

The Impact of Urbanization on Preserving the *Miring* Tradition among the Iban Community in Sungai Pasai, Sibul, Sarawak

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i10/26735>

Published Date: 22 October 2025

Abstract

Urbanization has reshaped the socio-cultural landscape of many indigenous communities worldwide, including the Iban of Sarawak, Malaysia. This paper examines the impact of urbanization on the preservation of *Miring*, a ritual deeply embedded in the Iban worldview as a symbolic offering to *Petara* (deities) and ancestral spirits. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the study was conducted in Sungai Pasai, Sibul, where urban migration, modernization, and religious conversion have significantly altered cultural practices. Data were collected through participant observation of rituals, in-depth interviews with longhouse leaders, ritual experts (*Lemambang*), and community elders, alongside document analysis. The findings reveal that urbanization has led to a generational decline in the knowledge and practice of *Miring*. Younger generations, influenced by education, modern employment, and Christianity, often perceive the ritual as outdated. Additionally, the costs of ritual offerings and the dwindling number of ritual specialists have further weakened its practice. However, the study also uncovers resilience strategies, such as intergenerational teaching, embedding *Miring* elements within Gawai celebrations, and community-driven cultural clubs. These adaptations highlight the dynamic ways in which the Iban negotiate modernity while striving to preserve cultural identity. The paper concludes that while *Miring* faces existential threats in the context of urbanization, it continues to function as a cultural anchor for community cohesion and spiritual continuity. Efforts to safeguard the ritual should focus on community-based education, documentation, and state-level cultural preservation policies.

Keywords: Urbanization, Iban, *Miring* Ritual, Indigenous Heritage, Sarawak

Introduction

Urbanization has become one of the most transformative global phenomena of the twenty-first century, reshaping not only physical landscapes but also the cultural and social fabric of

communities. Across the world, indigenous societies have experienced profound changes as migration, modernization, and global economic integration alter their traditional ways of life. In Malaysia, particularly in the state of Sarawak, rapid urban development and expanding infrastructure have drawn many indigenous peoples toward urban centers such as Kuching, Miri, and Sibü. While this process has created new opportunities for education and employment, it has simultaneously posed challenges to the continuity of indigenous cultural practices and belief systems.

Among the indigenous groups in Sarawak, the Iban community is known for its rich oral traditions, communal living systems, and elaborate ritual practices. The Iban longhouse has long served as the heart of community identity, functioning as a place where cultural, social, and spiritual life converges. Within this setting, rituals such as the Miring ceremony hold deep cosmological and social significance. Miring serves as a symbolic act of offering to Petara, or deities, and ancestral spirits, intended to ensure harmony between the human, natural, and spiritual worlds (Freeman, 1970; Sather, 2001). Historically, the ritual also reinforced collective identity, mutual cooperation, and moral values, sustaining the balance between material life and spiritual order.

However, with increasing migration to cities and the spread of Christianity, many Iban families have gradually abandoned or simplified traditional rituals, perceiving them as incompatible with modern beliefs or economically burdensome. The decline of Lemambang, or ritual specialists, together with changing generational attitudes, has further weakened the continuity of ritual knowledge. As a result, Miring faces the risk of being reduced to a symbolic display rather than a living practice. This transition reflects a wider pattern among other Dayak and Borneo communities, where modernization redefines traditional rituals as cultural heritage instead of faith-based obligations (Chelum et al., 2023; Rankesh, 2017).

Despite these pressures, some Iban communities such as those in Sungai Pasai, Sibü, continue to uphold Miring as an essential part of their cultural life. Their persistence provides an important opportunity to understand how indigenous communities negotiate the forces of modernity while preserving identity. The community in Sungai Pasai represents a meaningful case where the influences of urban development and cultural resilience coexist, offering valuable insight into the evolving meanings of Miring in a rapidly changing society.

This study therefore examines how urbanization affects the preservation of the Miring ritual among the Iban community in Sungai Pasai. Specifically, it investigates three aspects, namely how urbanization influences ritual practice, the challenges faced in sustaining Miring, and the strategies used by the community to preserve and adapt it.

The novelty of this research lies in its contextual focus on an Iban community situated at the intersection between rural and urban life, a dimension that has rarely been explored in social science studies of cultural sustainability. By linking theories of urbanization, religious transformation, and indigenous resilience, this study contributes new insights into the evolving nature of traditional belief systems under modern influences. It highlights Miring not only as a ritual act but also as a dynamic process of cultural negotiation that enriches wider discussions on indigenous heritage preservation in Malaysia and the broader Southeast Asian region.

