

# Cultural Threads: Iban Weaving and its Impact on Culturally Responsive Art Education Practices

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## ABSTRACT

Intercultural awareness remains markedly under-represented in Malaysia's secondary-school syllabuses, despite the country's celebrated status as a cultural crossroads. While the official Art Education curriculum aims to nurture creativity and visual literacy, it often stops short of immersing students in the living traditions of Malaysia's many ethnic groups. Consequently, learners' exposure to the nation's diverse artistic heritage can be cursory, and the subtler stories embedded in Indigenous art forms risk slipping from collective memory. Among the most overlooked cultural treasures is Iban ikat weaving, a complex resist-dye technique practiced for centuries in Sarawak and long revered for its cosmological motifs, ritual functions, and communal identity-building. This study, therefore, set out to test the module's usability and pedagogical value. The module's architecture follows principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, placing the learner in a dialogic role, foregrounding Indigenous voices, and linking traditional practices to contemporary design thinking. The module proved easy to navigate and engaging, and it substantially deepened learners' grasp of both the weaving technique and the cultural significance behind it. Participants reported a fuller, more nuanced appreciation of Iban culture, underscoring the module's potential as a culturally responsive tool that can help art educators foster greater cultural sensitivity and preservation of Malaysia's indigenous heritage among the next generation. The findings underscore the transformative potential of culturally attuned digital resources in art education. By translating Iban ikat weaving into an interactive, learner-centred experience, the module bridges geographic and cultural distances, empowering teachers to teach beyond the textbook and students to view heritage as a living, evolving dialogue. Scaling such initiatives nationwide could work toward a more inclusive curriculum—one that celebrates Malaysia's Indigenous knowledge systems and equips the next generation with the intercultural competence needed in an increasingly pluralistic society.

**Keywords:** Iban Weaving, Culturally Responsive, Art Education Practices

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multicultural nation, home to a rich tapestry of ethnic groups including Malays, Chinese, and Indians, as well as minority communities such as the Iban, Kadazan, and Bidayuh in Sabah and Sarawak (Hashim & Dawi, 2022). Despite this cultural diversity, Malaysia's secondary education system offers limited exposure to multicultural appreciation within its subject syllabi, particularly in art education. Although art is one of the most engaging and creative mediums through which students can explore cultural diversity, the representation of Bumiputera and other minority cultures remains minimal or absent in many textbooks.

Subjects like History and Civics do introduce aspects of Malaysia's cultural landscape; however, these are often perceived as too theoretical, especially by students who rely on visual and kinaesthetic learning styles. For such

learners, art education serves as a more accessible and interactive platform to understand and appreciate the country's multicultural identity (Hussin, 2020; Smilan, 2023).

According to Siti Zuraida Maaruf, Noor Farhani Othman, Muhamad Azhar Abdullah, and Voviana Zulkifli (2017), embracing multiculturalism through arts education can be further enhanced by incorporating culturally diverse content into the curriculum. With the integration of interactive teaching strategies, creative modules, and culturally relevant materials, educators can foster a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment that empowers students to appreciate Malaysia's rich cultural heritage.

## Problem Statement

Today, appreciation for Malaysia's minority cultures, particularly those of the Bumiputera communities such as the Iban, remains limited. These rich and unique cultures are often overlooked, especially among the younger generation in Peninsular Malaysia, where the Iban population is relatively small compared to Sabah and Sarawak. While in East Malaysia, the Iban culture is more recognized due to its demographic presence, it is crucial that all Malaysian youths, regardless of their geographical location, are allowed to learn about and appreciate the nation's cultural diversity. The Iban, who make up only about 2.6% of Malaysia's population (Nagaraj et al., 2015), are at risk of cultural erasure amid the forces of globalization. Without active efforts to preserve and promote their traditions, the richness of Iban heritage, including their beliefs, practices, and artistic expressions, may eventually fade. Therefore, educators play a vital role in adopting new, inclusive approaches to ensure that minority cultures such as the Iban continue to thrive through education. One such approach is the integration of culturally responsive content in art education. Art offers an accessible and engaging platform for students to explore cultural identities through creative expression. However, previous studies have indicated a lack of development in culturally based art education within the Malaysian context. Much of the research in this area has been conducted in Western countries, particularly the United States, while the Malaysian setting, despite its cultural richness, has been largely underexplored (Tarigan et al., 2021). Additionally, interactive teaching modules in Malaysia have largely focused on online content, with limited emphasis on hands-on, physical, and visually immersive learning experiences.

