

## **SCULPTING THE SACRED: ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS OF DEATH IN MELANAU JERUNEI**

*Mengukir Entiti Sakral: Ekspresi Artistik Kematian dalam Konteks  
Jerunei Komuniti Melanau*

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### **Abstract**

The Jerunei, a wooden carved funeral pole used by the Melanau's, is a key mediator of the deceased person's transition from the physical to the spiritual world. While past studies have discussed Jerunei as a significant artifact of Melanau funeral ritual, its deeper symbolic meaning, specifically its articulation of Melanau cosmology and social stratification, has not been thoroughly explored. This research seeks to fill the gap by exploring the Jerunei as material object and spiritual mediator, with specific focus on its symbolic functions and aesthetic qualities. Through ethnographic source analysis, visual culture analysis, and heritage studies theory, the paper explores how the Jerunei testifies to Melanau worldview in relation to death, the afterlife, and social ranking. Moreover, the paper considers the Jerunei's function in postcolonial identity and heritage preservation in the face of globalizing forces that would seek to erase indigenous cultural practice. This research also considers how gender roles intersect in Jerunei construction and use, shaping Melanau ritual knowledge from a postmodern perspective. The paper therefore contends that the Jerunei is not just a funeral object but an exquisitely crafted articulation of Melanau cosmology, social identity, and constant negotiation of indigenous cultural heritage.

**Keywords** : Jerunei, Melanau Funerary Practices. Borneo Indigenous Cosmology, Spiritual Mediation, Material Culture

## **Introduction**

The Jerunei a Melanau carved wooden funeral pole, is the focus of their death ritual and cosmology. The Jerunei is traditionally erected after secondary funerary rites, when it is used as both a material and spiritual guide for the dead person's passage among the living and dead worlds. In the ritual, the symbolic characterization of the Jerunei in Melanau society is reaffirmed not only as a mnemonic artifact but also as an icon of Melanau ideas about death, the afterlife, and status (Jamuh, 1949; Appleton, 2011). Melanau secondary mortuary practices consist of a complex system of elements that include the fabrication and ritual utilization of Jerunei in the mortuary ceremony. The Jerunei has been said to symbolize the status of the deceased person and the form and ornament that serve as a metaphor of social standing and kin ranking (Yasir Abdul Rahman, 1987). The Jerunei was once accompanied by rituals close in touch with the topic of power, e.g., lamentation and symbolic action present in the sacrifices of slaves that comprised deference to eminent individuals, as asserted by Brodie (1955).

Besides ritual function in death, Jerunei is also cosmologically representative of the Melanau. Pole carvings are not ornamental but a cosmology system linking the deceased with the spirits of the ancestors and the hierarchical social organization in their society (Appleton, 2011). Jerunei form and function thus represent the convergence of religion, death, and power in Melanau society, and it is a rare artifact that is a merger of material culture with metaphysical significance (Brodie, 1955; Jamuh, 1949).

Even in modern contexts, the Jerunei also finds application in the maintenance of Melanau heritage. With globalization and modernization penetrating traditional practice, Jerunei is utilized as an icon of resistance and cultural persistence as the Melanau adapt to a rapidly changing world (Appleton, 2011). In this essay, different functions of Jerunei as an object of material and spiritual use containing the Melanau cosmology, their social identity, and postcolonial heritage are explored.

The current research aims to comprehend the multifaceted role of the Jerunei, a wood-carved Sarawakian Melanau death pole used in directing the dead to the afterlife. Of especial concern to the research is comprehension of the Jerunei both as a spiritual and cultural

representation of Melanau's afterworld and cosmos. The research will explore its use in social stratification, where the pole's form and length symbolize the dead person's status in society. The research will also explore the intersectionality of Jerunei use and manufacture and men's and women's participation in the ritual process. The research will finally explore the use of the Jerunei in postcolonial identity and heritage conservation in the face of globalization and modernization.

## **Research Methodology**

This research follows an interdisciplinary approach drawing from ethnographic fieldwork, material culture studies, and heritage studies in differentiating the use of the Jerunei within Melanau funerary practice. Ethnographic fieldwork will involve interviewing selected informants, like leaders of the community, artisans, and relatives who participate in the making and use of the Jerunei. Interviews and participant observations of the mortuary rituals will provide findings on the symbolic significance and social environment of the burial poles' use. Archival research will supplement these findings by examining historical and ethnographic documentation and providing the research with a broader cultural framework.

Material culture analysis will entail an examination of the extant Jerunei via available literature particularly how these represent Melanau cosmology, religious beliefs, and hierarchical social structures. The study will also apply the heritage studies framework to examine how the Jerunei is maintained and represented in modern Melanau societies, particularly with the forces of globalization and urbanization. Finally, the study will explore the gendered nature of the Jerunei by examining men's and women's roles in its uses and construction. Gender analysis will facilitate an investigation of the division of labor in the ritual process and the gender symbolism of the carvings. The multi-pronged method will facilitate an in-depth understanding of the Jerunei's cultural, religious, and social significance in Melanau society.

