

Carved, Uncarved, Re-Carved: A Deconstructive Perspective on Sarawak Woodcarving

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Sarawak woodcarving has long been discussed within fixed cultural, ritual, and ethnographic frameworks that emphasize preservation, authenticity, and continuity of tradition. While such readings are important, they risk positioning woodcarving as a static cultural artefact rather than a dynamic and evolving practice. This paper applies deconstruction as a critical and methodological approach to examine Sarawak woodcarving through three interrelated conditions: carved, uncarved, and re-carved, drawing conceptually from Derrida's critique of fixed meaning. These conditions function as analytical lenses to examine how meaning is constructed, disrupted, and reconstituted through material presence, absence, and transformation. Drawing on arts-informed qualitative methods and visual inquiry, the study foregrounds tacit knowledge embedded in material, process, and erasure. The findings suggest that Sarawak woodcarving operates as a fluid cultural text in which meanings are continually negotiated rather than fixed, repositioning woodcarving as an active and contemporary cultural practice rather than a closed tradition.

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INTRODUCTION

Artworks are often perceived as carriers of fixed meanings embedded within their formal, symbolic, and cultural attributes. Such assumptions have been widely critiqued in visual culture and art education scholarship, where meaning is understood as contingent upon context, audience, and lived experience (Rolling 2017). In art practices, meaning is not inherent or stable but produced through interaction between the artwork, its maker (artist), its material conditions (medium), and its viewers (audiences). Art is not directly accurate or retain its original context, but rather frequently is further extended by the practitioners, based on how the artist responds to the subject, which is the 'process' often known as: inspiration, aspiration, representation, or adaptation. These processes have stimulated the motivation and creativity of artists and creative practitioners (Mason and Robinson 2011). The study also engages with the Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction, as an analytical perspective rather than a prescriptive framework on the Sarawak

woodcarving. Deconstruction will be as a critical lens in a way that remains attentive to the indigenous knowledge system and also cultural meaning-making.

In the context of Sarawak woodcarving, meanings are plural and continuously shaped by changing socio-cultural circumstances. In Sarawak, woodcarving occupies a significant position as a visual and material culture, particularly among indigenous communities such as the Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, and Orang Ulu (Mashman 1994; Appleton 2012). Traditionally, carvings functioned as architectural components, ritual objects, status markers, and symbolic carriers of cosmological beliefs (Mitot *et al.* 2016). Some of the carvings were not produced for general consumption but for specific individuals, often to honor those of high social standing. These cultural expressions are also preserved and passed down as the inherited heirlooms embodying lineage, signifying authority and the communal memory (Aditiawarman and Putra 2024). In recent decades, Sarawak woodcarving has shifted from sacred and communal objects to commodities and contemporary art forms. This change is driven by increasing commercialization, where carvings once made for ritual or social purposes are now produced for tourist markets, galleries, and exhibitions. As a result, there are changes in scale, motifs, and production, with more focus on aesthetic appeal and portability rather than ritual meaning.

Figure 1 shows the woodcarving sculptures, known as *pentik* among the Iban community, captured at the Ulu Kedoh, Roban, Sarawak, Malaysia that were carved for ritual purposes as spiritual guardians and traditionally placed near longhouses or at road junctions leading into the longhouse area.



Fig. 1. The woodcarving sculptures captured at the Ulu Kedoh, Roban, Sarawak, Malaysia known as *pentik* (authors' photograph)

Figure 2 shows the *kenyalang* (hornbill) woodcarving sculptures from Lingga and Engkeramut, Sarawak, Malaysia that were originally made for *Gawai Kenyalang* to honor *sengalang burung*. Today, they are often produced to commemorate individuals or as souvenirs in Sarawak.



