

# Hegemonizing the *Ajat Indu* in Sarawak, Malaysia

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## Abstract

This article discusses the reinvention of women's dance tradition, *Ajat Indu* by Sarakup Indu Dayak Sarawak (SIDS), a socio-cultural association established for Sarawak's Ibans in East Malaysia. SIDS aims to standardize, codify, and refine the dance form for tourism and promoting the culture of Iban. Using the concept of cultural hegemony by Antonio Gramsci, this essay examines the role played by SIDS as the hegemonic organization that governs *Ajat Indu* to the extent that the institutionalization of *Ajat Indu* was forced to be accepted by the Iban people as a cultural norm. Although such, there is a form of active subversion of power due to the existence of individual forms of *Ajat Indu* still practiced in the rural areas in Sarawak. Through ethnographic study, this essay analyses the politics of power in the practice of *Ajat Indu* by comparing the performances of Iban's subgroups in the rural longhouses in Sarawak and the urbanized SIDS' version.

**Keywords:** *Ajat Indu*, Dance, Hegemony, Iban, Sarawak, Malaysia

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## Introduction

The stage light slowly fades in. The music of *taboh*, which consists of *engkerumong* (the gong-row) *tawak* (the knobbed gong), *bebendai* (the knobbed gong) and *ketebong* (waist drum), is played. An ensemble of female dancers makes an entry into the performance space from the stage's right and left wings. They look beautiful in an elaborate traditional attire on the urban proscenium stage of the festival. The upper body sways from right to left, and their weight shifts gracefully from the right leg to the left leg and vice versa. Their dance moves look like a bird flying in the sky while their head is controlled by the traditional headgear, the *sugu tinggi*. The movements of the dance are executed with uniformity by the dancers according to the beats of the *taboh* that beams at the event space in the touristic town of Sibu, Sarawak.

That was my (author - Jamu)<sup>1</sup> personal experience watching the Ajat performance staged by the Dayak Cultural Foundation Cultural Troupe (DCF) during the Borneo Cultural Festival in 2015. The performance was an annual cultural festival in Sarawak organized by Sibu Municipal Council in the heart of the town. I was amazed by the DCF's performance not only for its elaborated staging, but also its significant representation of the Iban community during the event. DCF is a well-recognized foundation that was established to receive and administer funds for cultural, educational, scientific, charitable purposes, and public welfare.

I witnessed for the first time the *Ajat Indu* which was performed outside of the *ruai*, a social-communal space of the longhouse. In the longhouse, *Ajat Indu* was performed by female dancers to welcome guests and to honor the ancestors and rice spirits (*antu*) during the Gawai festival. As someone who was born and brought up in a longhouse located in Pakan, in central Sarawak, I have always wondered where does this staged *Ajat Indu* originated from and why is the performance different from the *Ajat Indu* back in my longhouse? How far could *Ajat* vary according to the different Iban subgroups? The *Ajat Indu* that I witnessed that day was more orderly in sequence, fast in speed, and some movements were complex, extravagant, and theatrical. It was visually appealing compared to the *Ajat Indu* style we have back in *rumah panjai*. Although these demonstrate typical adaptations when traditional dances are re-staged for formalized performances in Malaysia, this experience intrigued me to delve deeper into the practice of *Ajat Indu*, particularly in teasing out the power politics that are at play.

The *Ajat Indu* performed in the theatrical space is common to the urbanite society but is considered strange to the longhouse communities. According to their subgroup's style, in the social-communal space of *rumah panjai*, the *Ajat Indu* is only performed by a solo female dancer with a slow tempo, repetitive, and moderate movements. The emergence of the hegemonic association, Sarakup Indu Dayak Sarawak (SIDS), in 1961, has changed the interpretation of *Ajat Indu* in Sarawak from the original styles practiced by the Iban subgroups in *rumah panjai*. The *rumah panjai* communities were seemingly coerced to accept the *Ajat Indu*'s reinvention by SIDS, although there is an existing *Ajat* style of their own that are still being practiced until today. Each *rumah panjai* community regards their *Ajat* style as the best compared to the others. However, the act of hegemonizing *Ajat Indu* in Sarawak was not willingly accepted by the local communities since they have been practicing the various styles of *Ajat* in their own *rumah panjai*. This study

recognizes that the Ajat originated from the longhouses as the *rural rumah panjai* styles. It argues that the beauty of the dance form lies in the variety of styles practiced, each different from the other. Each *rumah panjai* community valorizes its own style and marks the identity of each community. The process of hegemony, hence, centralizes the power on SIDS. This move is strongly opposed and contested by the *rumah panjai* communities that feel that their dance styles have been marginalized through the process of hegemony. As stated by Scott (2008: 318), “subordinate classes are often seen as backward-looking, in as much as they are defending their own interpretation of an earlier dominant ideology against new and painful arrangements imposed by elites and/or the state.”

The rural *rumah panjai*’s dance styles and costumes cannot be highlighted in any SIDS’ occasions or events. The standardized *Ajat Indu* by SIDS is different and as such, resisted by the rural subgroups of Iban. They do so by refusing to follow the standard as well as acknowledge the reinvented style. As a result, two different styles exist, urban style on proscenium stages and rural style at social-communal spaces in the *rumah panjai*. SIDS reinvented *Ajat Indu* for tourism and cultural representation purposes. Hence, the general public is familiar with the reinvented style by SIDS that was appropriated for touristic performances and for more visible cultural displays, while the rural traditional *rumah panjai* styles are not visible to the general public.