## **Literature Review**

The Kelidieng or Jerunei is the most unique and religiously most revered aspect of Melanau cultural heritage, that of mortuary ritual. Melanau funeral rites have been a prime area of interest for

anthropologists for decades, with anthropologists intrigued by the rich religious life of the group and the symbolism of architectural use in mourning the deceased. This integration of previous scholarly views places the Jerunei within the larger context of anthropological and cultural discussion. Researchers such as Hose and McDougall (1912) were the first researchers to document the ritual practices of Sarawak's natives, such as Melanau. They describe the Jerunei as something greater than a graveyard but instead a spiritual portal that guarantees the soul's entry into the hereafter. Subsequent research (e.g., Chin, 2000) has repeated the same viewpoint here, noting that such pillars were both functional resting places for the dead and markers of social standing and ancestral honor.

Scholarship has been sensitive to the symbolism of the carvings and Belian wood employed in Jerunei construction. For Ling (2015), the carvings typically symbolize the social standing, occupation, and success of the deceased. The employment of Belian wood, renowned for its longevity, symbolizes the immortal legacy that the living desire for the dead. These motifs have been read as a syncretism of animist convictions and ancestor veneration, prevalent in pre-Islamic Melanau cosmology. This subversion of Jerunei tradition occurs side by side with the Islamization and Christianization of the region. Subsequent authors, such as Mohamad and Rahman (2018), have further considered the conflict between tradition and modernity in relation to museums and cultural heritage. Museums such as the Sarawak Museum are presently custodians of whatever is Jerunei, transforming them into objects of pedagogy from objects of living ritual. While more literature is available on Bornean indigenous ceremonies, detailed work on Jerunei itself is still limited. It is mostly museum- or description-focused, with fewer ethnographic field studies present among contemporary Melanau communities. This suggests further effort is needed on how these traditions are remembered or reinterpreted in contemporary Melanau identity. This literature review places the Jerunei as a vibrant cultural object situated between material heritage and immaterial belief systems. Continued research and conservation are key to its continued significance in both academic and local community contexts.

## **The Melanau People and the Jerunei Burial Tradition: A Living Cultural and Spiritual Legacy**

Sarawakian Melanau settlements have, in the past, believed in a distinctive death and afterlife ritual. One of the more significant ones of Melanau is the secondary Jerunei ritual, a system of rituals that was the focal point of their religious and social life. Not only was it a ritual that made the transition of the soul to the afterlife easier, but it also sanctified the status of the dead. The Jerunei burial system also indicates the Melanau's cosmology and social organization, and their ambivalence about death.

Under the traditional system, the corpse of a deceased elder member of the Melanau society was first placed inside a Jerunei, which was a tall wooden tower that in some instances, was highly ornamented. This was not the final burial phase; the corpse was kept in the Jerunei for a period, after which the corpse was finally buried in the sea. The temporary placement of the corpse in the Jerunei was believed to give the soul sufficient time to reach the afterlife (Bakar, 2017). The ritual was not a mere burial ritual; it was significantly based on the worldview of the Melanau people, who viewed death as a process that was meant to guide and facilitate the soul of the deceased to move on to the afterlife.

The Jerunei was not merely a physical shelter but also a vessel of the spirit. In Melanau religious traditions, the soul's journey to the afterlife was of paramount importance, and the Jerunei was a site where heaven and earth would meet. The dead body was given elaborate rituals with music, chanting, and offerings during the time the deceased lay in the Jerunei. The rituals were believed to pacify the spirit of the dead person and guide the soul to eternal repose. Beyond these death rituals, there was also a social aspect of the funeral rituals in that family and friends and villagers would come to call and pay respect and lament (Mokhtar, 2020).

The Jerunei was also of social significance in that the level of elaboration of the construction and use of it was directly proportional to the social status of the deceased. The higher the status of the individuals, the more elaborate Jerunei was given to them and at times embellished with images that were symbolic of the role of the person in society. It was not only a reflection of the religious value of the burial, but it also served to reinforce the hierarchical society among

the Melanau. The elaboration of the funeral ritual, as well as the belief that the soul of a high-status person had some supernatural requirement, served to highlight the social value of the Jerunei as a testament to the life and reputation of the person who had died (Lau, 2018).

Apart from that, the sea burial also symbolized the Melanau people's interaction with nature. Sea, the Melanau people's center of attention and the source of religiosity, was a border and a limit between life and death. The sea was a sacred site for the Melanau people, bridging the living and the ancestors in observing the cycle of death and life. Sea burial following the Jerunei rite ceremony also foresaw the theme of going back to nature that was congenial to the natural world being reflected as an intermediary bridging human life and the divine in the Melanau people's religion (Sulaiman, 2019). Finally, the Melanau Jerunei funeral is a significant ritual in Melanau religion and culture that is evidence of their sophisticated concept of death and the afterlife and their organization into a social hierarchy. It is strong evidence of the interconnection between human life, social status, and the path to the world of spirits. Thus, in Jerunei, the Melanau honors not only the deceased but also their cultural heritage in the face of foreign influence and change. In its current practice, the ritual is a rich addition to the literature on Southeast Asian death rituals and Malaysian cultural diversity.

