

Embodying Iban Masculinity across Ritual and Public Performance Contexts: An Ethnochoreographic Study of *Ajat Laki Iban*



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ABSTRACT

Despite increasing scholarship on Iban performing arts, limited attention has been given to how *Ajat Laki Iban* negotiates masculinity across ritual and public performance contexts and to how locally authoritative oral accounts enter that negotiation. This article examines the relationship among movement, Indigenous cosmology, oral explanation, communal practice, and performance context through a qualitative ethnographic and ethnochoreographic study in Nanga Tutong, Lubok Antu, and selected public performances at the Sarawak Cultural Village. The study draws on participant observation, semi-structured interviews with six Iban cultural practitioners, field notes, photographs, and audiovisual documentation. Findings are presented as situated to the documented community and performance corpus rather than as representative of all Iban practice. In Nanga Tutong, masculine values such as courage, discipline, responsibility, and composure were articulated through bodily practice and locally authorised narratives. Public performances showed continuity with adaptation: movement projection, spatial orientation, and audience relation changed, while recognisable movement vocabulary and practitioner-articulated values persisted. Origin and *ngayau*-related accounts are treated as emic oral traditions rather than historical verification. The study contributes to dance anthropology and Indigenous performance studies by integrating ethnochoreographic analysis with oral-tradition source criticism to explain how masculinity is embodied, transmitted, and recontextualised across performance settings.

Article History

Received 2026-08-20

Revised 2026-09-08

Accepted 2026-09-12

Keywords

Ajat Laki Iban;
Embodiment;
Ethnochoreography;
Iban Masculinity;
Indigenous
Performance;
Oral Tradition

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Introduction

Traditional dance has increasingly been understood not merely as aesthetic expression but as an embodied form of cultural knowledge through which communities construct identity, transmit memory, and negotiate social values (Csordas, 1990; Sklar, 2001; Tamisari, 2024). Within anthropology and performance studies, the body is recognised as a primary site where cultural meanings are produced and experienced rather than simply represented (Farnell, 1999; Schechner, 2003). This perspective shifts analytical attention from choreography as an autonomous formal object toward performance as bodily practice situated within particular historical, ritual, social, and epistemic environments.

Among Iban communities in Sarawak, *Ajat Laki Iban* is a male dance tradition associated in published ethnography and local accounts with longhouse sociality, cosmological relations, ritual responsibility, and communal identity (Jensen, 1974; Kedit, 1980; Sather, 1993). Within longhouse settings, movement, music, costume, spatial organisation, and verbal explanation can operate together as modes through which practitioners situate the dance within wider understandings of ancestry, customary practice, and responsibility. Earlier scholarship has connected Iban masculinity with courage, discipline, leadership, social obligation, and maturity

(Freeman, 1970; Kedit, 1980). The present article does not assume these values are uniform across all Iban communities; rather, it asks how they are locally articulated and embodied in the Nanga Tutong material examined here.

Recent socio-cultural transformations have expanded the settings in which *Ajat Laki Iban* is encountered, including tourism, cultural festivals, schools, competitions, and staged heritage performances (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Muzaini, 2017; Rozaimie, 2023). Such movement across contexts potentially changes not only where the dance is performed, but also movement projection, spatial organisation, audience relations, and the verbal framing through which a performance is understood. The resulting issue is therefore not a simple opposition between an 'authentic' ritual form and a 'commercial' public form. It concerns how cultural values, bodily techniques, and locally authorised explanations are retained, abbreviated, recontextualised, or transformed as performance circumstances change (Stock & Koivunen, 2022; Yea, 2002).

Existing studies of Iban dance and cultural heritage have made important contributions to historical description, ritual symbolism, choreography, improvisation, and heritage conservation (Anis Md Nor, 2005; Jamu & Thiagarajan, 2021; Rozaimie et al., 2023). However, three issues remain insufficiently connected. First, movement analysis has rarely been used to explain how masculine values are generated through the relationship among technique, music, space, and performer experience. Second, studies of public heritage performance do not always show which embodied features change and which are locally understood as continuous. Third, oral accounts about origin, movement meaning, and transmission are often cited as contextual information without being treated as situated sources whose authority, genre, and limits require analysis. A comparison informed by ethnochoreography can address these gaps by tracing embodied difference at the level of movement and performance organisation while simultaneously asking how practitioners verbally authorise and interpret those differences.

