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Revealing the symbolic role of Buket philosophy and cultural motifs in social development in Sarawak

Mohamad Maulana Magiman^a , Hassan Alli^b  and Fauziah Abu Bakar^c 

^aFaculty of Humanities, Management and Science, Universiti Putra Malaysia Sarawak, Bintulu, Sarawak, Malaysia; ^bFaculty of Design and Architecture, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia; ^cFaculty of Agricultural and Forestry Science, Universiti Putra Malaysia Sarawak, Bintulu, Sarawak, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Philosophy is essential for promoting social development by encouraging critical thinking and thoughtful reflection on societal issues. At the same time, cultural motifs serve as concrete representations of a community's values, beliefs, and perspectives on life. Together, these elements are instrumental in strengthening social cohesion, empowering marginalized groups, and preserving cultural heritage. Recognising cultural values and practices as essential components of development beyond their aesthetic significance reveals their influence in shaping collective mindsets and social dynamics. Despite the richness of indigenous cultures, there is often a lack of organised approach for interpreting and integrating indigenous philosophies and symbolic systems into mainstream development discourse. Among the Buket ethnic group in Sarawak, Malaysia, traditional knowledge and symbolic expressions face the risk of marginalization due to limited documentation and a decline in intergenerational transmission. This study intends to interpret the indigenous philosophy and cultural motifs of the Buket as symbolic representations of social development. It aims to underscore their significance in promoting sustainable and inclusive development practices. This research employs a qualitative methodology that integrates a literature review, fieldwork observations, in-depth interviews with members of the Buket community, and a case study focusing on the Hudoq cultural tradition. These methods enable a comprehensive exploration of the community's belief structures and cultural practices. The findings indicate that Buket indigenous philosophies, together with their cultural motifs are deeply embedded in social values, environmental relationships, and collective identity. These aspects play a pivotal role in sustaining cultural continuity and enhancing community resilience.

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1. Introduction

Philosophy is the disciplined inquiry into fundamental questions concerning existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind, and language. It seeks not only to understand the structures underlying reality and human thought but also to illuminate the ways in which individuals and societies interpret and assign meaning to their experiences. According to Cassirer (1923–1929), philosophy provides an intellectual framework through which societies can organise knowledge, interpret ethical and cultural norms, and comprehend their values. He emphasises that humans are symbolic beings who understand the world through language, art, myth, and science, and philosophy allows societies to critically analyse these symbolic forms to reflect on their shared beliefs and cultural practices. Moreover, philosophy fosters a continuous dialogue between theory and practice. While it clarifies abstract concepts such as justice, truth, and virtue, it also translates these insights into actionable principles that guide human behaviour and societal development. In doing so, philosophy not only preserves cultural wisdom but also promotes innovation in ethical, political, and social life. By nurturing critical thinking, reflective judgment, and

CONTACT Mohamad Maulana Magiman  mdmaulana@upm.edu.my  Faculty of Humanities, Management and Science, Universiti Putra Malaysia Sarawak, Bintulu, Sarawak 97008, Malaysia.

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ethical awareness, philosophy ensures that societies remain dynamic, responsive, and capable of sustained moral and cultural growth (Jalil et al., 2024; Tarman, 2023). In the context of social development, philosophy is instrumental in nurturing critical consciousness, empowering individuals and groups to reflect on their roles and responsibilities and promoting collective well-being. It fosters the principles of equality, dignity, and justice, thereby offering a robust foundation for progressive social structures (Macul, 2023). In addition, this philosophical also grounding enables the societies to adapt to modern challenges while remaining ethically grounded.

Cultural motifs, whether expressed through symbols, patterns, or artistic forms, are deeply embedded in a community's traditions, rituals, and everyday practices. These motifs extend far beyond mere decoration, and they serve as visual manifestations of collective memory, cultural beliefs, and social identity (Tugang et al., 2021). By encapsulating a community's interactions with nature, spirituality, and social organisation, cultural motifs operate as narrative tools that preserve and transmit heritage across generations, ensuring that the wisdom, values, and histories of a community endure over time. Moreover, cultural motifs play a crucial role in promoting social cohesion and cultural continuity, particularly within marginalised or vulnerable communities. By providing a shared visual language, these cultural motifs foster a sense of identity, belonging, and empowerment, reinforcing communal bonds and facilitating intergenerational transmission of knowledge (Golo et al., 2023). The symbolic meanings embedded in cultural motifs often carry ethical, spiritual, and ecological significance (Najib et al., 2023). For example, motifs inspired by natural elements frequently signify ecological harmony, sustainability, and respect for the environment, while spiritual or religious motifs reflect sacred values, moral teachings, and cosmological understanding. In essence, cultural motifs are not only aesthetic expressions but also repositories of philosophical, ethical, and social knowledge, bridging the intangible dimensions of thought and belief with tangible, visual forms that communicate meaning across time and space. They also allow communities to articulate identity, encode values, and maintain continuity between past, present, and future.

