. Mereka tertarik dengan corak dan cara buatnya."

This finding resonates with Cohen's (1988) work on cultural tourism, where authenticity is both performed and negotiated. UNESCO (2018) has emphasized that tourism-linked heritage can foster appreciation but risks commodification if not carefully managed. The Orang Ulu case shows artisans' agency in balancing cultural storytelling with market demands.

Intergenerational Transmission and Future Sustainability

Artisans expressed concern about the disengagement of younger generations:

"Kita wariskan identiti kepada generasi muda... Mereka kena terlibat dalam aktiviti macam buat manik, pakai pakaian tradisi."

This anxiety reflects global trends. Among the Sámi in Scandinavia, youth interest in traditional *duodji* crafts has waned due to urban migration (Porsanger, 2010). Similarly, Turok (2014) documents declining intergenerational transfer of beadwork skills among South African Ndebele communities.

For the Orang Ulu, sustaining handicraft traditions requires embedding cultural education in schools and community programs. UNESCO (2015) advocates integrating intangible heritage into curricula as a safeguard. This would ensure that handicrafts remain living practices rather than museum relics.

Comparative Global and Regional Insights

Placing the Orang Ulu experience in a comparative frame highlights shared struggles and unique strategies.

- i. **Dayak Iban (Sarawak):** *Pua Kumbu* weaving faces similar challenges of resource scarcity (cotton) and youth disinterest (Gavin, 2003).
- ii. **Ifugao (Philippines):** Woodcarving traditions commodified for tourism have raised concerns about authenticity (Salazar, 2012).
- iii. **Maasai (Kenya):** Beadwork marketed globally risks cultural dilution but also creates new spaces for cultural pride (Hodgson, 2005).
- iv. **Quechua (Peru):** Cooperative weaving has been successful in balancing economic and cultural goals (Howard, 2003).

These cases suggest that the Orang Ulu's challenges are not isolated but part of a global negotiation between heritage preservation and economic modernization.

Synthesis and Theoretical Implications

The results underscore Throsby's (2001) model of cultural goods, showing that handicrafts embody dual economic and cultural values. They also confirm Bourdieu's (1986) insights into cultural capital, demonstrating that artisanal skills constitute both economic assets and markers of distinction.

At the same time, the findings highlight structural vulnerabilities: ecological degradation, market competition, and digital exclusion. These challenges echo global debates on the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage in capitalist economies (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009).

Yet the Orang Ulu case also illustrates resilience. Artisans actively reinterpret tradition, use digital tools despite limitations, and mobilize exhibitions as cultural diplomacy. Their strategies suggest an evolving model of indigenous entrepreneurship, one that integrates cultural integrity with adaptive innovation.

This study shows that Orang Ulu handicrafts are more than commodities; they are cultural texts, pedagogical tools, and diplomatic instruments. They embody the community's identity while sustaining livelihoods. However, artisans face acute challenges, resource scarcity, rising costs, market imitation, and generational disengagement.

Comparative insights demonstrate that these challenges resonate across indigenous communities worldwide. What distinguishes the Orang Ulu is their dual emphasis on cultural pride and economic necessity, where each bead and motif speak both to heritage and to survival.

Sustaining these traditions requires systemic interventions: ecological protection, intellectual property safeguards, digital training, and youth engagement. Without such support, the cultural capital embodied in Orang Ulu handicrafts risks erosion. With it, these crafts can continue to thrive as living heritage, linking past to present and local to global.

Conclusion

This study has explored the role of Orang Ulu handicrafts in preserving cultural identity, sustaining livelihoods, and serving as instruments of cultural diplomacy. The results demonstrated that handicrafts such as beadwork (*Sabu*), ceremonial attire (*Ta'ah*), woven baskets, and musical instruments like the *Sape'* are not merely artistic objects but carriers of historical memory, cosmological meaning, and social identity. They constitute material archives of Orang Ulu heritage, constantly renewed through practice and performance.

At the same time, handicraft-making provides critical economic opportunities for rural communities. As documented in field interviews, artisans view their work not only as a source of income but also as a means of introducing Orang Ulu culture to wider audiences, both nationally and internationally. The dual role of handicrafts as cultural and economic goods validates Throsby's (2001) concept of cultural products possessing both market and symbolic value.

However, the findings also highlighted significant challenges. Resource scarcity, particularly in the availability of *Sega* rattan, rising costs of imported materials such as Japanese beads, and competition from cheap mass-produced imitations threaten the sustainability of authentic handicraft practices. Furthermore, limited digital marketing skills and the declining engagement of younger generations exacerbate these vulnerabilities. These issues mirror global trends faced by indigenous communities from the Maasai in Kenya to the Quechua in Peru, reinforcing the interconnectedness of indigenous struggles in balancing heritage preservation with modern economic pressures.