Accordingly, this article examines how Iban masculinity is embodied and negotiated through ritual/communal performances documented in Nanga Tutong and selected public performances at the Sarawak Cultural Village. Its contribution is deliberately situated: it does not propose a single normative model of Iban masculinity or *Ajat Laki Iban* for all longhouses. Instead, it argues that performance context conditions the ways masculine values become bodily legible, while locally authoritative narratives and transmission practices shape how those bodily forms are interpreted. The study therefore brings embodiment, ethnochoreography, oral tradition, and performance context into a single analytical frame to explain continuity with adaptation rather than assuming either cultural loss or unchanged preservation.

Understanding *Ajat Laki Iban* requires an approach that treats dance as culturally organised action rather than as a sequence of decontextualised choreographic movements. Dance anthropology has long shown that bodily movement produces and communicates social relationships, identities, and systems of knowledge through culturally specific conventions (Hanna, 1988; Kaeppler, 2000; Royce, 1977). Movement therefore acquires meaning through its relation to performers, audiences, musical structures, spatial arrangements, and the social occasions in which it is enacted.

Embodiment provides a complementary analytical foundation. Csordas (1990) conceptualises the body as an existential ground of culture, while Farnell (1999) emphasises bodily action as a socially organised practice through which meaning is actively produced. Applied to *Ajat Laki Iban*, this perspective allows masculinity to be examined as something learned and experienced through disciplined bodily practice rather than merely represented by symbolic gestures. The emphasis is consequently on how qualities such as composure, courage, responsibility, and attentiveness are made perceptible through repeated performance within locally meaningful settings.

Published Iban ethnography associates masculine formation with wider institutions and values, including *bejalai*, ritual participation, longhouse responsibility, and spiritual maturity (Freeman, 1970; Jensen, 1974; Kedit, 1980). Such ethnographic descriptions provide historical and comparative context but are not treated here as substitutes for local evidence. Likewise, the Iban term *semengat* is commonly described in ethnographic literature as a vital or spiritual essence associated with personhood (Jensen, 1974; Sather, 1993). The interview material

analysed for this article, however, did not consistently mobilise *semangat* as a movement-specific explanatory category. It is therefore retained as cosmological background rather than used to claim that particular Ajat motifs directly encode *semangat*.

Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity and Burt's (1995) work on the performing male body offer a useful comparative vocabulary for considering how gendered identities are reiterated through bodily practice. They are not used as governing explanations of Iban masculinity. In this analysis, local concepts, practitioner accounts, ritual responsibilities, and community-specific cosmological narratives remain analytically primary. Performativity is used dialogically to clarify repetition and bodily constitution, while its explanatory limits are recognised where Iban accounts locate masculine responsibility within ancestral, communal, and cosmological relations that exceed a purely social-performance model.

The verbal material accompanying *Ajat Laki Iban* is treated as analytically significant rather than as transparent historical fact. Oral-tradition scholarship emphasises that oral accounts require attention to source status, transmission, social context, and the event of telling (Bauman, 1986; Vansina, 1985). In the present corpus, verbal materials include an emic origin narrative concerning *Orang Panggau*, explanations of movement meaning, remembered associations with *ngayau*, performers' accounts of bodily experience, and statements about intergenerational transmission. These are differentiated by genre and authority: an origin narrative told by a Tuai Rumah is approached as locally authoritative oral tradition, whereas a performer's account of *Entepa* is treated as experiential testimony.

This distinction is crucial because Iban cosmology and oral tradition should not be presented as internally uniform. The article therefore avoids treating the Nanga Tutong account as the singular Iban version of *Ajat Laki Iban*. Nor does it use an oral narrative to verify a historical event without corroboration. Instead, oral materials are analysed for what they reveal about local cultural authority, the meanings attached to movement, and the ways embodied knowledge is narrated and transmitted. This approach also makes visible an important methodological point: cultural continuity depends not only on movement vocabulary but on whether explanations, terms, memories, and pedagogical relations remain available alongside bodily practice.

Methodologically, ethnochoreography enables these verbal and embodied dimensions to be analysed together. Following Kaeppeler (1999, 2000), the study examines movement structure, cultural function, and meaning in relation to performance context, while Nahachewsky's (1995) distinction between participatory and presentational modes helps clarify changing performer-audience relationships. The framework therefore asks not which context is more authentic, but how movement, music, space, oral explanation, and audience orientation combine differently across settings and with what consequences for the embodied negotiation of masculinity.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic approach informed by ethnochoreography to examine how masculinity is embodied and interpreted through *Ajat Laki Iban* across ritual/communal and public performance settings. Fieldwork was conducted in 2025 in Nanga Tutong, Lubok Antu, Sarawak, with additional observation of selected public performances at the Sarawak Cultural Village (SCV), Kuching. Nanga Tutong provided access to longhouse-based performance and locally situated practitioner explanations, whereas the SCV material enabled comparison with a public heritage environment characterised by a frontal audience relationship and presentational demands.