Literature Review

Urbanization and Cultural Transformation

Urbanization is commonly understood as a process of demographic, economic and cultural change that transforms rural societies. It involves not only the growth of towns and cities but also the restructuring of social life, identity and cultural practices (Friedmann, 2002; Cohen, 2006). For indigenous communities, urbanization brings both opportunities and threats. On one side, it improves access to education, healthcare and employment. On the other side, it weakens traditional authority, erodes indigenous knowledge systems and redefines cultural priorities (Smith, 1999).

In Southeast Asia, the pace of urbanization has been rapid since the 1980s. The expansion of towns has been closely linked to rural to urban migration and to the penetration of global cultural influences (King, 2008). For indigenous groups, this has created a dual reality. Communities are drawn into modern economies but at the same time they experience disruption of cultural systems that once sustained their way of life (Leete, 1996). In Sarawak, the Iban are an example of a group negotiating this dual reality. Earlier research shows that economic development and political change have reshaped the ways in which the Iban view their cultural heritage, with some traditions maintained and others abandoned (Jawan, 1991; Crain, 1997).

Rituals as Cultural Anchors

Rituals are powerful cultural anchors that preserve community values and reinforce identity. According to Geertz (1973), rituals serve both as models of reality and as models for reality, embedding meaning into symbolic acts. For the Iban, the Miring ceremony is one such cultural anchor. It is a ritual that establishes a cosmological link between humans, spirits and the natural world (Sather, 2001).

The Miring ceremony is not only a religious practice but also a social obligation. It requires the cooperation of longhouse members and functions as a repository of cultural memory (Sutlive, 1992). Turner (1969) describes this dimension of ritual as communities, moments when individual interests dissolve into collective identity. For the Iban, the ritual embodies ancestral heritage, conveys moral lessons through oral chants and redistributes resources in ways that strengthen solidarity (Sather, 2012). When such rituals decline, it is not only a matter of losing a religious act but also a weakening of community cohesion.

Indigenous Rituals in Transition

The decline of ritual practice in the face of modernization is a global phenomenon. Rankesh (2017) observes that modernization often transforms rituals from sacred acts into cultural performances. Among the Maori in New Zealand, rituals have been reframed as heritage for tourism and for community education (Mead, 2003). Among Native American groups, rituals are selectively preserved to affirm cultural identity rather than to guide daily spiritual life (Deloria, 2006).

In Borneo, similar processes are visible. The Dayak Tiwah ritual in Kalimantan has been reduced in frequency due to the high cost of animal sacrifice and the spread of Christianity and Islam (Schiller, 1997). The Salako Nyangahant ritual in Lundu has also faced decline due to modernization. Yet, as Chelum, Magiman, Leng and Kundat (2023) show, it continues as a

marker of identity. The Bidayuh likewise struggle with ritual continuity, as many of the younger generation see such practices as conflicting with Christian teaching (Masing, 1997). These comparative cases highlight both the vulnerabilities and the adaptive strategies of indigenous communities across Borneo.

Urbanization and Religion

Religious transformation is one of the strongest impacts of urbanization. The spread of Christianity among the Iban has redefined many cultural practices. Christian teachings often discourage Miring, labelling it as pagan or animistic (Jawan, 1991; Senang & Tugang, 2018). This change has led to a preference for church-based ceremonies, resulting in fewer traditional rituals being conducted.

Nevertheless, some families have sought ways to reconcile Christian faith with cultural identity. In certain cases, elements of Miring are preserved in symbolic form, allowing communities to retain aspects of heritage without contradicting religious commitments (King, 1993). This dynamic reflects Hefner's (1993) idea of religious pluralism under modernity, where belief systems overlap and reshape indigenous traditions. Urbanization accelerates this process by exposing rural communities to diverse ideologies and institutions.

Knowledge Transmission and Generational Change

The preservation of rituals relies heavily on knowledge transmission. Ritual specialists known as Lemambang are custodians of chants and ceremonial expertise that have been developed across generations (Sather, 2001). Their knowledge represents not only spiritual wisdom but also the continuity of oral traditions. As younger people migrate to urban centers, opportunities for apprenticeships decrease, threatening the continuity of ritual knowledge (Crain, 1997; Freeman, 1970).

Generational change also reshapes cultural values. Younger Ibans often prioritize education, wage employment and urban lifestyles over participation in rituals (King, 2008). Many view rituals as economically burdensome or socially irrelevant. However, as Hirschman (2016) explains, generational change does not always result in cultural extinction. Traditions may survive in adapted forms, reframed as cultural heritage, or celebrated during festivals.