Recently, the philosophy and cultural motifs are intricately linked through a mutually reinforcing relationship. Philosophy provides the abstract values and conceptual structures that guide cultural meaning, while motifs translate these philosophical insights into tangible, communicable forms that are embedded in daily life (Abeysekera, 2022; Liu et al., 2024a, 2024b; MMacul, 2023). This interplay allows abstract ethical concepts to become culturally resonant, visually recognisable, and widely practiced. Cultural motifs, therefore, become active approach in social development, not only preserving tradition but also encouraging reflection and adaptation. As Hall (1997) emphasises, culture is the 'production of meaning', and motifs serve as one of its most potent mediums. Through these views, motifs do more than reflect cultural identity, but they shape societal values, influence social structures, and contribute to the empowerment of marginalised voices (Geertz, 1973; Jalil et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024a, 2024b). This synergistic relationship is crucial for communities seeking to balance heritage with progress. According to UNESCO (2022), an integrating indigenous philosophies and cultural motifs into contemporary development strategies can foster more inclusive, sustainable, and resilient societies. When aligned, philosophy and cultural motifs offers a comprehensive approach for social transformation one that values reflection, identity, and continuity alongside innovation and change. Understanding the interdependence of philosophy and cultural motifs is essential for examining how cultural identity is preserved, expressed, and leveraged for social change. As the philosophy offers the ideational backbone, while cultural motifs provide embodied, lived expressions of these ideas. Together, they constitute a holistic background through which communities negotiate modernity, sustain their heritage, and pursue equitable social development. The investigation of their role is not only how the identity can be acknowledged but how they actively contribute to shaping the path of social development in meaningful and culturally grounded ways.

This study examines the Buket ethnic group in Sarawak, Malaysia, to understand how their indigenous philosophy and cultural motifs serve as symbolic expressions of social development. By exploring the community's beliefs, values, and practices, the study highlights how these expressions and cultural aspects contribute to social transformation and community resilience. The findings emphasise the role of integrating philosophical and cultural motif aspects deeply embedded in social values, environmental relationships, and collective identity into social development. Beyond addressing material needs, this integration highlights the importance of preserving cultural identity. Ultimately, the study also provides

a new approach for development that promotes social progress and economic growth while safeguarding the unique cultural heritage of local communities.

2. Background of study

In Malaysia, the classification of Indigenous Peoples (IP) is commonly framed through two terms: *Orang Asli* and *Bumiputera*. Both terms, when translated, mean ‘people of the origin’ or ‘sons of the soil’, signifying a connection to indigeneity. The *Bumiputera* group comprises approximately 67.4% of the national population, making it the demographic majority. It includes ethnic Malays and other Indigenous groups from East Malaysia, such as the Iban, Bidayuh, Kadazan-Dusun, Murut, Rungus, Bajau and others. Sarawak, with a population of approximately 2.7 million, is home to 34 distinct ethnic groups, including the Iban, Bidayuh, Orang Ulu, Malay, Chinese, and Melanau, each with unique languages, belief systems, and cultural practices (Magiman et al., 2024; Tugau et al., 2020). As reported by the Sarawak Energy (2025), in January 2021, the official recognition of additional indigenous communities has expanded the number of formally acknowledged indigenous ethnic groups in Sarawak, as stipulated under the Federal Constitution of Malaysia (Article 161A (6) and (7)). Furthermore, the rights of Indigenous peoples in Sarawak, legally referred to as the ‘Natives of Sarawak’, are safeguarded by several key constitutional provisions. Among the most significant are Article 153 and Article 161A, which uphold their special position in Malaysian society, including protection of customary land rights, access to resources, and preferential opportunities in education, public service, and economic development. Article 161A specifically defines the legal criteria for identifying a Native of Sarawak and affirms the state’s legislative authority over Native affairs. This autonomy includes the preservation and enforcement of customary laws, Indigenous land ownership systems, and traditional governance structures.

Orang Ulu in Sarawak refers to a collective term used to describe several indigenous ethnic groups in the interior regions of northern Sarawak, especially in the Baram, Tinjar, and Belaga areas. ‘Orang Ulu’ means ‘upriver people’ or ‘people of the interior’ in Malay, and although it is not an ethnic group by itself, it has become a recognised term to represent a variety of small, and distinct indigenous communities. These communities traditionally lived in longhouses along riverbanks and practiced subsistence farming, fishing, and forest product gathering. They have rich oral traditions, rituals, and a deep spiritual connection to the land and forest. However, the development of Bakun Hydroelectric Dam, one of Southeast Asia’s largest, has had a major impact on the Orang Ulu communities. Before the construction of the Bakun HEP, the area was home to 15 longhouses, housing over 9,400 (1,640 families). Illustrated in Figure 1 is the Orang Ulu village (former village) in the Bakun area, highlighting the traditional architectural style, cultural setting, and natural environment that characterises the community’s way of life. The Bakun Dam is located in Belaga District, part of the Kapit Division in Sarawak, Malaysia. It is situated on the Balui River, a tributary of the Rajang River, approximately 60 kilometers east of Belaga town.

The resettlement process associated with the Bakun Hydroelectric Project (HEP) affected several indigenous communities located approximately 40 kilometres from the Bakun HEP Dam. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, around 10,000 indigenous people were relocated to the Sungai Asap Resettlement Scheme as part of the project’s implementation. This large-scale resettlement profoundly transformed the social, cultural, and economic landscape of the affected communities, requiring them to adapt to new environments and reconstruct social and cultural networks. According to Sarawak Energy (2025), the Orang Ulu population within the resettlement area in 2023 is predominantly Kenyah, comprising 5,161 individuals



Figure 1. Orang Ulu village formerly situated in Bakun, Belaga District, Sarawak.
Source: By authors (photo taken at Bukit ethnic longhouse in Sungai Asap) 2024.