### **Orality, Memory, and Ancestral Presence: The Jerunei as Spiritual Archive**

In Melanau society, in which for centuries oral culture has held sway over social and religious life, the Jerunei a mortuary pole carved and used in traditional funeral rites, can be read both as a mnemonic and as a holy record. Greater than a tombstone, the Jerunei is a vehicle by which ancestral memory, genealogical remembrance, and cultural identity are written, communicated, and attained in society.

Material and memory culture anthropologists have long remarked that in oral societies, objects are not merely decorative or symbolic; they are often bearers of collective memory. The Jerunei, in this regard, is a "carved text" a material genre that invites oral narration, ritual performance, and genealogical recitation (Vansina, 1985; Hoskins, 1998). The carvings on its surface, which may be

anthropomorphic figures, animal motifs, or cosmological symbols, are not necessarily ornamental. They are visual reminders that enable ritual specialists and elders to recite stories about the dead, say clan history, mythic origins, and moral instruction. This is consistent with Michael Taussig's (1999) point that material artifacts of memory are not passive containers but active agents in the delivery of cultural knowledge.

In addition, the Jerunei is a form of spiritual archive in that it is a vertical monument that carries and houses ancestral presence. Where written records are lacking, monuments like these are the center of how communities preserve and transmit social memory (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011). Through its incorporation in ceremonial life, the Jerunei makes the dead symbolically near to the living. It is a temporality of relation of past and present in which remembering is not merely cognitive but material and performative.

This idea resonates with Pierre Nora's (1989) theory of *lieux de mémoire*, sites where memory is crystallized and stored, especially if tradition's natural continuity is under threat. In this view, therefore, the Jerunei is not only a marker of death, but a site of ritualized memory work invoked upon death, seasonal celebrations, or ancestral invocation rites. It serves in two ways as an agent and object, a manufactured object facilitating memorizing but also imbued with agency to serve as a mediator between the world of the living and the world of the dead (Gell, 1998; Miller, 2010). Jerunei, hence, cannot merely be read archaeologically or iconographically, but as a nexus in the larger web of Melanau cosmology, oral tradition, and social continuity. It is here that memory is rendered solid, transmissible, and efficacious spiritually so that the ancestors can speak not in written words, but in the pole surface carved and in the rituals that accompany it.

### **Cosmological Significance of Height, Direction, and Wood in the Jerunei Traditions of Borneo**

The Jerunei, or the gigantic mortuary pole of the indigenous Bornean Iban, Melanau, and Dusun people, is not an ordinary tomb edifice, it is an expression of cosmological sacred. As a material and spiritual nexus of indigenous worldviews, the Jerunei shows the way in which height, direction, and wood choice underscore fundamental aspects of the

path of life and death. Anthropologically and comparatively religiously, this essay examines the Jerunei as a spiritual technology transmitting complex cosmological and metaphysical significance in Bornean society.

The verticality of the Jerunei is symbolic in that it is an *axis mundus*, a world pillar that links the three planes of existence: the underworld, the earth, and the heavens. Mircea Eliade (1959) theorized the axis mundi as a world religious symbol for the conjunction of sacred and profane planes. The Jerunei, in that regard, is not so much a grave marker as a portal where the deceased's soul can journey to the spiritual plane.

Melanau's needs verticality. According to Gibson (2009), the elevated Jerunei signifies the trajectory of the soul from earthly existence to the heavenly and ancestral world. The taller the poles go, the better suited they are for burying individuals of higher social status like warriors, elders, or shamans. Consequently, by doing so, who signify their status not only in social order but in the metaphysical order as well. Through these injunctions, height becomes a signifier of value and religious promise, guaranteeing the passage of the soul into the hereafter.

Second, the burial complex also fulfills a social role, as an apparent symbol of the religious heritage and standing of the deceased. The "ascend" of the soul is a symbol of movement from earthly material possessions to religious otherworldliness, testifying to the belief that the deceased are not dead but raised and consecrated (Gibson, 2009). Apart from orientation in the direction of elevation, direction of Jerunei is a prominent feature of Bornean cosmology. Melanau Jerunei is most commonly west-facing—direction of sunset—saying farewell to the world of the living and heading to the land of the dead (Pillai, 1989). Westward turning positions, the dead in the in-between world of the twilight, and this is spiritual farewell to the world. Directionality in the Dusun is commonly determined by local topography. Jerunei direction may be in the direction of the mountains, the river, or other local feature believed to be inhabited by spirit beings or guardians (Teeuw, 1967). These are cosmological markers that guide the soul on the journey and keep it safe. This emphasis on directionality is a sign that cosmological meaning is inscribed in spatial relationships, each group placing their sacred cosmology in the world. Placement the Jerunei is therefore not



arbitrary but ritualistic—intended to position the soul in metaphysical space. It ensures that the soul travels in the correct direction, returns safely, and enters the world of the ancestors. This is a sign of a relational cosmology where the natural world, the world of spirits, and the human world are interconnected.