Cultural Sustainability and Resilience

In recent years, scholars have shifted toward examining resilience as a framework for understanding how indigenous traditions survive under modern pressures. Cultural sustainability refers to the ability of a community to maintain traditions while adapting to new social realities (Nurse, 2006). For the Iban, sustaining the Miring ceremony may require a redefinition of its meaning from religious obligation to cultural heritage.

One adaptive strategy is the integration of ritual elements into festivals such as Gawai. This ensures that cultural practices are visible to younger generations and remain part of community life (Bilon & Tugang, 2020). Another approach is the documentation of rituals and the formation of cultural clubs that promote traditional knowledge (Sather, 2012). These align with the framework of UNESCO (2003), which emphasizes safeguarding intangible cultural heritage through community participation.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design. Qualitative research is appropriate when the aim is to understand meanings, experiences and cultural practices from the perspectives of participants (Creswell, 2014). Since the Miring ritual is a practice that is embedded in cultural symbolism, oral tradition and lived experience, it requires a method that allows for deep exploration rather than numerical measurement. The descriptive approach was chosen because it focuses on providing a detailed and systematic account of events and processes as they occur in their natural setting (Sandelowski, 2000).

The research design was also informed by the interpretivist paradigm, which holds that social reality is constructed through shared meanings and interactions (Schwandt, 1994). For the Iban community, rituals such as Miring carry meanings that are not easily visible without contextual interpretation. Therefore, the study sought to describe how community members understand the ritual, how they perceive the effects of urbanization, and how they attempt to preserve cultural practices.

Research Site

The study was conducted in Sungai Pasai, Sibu, Sarawak. The location was selected because it represents an Iban community that continues to practice Miring in a modified form despite the pressures of modernization. Sungai Pasai is situated near an urban centre, which makes it an ideal case for examining how rural traditions are influenced by urbanization. The community has experienced both outmigration of younger people and exposure to modern values, yet traditional practices such as Miring remain visible. This balance of change and continuity provided a suitable context for the research.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a method that identifies individuals who possess knowledge or experience relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015). Five key informants participated in the study. They included the longhouse chief or tuai rumah, one ritual specialist or Lemambang, and three community elders. These individuals were chosen because of their involvement in the Miring ceremony, their knowledge of ritual traditions, and their long-term observation of cultural changes in the community.

The study also took into account the perspectives of younger Iban members through informal conversations during field visits. While the focus remained on ritual experts and elders, the voices of youth were essential for understanding generational perspectives on urbanization and cultural continuity.

Data Collection

Three methods of data collection were employed. The first was participant observation. The researcher attended community events and observed the performance of Miring where possible. Observations focused on the procedures of the ritual, the offerings prepared, the role of participants, and the meanings expressed during the ceremony. Field notes were kept systematically to record details of both ritual actions and the surrounding social context.

The second method was semi-structured interviews. These interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words while also responding to guiding questions. Topics included the role of Miring in the community, changes observed over time, challenges faced in preserving the ritual, and strategies for ensuring continuity. Interviews were conducted in the Iban and Malay languages, depending on participant preference, and were later transcribed and translated into English.

The third method was document analysis. Archival sources, academic publications and community records were reviewed to provide historical and comparative perspectives. This triangulation of sources helped to enrich the understanding of the ritual and to situate it within broader discussions of cultural change.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involves coding the data to identify patterns and themes across the interviews, observations and documents (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding process began with a careful reading of the transcripts and field notes to identify meaningful segments of text. These were then grouped into categories such as “religious transformation,” “economic challenges,” “generational change,” and “cultural resilience.”

Themes were refined by comparing data across sources. For example, observations of ritual performance were compared with the narratives of elders and the perspectives of younger participants. The triangulation of different sources allowed the researcher to validate interpretations and to ensure that the analysis was not based on a single viewpoint. Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm accuracy and credibility.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave verbal consent before interviews were conducted. Anonymity was maintained in reporting, and sensitive information was treated with confidentiality. Care was also taken to respect cultural protocols during observation of rituals. For example, offerings and prayers were not interrupted, and permission was sought from community leaders before taking notes or photographs.

Limitations

As with most qualitative studies, this research has limitations. The small number of participants means that findings cannot be generalized to all Iban communities. However, the focus on Sungai Pasai provides a rich and contextually grounded case study. Another limitation is that the researcher’s presence may have influenced participants’ responses, particularly in sensitive discussions of religion and cultural change. Nonetheless, the use of multiple data sources and validation strategies helped to strengthen the reliability of the findings.