In 1961, SIDS was established in Kuching to enhance and elevate Dayak women’s status to enable them to participate fully in nation-building through educational, social, and economic development strategies formulated in line with the association’s objectives and the National Women’s Policy. It aims to envision a society of Dayak Women, who are educated, skilled, knowledgeable, progressive, and economically empowered. It is an organization that middle-class Iban women have always dominated. These women or bourgeoisie (Poulantzas, 1979:56-60) are mostly professionals who inhabit Sarawak’s capital city, Kuching. They are also seen as role models in rural areas. It has become very influential to the extent that it has started to affect the Ibans’ socio-cultural needs, including performing arts. SIDS has slowly grown by opening branches all over the state. SIDS has become a dominant body that fights for Dayak women’s rights and improving or enhancing socio-cultural aspects among women, including *Ajat Indu*. SIDS refashions and introduces a new *Ajat Indu* style in Sarawak, borrowed and modified from the Sebuyau subgroup from Batu Gong, located at the Southeast of Kuching. It is chosen because the location is near to Kuching. Furthermore, most of the SIDS’ members originate from Sebuyau and its vicinity. Using the concept of cultural hegemony developed by Antonio Gramsci (1997), this essay examines the standardization of *Ajat Indu* by SIDS, the hegemonic body. It is powerful because it has historically influenced the Ibans’ ideology, worldview, cultural norms, and behavior after colonialism in 1963.

This article investigates firstly, the existence of Iban subgroups in Sarawak by looking at the migration social status/class, and the social hierarchy according to

Max Weber's theory of stratification, secondly, the emergence of SIDS as the hegemonic body that restructures, codifies, and standardizes the popular dance form, *Ajat Indu*, and thirdly, the comparison between SIDS' institutionalized version of *Ajat Indu* and the styles practised by various Iban subgroups in longhouses to demonstrate the aesthetic changes that have taken place to this dance form and the ultimate resistance of the beholders of tradition to adopt the stylized version.

### **The History of Iban: Diaspora and Stratification**

Iban diaspora emerged during the early migrations and expansions from the pre-colonial 16th century to the colonial eras from 1881-1963. The Ibans migrated from outside of Sarawak, specifically from Kapuas Hulu in Kalimantan Barat, Indonesia, to Ensebang and Engkari basin and expanded to another region, namely Rajang (refer to Figure 2). According to Gavin (2012), early scholars speculated that the term "Iban" is derived from the Kayan term "hivan," meaning "wanderer." But he wrote that the term more likely comes from the Iban word, which "iban" meaning "a person," "human being," or more specifically, a "layperson." This study found that the *rumah panjai* communities still use the term to refer to "human being" rather than "*mensia*," a standardized term. In the post-Pacific War (1941-1945) years, with growing political consciousness, Kalaka and Saribas Iban preferred to call themselves Sea Dayak, reflecting a former tradition of coastal raiding. Since the 1970s, that term has largely passed out of use, and today, Iban is universally employed, both officially and by the Iban themselves (Gavin, 2012). Scholars in the past such as Sandin (1957 and 1967), Vayda (1961 and 1976), Freeman (1955 and 1970), Wagner (1972), Morgan (1978), Sutlive (1976), Rosseau (1986), Sather (1996), King (1976 and 2017) have discussed the way-of-life of the Iban that affected them in the post-colonial period including their social class, status, and power.

However, the interest in dance and performing arts of the Iban was non-existent until the pioneering work of Mohd Anis Md Nor (1997 and 2008) on dance, Matusky and Tan (2004 and 2012) on music and vocal performance, and Sather on oral tradition (2001). A critical interest on research in the dance of the Iban led to emerging young local scholars such as Fomalavia Tingang and Nancy Gilbert Apun (2007), Anna Sulan Masing (2012), Bryan Omega David (2016), and Andrew Igai Jamu (2019). These studies focused on the form and the evolvement of *Ajat Indu* in the present context. Still, this essay advances the study on *Ajat Indu* by focusing on the intersection of dance and politics through the analysis of the institutional domination of power resulting in two *Ajat Indu* practices - SIDS and the *rumah panjai* in Sarawak.

### **The Migrations and the Expansions of the Iban in Sarawak**

The Iban, commonly known as the Sea Dayak, is a group of Dayak people found across two-thirds of Borneo Island (refer to Figure 1), known as Kalimantan across the Indonesian border (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2007:357-362). The Iban of Sarawak is believed to have migrated from the Kapuas Hulu basin of the Kalimantan Barat during the 16th century.



Figure 1. Borneo Map (Source: Google Earth. “Borneo.” Accessed May 17, 2021).