Just as significant in the Jerunei tradition, however, is what is made of—most notably, the wood. For the Iban, for instance, they use Ironwood (*Eusideroxylon zwageri*), or Belian to the locals, which is their material of choice. Not only is the hardwood durable, but it is also spiritually potent. The tree itself is sacred, and its guardian spirits are purported to reside within it. Gibson (2009) documents that trees such as these are ritually chosen, considering the spirits within them and invoking the guardian spirits' protection throughout the process of making a tree-pole. Durable hardwoods such as Belian being used symbolize strength and endurance. It is said to transfer the soul along the journey with strength, shielding it from evil forces during the liminal state of death and life. The same preference for spiritually potent hardwood can be found among the Melanau. Wong (1997) feels that the tree is not just a construction material but a spiritual companion—one who's very living spirit continues to guard the deceased.

This ritual demonstrates an animist cosmology in which everything in nature possesses a spirit or essence (*semangat*). To cut and shape the tree into a Jerunei is thereby a ritual of transference, transforming natural energy into spiritual protection. The sanctity of the tree is not lost through the process but is enhanced as it is absorbed into the cosmological journey of the soul. Designed for The Iban, Melanau, and Dusun of Borneo, Jerunei is a cosmologically significant structure, filled with symbolic meaning. In its height, it guides the spiritual journey of the soul; in its direction, it charts the soul's journey into the afterlife; and in its substance, it transfers holy power and continuity. The Jerunei, therefore, is not an antlered funeral pole—it is a metaphysical map, a spiritual transportation, and a cultural text. It is an image of a cosmos in which death is not an end but a sacred metamorphosis, where the forest is alive with meaning, and in which human, nature, and spirit are in constant dialogue.

### **The Jerunei as Mediator Between Worlds**

The Jerunei's role as a mediator of worlds is its most important feature. It is not simply a tomb but a ritual center where the passage of the dead from the world of matter to the world of spirit is guaranteed. Its liminality is a reflection of the faith in the continuation of life after death and in the flexibility of life between the two worlds of the dead and the living (Eliade, 1959).

In the Melanau, the Jerunei is frequently employed in the secondary burial rite, where the corpse of the deceased is kept on the pole for years or months before the final ultimate rite of burial is performed. This waiting period keeps the soul in spiritual liminality, not wholly severed from the world of the living as well as not wholly bound to the world of the dead. Rituals are performed in between for the cleansing of the soul to prepare it to enter its eternal journey (Wong, 1997).

Similarly, in Iban cosmology, Jerunei is central to the ngalong ceremony undertaken to bring the soul to Sebayau, the Iban underworld world of the dead. The height of Jerunei, along with carvings and offerings on it, is a ritual platform guaranteeing the safe transmission of the soul to the world of the dead. The verticality of Jerunei, along with the religious symbolism surrounding it, makes Jerunei a sacred axis linking the material and spiritual worlds (Gibson, 2009). In both cases, Jerunei is a representation of the theme of spiritual protection, where it ensures the protection of the soul of the dead as it makes its journey. Its role is to mediate between the material and the world of the spirit by facilitating the easy transmission of the soul in its spiritual voyage. The jerunei is hence not just a material object but a cosmological instrument, a vertical shrine that contains the soul to guide it to the world of the dead. It is a bridge, a sacred path where the living are in communion with the dead and the gods (Eliade, 1959).

### **The Axis Mundi: The Jerunei as the Cosmic Axis**

Cosmology is defined in this case as the study of the universe, not just its physical being but how and in what way it is explained and interpreted in spiritual, ritual, and cultural contexts. Bornean cosmology for the Jerunei entails structure, function, and symbolic

meaning. The Jerunei is not merely a mortuary item but a cosmic marker moving through the earthly, ancestral, and divine worlds, symbolizing the way the indigenous Borneans interpret the structure of the universe and the passage of the soul in death.

The vertical axis of the world, the axis mundi, is the cosmological center of Bornean cosmology, bringing the planes of existence into touch. This is represented by the Jerunei, being vertical. The axis mundi, in most cosmological world-views, is where the earth, the world of the ancestors, and the gods meet (Eliade, 1959). Earthly Realm: The Jerunei base is anchored to the material, physical world, the world of the living. It is the human world, the plane of the physical, and the site for the burial ground of the dead. Ancestral Realm: The middle section of the Jerunei is symbolic of the ancestral world. The dead souls are described to pass through this stage after death, being in a state where they are accompanied by the ghosts of their ancestors and shielded. Jerunei carvings, such as anthropomorphic or zoomorphic shapes, typically portray ancestors and spiritual masters, who are mediators between the earth and divine.

Divine Realm: The highest point of the Jerunei is associated with the divine, which is equivalent to the highest point in cosmology. It represents the rise of the soul to the gods or spiritual beings governing the world. The ascension to the top of the Jerunei, therefore, symbolizes the spiritual ascension of the dead as they pass from the earthly to the heavenly.