(55.0%), followed by the Kayan with 3,781 people (35.0%), the Lahanan with 535 people (6.0%), the Buket with 300 people (3.0%), and the Penan with 104 people (1.0%). This demographic composition underscores not only the diversity of indigenous groups in the resettlement area but also the relative sizes of each community, which has important implications for cultural preservation, social cohesion, and equitable allocation of resources.

2.1. The Buket ethnic in Sarawak

The Buket ethnic is one of the indigenous communities in Sarawak, residing in the interior regions of Borneo. As part of the broader Orang Ulu group which includes several indigenous populations living in the highlands and riverine areas of Sarawak and Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo). The Buket represent one of the smallest and most threatened ethnic groups in the state. Their population has declined significantly over time, and their native language, belonging to the Austronesian language family, is now nearly extinct, as many Buket ethnic have shifted to speaking Iban or other dominant regional languages. Historically, the Buket led a semi-nomadic lifestyle, living in longhouses and engaging in shifting cultivation, hunting, and gathering. Their subsistence practices and spiritual beliefs were closely intertwined with the rainforest and river ecosystems that surrounded them. Traditionally animist, the Buket revered nature, spirits, and ancestral forces, though many have since embraced Christianity due to missionary influence. Despite these religious transitions, their cultural expressions reflected in oral traditions, symbolic carvings, beadwork, and ritual practices continue to embody their cosmology and social values. However, processes of displacement, assimilation, and intermarriage have placed their cultural identity, language, and traditions at risk, prompting increasing scholarly and community interest in preserving their intangible cultural heritage.

Presently, the Buket primarily reside in remote areas of the Belaga district in central Borneo (see [Figure 2](#)), a region dominated by dense tropical rainforests, rugged terrain, and limited infrastructure. These conditions continue to make the settlements relatively inaccessible, with the nearest urban centre, Bintulu, located approximately 150 kilometers away and requiring lengthy travel (Magiman et al., 2024). While this isolation still poses challenges for access to modern services, it has also helped preserve many aspects of the community's traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and indigenous identity, even as gradual infrastructure development and external pressures begin to influence their way of life.

2.2. Buket's philosophy and cultural motif

The Buket ethnic, a sub-group of the larger Orang Ulu group in Sarawak, have a distinctive cultural identity shaped by their rich traditions, beliefs, values, and social practices. Buket or Ukit are an indigenous Dayak group in Sarawak, known for their traditional way of life, unique language, and current endangered status. As one of the indigenous groups of the Orang Ulu, the Buket ethnic is known for their strong spiritual connection to nature, their agricultural practices, and their complex social structures. Their culture and way of life are intricately tied to the land, the spirits they revere, and the social and familial networks that support the community.



Figure 2. Buket ethnic village in Sungai Asap, Belaga District, Sarawak.
Source: By authors (photo taken at Buket ethnic longhouse in Sungai Asap) 2024.

Buket philosophy is deeply rooted in the community's traditions, spiritual beliefs, and ethical systems, serving as a symbolic system for understanding and guiding life. It emphasises interconnectedness between individuals, society, the environment, and the spiritual realm, reflecting Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms as a means through which societies interpret values, norms, and collective meaning. Central to this philosophy is spirituality, as the Buket believe that the spirits of ancestors, nature, and deities influence daily life, providing guidance for rituals, conflict resolution, and ethical behaviour (Chin, 2020; Karim et al., 2018). Harmony with nature is a key principle, with the environment regarded not merely as a resource but as a living entity deserving respect (Ling & Daniel, 2021). Buket mythology, shaped by animism and ancestral guidance, functions as a practical expression of philosophical principles, offering spiritual guidance, ethical precepts, and moral wisdom that direct conduct, social responsibilities, and interaction with the environment. These precepts and wisdom are transmitted through myths, rituals, and oral traditions, ensuring that community members understand and apply ethical principles in daily life. According to Cassirer (1874–1945), mythology is a fundamental symbolic form through which humans make sense of reality. Far from being mere superstition, it represents an early way of constructing the world, grounded in collective emotions such as awe and fear that imbue natural forces with the qualities of living powers. Although pre-logical in nature, mythology provided the foundation for culture by shaping communal identity and shared experience. As human thought advanced toward rationality, science, and philosophy, myth continued to exert influence, leaving a lasting impact on art, religion, and cultural imagination. Together, the philosophical and mythological traditions constitute an integrated heritage that upholds community cohesion, guides ethical conduct, and fosters ecological awareness. This foundation enables the Buket to navigate challenges, maintain harmonious relationships with one another and the natural world, and preserve their cultural heritage across generations. In essence, it functions as a bridge between abstract values and practical daily practices, ensuring that Buket philosophy and mythology are both lived and transmitted within the community.