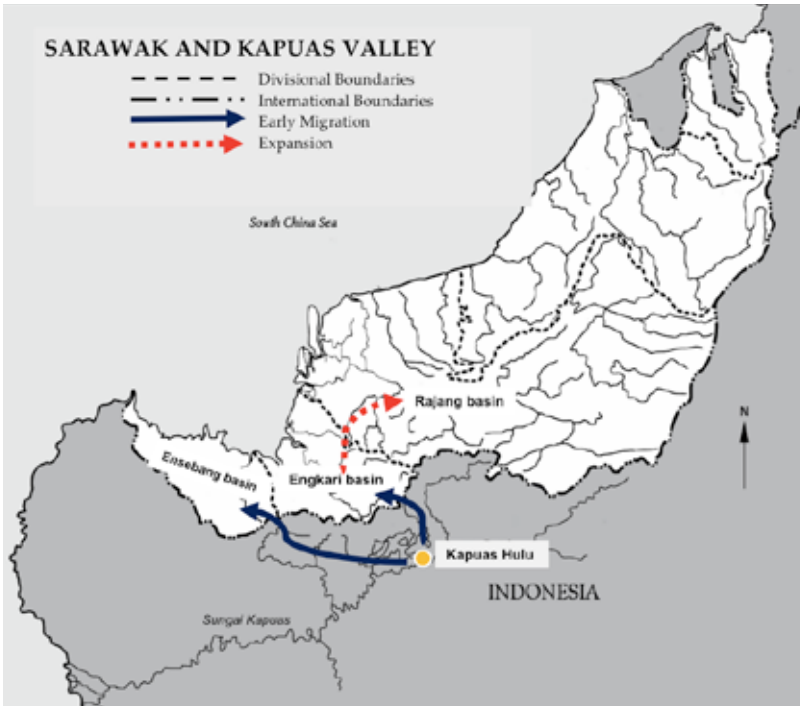


Figure 2. The Early Iban Migration and Expansions Areas (Source: first author).

According to Padoch (1982:1-29), the ancestors of the Sarawak Iban crossed the watershed of Kapuas Hulu to the entrance of Batang Lupar and pioneered the upper Ensebang basin and Engkari basin. Ensebang basin in Kuching is the First Division of Sarawak alongside the river and stream of Batang Sadong, Sungai Pelai and Sungai Ensebang while the Engkari basin in Simanggang (known as Sri Aman in the present) is the Second Division. The Ibans dwell along the stream of Batang Lupar, Batang Ai, Sungai Lemanak, Sungai Engkari, Sungai Rimbis, Sungai Saribas, Batang Layan, Sungai Delok, Sungai Paku and Sungai Skrang. The Ensebang basin expanded to Lundu in 1955 and the Engkari basin expanded to the Rejang basin in 1880 (see Figure 1).

By tracing the Iban paths' migration, Padoch (1982:1-29) subdivided the Iban into specific subgroups such as Balau, Undup, Sebuyau, and Saribas according to their migration patterns. These terms are used by the Iban themselves. It is inevitable because this study utilizes specific terms for Iban subgroups that undoubtedly influenced their performing arts, especially the *Ajat Indu*, after settling for an extended period of time all over Sarawak.

### **The Iban Stratification**

The changes and development of the social and economy have significantly affected the Iban community, influencing their perception and worldview. Changes began earlier with the inclusion of colonial rule that brought together new influences such as beliefs, religions, secular education, modern technology, and the capitalist economic system. The Iban community transformed from a "pre-modern" or "traditional" society to a modern society in concomitant to the British colonial influence. From the *rumah panjai* in rural areas, working-class Iban migrated to the urban area in search of a better life. Besides, transformations such as the Christianization affected the way-of-life of the Iban. Mass conversion of the Ibans is believed to have affected their religious and cultural practices. For instance, the customary law such as *adat begawai* (ceremonial law), and *adat beburong, bemimpi enggau bechenaga ati babi* (omen, dream, and ritual law) that was practiced during the pre-colonial period has gradually changed.

Previous scholars plausibly argued the social system of the Iban. Freeman (1970:180-200) quoted Iban as 'classless' and egalitarian in terms of their social system. This ambiguous statement is nevertheless argued by other notable scholars such as Sather (1996:104), who see Iban not as unequivocally "egalitarian" but as structured around an articulation of principles of both "equality" and "hierarchy" (King, 2017:83-113). As depicted in his publication, Rousseau (1980:52-63) contested Freeman's Iban egalitarian concept as being inadequate. The only reference about the pre-colonial Iban is Sandin as stated in Appell (2001:741-785). The terms "prestige-seeking" or aristocrats, commoners, and slaves coined by Rousseau (1980:52-63) existed among the Iban society during the pre-colonial and colonial-era orchestrated by the Iban themselves in classifying the various social-strata the community. Rousseau (1980:52-63) raised the contradictory points of Iban inequality in several key factors, including *tuai rumah* (longhouse and religious leader), *orang kaya* (rank to community leader gave by the Brunei Sultanate), *tuai menua* (regional leader) as more than *primus inter pares* [the first among the equal]

chosen from the “core group” of the Iban. This study shows that the social strata had changed when James Brooke began his quasi-colonial reign in 1841 as the first Sarawak White Rajah. The Brooke Empire ruled Sarawak until the Japanese Occupation in Sarawak from 1941 until 1945. Great Britain legitimately claimed Sarawak as the Crown colony in 1946, which continued until the Malaysia Federation formation in 1963.

The introduction of White Rajah and modern governance to the state changed the traditional way of classifying Ibans’ social status and class during the colonial period in its entirety. Rousseau’s argument on hierarchy within the Ibans can be further discussed using Max Weber’s theory of stratification. Stratification of class, status, and power have affected the Ibans’ way-of-life in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. The stratification indisputably exists hitherto, which has led to the establishment, dominance, and authority of SIDS, logically. A selected group of the bourgeoisie among the urban Iban became the members of SIDS, while the marginalized rural Iban people, who are mostly from the lower-income group, tend to be dependent on the decisions made by SIDS.

This historical trajectory introduces us to entities like SIDS that dominate Iban’s cultures, including the form and style of *Ajat Indu*, which is the focus of this research. The existence of a hegemonic body formed by the high stratum of the Iban community’s hierarchy has led to the unification and codification of *Ajat*, the reinvention of a new style.

### ***Ajat Indu* in Rumah Panjai**

This section will discuss the history of rural *Ajat Indu*, particularly the performances in rural *rumah panjai* derived from my fieldwork, and the fundamental knowledge obtained from the beholder of tradition (the pioneers of the tradition) about *Ajat Indu*. *Ajat Indu* is a tradition of female dance of the Iban community where “*Indu*” is the term used for female in Iban. The Iban’s word of *Ajat* is an indigenous category, equivalent to the English word, “dance,” while *Ngajat* is a verb, which means “to dance.”