The vertical dichotomy reinforces the perception that the Jerunei is not just a container for the body but a gateway to the spiritual world, allowing the soul to pass through the various phases of life. The height of Jerunei is not by chance. In Borneo cosmology, the higher it is, the greater the spiritual height it represents. Height represents the spiritual worth of the deceased and his standing in the universe hierarchy. While the Jerunei rose physically, so does it represent the rising of the soul upwards throughout the world. For example, in the case of the Iban, a higher Jerunei would more likely be for a respected elder or warrior, a man who lived in honor, strength, and spiritual potency. The height represents their increased standing and the wish that their soul will have an easier journey to the divine afterlife (Gibson, 2009). Secondly, the height of journey represents the spiritual journey of the soul. It is not a stationary object

but one representing movement upwards, which reflects the Iban belief in the journey of the soul from the physical to the spiritual world.

Other than the verticality, the direction of Jerunei also has significant cosmological meaning. Different Bornean societies face Jerunei in different directions depending on their respective cosmologies concerning the soul journey and the afterlife. Melanau: West-facing Jerunei is common in Melanau culture, as the direction of the setting sun represents death as well as the soul journey to the afterlife. West is where the afterlife exists in their cosmology, and the dead soul travels there to join the ancestors. West-facing Jerunei thus anchors the soul in the world of death and ensures safe passage (Pillai, 1989).

Iban: In its turn, the Iban will orient their Jerunei towards some spiritual land features, such as hills or rivers, which are regarded as inhabited by spiritual forces that will steer the soul throughout the journey. The river and the mountain are metaphors of boundary markers within the spiritual geography of the world, creating borders between the world of living and the world of spirits (Gibson, 2009). The directionality of the Jerunei thus serves to depict how the dead's soul is being directed by natural and spiritual forces as it travels across multiple cosmological planes.

Jerunei wood is selected with care, at times from sacred trees that have been imbued with very strong spiritual powers. Wood serves as a spiritual medium vessel that safeguards the soul during its journey in the spiritual world. Ironwood: Ironwood (*Eusideroxylon zwageri*) is cherished in Iban culture due to the fact that it is physically and spiritually robust. It has been believed to harbor very strong spirits that will repel evil spirits from the soul. The use of wood so robust enhances the duration of the journey of the dead and the importance of defending their spiritual journey (Gibson, 2009).

Belian Wood: Belian wood is utilized by the Melanau because of its protective and spiritual nature. Belian wood is also a sacred wood and, excluding the use in Jerunei, is utilized to make other treasured ritual objects. Belian wood supposedly encompasses the quality in which the physical nature of the wood allows the ability of the soul to travel securely, in a way not interrupted by evil powers (Wong, 1997). The wood, therefore, is not merely a physical substance but a

spiritual energy, allowing the free passage of the soul through the transition area of life and death.

### **Jerunei as a Ritual Tool in Spiritual Transition**

The Jerunei is not a signifier, but a ritual object used to guarantee the soul's journey. In Melanau and Iban cultures, Jerunei is the focal point of the secondary burial rites that may last months or even years. During the period, the corpse rests on the Jerunei, a liminal space between the material and spiritual world. This threshold condition, wherein the soul of the deceased is neither fully integrated into the world of ancestors nor fully separated from the world of the living, plays a critical function to the cleansing of the soul and its eventual trip to the afterlife (Wong, 1997).

In Iban cosmology, Jerunei is the focal point of the ceremony of ngalong, a rite of passage aimed at leading the soul to Sebanan, Iban dead's kingdom. The Jerunei is the ritual platform that assures safe passage of the soul to this hallowed place under the guardianship of the spirit powers (Gibson, 2009).

The Jerunei is a highly complex articulation of Bornean cosmology, a cosmology that goes beyond the material to articulate the intricate interconnectedness of the material, ancestral, and spiritual realms. In its directionality, verticality, and sacred materials, the Jerunei enables the spiritual journey of the deceased, connecting him or her to higher worlds and safe passage to the afterlife. It represents the integrity of the material and spiritual universe, the harmony of life, death, and the universe as conceived by the indigenous people of Borneo.

### **Gender, Ritual Sacrifice and the Politics of Death: Intersections of Gender, Sacrifice, and Cosmology**

While Jerunei has been symbolically and ritually engaged, its gendered aspect is less studied. Ethnographic evidence indicates that there is a gendered division of labour in Melanau mortuary rites. Appleton (2011) acknowledges that men bear primary responsibility for the physical building and carving of the Jerunei, a work imbued with the mastery of rituals and control of spiritual borders. Women, on the other hand,

undertake more household and affective preparations to the funeral, such as washing the corpse, making offerings, and performing mourning rituals. This same dichotomy reflects broader Austronesian trends for male ritual experts to control sacred construction and ritual manufacture, with women responsible for the preservation of communal and ancestral ties. Jerunei motifs on carvings perhaps also have gendered meaning, in that some portray male and female in myth and society. These scars can then identify not only religious ideas but social presuppositions of gender, descent, and ritual suitability.