Meanwhile, the cultural motifs of the Buket ethnic serve as visual and symbolic expressions that embody their philosophical system. These motifs are embedded in everyday practices, arts, crafts, and rituals, providing tangible representations of the community's beliefs, values, and ethical principles. Traditional Buket art forms, such as weaving, carving, and painting, frequently incorporate motifs that communicate spiritual concepts, family lineage, and social values. Many patterns depict the cycle of life, the connection between humans and nature, or the journeys of ancestors, reflecting the ethical and cosmological ideas central to Buket philosophy. Specific motifs carry distinct meanings. For example, a bird motif may symbolise freedom, spirituality, or a connection to ancestral spirits, while patterns representing plants or animals often convey respect for the natural world and its sacredness. Geometric patterns, too, hold symbolic significance linked to social norms or cosmological understanding. These motifs thus serve not only as artistic decoration but also as a means to express moral, spiritual, and cultural ideas, but ensuring that the community's values are both visible and recognisable in daily life. Colour also plays a significant symbolic role in Buket motifs (see [Figure 3](#)). In the Buket community, blue is closely associated with water sources, such as rivers and rainfall, symbolising life, continuity, and harmony with the natural environment. Red signifies vitality, protection, and ancestral presence, linking the community to spiritual forces and reinforcing social cohesion. Yellow represents prosperity, fertility, and enlightenment, reflecting the community's aspirations, growth, and engagement with knowledge and wisdom. Collectively, these colours embody the philosophical and cultural values that guide social behaviour and communal identity.

Buket philosophy provides the ethical and spiritual guidelines that structure daily life, while cultural motifs function as visual embodiments of these principles, preserving and transmitting the community's values across generations. In this sense, Buket cultural motifs are far more than decorative elements, but they offer insight into how the community navigates social realities, maintains cohesion, and reinforces cultural identity and continuity. These intertwined elements play a vital role in guiding social development, safeguarding cultural heritage, and fostering a strong sense of belonging among the Buket ethnic. However, the processes of modernisation and displacement, particularly following the construction of the Bakun Hydroelectric Dam, have disrupted the transmission of Buket philosophical values and the symbolic meanings embedded in cultural motifs. Relocation into structured villages such as Sungai Asap introduced new socio-economic conditions that often emphasise formal education, wage labour, and



Figure 3. The Buket ethnic attire.

Source: By authors (photo taken at Gallery Pehin Sri Adenan Satem, UPM Sarawak, and the Buket longhouse in Sg. Asap) 2024.

religious conversion, frequently at the expense of indigenous ways of knowing. Consequently, many Buket cultural motifs, once rich with meanings linked to ancestral spirits, forest guardians, and natural cycles, have been reduced to mere aesthetic decoration or have been forgotten entirely. This erosion of Buket philosophy and symbolism reflects a broader trend of cultural loss among minority indigenous groups in Borneo. It highlights the urgent need for culturally sensitive documentation, revitalisation, and design-based interventions that respect, preserve, and restore indigenous knowledge heritage, ensuring that both philosophical values and cultural motifs continue to inform the Buket community's social and cultural life.

3. Source of data and research method

A literature review combined with a qualitative ethnographic approach was employed to examine the philosophical and cultural meanings embedded within the Buket community. The literature review established the theoretical foundation by exploring indigenous knowledge practices, symbolic meanings, and perspectives on social development, with relevant studies sourced from Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science using filters to identify recent and peer-reviewed publications. Meanwhile, the ethnographic approach incorporated field observations, in-depth interviews, and case study analysis to investigate the community's cultural practices and traditional knowledge systems. Ethnography was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of lived experiences, social interactions, and cultural expressions within natural settings, making it particularly appropriate for studying indigenous communities where cultural meaning is deeply embedded in rituals, craftsmanship, oral traditions, and everyday life (Crouch et al., 2023; Spradley, 1979).

3.1. Data collection, participants selection and ethical protocols

Fieldwork observations were conducted in the Buket longhouse in Sg. Asap, Belaga District, to document the community's cultural practices, rituals, and the social and philosophical significance of Hudoq traditions, that providing a meaningful context for examining how traditional practices are preserved and adapted amid modern influences. Supplementary fieldwork at the Borneo Cultural Museum and the Sarawak Cultural Village in Kuching offered additional perspectives, as both institutions serve as key cultural repositories and interpretive centres that document and present the tangible and intangible heritage of Sarawak's indigenous communities, including the Buket people. Observing exhibitions, performances, and interpretive displays at these sites generated valuable comparative insights into how Buket culture is represented, curated, and communicated to broader audiences.

According to Table 1, in-depth interviews were conducted with five key representatives: the Tok Tuai (Head of the Longhouse), the Tok Tuai's assistant, a spiritual leader (Babayuh), a community member, and a craft practitioner. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse perspectives and expertise. As noted by Palinkas et al. (2015), Mulisa (2022), and Adeoye (2023), purposive sampling is a non-probability technique in which researchers intentionally select participants based on

Table 1. The list of respondents and their knowledge contributions.

Respondent	Knowledge contribution
Tok Tuai (Head of the Longhouse)	Provides leadership knowledge, decision-making insights, and historical understanding of community traditions and practices
Tok Tuai Assistant (Deputy Head of the longhouse ¹)	Supports leadership functions, offers administrative perspectives, and assists in managing community affairs
Spiritual Leader (Babayuh)	Shares religious and spiritual knowledge, guides rituals, ceremonies, and cultural values
Community Member (Young Generation)	Offers practical, everyday knowledge of social norms, customs, and lived experiences within the community
Craft Practitioner	Contributes technical and artistic knowledge of traditional crafts, techniques, and material use

Source: By authors.

characteristics, knowledge, or experience relevant to the study. All participants were nominated by the Head of the Longhouse and identified based on their knowledge, enabling them to provide insights into oral histories, philosophical narratives, and traditional cultural motifs. Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary method of data collection, defined as an interaction between an interviewer and an interviewee at a specific point in time (Flick, 2006; Magaldi & Berler, 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were supported with photographs, audio recordings, and detailed field notes, all collected with participants' consent. The researcher adopted a participant-observer role, engaging in community activities to build trust through extended presence, participation in communal events, and transparent communication of the research purpose. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the fieldwork to document personal biases, cultural interpretations, and emerging themes, ensuring analytical transparency. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and informed consent was secured through both verbal and written agreements in accordance with local customs and literacy levels. Participant names were anonymized, and photographs and audio materials were used only with explicit permission.