The field record used for this article does not preserve a uniform count of performance events or a single continuous fieldwork duration. For that reason, the article treats the evidence as a bounded, situated comparative corpus rather than as an exhaustive survey of *Ajat Laki Iban* performance. For the present analysis, SCV sequences were retained when *Ajat Laki Iban* was clearly identifiable, bodily projection and spatial orientation were visible, and the material could be compared with named movement motifs or performance qualities documented in the Nanga Tutong corpus. Claims are restricted to patterns that can be traced to interviews, field observation, or audiovisual material available in this corpus.

Six Iban cultural practitioners were purposively selected because of their long-term involvement in the practice, interpretation, or transmission of *Ajat Laki Iban*. Rather than treating all participants as equivalent informants, the analysis differentiates their knowledge positions where the field record makes those positions explicit. Table 1 summarises the participant roles that can be documented from the available research corpus. Exact ages and years of practice were not consistently retained in the field record and are therefore not reconstructed retrospectively; this reporting limitation is addressed below.

Table 1. Participant Knowledge Roles and Evidentiary Contribution

Participant/sour	Documented role or authority	Documented context	Primary contribution to analysis
Entirong Bayang	Tuai local authority	Rumah; cultural	Nanga Tutong Emic origin narrative; explanation of <i>Ngentak Kaki / ajat pulai ngayau</i>
Liew Naka	Cultural practitioner performer	Community performance context; specific affiliation not stated in the article record	Preservation discourse; embodied experience of <i>Entepa</i>
Naga Buda	Experienced practitioner with community public-stage experience	Lubok Antu and Kuching/SCV comparative experience	<i>Ayun Lundai</i> , stage adaptation, schools and competitions
Brinyie Pigan	Cultural practitioner knowledge holder	Specific affiliation not stated in the article record	Intergenerational transmission and continuity
Participants 5-6	Experienced dancers / cultural practitioners	Participant pool; profiles not individually quoted	Corroborative interview material within the coded corpus

Note. The table reports only roles documented in the available field record. Age and exact years of practice were not consistently recorded and are not inferred.

Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, field notes, photographs, and video documentation. Participant observation was the primary mode of inquiry and focused on movement execution, musical accompaniment, spatial organisation, bodily projection, and performer-audience relations. Interviews explored participants' understandings of masculinity, ritual responsibility, origin and movement narratives, bodily experience, and changing performance contexts. The oral material therefore comprises several forms of testimony rather than a single genre: origin narrative, movement explanation, experiential account, performance memory, and statements about transmission.

The recorded quotations preserve the wording available in the field corpus, which includes Malay discourse and Iban lexical items, sometimes in code-mixed form. Because interview-language choice was not systematically logged for each participant, the article does not retrospectively assign one language to the entire interview corpus. Iban terms are retained where translation could flatten culturally specific meaning, and English translations are author-produced. During revision, translations were checked against the recorded wording for semantic consistency, but no independent back-translation or participant-checking procedure is claimed. Oral statements are therefore interpreted as situated accounts and are not treated as unmediated historical evidence.

Analysis combined inductive qualitative coding with an operationalised ethnochoreographic procedure. The primary units were (a) named movement motifs, (b) phrase-level movement sequences where the relation among motifs could be observed, (c) spatial formation and orientation, and (d) the relation of movement to musical framing and performer-audience organisation. Interview transcripts and field notes were coded for embodiment, masculine values, cosmological or historical explanation, transmission, performance context, and claims of continuity or adaptation. Audiovisual materials were then reviewed for movement amplitude, posture, travelling range, orientation, and synchronisation with musical accompaniment.

Comparative interpretation proceeded only where a performance dimension could be evidenced in both contexts. The corpus supports comparison of performance purpose, audience orientation, movement projection, spatial orientation, and aspects of rhythmic framing. It does not support systematic cross-context claims about exact duration, complete sequence order, costume change, or dramaturgical restructuring; these dimensions are therefore identified as evidentiary limits rather than inferred. Movement meanings were further classified according to evidentiary status: direct participant explanation, repeated interview association, field-observation inference, or researcher interpretive synthesis. This procedure was used to prevent interpretive claims from being presented as emic meanings when direct testimony was absent.

As an Iban researcher, the first author occupied an insider position that facilitated access to community members and culturally embedded explanations. Insider status also created risks of treating familiar concepts as self-evident, reproducing deference to senior knowledge holders, or reading local narratives as community-wide truths. Reflexive analysis therefore distinguished between the authority of a speaker and the scope of a claim. For example, the Tuai Rumah's account is treated as locally authoritative in Nanga Tutong but not as proof of a single Iban-wide origin narrative. Interpretations were cross-read against observation, other participant accounts, and audiovisual evidence where available, and uncorroborated associations were qualified rather than universalised.