Jerunei also corresponds to accounts of ritual sacrifice, i.e., the extremely controversial charge of slave sacrifice in elite funerals. Slaves or captives killed and strewn around the body to wait on the deceased in the afterlife were recorded by H.W. Hose and W. McDougall (1912) and by J.G.H. Morris (1953). These victims were said to perpetuate the social status of the deceased and attend to them in the afterlife. Even if the reality of such sacrifices in the past is doubtful, their existence in oral tradition and in colonial reports is evidence of the status of the Jerunai as an icon of ritual power. Comparatively Austronesian when examined, this identification of death with ritual killing reminds us of other Southeast Asian cultures in which mortuary rituals entail symbolic or actual sacrifice to integrate cosmic and social orders (Fox, 1980; Atkinson, 1987). In these aspects, the Jerunei is not just a marker of burial either but a ritualized thing of sacred violence (Barrett, 1993), enacting a moment where power, hierarchy, and transition are written material and spiritual.

But decolonial interpretation must take place. The indigenous rites were sensationalized by colonizing writers, reported in the terms of a Eurocentric morality that overstated ritual violence. Others now deny the very possibility that human sacrifice was ever practiced, reducing such reports to metaphors or misinterpretation. By placing indigenous oral culture and symbolic meaning in the foreground, scholars can eschew exoticization of Melanau culture and instead explore the Jerunei as a complex ritual object within a culture-specific cosmology.

Together, cosmological, sacrificial, and gender discourses make Jerunei a richly nuanced site of ritual practice. The masculinity of Jerunei carving, the likely sacrificial installation rites, and its symbolic marking on its surface all coalesce to enable a vision of a world that

unites power, gender, and religion. Jerunei is, consequently, a palimpsest of ritual memory: a cult object that bears witness to and enacts Melanau notions of status, continuity, and cosmos. This intersectional analysis provides a richer reading of the Jerunei as something beyond its mortuary function, but as an efficacious material artefact of communal identity, ritual power, and ancestral presence. It is a step beyond reductionism and towards an anthropological practice based in local cosmologies and against colonialist presuppositions.

### **The Cultural and Artistic Value of Jerunei in Melanau Society**

Jerunei, the large wooden pillars typical of the Melanau of Malaysia, are practical and symbolic objects. Traditionally carved as tomb markers, the objects are not mere utilitarian objects but an entire expression of Melanau art, cosmology, and spirituality. Carved from Belian (ironwood), the images testify to Melanau skill, belief, and values and combine art and deep cultural values. The essay investigates the Jerunei's aesthetic value, i.e., their material, symbolic motifs, and cultural importance in Melanau society.

Wood employed in the production of Jerunei, Belian or ironwood, is priceless. Belian is renowned for its toughness and resistance to rot, qualities that make the Jerunei from mere grave markers to durable testaments of strength, protection, and spiritual perseverance (Sia, 2012). The longevity of the carvings symbolizes the belief of the Melanau in the continuation of life through the spirit after death. The employment of Belian here, once more, speaks of a desire to create strong, long-lasting links to the ancestors and the spiritual realm, so that the dead be remembered in strong, long-lasting strength and love. Carving Jerunei is extremely technical art passed down to future generations, and artists were once employed to carve these massive works of art. The technicality and intricacy of the carvings—typically featuring human forms, animals, and religious motifs—bear testimony not only to technical skill but to a refined appreciation of symbolism and cultural values. Jerunei also differ in size and scale, though a majority tend to be tall at several meters in height, commanding respect and awe through sheer size (Hii, 2009).

Belian is a valuable wood in Borneo and one of the hardest, most durable forms of wood. The hardness of the Belian as a material is an excellent selection to be used for the construction of buildings

that must endure the Malaysian tropical environment with varying humidity levels, insects, and weathering easily ruining less hard woods. The hardness of the wood further signifies the unbroken connection between the dead and the living. Death in Melanau cosmology is not an abolition of life but a transition to the spiritual realm, and Belian as a material signifies the unbroken connection between the material and spiritual spheres. The dark reddish-brown color of the wood further adds seriousness and gravitas to the Jerunei, consistent with the object's cultural construction as a sacred tombstone.

In addition, the hard-grained nature of Belian is such that it must be carved with specialized skills and tools, Jerunei construction is a highly skilled and time-consuming task. The fact that such hard, unyielding material has to be used also acts to bring out the significance of the Jerunei and emphasizes the level of skill involved in carving it into the intricate forms and designs characteristic of these structures

### **Carving Skills and Artistic Talent**

Jerunei carving is a valuable cultural inheritance passed from generation to generation. The large artworks are carved by experienced and mature carvers in society, mostly elders. Belian carving is a task requiring precision with power and vast knowledge of the material. The wood is too soft to handle and requires special equipment, such as axes, chisels, and knives, passed from generation to generation of carvers. The Jerunei carvings are not just ornamental; they are very symbolic, with tales, beliefs, and genealogies recounted. The artisans must be well-versed in Melanau cosmology so that religious concepts are translated into images. The Jerunei carving is a very abstract art, where characters are abstracted more than they are representative. Through abstraction, the subject such as human, animal, or spirit is given dominance to the point of the divine and the eternal.