The history of *Ajat* was only narrated through oral traditions (*leka main*) such as *Timang* (invocatory chants), *Ensera* (folktales/legends), *Pantun* (traditional songs), and *Pengap* (ritual/invocatory chants) by the ancestors and passed down from generation to generation. According to Sandin (1980), the Iban community believed that *Ajat* was taught by *antu* (spirit) called *Ulup Batu Lichin Bujang Indang Lengain* in the Iban longhouse in ancient times, but the story is considered as a mere myth by the communities. Their own *ajat* styles can differentiate the existence of *Ajat Indu* of the Iban subgroups. The styles of Balau, Undup, Saribas, Skrang and Batang Ai subgroups are more grounded through extensive stomping of foot-works while the upper body is “bouncy.” Rajang and Julau subgroup styles are more sustained and graceful with elevated foot-works (as though “floating”) while the upper body is bouncy rather than rigid and stiff. Referring to Matusky and Tan (2012:159-184), *Ajat Indu* performance is normally accompanied by the musical ensemble called *taboh* which includes the *engkerumong*, the *bebendai*, the *tawak*, and the *ketebong*.

In the *rumah panjai*, the Iban define the act of musicking the *taboh* ensemble as *betaboh* or *begendang* according to their subgroups. Matusky and Tan (2012:159-184) also stated that the Saribas subgroup used the *dumbak* (barrel drum) in their *taboh* ensemble. In *Ajat*, the engkerumong ensemble will also play several melodies through the gongs and drums' interlocking beats. The musical pieces of *taboh* ensemble can be divided into two tempos which are slow and fast. In *rumah panjai*, the slow tempo usually played for the *Ajat Indu* are called *Ayun Lundai* (The Elegance Sway), *Ai Anyut* (The Flow of the Stream or River), and *Sinu Ngenang* (The Somber Memories).

*Ruai*, an unpartitioned gallery represents the whole longhouse even though there are many *bilek* (apartments or rooms). Therefore, performing *Ajat Indu* in *ruai* involves the longhouse communities and can be a “play-performance,” a specific structured movement system participated by everyone within a performative space, likened to a game (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2003). The act of “play-performance” in Iban is called *bebuti*. During my fieldwork in several longhouses in Pakan and Ulu Julau, Sarawak, the “play-performance” of *Ajat Indu* in *ruai* takes place during the ceremony of *Gawai* where female dancers will perform and imitate the daily life of the Iban in their dances such as *muar kesa* (harvesting the weaver ant), and *pelanduk* (imitating the mousedeer). The dance of *Ajat Indu* (by women) and *Ajat Laki* (by men) are performed surrounding the *ranyai* shrine (decorated sacred tree) in *ruai*. The “play-performance” of *Ajat Indu* begins early night (*pun malam*) and continues until early next morning (*dini hari*) until *nebang ranyai* (cutting down the decorated sacred tree) ritual happened. In *ruai*, *Ajat Indu*, which includes the musical pieces and dance itself, is normally performed for non-ritual performance and specific rituals in *Gawai*. According to other interviews with *Jabah anak Layau* and *Libau anak Matu*, the dance practitioners from Pakan, the dance motifs that are performed in the presentational *Ajat Indu* at their *rumah panjai* are named according to the proverbs (*jaku silup*) of the Iban. These dance motifs depict the image of the movements described as follows (see table in figure 3).

	Dance Motifs	Descriptions
1	<i>Entepa, Nelentangka Tapa Jari Lima Berasuk Belulin Tinchin Temaga</i>	Outstretched arms at the middle level (45 degrees) with the rotation of the wrists ending with palms facing the front
2	<i>Engkepai, Nunda Tajai Terebai Nyerumba Nyang Panas Lemai</i>	Both wrists are rotated while arms are moved from right to left and vice versa
3	<i>Bungai Sembah, Kena Masa Kita Ka Bekedunga Duduk Semuka</i>	the opening and the closing salutation of the dance

Figure 3. Table of *Ajat Indu* Motifs in *Rumah Panjai*.

When I asked the dancers whether there were any specific dance movements, they answered that the improvisation of the movements is up to the dancers' creativity in *ruai*. They said that the *Ajat Indu* is performed according to the “*nitihka munyi tempap palu engkerumong*.” *Engkerumong*, the ascending-descending phrases of the gong-row, guides the transition from one movement to another, while the *bebendai* is the guide for the speed of the dance motifs. *Ajat Indu*'s uniqueness by



the *rumah panjai* communities can be shown by the skillful interaction between dancers and musicians. These dancers are not trained formally, and neither are they professional dancers, but they dance naturally according to the phrases of *engkerumong* without the need to count the beats. The transitions between the movements are smooth, relaxed, and calm, even though they need to control the heavy silver headgear while controlling their movement's speed.

The structural movements of *Ajat Indu* depict the regal motions of birds from the Iban's cosmology (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 1998). The *Ajat Indu* is metaphorically identified with specific stylized movements, which are described as *bungai ajat* (petals of dance), *pusin ke baruh* (turning the body while doing a low pivot turn on one leg and tilting the pelvis on the gestured leg) and *titi tiung* (stepping sideways and forward like a hopping bird). The fundamental movements of *Ajat Indu* imitate the movement of the bird, such as *burung terebai*, which is depicted through outstretched arms, bent torso, and crossed feet, likened to the birds flying in the sky. *Titi papan* and *titi tiung* are sidestepping motions of the feet with bent and folded arms while wrists are being rotated. This gesture imitates birds moving delicately on the twigs and branches of the trees in the rainforest. *Pusin ke baruh* or *pusin tinggi* are the turns performed on one supporting leg with the other leg gesturing towards the floor while circulating the supporting leg (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 1998). Mohd Anis reconstructed the dance motifs in his structural analysis based on the Skrang subgroup.