Findings

The findings of this study reveal that urbanization has significantly altered the practice of the Miring ritual among the Iban community of Sungai Pasai. The analysis is presented under four major themes: (1) religious and spiritual transformations, (2) socio-economic and migration

effects, (3) generational perspectives and cultural identity, and (4) community resilience and adaptive strategies. Each theme is discussed with reference to both field data and existing scholarship.

Religious and Spiritual Transformations

One of the most visible effects of urbanization is the transformation of religious practices. The spread of Christianity among the Iban has redefined spiritual life, often discouraging participation in animistic rituals. Elders interviewed during the study recalled that Miring was once performed for almost every significant occasion, including harvest celebrations, healing ceremonies, house building, and protection during journeys. Today, many of these rituals are replaced by Christian prayers.

An elder explained:

“In the past we could not start planting without Miring, but now many families pray in church before they go to the farm. The young people do not even know the chants.”

This observation reflects what Jawan (1991) and Senang and Tugang (2018) have described: the growth of Christianity has created a cultural tension between indigenous practices and Christian teachings. While some households still perform Miring in private, the collective dimension of the ritual has weakened.

However, the study also found examples of selective retention. In some cases, symbolic offerings are made during Gawai Dayak, even by Christian families. This supports Hefner’s (1993) view of religious pluralism, where indigenous rituals are reinterpreted rather than entirely abandoned. Instead of seeking direct blessings from spirits, some participants explained that they view Miring as a cultural expression of respect for ancestors.

Socio-Economic and Migration Effects

Another major factor influencing the decline of Miring is economic pressure. Rituals require livestock, rice wine, rice, and other materials that are costly for families. A longhouse chief stated:

“To do Miring properly, you need pigs, chickens, tuak, and many other things. Not everyone can afford this. That is why people only do it during Gawai now, because the cost can be shared.”

This confirms earlier findings by King (1993) and Schiller (1997), who noted that the financial burden of ritual sacrifice is a major reason for their decline. Urbanization intensifies this challenge because many young members who migrate to towns no longer contribute resources to longhouse rituals. As a result, the responsibility falls to a smaller group of elders and those who remain in rural areas.

Migration also reduces the number of participants. With younger members absent, rituals are conducted with fewer people, weakening their communal dimension. This echoes research on the Dayak Tiwah in Kalimantan, which has also suffered from depopulation of villages due to migration (Schiller, 1997). The demographic shift in Sungai Pasai thus undermines both the economic and social foundations of Miring.

Generational Perspectives and Cultural Identity

The study revealed a striking generational divide in attitudes toward Miring. Younger Ibans often regard the ritual as outdated or irrelevant. Many explained that they had been educated in urban schools and were more familiar with modern lifestyles. They also saw Miring as incompatible with their Christian beliefs.

A young participant remarked:

"I respect what the elders are doing, but for me, praying in church is enough. Miring feels like something from the old days."

This sentiment reflects the findings of Hirschman (2016), who argues that generational change reshapes values and cultural practices. For many young people, participation in Miring does not align with their aspirations for urban employment, modern education, and global cultural practices.

However, the study also found curiosity among some younger members who expressed interest in learning about Miring if it was presented as cultural heritage rather than as a religious obligation. This resonates with the concept of cultural sustainability described by Nurse (2006), which emphasizes the adaptation of traditions to new social realities. In this sense, Miring could be preserved as a cultural practice that reinforces Iban identity, even if its original spiritual meaning diminishes.

Community Resilience and Adaptive Strategies

Despite the many challenges, the study found evidence of community resilience. Several strategies have been adopted in Sungai Pasai to preserve Miring in adapted forms.

a) Cultural Transmission through Family Lines

Elders continue to teach grandchildren about ritual chants and the meaning of offerings. One elder explained that he always asks his grandchildren to help prepare food during Miring so they can learn its significance. This aligns with Sather's (2001) observation that oral teaching within families is central to the survival of Iban ritual traditions.

b) Integration into Gawai Celebrations

Miring has become a symbolic part of Gawai Dayak celebrations, which are more widely accepted by both Christian and non-Christian Ibans. By embedding ritual elements within Gawai, the community ensures that younger generations remain exposed to cultural practices. Bilon and Tugang (2020) describe this strategy as a form of cultural adaptation that transforms ritual from a religious requirement into a public celebration of identity.

c) Documentation and Cultural Clubs

Community members have begun recording rituals through photographs, videos, and written notes. Local cultural associations also organize events to showcase traditional practices. These initiatives align with UNESCO's (2003) framework for safeguarding intangible heritage, which emphasizes documentation and community involvement.

d) Selective Practice of Rituals

Instead of performing Miring for every occasion as in the past, the community now practices it selectively for significant events. This allows families to manage costs while still maintaining continuity. This selective approach reflects what Rankesh (2017) calls "cultural negotiation," where traditions are reshaped to fit within modern constraints.