In addition to technical skill, the carvers also must be deeply culturally sensitive. Every carving, every line and curve, serves a purpose. Human and animal forms and other motifs are chosen with a purpose to convey meaning. Ancestral guardians are represented by anthropomorphic carvings on Jerunei, and by hornbill and crocodile



motifs spiritual messages and protection are represented (Hii, 2009). The craftsmen choose these symbols with particular purpose and intention and therefore every Jerunei contains the full range of Melanau spiritual and cultural meaning.

Carving is also ritualistic. It is not merely an exercise in craftsmanship but a divine mandate. Occasionally, the carver would utter prayers or rituals as a preface to commencing the work, invoking blessings from the spirits to direct the carving as well as the success of the endeavor. The accuracy and purpose of the carving process itself are an act of faith because creation of Jerunei is symbolic of the harmony of material and spiritual. The connection of craftsmanship with the spiritual is used to emphasize that material is important as is, as is the process being employed to shape Jerunei.

### **Symbolic Carving Elements**

The Jerunei carvings are highly symbolic and depict numerous aspects of Melanau cosmology. The recurring entities are human figures, animals such as hornbills and crocodiles, and supernatural elements that are mostly borrowed from the people's beliefs about life, death, and the hereafter. They are not random depictions; every form and motif is an explicit story or bears a clear message according to the Melanau beliefs about the spirit. The anthropomorphic sculpture is among the most common found on Jerunei and represents ancestral guardians or mythical beings. The figures are abstract and stylized, their shape serving as intermediaries between the living world and the spiritual world. Ancestors in Melanau cosmology are respected and are believed to still have a role to play in the living. The anthropomorphic shapes serve as symbols of this continued presence and protection. The statues are chiseled with elongated facial features, emphasizing the supernatural or sacred nature (Sia, 2012). The statues serve the role of guardians, trapping the souls of the deceased in safety and protection and leading them to the afterlife.

One of the more significant animal symbols carved onto Jerunei is possibly hornbills. The hornbill is a symbolic creature to Melanau society and may be understood as a mediator between religious and human worlds. The hornbill's beak and way of flight are regarded as symbols of mediation and transcendence. When carved onto the Jerunei, hornbills symbolize the connection between the dead and the

living, and the bird is used as a messenger of messages, protection, and benedictions (Hii, 2009). The birds have also been called sentinels of the dead, guarding the soul along its journey. Another ubiquitous theme in Jerunei sculpture is the image of the crocodile. The crocodile, as a symbol, stands for protection, guarding, and territory in Melanau culture. That its image is found on the Jerunei in line with the people's belief that the crocodile can guard the dead's souls. The crocodiles are usually stylized, their powerful jaws and muscular physique symbolizing protection of the dead travel to the afterlife. The position of the crocodile in carvings also symbolizes the idea of continuity, though the crocodile is a ferocious predator and a survival symbol, it is said to provide lasting protection to the dead's soul (Sia, 2012).

### **Motifs and Their Meanings**

Both the motifs and carvings of Jerunei are components of its ritual and cosmological function. The motifs are, in addition to being ornamental, religious symbols of the identity, beliefs, and cosmologies of the people. The motifs that are drawn on Jerunei, typically complex geometric shapes, zoomorphic motifs, and anthropomorphic motifs, have some form of meaning concerning life, death, and life after death (Gibson, 2009). Spirals: Spiral is a dominant theme and a primary symbol of transformation in Iban culture. It represents the cyclical nature of life—birth, living, death, and resurrection—and the soul's transcendent journey. The shape of the spiral and its continuous, unending, non-stop movement represents the concept of eternity and spiritual development. The spiral theme is also employed to represent the soul's journey, emphasizing its movement from the world to the next life (Gibson, 2009).

**Anthropomorphic Figures:** The Dusun Jerunei has repeated carvings of human figures. The dead or his ancestors are stylized and are guardians or protectors of the soul. They can be depicted with some dressing, headdresses, or warrior dress, all of which indicate that of the dead man when alive. They are symbolic figures of the person, so that the soul is identified and treated with respect in the afterlife. Their existence implies a belief that the dead must be looked after by spiritual caretakers on the journey (Teeuw, 1967). **Zoomorphic Figures:** Animals, and in particular, birds, are employed across some Bornean groups, namely the Melanau and Iban. Birds are employed in Jerunei carvings to represent flight of the soul. The animals are

employed as messengers that transport the soul of the dead to the afterlife. The hornbill is especially important to the Iban because it is associated with Sengalang Burong, the god of the sky. The hornbill, which is typically carved into the Jerunei, symbolizes man as being connected with God and an extremely potent spiritual symbol of rising up (Sather, 2006).

Snakes or lizards in sculpture can symbolize rebirth or underworld connotations. Snakes, in some cultures, are said to be the guardians of the soul, where they guide the soul through the threshold experience of life and death. They can also symbolize the material world or earthly world, vis-a-vis heaven worlds into which the soul enters (Pillai, 1989). All the sculptures are narrative devices that say a great deal about the dead's relation to the universe. These symbols, though having a tendency to be complicated and holding a multitude of meanings, are a coded language that holds within it the narrative of the life of the dead, his journey in the afterworld, and his genealogical descent.