Ethical procedures included informed consent, voluntary participation, and respect for Indigenous cultural knowledge. The manuscript reproduces only material contained within the consented research corpus and does not claim access to or disclose knowledge identified as restricted or sacred. Identifiable photographs and translated quotations are treated as part of that documented corpus. At the same time, the available article record does not separately document image-specific consent language, which is recognised as a reporting limitation rather than retrospectively reconstructed.

Result and Discussion

Embodying Iban Masculinity through Ajat Laki Iban

The ritual and communal performance material documented in Nanga Tutong indicates that masculinity is locally articulated through the interaction of disciplined movement, communal responsibility, and cosmological explanation. This formulation is deliberately site-specific. The evidence supports an account of how participants in the documented Nanga Tutong corpus understand and enact *Ajat Laki Iban*; it does not establish that identical movement meanings or narratives operate across all Iban longhouses or regions. The relationship between the dance and local cosmological knowledge was most explicitly articulated by Entirong Bayang, the Tuai Rumah of Nanga Tutong. In explaining the origin of the dance, he stated:

"Ajat Laki lain dari segi patah, uwa sebab kenapa begitu sebab mesti ada perbezaan... tempat asal kita di Nanga Tutong ini telah diajar oleh Orang Panggau. Gendang Pampat, Ajat Laki dan Ajat Indu itu semua diajar oleh Orang Panggau."

Author's translation: "Ajat Laki differs from Ajat Indu in its movement patterns and bodily movements because each dance has its own identity. The Ajat Laki tradition in Nanga Tutong was originally transmitted by the Orang Panggau. Gendang Pampat, Ajat Laki, and Ajat Indu were all inherited from the teachings of the Orang Panggau."

This statement is treated here as an emic origin narrative rather than as historical verification. Entirong Bayang's position as Tuai Rumah gives the account particular local authority, but the study did not collect a systematic comparative corpus of origin narratives across families or longhouses. The analytical importance of the *Orang Panggau* account therefore lies in how it locates movement within ancestral and cosmological legitimacy in Nanga Tutong, not in establishing a singular historical origin for all *Ajat Laki Iban* practice. Entirong Bayang also linked the stamping movement to courage through the locally remembered expression *ajat pulai ngayau*:

"...tapak depan kaki dihentak ke lantai itu adalah tanda kita berani berlawan ataupun digelar ajat pulai ngayau."

Author's translation: "...the front sole of the foot is firmly stamped onto the ground as a sign of bravery and readiness to face conflict. This movement is known as ajat pulai ngayau because it is associated in local memory with the courage of returning from ngayau."

The reference to *ngayau* is interpreted as a locally remembered symbolic association voiced by one senior knowledge holder, not as evidence that the present movement reenacts or historically verifies headhunting practice. This distinction avoids literalising a complex historical institution through a single contemporary explanation. What the quotation directly supports is a local association between forceful stamping, courage, and remembered masculine responsibility. Liew Naka offered a different kind of evidence by describing *Ajat Laki Iban* as inherited custom and by reflecting on the bodily experience of *Entepa*:

"Bagi saya Ajat kita Iban ini perlu disimpan sebab memang adat asal kita Iban yang turun-temurun dari nenek moyang."

Author's translation: "For me, Ajat Laki must be preserved because it is part of Iban customary tradition passed down from our ancestors through successive generations."

"Pada saya, memang saya ada rasa kekuatan pada diri saya apabila waktu *Entepa* dalam Ajat dan gerak saya itu lebih bersemangat."

Author's translation: "I genuinely experience a sense of inner strength when performing the Entepa movement, and my movements become more spirited and confident."

The contrast between these accounts is analytically useful. Entirong Bayang speaks from a position of local authority about origin and symbolic meaning, whereas Liew Naka describes lived bodily experience. Together they show that masculinity is not supported by one type of evidence alone: it is narrated through community memory and experienced through the performing body.

Field observation adds a third evidentiary layer. In the documented *ruai* performance represented in Figure 1, movement was characterised by measured footwork, controlled posture, relatively restrained arm projection, and close coordination with the *Taboh Ayun Lundai* musical frame. The performance occupied a contained longhouse environment rather than a frontal theatrical stage, and the observational emphasis was on balance, composure, and continuity with the surrounding community. The field record does not provide a metrically measured tempo or a standardised dancer-count comparison, so the interpretation is restricted to observable movement quality and spatial relation rather than quantitative choreometrics.