Fig. 2. The *kenyalang* (hornbill) woodcarving sculptures from Lingga and Engkeramut, Sarawak, Malaysia (authors' photographs)

Meanwhile, materiality played a crucial role in reinforcing these meanings. Wood selection, carving techniques, motif composition, and placement within architectural space collectively established carvings as active cultural agents rather than decorative objects. However, while woodcarving practices continue to exist, their purposes have shifted in response to contemporary needs. Traditional carvings once reserved for ritual or elite use are now frequently produced as ornaments, architectural embellishments, souvenirs, or contemporary artworks, reflecting broader socio-economic and cultural transformations (Mashman 1994; Castaldi and Mendonça 2024). Figure 3 shows the *Pua Kumbu* wooden hangers, samples from the author's (Sinin Hamdan) own collections. Figure 4 shows the *belia'* (woven beaters) from Lingga, Sarawak Malaysia, a weaving tool known among the Iban as *Kayau Kumang*, symbolizing a woman's skill and status.



Fig. 3. The *Pua Kumbu* wooden hangers, from Sinin Hamdan's own collection



Fig. 4. The *belia'* (woven beaters) from Lingga, Sarawak Malaysia, a weaving tool known among the Iban as *Kayau Kumang*, symbolizing women's skill and status

A further point to consider is the growing emphasis on individual authorship in contemporary woodcarving is linked to changes in education, market exposure, and global cultural exchange. With greater access to formal education, tourism markets, and digital platforms, artisans are no longer seen only as cultural transmitters but also as creative individuals. This shift shows a move from collective production toward more personal expression, especially when carvings are made for sale or exhibition. While earlier practices were closely tied to communal roles and meanings, current practices reflect a more flexible balance between shared cultural identity and individual creativity.

Therefore, this study reconsiders Sarawak woodcarving as a cultural practice whose meanings are not fixed but continually shaped by context, use, and interpretation. Rather than reading woodcarving through established oppositions, such as sacred *versus* profane, traditional *versus* contemporary, or functional *versus* decorative, the paper adopts deconstruction to understand how meaning is produced through change, and reinterpretation. Attention is given not only to what is visibly carved, but also to what is absent, fragmented, or transformed, as these conditions reveal tacit knowledge embedded in making practices. Thus, Sarawak woodcarving is positioned as a dynamic cultural text in which meaning is continuously negotiated rather than preserved as a fixed tradition. Through these terms “carved,” “uncarved,” and “re-carved” as well purposely for conceptual conditions, not intended as literal descriptions. Even “Uncarved” does not refer to the absence of carving in a physical sense, but to moments of omission, erasure, or conceptual absence in which meaning is displaced or silenced. These terms function as analytical constructs that enable the examination of presence, absence, and transformation within woodcarving practices.

DECONSTRUCTION AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

Deconstruction is considered as the way to observe, as the means to extend the notion of fixed meaning by foregrounding instability, difference, and contradiction within texts, images, and cultural practices. Derrida (1976) argues that meaning is never singular or original but is continually deferred and produced through relational differences. When

applied to visual and material culture, deconstruction unsettles assumptions of authenticity and originality, revealing how meaning is shaped through cultural hierarchies, institutional framing, and processes of inclusion and exclusion. In the context of Sarawak woodcarving, this perspective is particularly relevant, as carving motifs, forms, and material practices are embedded within indigenous cosmologies, social structures, and ritual systems specific to communities such as the Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau and Orang Ulu. These symbolic systems are often not fully legible to external audiences, and when woodcarvings are encountered outside their original cultural settings, their meanings may be reinterpreted through aesthetic, institutional, or contemporary frameworks that differ from those of the communities in which they originate.

When Sarawak woodcarvings are displaced from their original cultural contexts, such as through museum display, heritage classification, or removal from ceremonial and architectural use, their meanings become unstable and open for reinterpretation based on external aesthetic, academic, or institutional frameworks (Duncan and Wallach 2013). From a deconstructive standpoint, this instability does not signal the loss of meaning but exposes how meaning in Sarawak woodcarving is continually negotiated rather than fixed. However, the application of deconstruction within this study does not assume direct cultural equivalence between Western philosophical traditions and indigenous knowledge systems. Rather, its compatibility lies in its openness to multiplicity, contradiction, and non-fixed meaning, which resonates with the fluid and adaptive nature of many indigenous practices. Instead of replacing local epistemologies, deconstruction is used to foreground the instability already present within cultural production, allowing indigenous practices to be read as dynamic rather than static. This compatibility is therefore methodological rather than cultural, operating at the level of interpretation rather than ontology.