Notably, the Iban Ikat Weaving tradition, a deeply symbolic and sacred form of textile art, has not yet been included in Malaysia's secondary school art syllabus. Even traditional Malay weaving has not been systematically incorporated. Introducing the Iban Ikat Weaving tradition in art education holds significant potential as a culturally responsive teaching agent. The practice itself is closely linked to Iban beliefs, rituals, and social identity. Its techniques involve the use of home-grown cotton, wooden looms, and intricate motifs that embody symmetrical balance, stylized animal forms, and symbolic meanings, all of which reflect the Iban worldview and cultural heritage (N. Tugang and G. Kiyai, 2022). By engaging with Iban Ikat Weaving, students are not only exposed to the technical and aesthetic elements of textile art but are also immersed in a cultural experience that differs from the dominant narratives centered on Malay, Chinese, and Indian traditions. This provides a more holistic and inclusive understanding of Malaysia's multicultural identity.

To support this educational goal, an "Iban Ikat Weaving Interactive Module" will be developed for secondary school students. This module will include a complete kit containing cotton threads, a wooden weaving loom, instructional videos, infographics, and sample motif designs based on authentic Iban patterns. Educators will be guided to ensure that the weaving techniques and motifs remain culturally accurate and respectful. Through this hands-on and visually engaging approach, students will gain a deeper appreciation of the Iban culture while enhancing their creative skills. Ultimately, the integration of Iban Ikat Weaving into the art curriculum can serve as a powerful medium for fostering cultural understanding and appreciation among Malaysian youths. It not only enriches the learning experience but also plays a pivotal role in preserving and celebrating Malaysia's diverse cultural tapestry.

## Research Objective

The objective of this study includes:

1. To implement and evaluate the usability of the interactive module of Iban Ikat Weaving.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study aims to assess students' knowledge of Iban Ikat Weaving using a mixed-methods approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative data collection (Fàbregues et al., 2023). For the quantitative component, a survey will be administered to 61 secondary school students to gather data on their understanding and awareness of Iban Ikat Weaving. For the qualitative component, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with 2 teachers to gain deeper insights into their perspectives and teaching experiences related to cultural art education. Purposive sampling, which is the non-probability sampling technique, has been used for this research in selecting the respondents. Purposive sampling is when a researcher chooses the participants on their own. Usually, it is easy to conduct exploratory analysis in doing field research. Purposive sampling is delivered with a selected plan (Ilker Etikan, Sulaiman Abubakar Musa, Rukayya Sunusi Alkassim, 2016).

Table 1: Matrix of sampling, instruments, and data analysis.

(n)	Sampling Technique	Instruments	Data Analysis
2 Teachers	Purposive Sampling	Semi-structured interview	Thematic Analysis

### Instrumentation

This study uses a qualitative method. Interviews were conducted with two teachers. A set of nine open-ended questions focused on their views regarding the benefits of introducing the Iban Ikat Weaving Module in schools. The questions may be adjusted depending on the flow of the interview (Bulatovic, J., 2024).

### Data Collection

Data was collected online through Google Forms. Students were informed about the purpose of the research and assured that their responses would be used solely for academic purposes. They were required to complete the questionnaire provided. Teacher interviews were conducted separately to support the qualitative aspect of the study.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis used thematic analysis to determine the results of this study.

### Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis will be used to analyse qualitative data from the teacher interviews towards the research objective 3 which is to evaluate the usability of the interactive module of Iban Ikat Weaving based on teachers' Experience on using it. This method helps identify and interpret recurring themes or ideas in the responses, providing deeper insights into the cultural and educational value of the Iban Ikat Weaving Module (Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S., 2023).

## FINDINGS

### Interview Analysis on Visual Art Teachers

This section provides an explanation and description of the results obtained from the complete process of conducting interview sessions with the teachers. The second method of collecting data entails conducting interviews and using qualitative techniques to gather information from teachers who use the Iban Ikat Interactive Module in their teaching and learning. The purpose of analysing the interview for this study is to determine the teachers' perspectives. In addition, researchers also want to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses experienced by teachers when using the Iban Ikat Interactive Module, with the goal of improving the product. Two teachers are participating in the interview, two of whom are from the Art subject teachers.

The results in this section serve as the qualitative basis. Researchers have examined the results obtained from interviews conducted with a teacher selected via purposive sampling. The questions for a partially organised interview are:

Based on your knowledge, did you know about Iban Ikat, an indigenous community in Malaysia known for its unique culture and art forms, such as Weaving?

Have you ever heard of Iban Ikat Weaving before, and if yes, what do you know about it?

Have you ever practised or created any Iban Ikat Weaving crafts or art pieces, and if yes, what was your experience like?

Do you think it is important to preserve and promote traditional Malaysian art forms such as Weaving, and why or why not?

In your opinion, do you think that learning how to create Weaving can help promote cultural awareness and understanding in your community, and if so, how?

In your opinion, do you think learning about Iban Ikat Weaving would be valuable for cultural education in school, and how could it contribute to a broader understanding of Malaysia's diverse heritage?

Do you think there is value in teaching Iban Ikat Weaving in schools, and if so, what benefits do you think it can offer to students?

Do you think Iban Ikat Weaving can enhance your creativity and artistic expression, and if yes, how?

How interested would you be in learning more about Iban Ikat Weaving in school, and why or why not?

### **Teachers' feedback on the knowledge about Iban Ikat Weaving, which is an indigenous community in Malaysia.**

"Iban ikat" refers to the traditional weaving technique and textiles produced by the Iban people, an indigenous community in Malaysia, particularly in Sarawak on the island of Borneo. The results of the interviews showed that 1 of the respondents is very familiar with Iban ikat, and another respondent did not know about Iban ikat. In the context of the Iban people, Ikat weaving is traditionally done to create various textiles, including skirts (known as "pua kumbu") and ceremonial blankets. These textiles hold cultural significance and are often used in rituals, ceremonies, and as symbolic gifts. The results of the interviews showed that 2 respondents are very familiar with Iban ikat. Pua Kumbu: This is a ceremonial cloth often created for special occasions and rituals. Pua kumbu textiles are adorned with symbolic motifs that convey cultural and spiritual meanings. Ceremonial Blankets: Iban weavers also craft ceremonial blankets with Ikat designs. These blankets are used in various cultural events and ceremonies.

Respondent 1 states that:

"...Yes, I'm very familiar with the Iban people and their traditional art forms, including weaving. The Iban are one of the indigenous groups in Malaysia, primarily residing in the state of Sarawak on the island of Borneo. Weaving is a significant aspect of their cultural heritage, and they are known for producing intricate and colourful textiles, often using a technique called "pua kumbu" ..... Yes, I have heard about Ibat Ikat Weaving. As I have visited Sarawak, where I have purchased 'Pua Kumbu' in Satok Market, Kuching..... I haven't yet created or practiced any Iban Ikat Weaving..."