SIDS ignored the variegated and individual motifs when it reinvented the standard *Ajat Indu*. Motifs were borrowed extensively from one subgroup, Sebuyau, the subgroup from which most of the SIDS members originated. It is biased because the dominance of power is centered on one group while the other styles are ignored. This move demonstrates that hegemonic power is non-egalitarian, authoritarian, and hierarchical through the cruel act of exclusion/inclusion. Hence, this style pre-dominates other substyles. The unification and codification of *Ajat Indu* were done through a special branch of the performing arts of SIDS called Rumah Dayak, which was later renamed as Dayak Cultural Foundation (DCF) in 1995. Seniorita Linang taught this style to SIDS members. While the individual styles remained in the periphery and existed in *ruai* for the visibility of insular audience members, the reinvented style was refashioned, promoted, and circulated widely by SIDS amongst urban practitioners and gained visibility and recognition. While SIDS makes efforts to convince longhouse dwellers to adopt its style, the dwellers are resistant and unwilling to let go their own styles. Clearly, the two strands of practices co-exist - the rural individual styles versus the urban reinvented style.

### Codifying, Standardizing, and Hegemonizing the *Ajat Indu*

*Ajat Indu* in Sarawak became a prominent part of the cultural representation of the Iban. As SIDS being the agent of hegemony that has dominated the interpretation of *Ajat Indu* in Sarawak in the present, this section will discuss the reconstruction and revitalization of the dance for the preservation of Iban cultural heritage, aesthetic values of *Ajat Indu*, and the continuity of *Ajat Indu* in the contemporary scenes outside the longhouses.

As stated in Antonio Gramsci's (1997:85-91) article entitled, *Hegemony, Intellectuals, and the State*, the state uses cultural institutions in maintaining power in a capitalist society. Even though Gramsci's specific term of cultural hegemony is not stated directly in his writing (Lears, 1985:567-593), the concept has recently been used in popular culture as one of the Marxist concepts of hegemony. Cultural hegemony is popularly used to denote one social class's predominance over others (bourgeois hegemony). The working class and other classes established their constructive points of view about the bourgeois and contributed to preserving instead of revolting the status quo. The connection between persuasion, consent, and the occasional brute force involved in cultural hegemony is obvious. I utilize this theory to examine the "prestige seekings," "aristocrats," and "core group" and how the bourgeoisie formed SIDS. In this hierarchy, the Iban subgroups become the proletariat. The process of hegemonizing the *Ajat Indu* in Sarawak, which began after the formation of Malaysia in 1963, reflected the need to standardize *Ajat Indu* as a homogenized form representing the identity of Ibans. However, the *Ajat Indu* standardization was not an easy task. It became very complicated due to the existence of various styles of *Ajat Indu* in the rural areas practiced by various subgroups, the *rumah panjai* communities as discussed in the earlier section.

The association was dominated by the "core group," whose members originated from the women of "prestige seekings" and commoners from the pre and colonial hierarchy, as stated earlier. SIDS as the hegemonic body, had the supreme power among the Ibans. SIDS shaped the communities by playing its role in codifying the *Tusun Tunggu* (the native customary law). In 1961, the late Tan Sri Temenggung Tra Zehnder represented SIDS at the Simanggang Adat Law Conference. SIDS' proceedings were published in 1963 as "Sarawak Dayak Adat Law," which became the basis for the present Native Customary Law that is being used until the present day. The emergence of SIDS altering the worldview of the Iban and their cultural practices. In its website, SIDS states that "SIDS around this time also introduced the '*Baju Modern*' because the traditional costume was too elaborate and not practical for formal functions, especially for Iban women. The '*Baju Modern*' is a practical and "authentic" '*Half-Dress*' version of the traditional costume. It consists of a sash (*selampai panjai*) wrapped cross-wide fashion over the chest and tucked-in at the back, a long-woven skirt (*kain panjai*), and some silver accessories to wear with the costume" (Sarakup Indu Dayak Sarawak [SIDS], n.d).

The statement is from the SIDS website that related to the history of SIDS. The members of SIDS are required to wear the *Baju Modern* if there have official events or ceremonies. From the statement, it is undeniable that the SIDS reinvented the micro and the macro elements in Iban's cultural practices. In the performing arts scene, the power and authority of SIDS are shown as they set the rules for *Ajat Indu*. The intervening of SIDS by bringing the structure into the system and invented the new style of *Ajat* by borrowing and modifying the Sebuyau subgroup's style became problematic to the *rumah panjai* communities. Introducing the unified style as an exclusive representation of the Iban communities indirectly disrupts the notion of egalitarianism. Iban as the egalitarian society opposed to the subjects of class, superiority, and subordination, valorize their own styles of *Ajat* in *rumah panjai*. The varieties of *rumah panjai Ajat* were able to share and perform

with each other during Gawai celebration. The Iban communities used the open house during the Gawai festival, a mid-year festival, to showcase each *rumah panjai* style. Even though a SIDS unified *Ajat Indu* style existed, the *rumah panjai* dwellers do not acknowledge or adopt the new style. The community's identity lies in the dance and how it is represented. When it is taken away from its original essence, the *rumah panjai* communities resist acknowledging the style made by SIDS.