DOMINANT NARRATIVES AND INDIGENOUS ART

The indigenous art practices highlight how dominant narratives are frequently constructed through museums, academic discourse, and heritage policies (Czerwińska 2024). These narratives are shaped by power hierarchies that determine which meanings are legitimized. In the case of Sarawak woodcarving, institutional representations often prioritize aesthetic value, craftsmanship, or historical significance while marginalizing spiritual, functional, and communal dimensions emphasized by practitioners themselves.

Ethnographic and preservationist approaches have significantly shaped how indigenous woodcarving is represented, often framing it as ‘traditional’, ‘authentic’, and unchanging. Although these approaches aim to safeguard cultural heritage, they risk romanticizing and exoticizing indigenous practices, thereby reducing living traditions to static cultural artefacts (Cant 2015). From a deconstructive perspective, transformation within tradition should not be understood as cultural loss but as an active process of meaning-making that reflects the ongoing life and adaptability of indigenous practices.

The tension between preservation, exoticization, and meaning-making can be further illuminated through discussions of modernist engagements with non-Western visual cultures, most notably Pablo Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger (O.J.)* (1911–1914). Art historians have widely noted that Picasso was encountered through ethnographic displays rather than through the cultural contexts from which these objects originated. Within early modernist discourse, such appropriations were often framed as innovative and radical, yet they simultaneously

relied on the abstraction and decontextualization of non-Western cultural forms. As a result, the original symbolic, ritual, and cosmological meanings embedded in these forms were rendered inaccessible, while their visual qualities were reinterpreted through Western artistic frameworks. From a deconstructive perspective, *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. no. 1) exposes how cultural forms are transformed when displaced from their original contexts and re-inscribed within dominant artistic narratives. This process parallels the risks identified in ethnographic and preservationist approaches to indigenous woodcarving, where efforts to document or safeguard tradition may inadvertently fix practices as static, exotic, or timeless (Cant 2015). In both cases, meaning is not lost but reconfigured through hierarchical systems of representation that privilege certain interpretations over others.

Figure 5 shows the *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. no. 1) (The Young Ladies of Avignon), originally titled “The Brothel of Avignon”, is a large-scale oil painting produced by the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso. This work illustrates how cultural forms are detached from their original symbolic contexts and reconstituted within dominant artistic narratives. *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. no. 1) is included as a conceptual reference for the uncarved and re-carved conditions, illustrating how cultural forms are decontextualized and re-inscribed within dominant narratives, a process that parallels institutional framings of Sarawak woodcarving where meaning is reconfigured rather than lost.



Fig. 5. The *Les Femmes d'Alger* (The Young Ladies of Avignon), originally titled *The Brothel of Avignon*

DECONSTRUCTIVE CONCEPTS IN ART AND MATERIAL CULTURE

The key of the deconstructive concept is to emphasize the relevance to art and material culture, including presence *versus* absence, whole *versus* fragment, and stability *versus* instability (Derrida 1976). Rather than functioning as fixed oppositions, these binaries reveal the internal tensions that shape how meaning is produced and negotiated

within cultural practices. In craft and indigenous art contexts, such tensions highlight how tradition is not closed or homogeneous, but rather continually reworked through processes of adaptation, reinterpretation, and transformation. Change, in this sense, is not an external disruption imposed upon tradition but an inherent condition of its continuity.