Taken together, the Nanga Tutong material supports a situated interpretation of masculinity as embodied through disciplined presence, locally authorised meaning, and communal responsibility. The claim is therefore one of patterned association within this corpus rather than an assertion that ritual performance everywhere among the Iban produces the same masculine meanings.



Figure 1. Ritual performance of Ajat Laki Iban performed by Entirong Bayang.
Source: Fieldwork, 2025.

Embodied Masculinity through the Core Movements of Ajat Laki Iban

The movement corpus suggests that masculine meanings are produced through an integrated relation among technique, bodily control, musical responsiveness, oral interpretation, and performance context. To avoid assigning fixed meanings to every motif, the analysis distinguishes direct emic explanation from researcher synthesis. *Ngentak Kaki* and *Entepa* are

supported by quoted participant testimony; *Bejalai* is supported by repeated interview association but requires caution because *bejalai* is also a wider Iban social institution; the remaining motifs are described primarily at the level of observed movement function unless direct verbal evidence is available.

Ngentak Kaki provides the clearest example of a movement-specific emic interpretation. Entirong Bayang's explanation links the stamping action with courage and remembered *ngayau* imagery. Ethnochoreographically, the movement also creates a grounded bodily presence through controlled weight placement. The masculine interpretation is therefore supported by both a participant explanation and the observable physical quality of the motif, although the historical *ngayau* association remains an oral-memory claim rather than historical proof.

Bejalai requires a different level of caution. Interview material associated the measured forward-walking motif with perseverance, experience, and social maturity. Because *bejalai* also refers to a broader Iban institution and cultural idea of journeying, the article does not treat these values as intrinsic semantics automatically contained in the movement. Instead, the movement-specific interpretation is presented as a local association articulated within the interview corpus, where a familiar social concept provides a frame for understanding bodily travel.

Entepa is supported most directly by Liew Naka's description of 'inner strength' and heightened spirit while performing. Here masculinity is not inferred from a symbolic code alone; it emerges through the performer's felt experience of responsiveness and confidence. The motif therefore demonstrates how embodied identity can be generated in performance rather than existing fully formed prior to movement.

For *Buka Uwa*, *Gilik Pala*, *Dedat Kaki*, and *Nempap Tikai*, the available corpus supports observations about posture, spatial awareness, rhythm, and coordination more strongly than fixed emic masculine meanings. Earlier formulations that assigned definitive values to these motifs are therefore revised as researcher interpretive synthesis. In particular, the phrase *enda alah ayu* is not retained as a movement-specific explanation because the available interview record does not provide adequate source attribution or contextual evidence for using it in that way.

Table 2. Core Movements, Evidence Base, and Analytical Status

Core movement	Primary evidence	Interpretive reading	Evidentiary status
<i>Ngentak Kaki</i>	Entirong Bayang quotation; field observation	Grounded presence and courage; local association with <i>ajat pulai ngayau</i>	Direct emic explanation + observation
<i>Buka Uwa</i>	Movement observation	Bodily openness/readiness within sequence	Researcher synthesis; no fixed emic meaning claimed
<i>Bejalai</i>	Repeated interview association; movement observation	Perseverance and maturity as a local association with wider <i>bejalai</i> concept	Interview association; not intrinsic movement semantics
<i>Gilik Pala</i>	Movement observation	Spatial attentiveness and orientation	Researcher synthesis
<i>Entepa</i>	Liew Naka quotation; movement observation	Felt strength, confidence, and embodied responsiveness	Direct experiential testimony + observation
<i>Dedat Kaki</i>	Movement observation	Controlled strength and rhythmic discipline	Researcher synthesis
<i>Nempap Tikai</i>	Movement observation	Contribution to sequence closure/order and spatial regulation	Researcher synthesis; protective symbolism not asserted

Note. The table distinguishes participant-articulated meanings from researcher interpretation so that analytical synthesis is not presented as uniform emic semantics.

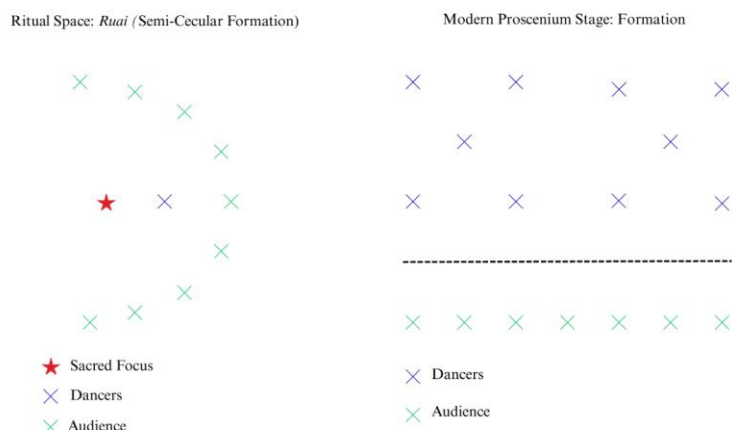


Figure 2. Illustrative floor patterns of Ajat Laki Iban in ritual/semi-circular and modern proscenium-stage formations.

