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The Iban Folk Belief

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine Iban's *miring* tradition using Victor Turner's (1985) theoretical framework of sociodrama. *Miring* is a worship presentation by providing food to extraordinary powers consisting of god, goddess, good spirit and evil spirit, and their ancestors' spirit that have died long ago in order to seek for solution to the problems they encountered in their daily life. In other words, *miring* is part of Iban's folk belief system passed down from one generation to another. By incorporating Turner's sociodrama, it gives new perspective on *miring* ritual as a form of sociodrama, of which mantra and ritual dance are performed with many other ingredients prepared alongside the ritual. Symbols that signify Iban people's life is very much interconnected with their environment and the supernatural world are recorded and given meanings in this article.

Keywords: Iban Society, Iban Beliefs, *Miring* tradition, Sociodrama, Extraordinary Powers

Introduction

In Iban community, they often experience various problems, challenges and conflicts. They believe all problems must be resolved by doing *miring* ceremony to defuse problematic situations which occurred in their life. Furthermore, this tradition is also done to request for assistance from the god. *Miring* ceremony can only be conducted when there are “calls” given through dream, *pengaruh*, and signs. In implementing the *miring* tradition, the community assigns ritual role to a group of specialists known as *lemambang* (shamans). This is because all preparations of *miring* will be managed and set by *lemambang*. The very objective of organizing *miring* is nonetheless to seek for supernatural’s help and blessing in whatever activities the Iban people were about to undergo, namely warship, agriculture, good health and harmony in the long house.

Nowadays, majority of Iban society adheres to Abrahamic religions such as Christianity and Islam. Nevertheless, there are some who practice paganism. This is because they practice inherited belief hereditary since their period of the ancestors. Inherited belief practised by those include various god and perform *miring* during *gawai* celebration to ensure paddy harvest being performed by those better (Sandin, B. 1962a, 1962b, 1967; Sather, C. 1972; Morgan, S. 1968; Jensen, E. 1966; Noria, T. 2011). Furthermore, *miring* ceremony carried out in Iban society had undergone modification (Robert Menua Anak Saleh; Walter Wong Tedong Child, 2009). Hence, *miring* tradition commit as need in Iban society itself.

Miring ceremony in Iban society can be equable with sociodrama explained by Victor Turner (1985). In a sociodrama, there is usage of a set of symbols, recitation of a few important myths and ritual actions such as dance and mantra reading. According to Victor Turner (1985), society that still believes in inherited belief or animism, they believe that there is extraordinary existence of powers in their surroundings. All problems or disasters which befell the community are likely caused by their own actions such as violating taboos; disobeying order and sign given by the extraordinary powers. For Iban society, extraordinary powers include gods, goddess, good spirit and evil spirit, and ancestors' spirit which already passed away. For Iban society, extraordinary powers can bring advantages to the people on one hand, yet it can also cause problem or disaster should they are not being treated properly, on another hand. To make good with the extraordinary powers, the Iban people have had sought solution through *miring* tradition.

Materials and Methods

This research is based on exploratory research which uses qualitative approach. In exploratory research, the researchers describe problem statement to understand and explore concepts in relation to a phenomenon. In this case, the researchers explore *miring* ceremony carried out in Iban society. This research aims to add information to the research subject by first participating in *miring* ceremony conducted in Sarawak and followed by observations and interviewing the ritual experts who have had involved in *miring*.

By participating in *miring* ceremony, the researchers are given opportunity to observe the ritual without interrupting the ritual itself. Throughout the process, researchers took visuals and notes of events occurred. Later, the researcher interviewed ritual experts regarding the ritual they had

performed. This is a cross-checking process as it allows researchers to confirm what they had observed with the ritual experts who have been practicing the ritual for many years.

In short, the researchers use observation method by first partaking in the ritual ceremony and followed by interviewing sessions with the ritual experts. Following are the instruments used in research data collection:


Table 1: The Instruments Used to Collect Research Data




Research Instrument	Explanation
Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Surveying Iban community life in long houses. - Seek for opportunity to participate in miring ritual. - Participating in <i>miring</i> ceremony in <i>Gawai Kelingkang Nimang Pengaruh</i> at Muses Anak Amba houses, Bintulu. - Taking note and visuals of the rituals.
Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interviewing ritual expert, namely the <i>lemambang</i> (shamans) who lead the ritual ceremony.

Findings

Miring ceremony performed during the celebration of *Gawai* carried out by Iban society's, namely *Gawai Kelingkang Nimang Pengaruh*.