Within indigenous craft practices, moments of mixing, overlap, and reinterpretation are often described as hybridity or appropriation that later generate uncertainty around authorship, authenticity, and cultural ownership. From a deconstructive perspective, these conditions are not merely signs of confusion or loss but indicate active sites of meaning-making, shaped by shifting social, economic, and institutional contexts. Meaning emerges not only through material presence but also through absence, fragmentation, and reconfiguration, particularly when objects circulate beyond their original cultural settings. Woodcarving can therefore be understood as a cultural text shaped by context, power relations, and changing modes of representation. As woodcarvings move from ritual or architectural use into museum collections, tourist markets, or contemporary art contexts, their meanings are not erased but re-inscribed through new interpretive frameworks and value systems (Mashman 1994; Castaldi and Mendonça 2024). Deconstruction allows these transitions to be read not as a linear loss of authenticity but as a series of negotiated transformations in which cultural meaning remains dynamic, contested, and continuously evolving.

EXPERIMENTAL

Natural species that once or now inhabit the forest are portrayed in this artistic manifestation. Local artisans often use Indian mahogany and *kempas* in their creations. These species' physical and sensory attributes demonstrate an empirical selection of woods with good workability, dimensional stability, and aesthetic qualities suitable for artistic expression. *Kempas* wood is a dense, medium hardwood with an air-dry density that typically ranges from 770 to 1,050 kg/m³ (or ~880 kg/m³ on average), while wood from Sabah and Sarawak can be much denser. It is classified as heavy timber due to its high density, which makes it suitable for durable construction like railway sleepers, flooring, and structural beams. Indian mahogany, sometimes referred to as big leaf or *Swietenia macrophylla*, is a robust, medium-density hardwood that is prized for building and furniture due to its workability and durability.

Depending on growing circumstances and moisture content, its density normally ranges from 485 to 850 kg/m³. Dried wood typically weighs about 540 kg/m³. Many varieties of natural wood are used by the Dayak people of Malaysian Borneo (Sarawak and Sabah). The primary building material for longhouses and statues is belian (Borneo ironwood, *Eusideroxylon zwageri*), which is renowned for its exceptional durability. Another timber used for large seats, sculptures, and other items is menggeris (*Koompassia* spp.).

Borneo ironwood (*Eusideroxylon zwageri*) and menggeris (*Koompassia* spp.), both indigenous to Borneo, exhibit distinct wood microstructure variances that account for their disparate characteristics. *E. zwageri* has a dense, compact structure with few, tiny vessels and thick-walled fibers, which results in limited porosity. As a result, the wood has good dimensional stability, high strength, and a strong inherent resistance to insects and decay. In contrast, *Koompassia* spp. have a more open, diffuse-porous structure with larger and more frequent vessels, moderate amounts of parenchyma, and thinner-walled fibers.

Higher permeability results from this, which facilitates drying, treating, and processing the wood. Both species have comparable multilayer cell wall architectures, but *E. zwageri* typically has a higher extractive content and a smaller microfibril angle, which increases its rigidity and durability. In general, *Koompassia* spp. offer a reasonable compromise between strength and workability, whereas *E. zwageri* is better suited for applications requiring high durability. The intentional choice of these wood species does demonstrate an inherited material intelligence, in which the carved artworks' form, symbolism, and endurance are directly shaped by physical characteristics such as density, grain, and durability.

While high-density woods such as belian (*Eusideroxylon zwageri*) present challenges in carving due to their hardness and resistance, they also offer greater durability and allow for finer detailing. To work with such materials, artisans often develop specialized techniques and tools, indicating a high level of skill and experience. The difficulty of carving dense wood may also contribute to the refinement of craftsmanship over time, where only skilled or persistent artisans continue to engage with these demanding materials.

Carved, Uncarved, and Re-Carved

Through an arts-informed qualitative study grounded in visual inquiry, selected Sarawak woodcarvings from both traditional and contemporary contexts were analyzed using visual practice as both an analytical method and a mode of knowledge production. Rather than treating these works solely as cultural artefacts or ethnographic objects, the study emphasizes spatial relationships, fragmentation, and the construction of meaning and function based on the placement of the carvings. Tacit knowledge is inferred through close visual and material analysis, including tool marks, carving sequences, surface treatments, and evidence of modification or reworking. These observable features indicate embodied skills and decision-making processes that are not always verbally articulated.