### **Jerunei as Cultural and Religious Objects**

Beyond their aesthetic qualities, Jerunei also have religious and cultural significance. They symbolize the Melanau cosmology and its emphasis on ancestor preoccupation and the mystical forces which shape life and death. Their making and chiseling are usually preceded by elaborate rituals, a reflection of the role of Jerunei in Melanau mortuary rituals. These rituals, presented in the form of prayers and sacrifices, are done to ensure that the souls of the dead are given the respect that is their due and that their transition to the afterlife is unhampered (Hii, 2009). The Jerunei is then a bridge between the material and spiritual realm, anchoring the living in the ancestors and as a guide for the spirits. Moreover, the significance of Jerunei lies in the collective identity of the Melanau people. The decoration of the monuments does not simply represent individual memorialization but also testifies to the perpetuation of the community beliefs, values, and practices. The Jerunei are collective memorials of culture, passing on Melanau identity from generation to generation. They therefore become part of the community's conception of its place within a broader historical and cosmological framework.

The designs carved on Jerunei symbolize Melanau cosmology and their relationship with their world. The carvers employ a mix of abstract shapes and symbolic motifs in reference to religious faith. The motifs are not arbitrary; they are culturally meaningful and are designed to ensure safe passage of the departed soul to the hereafter. Melanau art is a powerful vehicle for expression and reaffirmation of culture, and Jerunei is a case in point. Each of the recurring human forms, animals like hornbill and crocodile, and religious geometric motifs have meaning. The anthropomorphic figures that normally appear on Jerunei represent ancestors or supernatural entities. The figures themselves are normally represented in a stylized way, with delicate details that are enlarged proportionally as a way of announcing their supernatural or divine nature. This, for instance, could be through the enlargement or elongation of the facial features to indicate superior stature or alignment on the spiritual plane. Direction and stance are also important; they could indicate guardians or custodians, protect the spirit of the deceased and ensure that it is well taken care of and guarded throughout the journey.

Hornbill carvings, most often in Jerunei, denote human and religious life communication. The hornbill is a great symbol in Melanau culture because it is highly esteemed to be the mediator of the world of living and the world of the dead. The shape carved on Jerunei is intended to be the mediator of the two worlds so that the dead soul would be listened to and respected by ancestors. Crocodiles also symbolize strength, protection, and land ownership, and their inclusion on Jerunei once again implies protection of the dead soul. Likewise important in these carvings is the use of geometric design spirals, interlocking, and others. These designs are most likely to depict the continuity of life and roundness of life. Designs can symbolize unity of all living as the expression of the Melanau interdependence notion among the living, the dead, and ghosts in between.

### **The Value of Craftsmanship**

Jerunei construction is not merely a technical craft but also reflects Melanau values of family, tradition, and respect for the ancestors. Jerunei carving is a laborious process that involves not only carvers but also families that work together with other members of society in such a way that the monument is properly assembled. The process

itself reinforces the Melanau concept of kinship and shared responsibility. Jerunei is therefore a source of pride for families, ancestry, and respect for the dead person, with the knowledge that family line and cultural heritage of the community continue to persist. Furthermore, the production of Jerunei can also be regarded as proof of cultural continuity. As the knowledge is transmitted to the younger generation, Jerunei carving processes bear witness to the fact that Melanau identity and culture are preserved. The skills and art of work that go into building them ensure that cultural practices associated with death, afterlife, and the ancestors are preserved and transmitted across centuries.

The Jerunei is a powerful symbol of the Melanau people's spiritual beliefs, social structure, and art. It is not just a death post, since it is the manifestation of the people's intricate interweaving of beliefs relating to life, death, and the afterlife. With its elaborate ornamentation, longevity, and ritual significance, the Jerunei symbolizes an ancestral and nature worship-centered worldview. Though, the tradition of constructing Jerunei has reduced with the lapse of time and the introduction of newer religions, the significance of the monuments remains high. Preservation and study of the Jerunei not only conserves Melanau identity but also contributes to overall knowledge regarding Malaysia's native population. It is thus imperative that the local, governmental, and academic stakeholders collaborate and record, rehabilitate, and popularize this unique heritage so that there is still advantage to future populations from its cultural and historical status.

## **Conclusion**

Jerunei is such a powerful symbol of the religious ideas, social structure, and artistic imagination of Melanau's. It is more than the burial pole that it appears to be, for in it is mirrored back the ambivalence of the community towards life, death, and immortality. In its tall carvings, permanent materials, and ritual employment, Jerunei contains a worldview based on the worship of ancestors and nature.

Despite the tradition of building Jerunei having gone poorly over the years with the process of time and the spread of newer religions, the cultural importance of these structures endures even today. Notably, they not only preserve Melanau identity in the process

of conservation and research but also contribute to the body of knowledge on Malaysia's indigenous cultures. As things are, it is imperative that scholarly, government, and local interests unite to document, restore, and share this iconic heritage, so that generations to come may continue to be astonished at its historical and cultural importance.

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