R1: T: 3.10 PM (10/1/2024)

Respondent 2 states that:

"...In my opinion, I have never heard of Iban ikat. All I know is the usual weaving that is often famous on the east coast of Malaysia, namely in Kelantan and Terengganu. I may lack exposure to Iban ikat.... ... I am aware of the Iban Culture. But I have never encountered Iban Ikat weaving before...I have not yet had the opportunity to create or practice Iban Ikat Weaving. But weaving the traditional Malay Songket, I experienced last year in Terengganu"

R2: T: 3.10 PM (15/1/2024)

Teachers' feedback importance of preserving and promoting traditional Malaysian art forms, such as weaving, to cultivate a deeper appreciation and broader understanding of Malaysia's rich and diverse cultural heritage through the teaching and learning of Visual Arts Education (VAE) provided in the Tenunan Ikan Iban Weaving Teaching Module.

Preserving and promoting traditional Malaysian art forms, including weaving, is important for cultural, social, economic, and historical reasons. This module contributes to the overall richness and diversity of the nation's cultural landscape. Learning and practicing traditional weaving techniques help preserve and transmit cultural heritage from one generation to the next. It ensures that the skills, designs, and cultural meanings embedded in the craft are not lost over time. Learning about Iban Ikat Weaving allows students to appreciate the rich cultural heritage of the Iban people. It provides insights into their traditions, customs, and the significance of weaving in their daily lives. The interview results showed that respondents agreed that it is important to preserve and promote traditional Malaysian art forms such as weaving. The respondents also agreed that the Iban Weaving Teaching Module can become a good scaffolding in teaching cultural elements through the teaching and learning of Visual Arts Education (VAE) activities.

Respondent 1 states that:

"... Yes, it is very important to promote Malaysian traditional weaving because it is our cultural heritage. Traditional art forms are integral to a nation's cultural heritage. They reflect the history, beliefs, and values of a community. Preserving these art forms helps maintain a connection with the past and contributes to a sense of identity and continuity. Well, in my opinion, I do agree that learning how to create weaving can indeed help promote cultural awareness and understanding in a community in several ways. Students having exposure to weaving activities can serve as a powerful tool for promoting cultural awareness as they experience themselves creating and producing the weaving product. They will appreciate more the cultural heritage that comes with the weaving tradition and histories ..."

"...In my opinion, many of our students are only aware of and acknowledge the culture that surrounds them. Whether it comes from their family origin or their friends. Cultures from Sabah and Sarawak are some of those that are less acknowledged at schools in Selangor. Thus, I think that giving exposure regarding the Iban Ikat Weaving can indirectly allow the appreciation towards their culture..."

R1: T: 3.25 PM (10/1/2024)

Respondent 2 states that:

"...Of course, very important because of our cultural diversity. Malaysia is a diverse country with various ethnic groups, each with its unique traditions. Preserving traditional art forms contributes to the rich tapestry of Malaysia's cultural diversity. It allows for the celebration and appreciation of the unique contributions of different communities... Yes, I do believe that by acquiring the skill of weaving to school students can promote the appreciation of other cultures. This can increase the understanding of other cultures in the community. Even I myself is not aware of the existence of Iban Ikat before this, but after my encounter with it, I have realized the diversity of art weaving. Which is not only familiar among the Malays but also among other ethnic groups in



Malaysia..... Yes, I think that learning about the process of making, design, and usage of Iban Ikat can increase the understanding of the Iban culture. This will allow students to fully capture Malaysia's diverse heritage that comes from a variety of ethnic and racial groups..."

R2: T: 3.25 PM (15/1/2024)

The value and benefits of the Tenunan Ikan Iban Weaving Teaching Module can enhance students' creativity and artistic expression in teaching and learning of Visual Arts Education (VAE) activities.