Table 2: *Miring* Tradition in *Gawai Kelingkang Nimang Pengaruh*
(Source: Research fieldwork, 2015)

Type of activities	Explanation	Image
First day: <i>Miring</i> ceremony for <i>beranchautikai</i> (spreading the mats)	By spreading the mats, it signified a symbolic opening ceremony for <i>Gawai</i> during which preparation of important materials needed during <i>Gawai</i> and <i>miring</i> has just started.	
Second day: <i>Miring</i> ceremony for <i>nyenupat</i>	<i>Miring</i> ceremony for <i>nyenupat puang</i> or <i>ketupat</i> weaving by Iban ladies and ritual for bringing <i>dulang</i>	

<p><i>puang</i>(ketupat weaving)</p>	<p><i>pengaroh</i>(tray for the champ) in the same day.</p>	
<p>Third day: <i>Miring</i> ceremony for <i>nyenupat penuh</i></p>	<p>Conducting final preparation before the <i>Gawai Kelingkang Nimang Pengaroh</i>. All the needed ingredients for Gawai has to be ready by then.</p>	
<p>Fourth day: <i>Miring</i> ceremony for <i>hari nyadi/</i> <i>nimang/ nyugu</i> <i>bulu jani</i></p>	<p><i>Nyugu bulu jani</i> (combing pigs' hair)ceremony which is performed by the Iban ladied.</p>	

<p>Fifth day: <i>Miring</i> tradition for <i>meda atau babi</i> (Interpreting pig' liver)</p>	<p><i>Meda atau babi</i> is conducted during the <i>Gawai Kelingkang Nimang Pengaroh</i>. The part of livers of nine pigs being sacrificed must be placed in <i>dulang panggau</i> to predict the requester's fate.</p>	
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Analysis and Discussion

Miring tradition is not simply a worship ceremony to the extraordinary power existence to resolve various crises faced by the Iban people. It also provides platform for community meeting where they could exchange views and share experience to achieve better life. According to Turner (1985), ritual is a sociodrama that describes human's life journey with tensions out of human's control. These tensions can be assuaged by using symbol through ritual tradition in society. Hence, *miring* could be regarded as one symbolic show which aims to resolve crisis in society.

All problems (conflict or crisis) or disaster that stricken the society inevitably gives bad impact to their lives. For Iban people who still adopt inherited belief, all problems or disasters that happened in their life are likely caused by their own mistakes which caused angers to the extraordinary powers. Hence, their life hit by misfortunes like befall drought, flood, insufficient of food resources, bad luck, poverty and disease outbreak. Nevertheless, all problems which hit Iban community life needs to be stopped

and assuaged through *miring* tradition. This is because they need to request for amnesty and forgiveness from extraordinary powers.

Miring requires an expert group such as *lemambang*. This group of ritual expert will guide the Iban people in preparing materials needed for worshipping the extraordinary powers. The materials prepared for *miring* ritual can be seen as a set of symbols which are used to communicate with the extraordinary powers. They also act as the medium who communicate with both the requesters and the extraordinary powers.

For Iban society, *piring* (plate) is one of the symbols used during *miring* ceremony. This is because *piring* is the container for 'food presentation' which will be offered to the extraordinary powers. In a *mirin ceremony*, *piring* is one of the key requirements to invite the extraordinary powers in order to give aids to the requesters. Iban ladies are given the important role in preparing materials needed for the *piring* and strict rules and standards have to be complied.

In *miring* ritual, there is usage of a set of symbols such as *pua kumbu* (traditional textile made by Iban lady for sacred ceremony such as *miring* and *Gawai*), multiple ingredients ranging from tobacco to glutinous rice and myth structural recitation by ritual expert group, *lemambang* who recite mantras. Apart from that, *lemambang* also commit to ritual actions that require them to walk around *pandong* (altar) in circles while holding a walking stick decorated with small bells to produce sound during the ritual. Hence, it is proven that, *miring* is a form of sociodrama as proposed by Turner as symbolic materials, dance and mantras were performed in order to attain help from the extraordinary powers.

There are several advantages for a society who performed ritual. As of Iban community who performed *miring* ritual, it is believed that, they are likely to obtain welfare, peace and harmony in the community. During the ritual, they can make wishes with the hope that their wishes will be granted by the extraordinary powers. In short, as a ritual a sociodrama performed in the society, tensions that arise in the society can be resolved, be they disasters, illness or bad lucks. Hence, it is very important that *miring* ceremony as a power that pacifies or reunite their life that already disunited.

Conclusion

In Iban society's culture, most important activities that they do in their daily life will be accompanied with rituals. For example, rice cultivation activity, enemy's head hunting, *pua kumbu* weaving and medication activities. All activities will include ritual with symbolic meanings respectively in order to worship and to get help from extraordinary powers. The researchers have illustrated that *miring* is in line with Turner's sociodrama, as *miring* is conducted to reassuage tensions of people with their surroundings using symbolic materials such as *pua kumbu*, *piring*, tobacco and glutinous rice. Undeniably, *miring* is a very important activity to be carried out to obtain permission and blessing from extraordinary powers. This is because through *miring*, they request the extraordinary powers to help and protect them. Despite globalisation and multiple cultural contacts, the *miring* tradition is still needed to bring peace and harmony to the Iban people.

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All images and sources gathered and used are the outcome of the research. Photos are taken during *Gawai Kelingkang Nimang Pengaroh* that took place about five days in Mr. Muses Anak Amba's house. Researchers requested permission from the house's owner and *Iemambang* involved in *Gawai* before taking photos, record video and interview.

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