Yin (2009) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident. An explanatory case study design, as described by Yin (2013), aims to establish cause-and-effect relationships by examining how events occur, and which factors influence specific outcomes. In this study, the explanatory case study approach was applied to a traditional tangible artifact of the Buket (Ukit) community to explore the intersections of culture and belief. The artifact's materials, design motifs, and production techniques embody symbolic meanings rooted in the community's cosmology, including reverence for ancestors and the pursuit of harmony with nature. Its creation is typically a communal activity, facilitating intergenerational skill transfer and reinforcing social bonds. Additional examination of comparable artifacts was conducted at the Borneo Cultural Museum and the Sarawak Cultural Village in Kuching, Sarawak. By analysing both the physical characteristics of the artifact and the cultural practices associated with its use, the study illustrates how tangible objects function as carriers of intangible cultural knowledge and belief systems, linking material heritage to the community's collective identity and values.

3.2. Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). First, all data collected from the Buket community were familiarised through repeated reading. Second, meaningful features were identified and coded across the dataset. Third, codes were examined and organised into broader themes such as cultural perspectives, moral values, community roles, and spiritual connections to nature which were subsequently reviewed, refined, and clearly defined. These themes were interpreted and discussed by analysing Buket cultural expressions, including attire, weaving practices, ceremonial items, and storytelling, as symbolic carriers of social values and philosophical principles. The insights were further linked to intergenerational knowledge transfer, environmental stewardship, and cultural identity, highlighting the practical role of Buket indigenous philosophy in sustaining community order and guiding culturally sensitive development initiatives.

Case study research is among the most widely employed approaches in social sciences (Yin, 2013), offering significant advantages for both methodology and outcomes. It enables researchers to gain

in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena and to examine contextual factors in detail. Ensuring the validity of case study research requires careful selection of cases, triangulation of multiple data sources, and systematic collection and analysis of information so that findings accurately reflect the realities under investigation. Reliability can be further strengthened by maintaining clear documentation of research procedures, applying consistent data collection methods, and providing transparent explanations of how interpretations and conclusions are derived, allowing the study to be critically assessed, understood, and potentially replicated by other researchers.

Collectively, the use of rigorous thematic analysis within a case study demonstrates a robust approach to understanding how the Buket's philosophical and cultural systems sustain social structures while promoting development that is both culturally rooted and inclusive.

4. Results

The Buket ethnic group of Sarawak is a small and relatively lesser-known indigenous community within the broader Orang Ulu category. According to the Tok Tuai (Ngarit Luap), the current Buket population is fewer than 320 individuals, primarily due to the out-migration of younger members for employment and intermarriage with other ethnic groups. These trends mirror wider socioeconomic pressures faced by many indigenous communities, where limited local economic opportunities drive youth toward urban centres and weaken traditional family and community structures. Consequently, the transmission of language, rituals, and cultural knowledge becomes increasingly fragile. While intermarriage can promote social integration, it may also accelerate cultural dilution if preservation efforts are not sustained. Overall, these dynamics highlight the vulnerability of small indigenous groups like the Buket and reinforce the need to document and revitalize their cultural heritage.

Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the Buket have managed to preserve key aspects of their cultural heritage, including traditional rituals, ceremonial dances, storytelling, attire, handicrafts, and symbolic arts. These practices serve multiple social and philosophical functions: rituals and ceremonies reinforce social hierarchy and communal cohesion; storytelling and oral traditions transmit moral values, historical knowledge, and philosophical insights across generations; attire and handicrafts symbolise identity, status, and cultural aesthetics; while symbolic arts, such as carvings or motifs, encode spiritual beliefs and environmental wisdom (see [Figure 4](#)). For example, the Sape, a traditional lute-like musical instrument, is not only used in ceremonial performances but also embodies Buket philosophy, serving as a medium to convey ancestral stories, transmit moral values, and express spiritual connections to the natural environment. According to the Tok Tuai's assistant (Upang Bayong) and a local craft practitioner, these practices collectively illustrate how the Buket sustain their cultural heritage, uphold social order, and promote intergenerational knowledge transmission. Through rituals, craft-making, storytelling, and communal activities, elders and skilled practitioners guide younger members, ensuring that values, skills, and belief systems are effectively passed on. These practices also highlight the strategies small indigenous communities employ to navigate contemporary challenges such as economic change, cultural assimilation, and population decline while preserving cultural integrity and reinforcing a shared sense of identity.



Figure 4. Buket cultural symbols and artistic expressions.
Source: By authors (photo taken at the Buket longhouse in Sg. Asap) 2024.

4.1. Hudoq philosophy and cultural beliefs of Buket ethnic

The philosophy and cultural beliefs of the Buket are closely related to those of other Orang Ulu communities. According to a Spiritual Leader (Babayuh), while traditions and beliefs such as the Hudoq rituals typically associated with the Kayan and Kenyah, however, less prominent among the Buket, but they still participate in comparable ceremonial practices with their own unique variations. These include masked performances, ceremonial dances, and agricultural rites aligned with seasonal cycles. Such practices reflect the Buket's profound spiritual connection with the natural world and serve not only to ensure agricultural success but also to reinforce social cohesion and maintain cultural continuity within the community. More recent work highlights Hudoq as a living tradition that sustains cosmology, identity, and resilience amid modernisation and religious change. The word hudoq means 'mask'. The dance features performers wearing elaborately carved wooden masks and costumes made of banana leaves or bark, often representing mythical beings, ancestral spirits, or natural forces. It is traditionally performed after the rice planting season as a ritual of thanksgiving and protection.