Nevertheless, Orang Ulu artisans have shown resilience. They creatively reinterpret traditional motifs, participate in exhibitions as cultural ambassadors, and cautiously adopt social media for promotion. These strategies reflect a form of indigenous entrepreneurship that blends cultural integrity with adaptive innovation. The Orang Ulu case suggests that handicrafts are not relics of the past but dynamic, living practices capable of negotiating modernity while remaining rooted in cultural pride.

This study contributes theoretically by extending Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital and Throsby's (2001) cultural economics framework into the context of indigenous handicrafts in urban Malaysia. By situating Orang Ulu handicrafts within these dual perspectives, the research demonstrates how artisanal knowledge and motifs function simultaneously as intangible cultural capital and as cultural goods with symbolic and market value. Practically, the study highlights actionable strategies for artisans, policymakers, and NGOs: empowering artisans through digital literacy programs, strengthening legal protection of indigenous motifs, and embedding craft education into community and school initiatives. These findings not only affirm the Orang Ulu's cultural resilience but also provide a model for other indigenous communities navigating the tension between heritage preservation and economic modernization.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussions, several key recommendations emerge for sustaining and promoting Orang Ulu handicrafts in the contemporary era:

1. Cultural Education and Youth Engagement

The disengagement of younger generations is a critical concern. To counter this, cultural education should be integrated into local school curricula, community workshops, and apprenticeship programs. Similar to Māori *whare pora* weaving schools in New Zealand, Orang Ulu villages could establish structured learning hubs where elders pass on traditional skills to youth. NGOs and universities can play facilitating roles by providing logistical support and training modules. This would ensure that handicrafts remain embedded in the community's lived experience rather than relegated to occasional festival performances.

2. Sustainable Resource Management

Scarcity of raw materials such as *Sega* rattan underscores the need for ecological stewardship. Collaborative programs between local communities, government forestry departments, and conservation NGOs should focus on cultivating rattan and other essential resources through sustainable farming practices. This mirrors successful initiatives in Indonesia where community-based forest management has revitalized access to weaving materials. Without such ecological interventions, the material base of Orang Ulu crafts will continue to erode, jeopardizing both cultural continuity and economic stability.

3. Strengthening Intellectual Property Rights

The proliferation of mass-produced imitations calls for stronger protection of indigenous designs. Legal mechanisms such as Geographical Indications (GIs) or *sui generis* intellectual property frameworks should be explored to safeguard Orang Ulu motifs and craftsmanship. This would not only protect artisans from cultural appropriation but also enhance the market value of authentic products. Comparative precedents such as Ghana's protection of Kente cloth demonstrate how legal safeguards can empower indigenous artisans while deterring exploitation.

4. Capacity Building in Digital Marketing

While some artisans have begun using Facebook and WhatsApp for promotion, there is significant potential to expand their digital presence. Training workshops in e-commerce platforms such as Shopee, Lazada, and Etsy could enhance market reach, particularly to global buyers interested in authentic cultural products. Partnerships with universities, digital start-ups, and government agencies could provide technical training, mentorship, and logistical support. By building digital literacy, Orang Ulu artisans can better compete in contemporary markets without compromising authenticity.

5. Cultural Diplomacy and Tourism Integration

Exhibitions, festivals, and cultural tourism programs should continue to be platforms for Orang Ulu artisans to showcase their work and narrate cultural stories. However, these events must avoid reducing handicrafts to mere commodities. Curated exhibitions could frame handicrafts as living heritage, incorporating storytelling sessions, live demonstrations, and interactive workshops. Such initiatives would align with UNESCO's emphasis on intangible cultural heritage safeguarding while positioning Orang Ulu artisans as cultural diplomats representing Sarawak's rich diversity.

6. Collaborative Research and Documentation

Ongoing research is needed to systematically document Orang Ulu motifs, techniques, and oral histories. Collaborative projects between universities, museums, and community leaders could create digital archives, catalogues, and multimedia exhibitions. This would ensure that knowledge is preserved even as social conditions evolve. Such documentation could also serve as evidence in pursuing intellectual property protection and inform cultural education curricula.

The Orang Ulu handicraft tradition embodies a paradox: it is simultaneously fragile and resilient, vulnerable to external pressures yet deeply anchored in cultural pride. Sustaining it requires more than nostalgia; it requires practical, systemic support that integrates education, ecology, law, and digital technology. By addressing structural challenges and empowering artisans, Orang Ulu handicrafts can continue to thrive as a living heritage that connects past and present, local and global.

In doing so, Orang Ulu artisans not only preserve their own cultural identity but also contribute to global conversations about indigenous resilience, cultural justice, and sustainable development. Their story exemplifies how heritage, when supported and respected, can be both an anchor of identity and a pathway to shared futures.

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