The analytical process moves iteratively between internal and external modes of engagement. Internally, the study observes the original cultural, symbolic, and material contexts of production, including intended functions, spatial placement, and relationships to indigenous cosmologies. This internal reading is followed by a stage of conceptualization and contextualization, during which visual characteristics are interpreted through deconstructive principles. Externally, the study also analyses how woodcarvings are approached, processed, and represented through contemporary practices such as museum display, documentation, reinterpretation, and artistic intervention. These stages together form an integrated analytical pathway through which meaning emerges from the interaction between original contexts, interpretive frameworks, and contemporary conditions of display or transformation. Table 1 shows the modes of engagement and analytical actions in the study of Sarawak woodcarving.

Methodological procedures are also informed by the visual inquiry approaches of Butler-Kisber (2010) and Poldma (2010), who establish visual practices as legitimate and rigorous forms of qualitative research. Through this approach, the study accesses tacit knowledge embedded in processes of making, unmaking, and reworking, which are often difficult to articulate through text alone. Analytical attention is given not only to acts of carving but also to moments of removal, simplification, and transformation, where material is discarded, reduced, or left unfinished. These gestures are interpreted as intentional and meaningful actions, rather than as indicators of absence or loss. The study also does not directly incorporate interviews or participatory engagement with local artisans. As such,

the interpretations presented should be understood as exploratory and analytically driven, rather than as definitive accounts of practitioners' perspectives. Therefore, the findings represent a conceptual reading of visual and material practices, which may differ from lived experiences within local communities.

Table 1. Modes of Engagement and Analytical Actions in the Study of Sarawak Woodcarving

Mode of Engagement	Focus Areas	Analytical Action
Internal (Origin)	Indigenous cosmologies, symbolic intent, original spatial placement, material choice	Observation: Grounding the work in its cultural and material roots
External (Transformation)	Museum displays, documentation, artistic interventions, representation	Analysis: Examining how the object is processed and reinterpreted in contemporary contexts

The analysis is structured around three conceptual conditions: carved, uncarved, and re-carved. These conditions are not treated as linear stages but are examined as overlapping and coexisting states of meaning within woodcarving practices.

- a. Carved (The Stabilized): Focuses on established forms, traditional techniques, and stabilized meanings within the original cultural context, where carvings reflect continuity, shared knowledge, and recognized symbolic functions.
- b. Uncarved (The Absent): Examines erasure, displacement, and moments of removal. It refers not only to physical absence, but also to intentional omission, reduction, or conceptual silencing of form, where meaning is produced through what is left incomplete, removed, or displaced rather than lost.
- c. Re-Carved (The Hybrid): Explores contemporary reworkings, hybridity, and artistic interventions that transform original forms into new expressions, combining traditional elements with new materials, contexts, or conceptual approaches.

In this framework, the analysis transcends a surface-level description by treating the physical attributes of Sarawak woodcarving as six 'Active Sites' of meaning-making. The process begins with material choices, where the specific wood species, grain patterns, and physical properties are seen as deliberate contributors to the work's narrative. This is extended through surface treatment, examining how textures and finishes create a 'skin' that interacts with light and touch. The compositional structure and spatial relationships further define how the elements are organized and how the object asserts its presence within an environment, whether in a traditional longhouse or a contemporary gallery. Crucially, the framework also looks at fragmentation and absence; rather than viewing missing pieces or voids as indicators of loss, it interprets these 'uncarved' moments and the reduction of material as intentional gestures that speak to erasure, displacement, and the evolving nature of the craft. Together, these sites allow the researcher to extract rich, tacit data from the physical form itself. Figure 6 shows the deconstructive visual inquiry framework.