The Hudoq philosophy and the spiritual beliefs of the Buket ethnic group in Sarawak are deeply interconnected, reflecting a perspective rooted in the interdependence of nature, agriculture, and all living beings. According to the Tok Tuai (Ngarit Luap), although the Buket do not perform the Hudoq ritual in the same manner as the Kayan, Kenyah, or other Orang Ulu groups, their belief system reflects similar spiritual and ecological principles. While their practices are culturally distinct, the Buket share key philosophical themes found in the broader Hudoq tradition, particularly in relation to spiritual ecology, ancestral reverence, and a profound connection to the natural world. Through rituals involving agricultural symbolism, mask-wearing, and ceremonial dance, the Buket express a perspective grounded in balance, reciprocity, and interconnection with the environment. These beliefs not only shape their ritual life but also reinforce social cohesion, cultural identity, and sustainable agricultural practices. In this context, Hudoq philosophy represents a wider cultural logic that continues to shape the Buket ethnic's relationship with the land and with one another. At the heart of this philosophy are three foundational principles of the Buket:

- a. **Interconnectedness with nature** - The Buket hold a deep spiritual belief in the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and unseen forces. This spiritual ecology is embedded in daily life and ritual practices. Like the Hudoq masks, which represent both benevolent and malevolent spirits, the Buket recognise nature's dual capacities to nurture and to harm requiring careful spiritual and ecological balance for communal well-being.
- b. **Nature as sacred** - To the Buket, the environment forests, rivers, and the land is sacred and inhabited by spiritual beings who influence human life. Respect and ritual observance are essential to maintaining harmony with these forces. Agricultural ceremonies are conducted to honour these spirits, ensuring fertility, protection, and the ongoing vitality of the ecosystem. This philosophy promotes a respectful and sustainable relationship with nature.
- c. **Balance and reciprocity** - Balance is a central tenet of Buket spirituality. Just as the Hudoq dance mediates between opposing forces, Buket rituals aim to sustain harmony between humans and the spiritual-natural world. Reciprocity underpins this balance: offerings and ceremonies express gratitude to the spirits in return for harvests and protection. This mutual exchange nurtures both spiritual well-being and ecological responsibility, supporting long-term community resilience.

4.2. The belief and ritual of Hudoq

The Hudoq motif embodies symbolic elements that illustrate a profound interconnection between humans, nature, and the spirit world. It reflects a perspective grounded in ancestral reverence, spiritual protection, and environmental sustainability. According to a Spiritual Leader (Babayuh), the Hudoq ritual is most prominently practiced regionally by various Dayak subgroups in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, particularly among the Buket closely related to the Meratus Dayak people of the Meratus Mountains in South Kalimantan, also known as Urang Bukit, Dayak Bukit, or Dayak Buguet and their cultural relatives, where it holds deep ritual and cultural significance. Traditionally performed during agricultural festivals,

the Hudoq is a ceremonial masked dance intended to secure bountiful harvests and protect communities from malevolent forces. Rooted in animistic beliefs, it affirms the intimate spiritual relationship between people, nature, and the supernatural realm.

Dancers wear elaborates wooden or bamboo masks, often representing animals or mythic beings, with stylized features such as wide eyes, sharp teeth, and ornate carvings designed to channel the power of natural and spiritual forces. These masks, along with the rituals surrounding them, symbolise the community's respect for the environment and the belief in maintaining harmony with unseen powers. Among the Buket, while the formal Hudoq ritual may not be enacted in identical form as practiced by the Kayan or Kenyah, the spiritual themes embedded in the Hudoq motif fertility, protection, and stewardship of nature continue to resonate strongly. Their animistic beliefs centre on the veneration of nature and spiritual beings, with the Hudoq functioning as a conduit between the human and spiritual realms. Ritual performances reinforce cultural identity, affirm the sacredness of the land, and strengthen communal cohesion. Typically associated with the rice harvest, the Hudoq ritual marks a sacred period of agricultural renewal and spiritual engagement. Key ritual elements include:

- a. The Hudoq dance - Dancers wear large, animalistic or mythical masks crafted from wood or bamboo, representing spirits of nature and the ancestors. These masks symbolize the connection between human beings and the spiritual forces that govern natural processes. Their elaborate designs are believed to invoke protection, fertility, and the balance of energies.
- b. Sacrifices and offerings – Offerings such as food, rice, or small animals are made to honour and appease spiritual entities. These acts of devotion reflect gratitude for past blessings and a plea for continued prosperity and protection.
- c. Chanting and prayers - The dance is accompanied by chanting and invocations directed at ancestral and nature spirits. Through these spoken rituals, the Buket community seeks to safeguard their health, bless the harvest, and repel harmful influences.
- d. Mask making as sacred craft - The creation of Hudoq masks is considered a sacred task. The artisan must possess spiritual knowledge and craftsmanship, as the mask is viewed not merely as an artistic object but as a vessel for spiritual presence. The process itself is often ritualized to ensure the mask carries the intended power.