Source: Ramles Radin Suradi.

Oral Explanation and Intergenerational Transmission

The interviews repeatedly describe *Ajat Laki Iban* as transmitted across generations, but the available evidence supports some mechanisms more clearly than others. Brinyie Pingan explained that elders performed so that younger people could watch, learn, and continue the tradition:

“Orang tua dahulu mempersembahkan Ajat supaya anak-anak muda dapat melihat, belajar dan meneruskan adat ini. Kalau tidak diwariskan, lama-kelamaan ia akan hilang.”

Author’s translation: “In the past, the elders performed Ajat so that the younger generation could observe, learn, and continue the tradition. Without transmission from one generation to the next, the tradition would eventually disappear.”

This testimony directly supports observation, participation, and repeated bodily practice as mechanisms of transmission. The interviews themselves also demonstrate a verbal dimension: senior practitioners explain origin, movement associations, bodily feeling, and the need for continuity. However, the field record does not contain a systematically observed teaching session from which detailed patterns of correction, apprenticeship, kinship-based authorisation, or formal ritual instruction can be reconstructed. The article therefore distinguishes between mechanisms evidenced in the corpus - observation, bodily repetition, verbal explanation, and practitioner modelling - and pedagogical mechanisms that require further documentation.

This distinction also matters for public and educational settings. Naga Buda reported that Ajat is now performed in schools and competitions, but the present data do not establish whether *Orang Panggau* narratives, cosmological explanations, Iban terminology, or ritual restrictions are transmitted in those settings to the same degree as movement. Public visibility should therefore not be equated with complete transmission of the verbal and cosmological knowledge surrounding the dance.

Public Performance and Continuity with Adaptation

The public-performance material indicates a recontextualisation of embodied masculinity rather than either complete preservation or wholesale cultural replacement. Naga Buda, who has experience in community and public-stage settings, described a difference between Lubok Antu and Kuching performances:

“Kalau di Lubok Antu, rentak Ajatnya *Ayun Lundai* dan geraknya lebih halus. Bila dipersembahkan di Kuching, ada sedikit perubahan supaya sesuai dengan persembahan pentas.”

Author's translation: "In Lubok Antu, the dance follows the traditional Ayun Lundai rhythm and the movements are more refined. When it is performed in Kuching, certain adaptations are made so that the dance is more suitable for stage performance."

The quotation supports continuity with adaptation rather than the stronger claim that cultural values 'remain intact'. The field corpus shows recognisable movement vocabulary and practitioner references to *Ayun Lundai*, while observation of selected SCV performances shows wider arm projection, larger travelling movements, and stronger frontal orientation toward the audience. These are changes in movement quality and spatial presentation. The available data do not establish that sequence order, duration, costume, or dramaturgy are unchanged across contexts, and the article therefore makes no categorical claim on those dimensions.

Field observations similarly distinguish the two documented environments. Nanga Tutong performances were characterised by measured pacing, relatively restrained bodily projection, and close performer-community relations in the *ruai*. Selected SCV performances foregrounded visibility through expanded gesture, stage-fronted orientation, and a public audience relationship. These differences alter how masculine qualities become perceptible: composure and ritual responsibility are emphasised in the longhouse corpus, whereas public performance makes bodily confidence and cultural representation more visually explicit. The values are not treated as identical in expression, but as selectively rearticulated through context. Naga Buda also noted the expansion of Ajat into schools and competitions:

"Sekarang Ajat ini kita telah bawa ke sekolah dan dipersembahkan dalam pelbagai pertandingan. Ada juga yang menjadikannya lebih kontemporari supaya generasi muda terus mempelajarinya."

Author's translation: "Today, Ajat has been introduced into schools and performed in various competitions. Some choreographers have also adapted it into more contemporary forms so that younger generations will continue to learn and appreciate it."

These settings complicate a simple ritual/public binary. Schools, community festivals, competitions, and heritage stages can combine pedagogical, communal, and presentational logics in different proportions. They demonstrate that *Ajat Laki Iban* circulates through a continuum of contexts rather than two sealed categories. At the same time, because these intermediate settings were reported rather than systematically observed in the present study, the analysis treats them as evidence of expanding performance ecology, not as fully documented comparative cases.