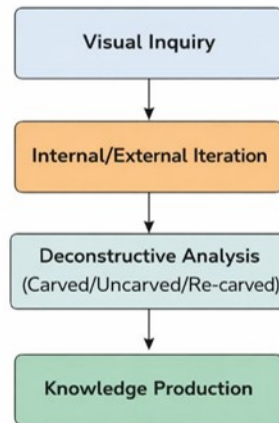


Fig. 6. Deconstructive visual inquiry framework

To analyze the uncarved condition through these six sites, the researcher shifts focus from what is physically present to the significance of what has been removed, omitted, or displaced. In terms of material choices and surface treatment, the uncarved lens looks for tool marks or raw, weathered surfaces that signify a departure from original contexts or a deliberate halting of the carving process. Compositional structure and spatial relationships are analyzed by observing how the absence of traditional motifs creates ‘negative space’, suggesting a loss of cultural continuity or a modern minimalist reinterpretation. Finally, fragmentation and absence become the primary focal points; a broken limb of a figure or a simplified geometric pattern is not viewed as a ‘damaged’ artifact, but as an active representation of the tensions between indigenous memory and contemporary erasure. This approach allows the uncarved to be read as a powerful, intentional state of meaning rather than a mere lack of form.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Carved: Constructed Meaning and Cultural Order

The carved condition refers to traditional woodcarving practices in which meaning is established through completed forms, stabilized motifs, and coherent visual narratives. In this condition, carvings assert presence, continuity, and cultural authority through their material completeness and visual clarity, such as *pentik* (Fig. 1) and *kenyalang* (Fig. 2) by the Iban, also the *Jerunei* from the Melanau. Based on these woodcarvings, the carved motifs are deliberately composed, surfaces are fully articulated, and symbolic meanings are reinforced through repetition, skilled craftsmanship, and shared communal knowledge (Aditiawarman and Putra 2024; Fang *et al.* 2024). Figure 7 shows the *Jerunei Besungau*. Figure 8 shows the *Jerunei Tuan Puteri*.

Woodcarving functions as a stabilizing cultural structure in which the act of carving operates as a form of inscription, embedding cosmological narratives, spatial hierarchies, and social values into material form (Rolling 2017). Within this condition, meaning is relatively stabilized through collective recognition, ritual use, and integration into architectural and ceremonial contexts, allowing carvings to operate as enduring visual markers of cultural continuity. For instance, the consistency of motif execution, precision of incision, and adaptation to wood grain direction demonstrate an embodied understanding

of material behavior. Such decisions, while not explicitly documented, indicate tacit knowledge accumulated through practice.



Fig. 7. The *Jerunei Besungau*



Fig. 8. The *Jerunei Tuan Puteri*

Uncarved: Absence, Erasure, and Silence

Sarawak woodcarving, when displayed outside its original cultural context, often illustrates processes of displacement and the partial erasure of functional meaning. In such instances, the uncarved or selectively carved condition foregrounds absence, loss, and contextual rupture rather than decorative incompleteness. This uncarving may occur through the simplification of motifs, removal from original ritual or architectural sites, or

shifts in function that render certain symbols inappropriate, unreadable, or culturally muted. Importantly, uncarving does not necessarily imply physical removal; it may also manifest as a conceptual absence in which original meanings are silenced, overwritten, or rendered invisible within new systems of display and value (Cant 2015). Figure 9 shows the displacement of *Kelirieng* from the original site to the Sarawak Museum ground (Mashman 1994).



Fig. 9. Displacement of *Kelirieng* from the original site to the Sarawak Museum ground (Mashman 1994)

In contemporary contexts, woodcarvings exhibited in museums or produced for the tourism market often retain their visual form while losing their ritual, cosmological, or communal functions. Such market-driven adaptations tend to preserve selected motifs deemed aesthetically appealing, while omitting embedded cultural knowledge and ceremonial significance. This selective retention produces what Czerwińska (2024) identifies as a tension between appreciation and appropriation, where cultural forms are admired yet detached from their original epistemological frameworks. From a deconstructive perspective, these absences should not be understood merely as cultural deficits, but as active sites of meaning that expose asymmetrical power relations, cultural negotiation, and the politics of representation.