The Hudoq ritual encapsulates the Buket philosophy of balance between humans, nature, and the spirit world. It is an act of spiritual renewal that ensures harmony within the ecosystem and continuity within the community. More than a performance, the Hudoq is a spiritual practice that reaffirms the Buket people's collective identity and resilience. Two broader social functions further highlight the significance of the ritual; a) Collective Unity - The ritual reinforces communal bonds and shared responsibility. By engaging in the Hudoq ceremony, the Buket people affirm their interconnectedness not only with the spiritual realm but also with one another strengthening social solidarity, and b) Ritual of Renewal - The Hudoq serves as a rite of seasonal and spiritual renewal. It offers a sacred moment to reflect on the past, honour ancestral spirits, and look forward to continued harmony, abundance, and cultural vitality.

4.3. The development of Hudoq cultural motif

The Hudoq cultural motif encompasses a variety of forms, such as Hudoq Sengiro, Hudoq Asok/Asu, Hudoq Pusung Tubak, and Hudoq Lino/Kelunan (Tugang et al., 2021). Each of these distinct motifs represents unique characters and carries symbolic meanings deeply embedded in the cultural beliefs and practices of the community. For instance, the Hudoq Sengiro often embodies protective spirits that safeguard crops and community well-being, while the Hudoq Asok/Asu is associated with animalistic forces that link humans with the natural environment. The Hudoq Pusung Tubak symbolises fertility and the cyclical renewal of life, reflecting the community's dependence on agriculture. Meanwhile, the Hudoq Lino/Kelunan represents human ancestors, serving as a bridge between the living and the spiritual realm. Together, these motifs articulate a complex cosmology in which humans, spirits, animals, and nature are interwoven, thereby reinforcing communal identity, agricultural sustainability, and the continuity of tradition. According to Sahari et al. (2016), Hudoq Lino/Kelunan, which is a human figure (A complete

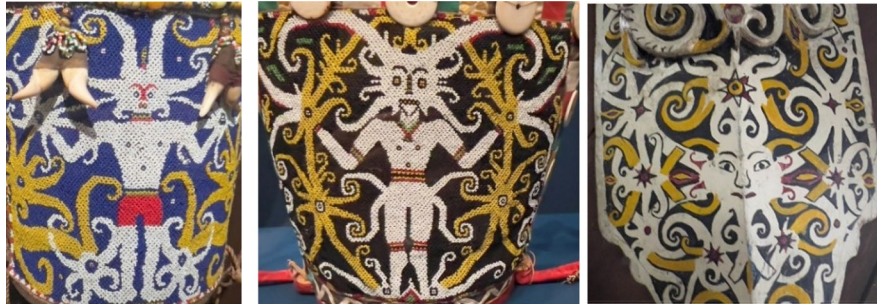


Figure 5. The Hudoq Lino/Keluan image.

Source: By author (photo taken at Borneo Culture Museum, Kuching) 2024.

human figure, that is, one with a head, legs, and arms) can only be used by the people with high social status in the community who are also known as *paren* (*bangsawan*) (see [Figure 5](#)).

The evolution of the Hudoq cultural motif reflects the Buket ethnic group's dynamic interaction with their natural surroundings, cosmological views, and shifting cultural identity (see [Figure 6](#)). According to the Tok Tuai, a Spiritual Leader (*Babayuh*), a community member, and a craft practitioner, these cultural motifs go far beyond mere decoration or performance art, embodying intricate layers of spiritual meaning, environmental awareness, and communal cohesion. Rooted in ancestral knowledge and preserved through oral traditions, Hudoq motifs originally emerged in the context of ritual performances particularly the Hudoq dance which serves as a symbolic medium for communication between humans and the spiritual-natural realm. This illustrates how the Buket integrate ecological consciousness and social values into their artistic expressions, highlighting the role of cultural motifs as both educational tools and instruments of social cohesion. Moreover, the motifs demonstrate the ways in which indigenous communities transmit complex knowledge systems across generations, ensuring that spiritual beliefs, environmental ethics, and communal identity remain interconnected and resilient in the face of modern pressures.

5. Discussion

The philosophy and cultural motifs of the Buket embody principles that promote community cohesion, ecological balance, and the transmission of intergenerational knowledge all of which are core elements of sustainable development. As highlighted by the Tok Tuai (*Ngarit Luap*), a community member, and a craft practitioner, these values are not merely abstract ideals but are actively embodied in daily life through rituals, symbolic arts, and collective practices that emphasise reciprocity, harmony with nature, and the preservation of ancestral wisdom. Through these practices, the Buket cultivate a sense of communal responsibility and ecological awareness, demonstrating how cultural traditions can guide sustainable living. In this way, Buket heritage provides a culturally grounded foundation for addressing pressing global challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and social fragmentation, illustrating the relevance of indigenous knowledge in contemporary environmental and social discourse. Importantly, these embedded values challenge dominant development paradigms that often marginalise indigenous voices or treat culture as a secondary concern rather than a central pillar of progress. By placing ecological stewardship, communal solidarity, and intergenerational responsibility at the heart of their philosophy, the Buket perspective resonates strongly with international agendas such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly Goal 11 (sustainable communities), Goal 13 (climate action), and Goal 15 (life on land). Similarly, UNESCO has stressed that cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge systems are not peripheral, but fundamental to achieving sustainability in a context-sensitive and socially inclusive way.