Discussion

The findings highlight a dual process of decline and resilience. On one hand, urbanization, religious transformation, economic constraints, and generational change have contributed to the weakening of Miring. On the other hand, adaptive strategies such as cultural transmission, integration into festivals, and documentation show that the ritual remains an important cultural anchor.

The case of Sungai Pasai illustrates the complexity of cultural sustainability. While the spiritual dimension of Miring may be declining, its role as a marker of identity and heritage remains strong. This supports Geertz's (1973) idea that rituals are symbolic systems that can be reinterpreted across different contexts. It also demonstrates that indigenous traditions are not static but evolve in response to social and cultural change.

The findings also suggest that cultural preservation efforts must be multi-layered. Policies that support documentation, community education, and integration of traditions into cultural programs are essential. At the same time, community-based strategies that involve elders, families, and youth are necessary to ensure continuity.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the impact of urbanization on the preservation of the Miring ritual among the Iban community in Sungai Pasai, Sibul, Sarawak. The findings have shown that urbanization is not only a demographic or economic phenomenon but also a cultural process that reshapes indigenous traditions, worldviews and identities. For the Iban, the Miring ritual has historically represented a bridge between humans, nature and the spiritual realm. It has provided moral guidance, reinforced community solidarity and ensured the redistribution of resources. Yet in the present context, these functions are increasingly challenged by urban migration, economic pressures, religious change and generational transformation.

The study revealed four main dynamics. First, religious transformation, especially the spread of Christianity, has redefined spiritual practices and discouraged participation in rituals perceived as animistic. This shift reflects broader patterns of religious pluralism in indigenous societies where old and new beliefs interact in complex ways. Second, the economic cost of ritual offerings combined with the migration of younger members to urban centers has weakened the ability of longhouse communities to sustain frequent ceremonies. Third, generational change has reshaped perceptions of tradition. Younger Ibans often view Miring as outdated or irrelevant to modern life, although some express interest in its preservation if framed as cultural heritage. Fourth, despite these pressures, the community demonstrates resilience. Elders transmit ritual knowledge through family lines, Miring is embedded within Gawai celebrations, and documentation efforts are underway to preserve ritual memory.

These findings carry several theoretical implications. They confirm Geertz's (1973) argument that rituals are symbolic systems that can be reinterpreted across different contexts. The case of Sungai Pasai illustrates that rituals are not static remnants of the past but evolving practices that adapt to changing circumstances. The study also supports the framework of cultural sustainability proposed by Nurse (2006), which emphasizes that communities can maintain traditions by recontextualizing them in ways that fit contemporary realities. In this sense, the

Miring ritual continues to function as a cultural anchor even when its original religious meaning has diminished.

The practical implications are equally significant. For policymakers, the study highlights the importance of supporting community-led initiatives that safeguard intangible cultural heritage. This includes funding for documentation projects, incorporation of indigenous rituals into cultural festivals, and educational programs that encourage intergenerational learning. At the same time, cultural preservation must respect the religious choices of communities, allowing them to reinterpret rituals in ways that align with their current beliefs. For community leaders and cultural organizations, the findings suggest that adaptation rather than rigid preservation is the most effective strategy for ensuring continuity. By reframing Miring as cultural identity rather than solely spiritual obligation, the community can ensure its survival for future generations.

Future research should build on these insights by conducting comparative studies across different Iban settlements and other indigenous groups in Borneo. Such studies could examine variations in adaptation strategies and explore how urbanized Ibans in cities negotiate their connection to rituals practiced in their ancestral longhouses. Another promising direction is the investigation of youth engagement, exploring whether cultural education programs can increase awareness and participation among younger generations.

In conclusion, while urbanization has undeniably weakened the practice of the Miring ritual, it has not erased its cultural significance. The people of Sungai Pasai demonstrate that traditions can survive in transformed forms through resilience, adaptation and cultural pride. Preserving Miring is therefore not only about maintaining a ritual but also about sustaining a worldview that affirms the Iban relationship with their ancestors, their community and their land. It is a reminder that in an era of rapid change, cultural identity continues to provide meaning, continuity and belonging.

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