Figure 10 shows the Anniketyni Madian's artwork entitled *Kumbu Rayong #2* produced using mixed hardwood, visually representing the traditional Iban textile's design, *Pua Kumbu* (Madian 2015). This condition is reflected in contemporary artistic practices

that deliberately engage with loss and transformation. For example, Anniketyni Madian's *Pua Kumbu* series translates textile traditions into carved forms, retaining recognizable visual motifs while displacing their ritual and communal functions. The work foregrounds the tension between material continuity and conceptual loss, highlighting how cultural knowledge may persist visually even as its original social grounding erodes. Through disrupting coherence and functionality, the work positions fragmentation itself as a meaningful condition, one that reflects the precarious status of indigenous visual languages within contemporary cultural economies.



Fig. 10. Anniketyni Madian's artwork entitled *Kumbu Rayong #2* produced using mixed hardwood, visually represent the traditional Iban textile's design, *Pua Kumbu* (Madian 2015)

Re-carved: Contemporary Interventions and Rewriting Meaning

Contemporary wood-based artworks that engage traditional carving methods often do so through processes of re-composition and material hybridity, marking a shift from preservation toward critical intervention. In these practices, carving becomes a site of negotiation where inherited visual languages are neither passively reproduced nor entirely rejected, but actively reworked. Such interventions raise questions of appropriation, particularly when traditional forms are detached from their original cultural frameworks and recontextualized within contemporary art systems, markets, or institutional spaces.

The re-carved condition involves deliberate contemporary interventions that fragment, reassemble, or hybridize existing carved forms. Artists engage woodcarving as a dialogic process, combining traditional techniques with new materials, media, or conceptual frameworks, such as metal, found objects, digital fabrication, or installation strategies. Through these hybrid approaches, artists challenge conventional notions of authorship, originality, and authenticity, positioning carving not as a fixed heritage object but as an evolving practice shaped by ongoing cultural exchange and reinterpretation (Castaldi and Mendonça 2024). Figure 11 shows a replica of *Kelirieng* at the Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, Sarawak, Malaysia. Figure 12 shows the installation sculpture by the author (Awangko' Hamdan Awang Arshad), where the *Jerunei* motifs were recomposed into flat-pieces, entitled *Unity* which was removed from the site of

Kuching City Garden (Mashman 1994). Figure 13a shows the design by Sylvester Wielding Jussem, inspired from the *Tuntun*, the Iban's hunting charm into the monumental sculpture or form in 1992. Figure 13b is the real *Tuntun* (Mashman 1994).



Fig. 11. A replica of *Kelirieng* as the Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, Sarawak, Malaysia (original photograph by author)

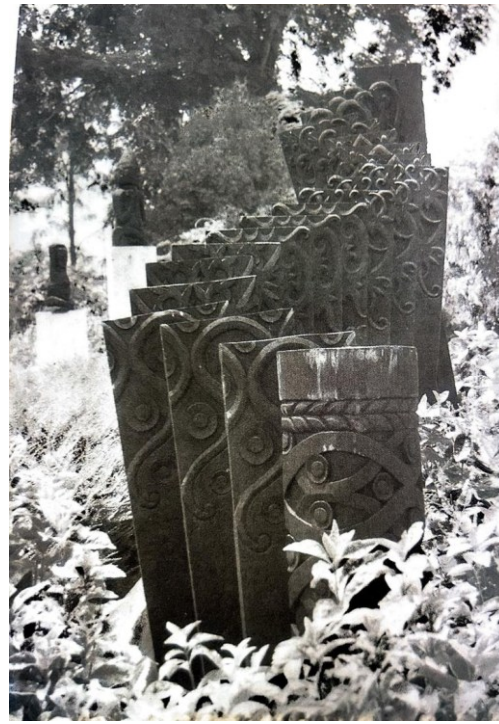
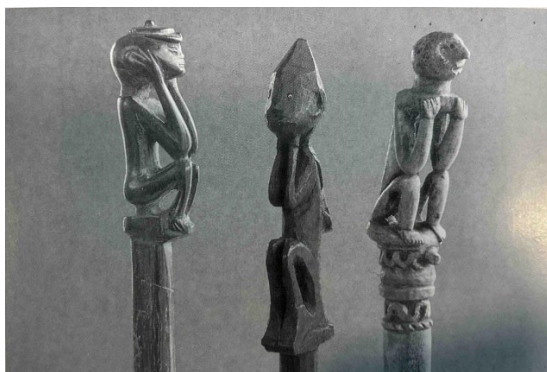