From a performance-studies perspective, this pattern is consistent with heritage as recontextualisation rather than simple preservation (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Muzaini, 2017). The contribution of the present study is to locate recontextualisation in bodily practice: movement amplitude, travelling range, and audience orientation change how masculinity is displayed, while selected named motifs and practitioner-articulated values provide points of continuity. The defensible formulation is therefore continuity with adaptation, supported at specific dimensions rather than a claim of complete intactness.



Figure 3. Comparison of documented Nanga Tutong and Sarawak Cultural Village performances, illustrating differences in bodily projection and audience orientation.

Source: Fieldwork, 2025.

Table 3. Situated Comparison of Ritual/Communal and Public Performance Dimensions

Performance dimension	Nanga corpus	Tutong	Selected corpus	SCV	Evidence qualification	/
Performance purpose	Ritual/communal obligation and participation	and	Cultural presentation to a public audience	to a	Interview observation	+
Audience orientation	Community and ritual participants; <i>ruai</i> -centred relations		Frontal audience	public	Observation	
Movement quality	Measured, restrained projection		Wider projection and larger travelling movement	arm	Observation; no quantitative measure	amplitude
Spatial orientation	Contained/ <i>ruai</i> -centred		Stage-fronted/proscenium-oriented		Observation + Figure 3	
Rhythmic framing	Close relation to <i>Ayun Lundai / Taboh Ayun Lundai</i> in local account		Adapted presentation while retaining recognisable rhythmic reference in practitioner account	while	Naga observation	Buda +
Sequence, duration, costume, dramaturgy	Not systematically compared		Not systematically compared		Insufficient comparative evidence; no continuity claim made	
Masculinity	Locally articulated through discipline, courage, ritual/communal responsibility		Rearticulated through confidence and cultural representation	visible and	Interpretive synthesis based on interview + observation	+
Intermediate contexts	Community festivals and teaching may overlap with ritual/pedagogical logics		Schools, competitions, heritage events may overlap with pedagogical/presentational logics		Reported by Naga Buda; not systematically observed	

Note. The table compares only dimensions supported by the documented corpus and explicitly marks dimensions for which systematic cross-context evidence is unavailable.

Negotiating Masculinity across Performance Contexts

Across the documented cases, masculinity is best understood as a situated embodied process rather than a fixed cultural attribute. Ritual/communal and public performances do not produce two completely separate masculinities; they provide different performance conditions through which overlapping values are made visible. In Nanga Tutong, participants foregrounded ancestral continuity, communal responsibility, courage, and disciplined bodily presence. In selected public settings, wider projection and frontal staging placed greater emphasis on visual legibility and cultural representation. Performance context therefore conditions embodied masculinity without mechanically determining it.

This interpretation also reframes cultural continuity. Continuity is not demonstrated by an unchanged choreography, nor can it be inferred solely from the persistence of named movements. It emerges through a combination of recognisable bodily vocabulary, practitioner-articulated values, oral explanation, community transmission, and the capacity to adapt to new audiences. Conversely, adaptation is not automatically evidence of cultural loss. The crucial analytical issue is which dimensions change, which remain locally recognised, and which forms of knowledge are no longer evidenced when the dance moves between settings.

Oral tradition is especially important in this respect. The Nanga Tutong corpus shows that movement can be accompanied by origin narratives, remembered associations, and experiential explanations that position bodily practice within a local moral and cosmological

world. The public-performance data demonstrate continuity of bodily and presentational elements more clearly than continuity of this verbal contextualisation. The study therefore does not claim that public staging carries the full narrative and cosmological repertoire of longhouse transmission. That question requires direct observation of teaching, narration, and terminology in schools, competitions, festivals, and other settings.

The rejection of an authenticity binary must also be accompanied by recognition of intra-Iban variation. Nanga Tutong's movement vocabulary and oral narratives are treated as a situated tradition, not as a normative template for all Iban communities. This position strengthens rather than weakens the argument: it shifts the analytical concern from defining the singular authentic *Ajat Laki Iban* toward examining how communities maintain cultural legitimacy through locally grounded combinations of movement, memory, authority, and adaptation.

Figure 4 synthesises this argument as a reciprocal rather than linear model. Ritual/longhouse performance, public/heritage performance, community transmission, and contemporary pedagogical settings are shown as interacting contexts around embodied practice. The model avoids implying that public performance is an endpoint of ritual transformation. Instead, adaptation can feed back into community practice, while community authority and oral explanation can shape how public performance is interpreted and taught.