In this context, the Buket case expressions how small indigenous communities can offer powerful alternatives to mainstream models of growth and modernisation. Their practices demonstrate the potential for development pathways that balance material well-being with cultural continuity, social justice, and environmental care. Recognising and integrating such perspectives into broader policy and academic



Figure 6. The Hudoq represents unique characters and carries symbolic meanings.
 Source: by authors (photo taken at Buket ethnic longhouse in Sungai Asap) 2024.

discourse is therefore essential, as it not only validates the knowledge of marginalised communities but also enriches global strategies for building a more equitable and sustainable future. Although detailed documentation of the Hudoq cultural traditions and ritual among the Buket is limited, similar spiritual and agricultural practices likely continue to persist, rooted in a deep connection to nature, reverence for ancestors, and a cyclical pursuit of harmony and prosperity. Building on this foundation, the study proposes a culturally grounded integration approach with three core components: (a) Documentation and Interpretation – systematically recording and analysing Buket philosophical and symbolic traditions to safeguard their intangible heritage; (b) Community-Based Participation – engaging local stakeholders in co-developing initiatives that reflect their values and lived experiences; and (c) Application in Development Practice – translating indigenous principles such as reciprocity, balance, and interdependence into practical strategies for education, environmental stewardship, and cultural tourism. This approach not only ensures the relevance and vitality of Buket heritage in contemporary contexts but also offers a replicable model for other indigenous communities navigating the pressures of globalisation.

6. Conclusion

This study positions Buket traditions as central to reimagining development through a culturally grounded lens. The Buket philosophy offers a holistic foundation for understanding the interdependence between human society, the natural world, and the spiritual realm. This indigenous philosophy provides ethical and moral guidance that shapes communal norms, behaviours, and governance structures. At the same time,

the visual and performative motifs embedded in Buket rituals, arts, and oral traditions serve as cultural expressions of these philosophical principles. They embody collective memory, moral values, and environmental knowledge, reinforcing social identity and community cohesion. By analysing these cultural motifs, the study reveals their role in strengthening social bonds, empowering marginalised voices, and promoting cultural continuity each of which is vital for fostering inclusive and sustainable development. Ultimately, this highlights the importance of recognising and integrating indigenous perspectives into broader development discourses. It promotes an approach to progress that not only addresses material needs but also respects cultural heritage, advances social justice, and ensures environmental stewardship. In doing so, it contributes to more equitable, context-sensitive, and culturally inclusive pathways to social development.

Note

1. list of respondents and their.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Mohamad Maulana Magiman**: Data curation, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Hassan Alli**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft; **Fauziah Abu Bakar**: Conceptualization, Software, Validation, Visualization.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval

This study received ethical approval, participation, and publication clearance (Ref. No.: UPM/Tok Nan (Grant02/2024-2026) Buket) and was formally endorsed by Tok Tuai, Head of the Buket (Ukit) ethnic community in Sungai Asap, Belaga, Sarawak. All participants, including cultural experts, artisans, and community representatives, were fully informed of the study's objectives, and written informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all personal data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality and respect cultural sensitivities.

About the authors

Mohamad Maulana Magiman, PhD He serves as an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Sciences and Management at UPM Sarawak and is a trained anthropologist. He holds the distinction of being the inaugural Pehin Sri Adenan Satem Research Chair at UPM Bintulu. His current research focuses on Sarawak's minority ethnic communities, underscoring the vital role their cultural traditions, artistic heritage, and practices play in shaping their identities. Without systematic documentation, the rich cultural diversity of Sarawak's 34 ethnic groups risks disappearing. With support from the Research Chair Grant, he and his team have collected valuable data on various communities, including the Sekapan, Kejaman, Lahanan, Punan Ba, Melanau Likaw, Tanjong, Kedayan, Lun Bawang, Jatti Miriek, Berawan, Ukit, Kelabit, and Salakau. These cultural narratives offer essential lessons in communal harmony key to realizing Sarawak's vision of becoming a developed state by 2030.

Hassan Alli, PhD Associate Professor at the Department of Industrial Design, Universiti Putra Malaysia, holds degrees in Industrial Design (UiTM, Malaysia), Automotive Design (Coventry University, United Kingdom, and a PhD in Engineering Design (University of Malaya, Malaysia). A prolific academic, he has authored six industrial design books, two on agricultural education, and produced over 100 scholarly works, including journal articles, conference papers, and registered intellectual properties. His research centres on New Product Development, design strategy, sustainable design, innovation management, and the integration of cultural heritage into products advancing design's role in innovation, identity, and market relevance.

Fauziah Abu Bakar, PhD She is based at the Faculty of Agricultural and Forestry Science, Universiti Putra Malaysia Sarawak. Her work plays a vital role in advancing biotechnology, particularly in the development of plant-based medicines for addressing health issues. By investigating the bioactive compounds found in locally thriving plant species, she aims to discover natural alternatives to conventional treatments. Her publications highlight both the societal relevance of her research and her deep commitment to public education. She actively promotes awareness of the health benefits and applications of medicinal plants, while also supporting knowledge-sharing among researchers. Her work not only underscores biotechnology's potential to enhance long-term health and well-being but also emphasizes the importance of collaboration between scientists and local communities.

ORCID

Mohamad Maulana Magiman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6501-6922>

Hassan Alli  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1727-4561>

Fauziah Abu Bakar  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6903-6579>

Data availability statement

All the data and materials are available.

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