After the formation of Malaysia in 1963, SIDS evolved in Sarawak by opening branches all over the state divisions. The bourgeoisie in SIDS are mostly highly educated individuals who are established in the aspects of “economic, social and cultural capitals” (Bourdieu, 1986), inhabited Kuching, the capital city of Sarawak. SIDS has taken a dominant role in protecting Dayak women's rights and in maintaining socio-cultural aspects. As a result of the powerful bourgeoisie manipulating other Ibans' way-of-life, *Ajat Indu*'s practices by the Iban subgroups in the longhouses were deeply affected. SIDS became the so-called “responsible” organization to preserve and control the Iban culture. It also became the authoritative association that decides the rights and wrongs in *Ajat Indu* performances except for the performances staged by Sarawak Cultural Village (SCV). SCV, the tourism organization under the state government, is able to break out from the hegemony only because it is directly governed by the Sarawak Economic Development Corporation (SEDC) and the Sarawak Tourism Board. As such, SCV decides its own style. According to interviews with Othman Hassan and Hamidah Mohammad, the choreographers and instructors of SCV, they said, “our *Ajat Indu* is somehow often being criticized by the authorities of SIDS as not “proper” because our style is different” (personal communications, 2018). That highlights how SIDS attempts to exercise control over the dance form in the state. In the national dance scene, SCV's *Ajat Indu* had been a subject of criticism as they created choreographed *Ajat* that were taught and performed at Istana Budaya, Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan (ASWARA), and in other performance companies in Kuala Lumpur.

In relation to power, this study intends to borrow from the Weberian concept of social stratification. This concept is useful to examine the resulted gap between Ibans who live in rural and urban areas, along with the manipulation by the bourgeoisie in the Iban tradition. Weber argued that power could take several forms. An individual's power can be seen through their place in the social order, through their class in their economic order, and through their party in their political order. Thus, class, status, and party are aspects of the distribution of power within a community (Weber, 2018:37-54). As the center of power, SIDS, shown their influence in the Iban community, has led to *Ajat Indu*'s standardization. The orders laid out by SIDS rules the Iban subgroups such as Balau, Remun, Saribas, Batang Ai, Skrang, and Rajang. The process of hegemonizing the *Ajat Indu* is illustrated in the flow chart below (see Figure 4).

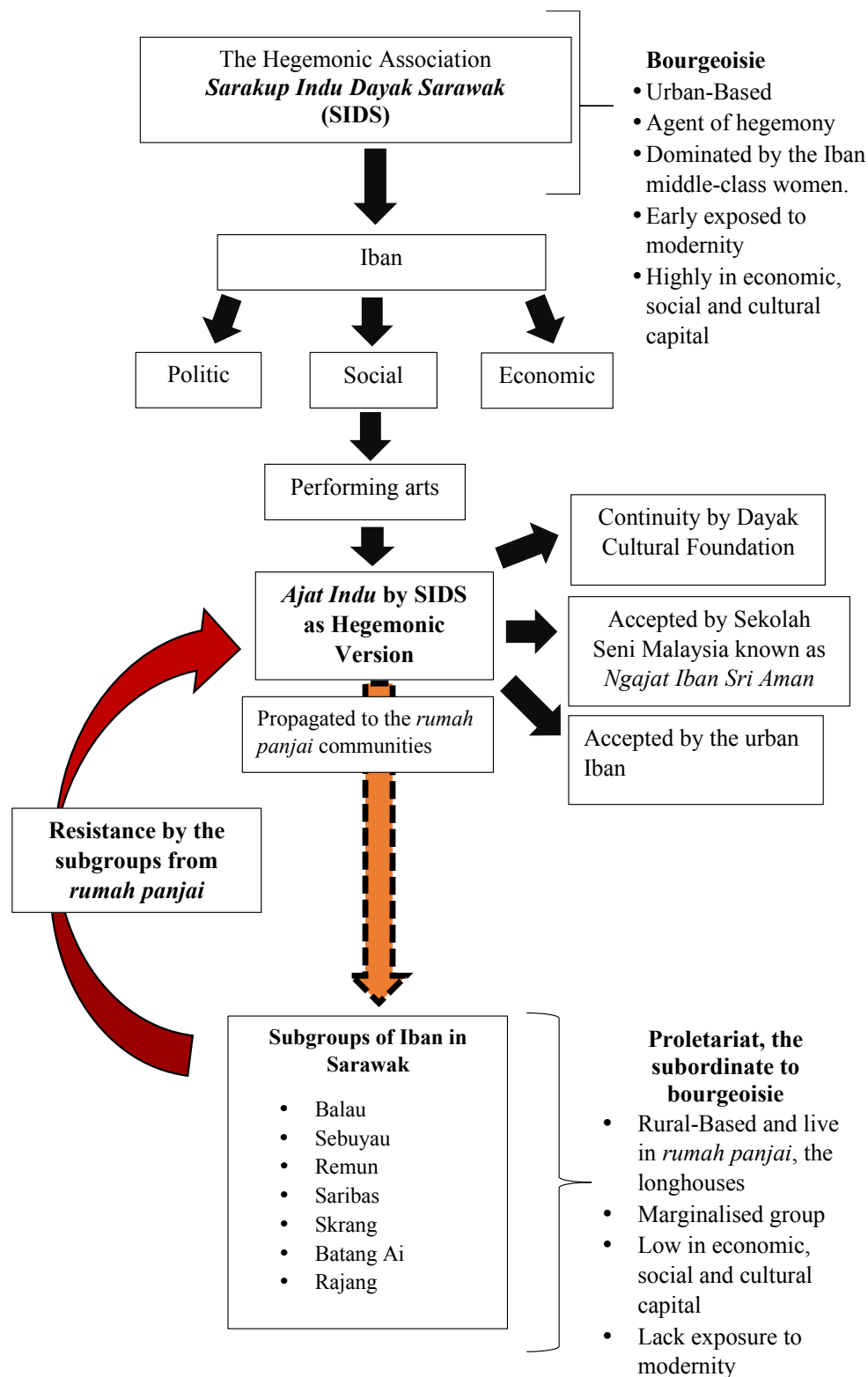


Figure 4. Process of Hegemonizing Ajat Indu Flow Chart (Source: first author).