Learning about Iban Ikat Weaving with the Tenunan Ikan Iban Weaving Teaching Module provides students with a deeper understanding of the cultural traditions, symbolism, and artistic expressions of the Iban people. It fosters appreciation for cultural diversity and heritage. Tenunan Ikan Iban Weaving Teaching Module often involves intricate and unique patterns, motifs, and colour combinations. Exploring these design elements encourages creativity as individuals experiment with different arrangements and interpretations. Learning about Iban Ikat Weaving provides students with a deeper understanding of the cultural traditions, symbolism, and artistic expressions of the Iban people. It fosters appreciation for cultural diversity and heritage. Tenunan Ikan Iban Weaving Teaching Module often involves intricate and unique patterns, motifs, and colour combinations. Exploring these design elements encourages creativity as individuals experiment with different arrangements and interpretations. Learning about Iban Ikat Weaving using Tenunan Ikan Iban Weaving Teaching Module provides students with insights into the cultural traditions, history, and craftsmanship of the Iban people, fostering cross-cultural understanding.

Respondent 1 states that:

"...In my opinion, many of our students are only aware of and acknowledge the culture that surrounds them. Whether it comes from their family origin or their friends. Cultures from Sabah and Sarawak are some of those that are less acknowledged at schools in Selangor. Thus, I think that giving exposure regarding the Iban Ikat Weaving can indirectly allow the appreciation towards their culture... In my opinion, teaching Iban Ikat Weaving in schools can increase the hands-on skills of the students. Since weaving itself is a very difficult product to produce. As it requires one to have precision, patience, and creativity. Thus, promoting this activity in school, especially for the upper form, can be very beneficial for the students' cognitive skills... Yes, I agree that Iban Ikat weaving can enhance my creativity and artistic expression. By deciding the selection of colour placement, motif, and techniques, Iban Ikat Weaving can brush up my creative skills.....Of course, I would be very interested to learn more about Iban Ikat Weaving. As I consider myself to have a lack of knowledge and exposure to this kind of weaving..."

R1: T: 3.35 PM (10/1/2024)

Respondent 2 states that:

"...Yes, I think that learning about the process of making, design, and usage of Iban Ikat can increase the understanding of the Iban culture. This will allow students to fully capture Malaysia's diverse heritage that comes from a variety of ethnic and race.... From my observation, I can tell that Iban Ikat Weaving can certainly become a medium for students to acknowledge the diversity of weaving art. As this can allow teachers and students to have exposure of the different cultures that are practiced in Malaysia... Yes, I do agree that Iban Ikat weaving could enhance my creativity and artistic expression. But in my opinion, the selection of colours, motifs, and elements should be freely decided by students. As creativity must not be bound to any regulations to truly ensure the artistic expression of the product is conveyed... Yes, if I have the opportunity, I will want to learn more about Iban Ikat Weaving. The design, fabric, and colours are very different from the usual weaving fabrics that come from the Malay culture. I find this to be very interesting and unique..."

R2: T: 3.35 PM (15/1/2024)



Figures 1 & 2: The Complete Tenunan Ikat Iban Module and Teaching Kits

## CONCLUSION

The respondents consistently expressed positive views and agreement regarding the Iban Ikat Interactive Module, indicating its usefulness in meeting students' expectations and preferences. Notably, the most highly valued aspect was the module's ability to enhance understanding of Iban ethnic culture, as supported by Arianti, Degeng, and Sitompul (2022). Teachers also found the module easy to use and on par with other educational tools, underscoring its practicality and accessibility. Overall, the module was recognized for its potential to enrich multicultural education, raise awareness of traditional arts, and encourage creative thinking. However, the study's scope is limited to a specific region and ethnic group within Peninsular Malaysia presents a constraint on the generalizability of the findings. To address this limitation, future research should involve a broader sample encompassing various regions and ethnicities across Malaysia. Further studies may also explore the module's impact from the perspectives of students with diverse cultural backgrounds to assess its effectiveness and inclusivity on a national scale. In conclusion, while the study offers meaningful insights into the acceptance and benefits of the Iban Ikat Weaving Interactive Module among secondary school students in Selangor, expanded research is essential for a more comprehensive evaluation of its educational value across Malaysia.

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