Fig. 12. Installation sculpture by the author (Awangko' Hamdan Awang Arshad), where the *Jerunei* motifs were recomposed into flat-pieces, entitled *Unity* which was removed from the site of Kuching City Garden (Mashman 1994)



(a)



(b)

Fig. 13. (a) Designed by Sylvester Wielding Jussem, inspired from the *Tuntun*, the Iban's hunting charm into the monumental sculpture or form in 1992. (b) The real *Tuntun* (Mashman 1994)

Importantly, re-carving does not seek to recover or restore an original or 'authentic' meaning. Instead, it operates through rewriting, where meaning is continually negotiated and reconstituted. In this process, cultural symbols are neither fully preserved nor entirely erased. Rather, they exist in a state of productive instability. From a deconstructive

perspective, this instability is not a weakness but a generative condition that enables woodcarving to function as a living cultural practice, as well as responsive to contemporary contexts, power relations, and modes of circulation (Derrida 1976). The analysis in this study does not claim to represent the authoritative voice of local practitioners, but instead aims to open a critical space through which visual and material transformations may be interpreted.

Within this framework, appropriation should not be understood solely as cultural extraction, but as a complex field of ethical tension shaped by intent, positionality, and relational engagement. Re-carved works may either reinforce asymmetries, by aestheticizing tradition without accountability or offer critical interventions that expose histories of displacement, transformation, and survival embedded within carved forms. As such, contemporary re-carving practices reveal how traditional woodcarving can operate simultaneously as material, method, and critical language within contemporary art discourse.

FUTURE WORK

Future research may extend this approach by engaging more closely or directly engaged with the voices of practitioners and local communities whose experiences and situated knowledge can further illuminate how meaning is generated, sustained, and redefined within Sarawak woodcarving practices today. Such engagement would allow deconstruction to operate not as an abstract theoretical tool, but as a means of supporting culturally grounded understandings of continuity, change, and creative agency.

CONCLUSIONS

1. A deconstructive approach reconsiders Sarawak woodcarving beyond rigid cultural categories that often frame it as fixed, authentic, or unchanging materials or objects.
2. Through the conceptual conditions of carved, uncarved, and re-carved, woodcarving is understood as a living cultural practice in which meaning is continually shaped, interrupted, and reworked in response to shifting social, ritual, and material conditions.
3. Change, in this sense, is not positioned as a loss of tradition but as part of the ongoing life of the practice itself, encompassing processes of adaptation, reinterpretation, and, at times, the transformation or discontinuation of certain ritual functions.
4. Rather than signaling cultural erosion, such changes reflect how woodcarving sustains cultural relevance by responding to contemporary realities, including altered belief systems, new forms of patronage, and changing modes of display and circulation.
5. This perspective moves beyond preservationist frameworks that prioritize permanence, authenticity, or safeguarding as ends in themselves, and instead emphasizes continuity through transformation.

6. Deconstruction thus enables woodcarving to be understood not only as something to be preserved or safeguarded, but as a practice that actively negotiates different purposes across time, such as ritual, commemorative, educational, artistic, and economic, without being reduced to a single, fixed function.

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