The flow chart shows the process of hegemonizing of Ajat Indu in Sarawak. It shows how SIDS manipulates and controls the Iban in Sarawak and the Ajat Indu.

The SIDS' *Ajat Indu* was initially learned from Megit, an influential master-teacher and a beholder of tradition, from Batu Gong, the Ensebang basin. She taught *Ajat Indu* to the main members of SIDS, among others, Seniorita Linang, Esther Bayang, and Mariam Janting. The *Ajat Indu* classes were held at various houses of SIDS members such as Lily Senada, Gladys Janting, Vida Andrian, and Esther Bayang. Seniorita Linang organized *Ajat Indu* competitions in Kuching for children, single adult women, and married women. The standardized version of *Ajat Indu* by SIDS was widely performed at the national level Gawai Dayak Open House, state-level Gawai Dayak Festival, and other official state events such as welcoming ceremonies of the King, Yang Di-Pertuan Agong, as well as state and foreign leaders.

DCF, under SIDS, plays a significant role in propagating the reinvented style. According to an interview with one of the choreographers of DCF, Helena Mathew, the dance motifs were named by Seniorita Linang, the institution's manager and a high-ranking member of SIDS. The dance motifs are described as follows (see table in figure 5).

	Dance Motifs	Descriptions
1	<i>Langkah Bejalai</i>	Pedestrian movement. Stepping both legs continuously with bending knees.
2	<i>Langkah Burung Semalau</i>	Depicting magpie-robin bird movement on the branches and twigs of the tree from side to side.
3	<i>Langkah Bungai Ajat Indu</i>	The main movement in <i>Ajat Indu</i> emphasizing upper torso and arms. Body weight transfer from the right to the left leg while bending the knees.
4	<i>Langkah Indu Ngauk Ai Mandi Duduk</i>	Scooping of water from the surface of a stream river in a sitting on toes position.
5	<i>Langkah Burung Kenyalang Terbai</i>	Depicting the movement of hornbill flying in the sky.
6	<i>Langkah Indu Meri Tabi Hormat</i>	The opening and the closing salutation of the dance.

Figure 5. Table of standardized *Ajat Indu* Motifs by SIDS.

This study suggests that the names were given to the *Ajat Indu* motifs also depicts the class, status, and early exposure to education by the group of bourgeoisie when they borrowed the words from the authoritative Malay language such as *Langkah* and *Meri Tabi Hormat*. Even though the Malay and Iban languages are from the same Austronesian branch of the Malayic language, but the difference between the standard Malay and Iban is very significant. The rumah panjai communities rarely use the creole language used by the urban-based Iban. *Langkah bejalai*, for example, is the movement of walking that was reconstructed for the dancers to move to their positions according to the composed pathways by the choreographers. As the standardized version of *Ajat Indu* by SIDS became the representation of the whole Iban, the original form of *Ajat Indu* is only performed within the rumah panjai. Malay is a privileged language used by the urbanites to categorize and label dance motifs of the Iban. The SIDS version simultaneously marginalizes the language of origin/native categorization in this process.

Besides, new dance motifs have been added to the dance to make it varied and stylized. This move makes the dance less repetitive, complex, and appealing. It becomes attractive when performed on the proscenium stages in uniformity. Floor patterns such as lines and circles are added in the new styles by SIDS' choreographer to make it visually eye-catching for the audiences. Thus, this reinvented *Ajat Indu* becomes popular than the *rumah panjai* styles.

From the aspect of music, *Ajat Indu* is usually performed with entirely different purposes from the standardized performance by SIDS. From my observation, *Ajat Indu* is traditionally performed without using any assigned dance sequence. The dancers can freely perform the dance motifs and improvise according to the music of *taboh* to demonstrate their skills; particularly by balancing themselves while wearing the seven to ten kilograms of *Ngapan*, the traditional costume that allows limited movement of the head, as the body tilts slowly from side to side thus ensuring extremely graceful movements and bearings. Usually, *Ajat Indu* in the *rumah panjai* is performed according to the beats of *bebendai* and phrases of *engkerumong* which plays 16 beats circulation of "ascending-descending" phrases for the transition of each dance motif. Spontaneity, natural, and improvisation are characteristics that make the dance unique. These highlight the beauty of the dance. Each community's dancers improvise in their own way, asserting the power of her style. It accentuates the power of individuality.