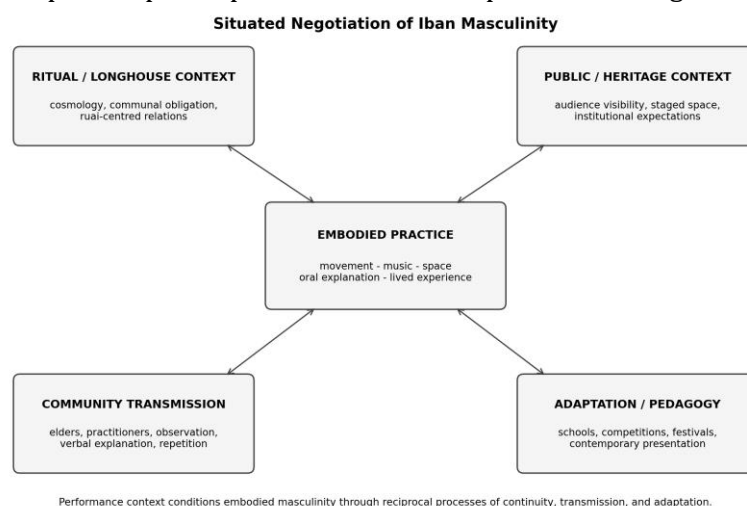


Figure 4. Reciprocal conceptual synthesis of the situated negotiation of Iban masculinity through Ajat Laki Iban.

Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis based on the documented field corpus.

Several limitations delimit the claims of this study. First, the interview corpus comprises six cultural practitioners, and the article record does not consistently preserve participant ages, exact years of practice, or equally detailed profiles for all participants. Second, the analysis is site-specific to Nanga Tutong/Lubok Antu and selected SCV performance material; variation across other Iban longhouses, regions, and lineages remains outside the evidence. Third, the field record does not provide a uniform event count, exact fieldwork duration, or equally dense access to all ritual and public contexts. Fourth, insider positionality facilitated interpretation but may also have shaped deference, taken-for-granted assumptions, and access to particular knowledge networks. Fifth, oral accounts were not collected as a comparative oral-history corpus across longhouses, and author-produced translations were not independently back-translated. Finally, the public-performance data do not systematically document changes in duration, costume, full sequence order, dramaturgy, or the retention of verbal/cosmological explanations in schools and competitions. The study therefore seeks analytical transferability through clearly delimited mechanisms rather than representative generalisation to Iban performance as a whole.

Conclusion

This study has examined how masculinity is embodied and negotiated through *Ajat Laki Iban* in a situated Nanga Tutong corpus and selected public performance contexts. The analysis demonstrates that masculine meaning is not inherent in movement form alone. It emerges

through the interaction of bodily technique, musical relation, local oral explanation, communal responsibility, and performance context. Ritual/communal and public performances differ in audience orientation, movement projection, spatial organisation, and performance purpose, yet the available evidence also shows recognisable movement vocabulary and practitioner-articulated values that support a formulation of continuity with adaptation.

The study also refines how Indigenous cosmology and oral tradition are used as evidence. The *Orang Panggau* account is treated as a locally authoritative emic origin narrative rather than historical verification, while the association between stamping and *ngayau* is approached as remembered symbolic meaning rather than a literal reenactment of headhunting. Similarly, *bejalai* is interpreted cautiously as a movement association shaped by a wider Iban social concept, and unsupported fixed meanings are not assigned to motifs for which direct testimony is absent. These distinctions strengthen the concept of Indigenous embodied knowledge by making its evidentiary basis explicit.

Theoretically, the article contributes to dance anthropology and Indigenous performance studies by placing ethnochoreography in dialogue with oral-tradition source criticism. Masculinity is shown as embodied through repeated practice but interpreted through locally situated systems of authority and memory. Butlerian performativity is therefore useful only as a secondary comparative language; it does not supersede Indigenous concepts, practitioner explanations, or community-specific cosmological relations. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of distinguishing direct emic explanation, experiential testimony, observational inference, and researcher synthesis when interpreting movement.

The findings also challenge a rigid ritual-versus-public binary. Public presentation does not necessarily signal cultural loss, just as ritual location does not guarantee unchanged continuity. Schools, competitions, festivals, longhouses, and heritage stages form an overlapping performance ecology in which movement, pedagogy, representation, and cultural authority can be recombined. Future research should therefore undertake comparative oral-history and ethnochoreographic work across multiple longhouses, document variant origin narratives, observe intergenerational teaching sessions directly, and examine how verbal explanations, Iban terminology, ritual restrictions, and movement practices change across ritual, school, festival, competition, and digital settings. Such work would allow the reciprocal model proposed here to be tested beyond the situated evidence of Nanga Tutong and selected public performances.

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