


The Indigenous Woods of The Carving Art in the Sarawak Malaysia Forest

Sinin Hamdan ^{a,*} Doris Maying,^b Ezra M. A. Duin,^b and Aaliyawani E. Sinin^c

In many human societies, trees are an essential component of creative expression. The native people of Borneo, an ethnic group who formerly inhabited a large portion of Borneo, combine technology, art, and traditional knowledge of trees and their forests in their woodcarving art. The carved art depicts the generational sociocultural link between people, their land, and sustainable management techniques meant to protect traditional culture. In the context of the Sarawak Iban in Borneo, this editorial emphasizes the relationship between wood qualities and indigenous carving art with the goal of demonstrating ancestral knowledge of the forest and its species.

DOI: [10.15376/biores.21.3.5727-5728](https://doi.org/10.15376/biores.21.3.5727-5728)

Keywords: Wood heritage; Historical anatomy; Indigenous carving art; Tropical rain forest

Contact information: a: Faculty of Engineering, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia; b: Faculty of Applied and Creative Art, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia; c: Department of Science and Technology, Faculty of Humanities, Management and Science Universiti Putra Malaysia Bintulu Campus, 97008 Bintulu, Sarawak, Malaysia; Corresponding author: hsinin@unimas.my

Indigenous cultures continue to have a social and historical connection to forest areas. Through cultural manifestations such as stories, rituals, agriculture, fishing, hunting, dance, music, games, and handicrafts, millennia-old ancestral knowledge is passed down orally from generation to generation in harmony with the sustainable management of biodiversity. There are over 50 indigenous groups in Borneo that live alongside forests; the Dayak people are particularly well-known for their woodcarving. They were longtime residents of the Borneo tropical forest region, which included Sarawak and Sabah in Malaysia and Kalimantan in Indonesia. The indigenous peoples of Borneo are collectively referred to as the Dayak, a broad term that encompasses more than 50 different ethnic groups, including the Iban, Bidayuh, Murut and Kayan, who live in the interior of the island and share cultural traits such as longhouse living, shifting cultivation, and rich forest customs. The seafaring Bajau of Sabah, (referred to as Sea Gypsies) and the Orang Ulu (interior people) are two more significant communities. With distinctive traditions, dialects, and strong ties to the rainforest, they are stewards of Borneo's abundant wildlife. The Dayak use their technological, symbolic, and cognitive understanding of biodiversity to create art that reflects their cultural identity and way of life. Through sensitivity, perception, and aesthetic appreciation, their artistic practice engages multiple dimensions of art, which include the following:

- (i) enjoyment and expression;
- (ii) reflection and critique by placing their people's sociocultural history within the global context; and
- (iii) creativity, originality, and technical skill. The indigenous artisan is responsible for the full craftsmanship process, which includes symbolic and spiritual aspects.

In order for the entire process (from gathering wood in the forest to cutting, carving, and pyrography) to proceed safely, the craftsman first asks God for protection. The craftsman enters the forest, chooses a tree, cuts it into pieces, and lets it dry for few days. The wood is carved into the form of an animal, with use of a cutting tool. The craftsman then gives it another 6 days to dry. After that, the sculpture is completed by using pyrography to add decorative elements and refine the animal's distinctive features. The artisan's multiple intelligences activated by this carved art are:

- (i) logical-mathematical in planning and carrying out the manufacturing process;
- (ii) linguistic in listening, learning, and sharing knowledge;
- (iii) spatial in identifying the surrounding geographic environment;
- (iv) bodily-kinesthetic in perceiving and representing the movement and features of the depicted animals; and
- (v) naturalistic in comprehending nature and its biodiversity

A variety of knowledge systems arising from the human relationship with land and biodiversity are reflected having or representing animal forms sculpture, creating a synergistic fusion of science, technology, art, and traditional wisdom. The main raw element for this indigenous skill is wood, which is the most used forest resource in all human societies. The utilization of a wide variety of species in their woodcarving art is made possible by the Dayak ancestors' understanding of sustainable resource management. Native tropical forest trees that are present inside indigenous life domains are the source of the indigenous timbers used in these carvings.

This creative expression depicts natural species that currently or formerly lived in the forest. Kempas and Indian Mahogany are frequently employed in the work of local craftspeople. The physical and sensory characteristics of these species show an empirical selection of woods with good workability, dimensional stability, and aesthetic traits appropriate for creative expression. Although wood from Sabah and Sarawak can be even denser, Kempas wood is a dense, medium hardwood with an air-dry density that normally ranges from 770 to 1,050 kg/m³ (or ~880 kg/m³ on average). Because of its great density, it is categorized as heavy timber, which makes it appropriate for long-lasting construction such as flooring, structural beams, and railway sleepers. Indian mahogany, also known as *Swietenia macrophylla* or Big Leaf mahogany, is a strong, medium-density hardwood valued for furniture and construction because of its durability and workability. Its density typically ranges from 485 to 850 kg/m³, depending on moisture content and growth conditions. Common figures for dried wood are around 540 kg/m³.

The Dayak people of Malaysian Borneo (Sarawak and Sabah) utilize many natural wood types. Belian (Borneo ironwood, *Eusideroxylon zwageri*), known for its extraordinary durability is utilized as the main building material for longhouses and for carving statues. Menggeris (*Koompassia* spp.), another hardwood is also used for big chairs, sculptures, and other objects. The deliberate selection of these timber species reflects an inherited material intelligence, where physical properties such as density, grain, and durability, directly shape form, symbolism, and longevity of the carved artworks.