In SIDS' version, the *Ajat Indu* is performed during official occasions by the state government in the proscenium stage. Performing the style of institutionalized *Ajat Indu* by SIDS and DCF is the act of performing an artistic likeness or image of *Ajat Indu* with a different purpose than the subgroups in *rumah panjai*. Performing the reinvented and standardized version of *Ajat Indu* by SIDS is a form of the socio-political statement that emphasizes the substitution of old traditional styles to reinventions necessitated by the need for theatrical entertainment. The reinventions of *Ajat Indu* by SIDS are therefore product-oriented and designated for public showcases. *Ajat Indu* by SIDS is appropriated for the stage and is normally combined with *Ajat Laki* (male dance). The movement of the reinvented *Ajat Indu* is choreographed and well-structured. Also, the movement sequences of *Ajat Indu* are arranged according to the performed repertoire in which the movements are shortened according to 4 beats and/or 8 beats. As a result, the reinvented *Ajat Indu* movements are faster, and the costume is simplified (lighter, not heavy as the longhouse costume). Some of the stage crafts related to Iban's daily life have been inserted in SIDS' *Ajat Indu*'s repertoire. The *pua kumbu* (a traditional patterned multicolored ceremonial woven cotton cloth used by the Iban), *buah genuk* (dry gourds to bring water from the stream by the Iban) and *kenyalang* wooden sculpture were inserted in the repertoire to highlight the 'Ibanness' in the reinvented and standardized *Ajat Indu* for public performances.

The Iban subgroups resist the hegemony imposed by the bourgeoisie. The subgroups subordinated by the hegemonic association resist accepting the reinvention of *Ajat Indu* by SIDS. The reinvention of *Ajat Indu* by SIDS is seen as a strange

form of *Ajat* by the *rumah panjai* dwellers. The *rumah panjai*'s Iban prefer to perform their own subgroup's *Ajat*. In line with this, I (the first author) experimented with several *rumah panjai* in Pakan, Sarawak from June 2018 until June 2019 during Gawai ceremonies. I performed and showed them the choreographed and theatrical form of *Ajat Indu*, SIDS version, which I learned from school, participated in the local dance group, and the fieldwork at DCF and SCV from 2015 until 2018. The Ibans in the *rumah panjai* called it a "*tarian*" or "*joget*" as it was strange and unusual to them compared to *Ajat Indu*'s performances in *ruai*. The labeling using the Iban's foreign language in *rumah panjai* showed that they did not recognize the standardized *Ajat Indu* by SIDS. Iban folks defined the reinvented *Ajat Indu* as "*Ajat Indu ti dipelajar*," denoting that the form was choreographed and taught in schools. The *rumah panjai* community's refusal to accept the new style of *Ajat Indu* to be performed in the longhouse is a "hidden transcript" (Scott, 2008) by the marginalized. That is a subtle rejection by the longhouse communities. The Iban folks viewed the standardized version as a strange form even though they knew its existence. This statement also showed the difference between the two styles and the Iban folks' unwillingness to accept the choreographed or reinvented version.

From another interview with Jelimun anak Layau, a master-teacher from Ulu Julau, Sarawak, this subgroup's *Ajat Indu* is different from the *Ajat Indu* in other *rumah panjai*. The style of the Ulu Julau longhouses and the surrounding area is graceful. The foot-work that shown by the female dancers were lighter, and the upper body is bouncier from the other Rajang subgroup like the Iban in Pakan. The Ulu Julau style is more alike with the Saribas and Batang Ai subgroups' styles, while the musical instruments that were played are the same with the Rajang subgroup, which is not using the *dumbak* (barrel drum).

As mentioned earlier, the subdivision of Iban groups in Sarawak is not only based on their different dialects, migrations, and expansion but is also evident from the different costumes donned by dancers of different subgroups and geographical areas. The Saribas group is identified by the *Ngepan Rawai Tinggi* (high brass corset), Balau wears the *Ngepan Baju Kuas* (black upper torso cover), the Batang Ai group is typified by the *Ngepan Skrang* and *Ngepan Lampit Tusu* (crossing belts across upper torso) attire, the Rajang with their *Ngepan Baju Ujan* beads costume, *Baju Buri* (the seashells costume) represents the Kapit area, *Ngepan Julau* (the using of two sashes to cover up the upper torso) in the Julau area while in the Krian area, the women wear the elaborate gigantic headgear called *enseruga* or *mensuga*. The bourgeoisie of SIDS only recognizes the standardized version of *ngepan*. Iban's subgroups called it as *Ngepan Kumang*, a standard set by SIDS in *Kumang* beauty pageant. SIDS excluded and did not recognize the various *ngepan* of the other subgroups. The costumes were worn by the SIDS and continued by DCF and SCV. The representational *Ajat Indu* institution even simplified the *ngepan* with the reason that subgroups' *Ngepan* is too heavy for *Ajat Indu* performance. This made the simplified *Ngepan Indu* are more visible than the various subgroups' *Ngepan*. It showed that SIDS was exercising their power by controlling and manipulating the Iban's cultural heritage interpretation. The standardization and modification of the costumes in an act to rule and manipulate the *rumah panjai*'s communities by SIDS. Alas, the

simplified *Ngepan Indu* are accepted and worn in several *rumah panjai* because it made them look more superior in the Iban communities' social realm.

SIDS version of *Ajat Indu* serves its purpose as the representation of the whole Iban identity because of the hegemonic process. As part of a new generation of the Iban, I see the *Ajat Indu*'s continuity as the political statement to unite and represent the whole Iban community in Sarawak. However, at the same time, the process of hegemonizing *Ajat Indu* leads to resistance among the longhouse dwellers and misconceptions and misinterpretations amongst outsiders (other races in Malaysia), scholars and tourists in understanding the cultural practices of the Iban in rural *rumah panjai*. In the contemporary scene, *Ajat Indu*, the codified form that has been revitalized as the staged performance has become the tourist attraction in SCV and DCF in Kuching and has become the representational dance of the Iban community. The representations of *Ajat Indu* in SCV and DCF are product-oriented, designated for public showcases for tourists, constructing messages of regional and national identities, and providing experiential opportunities for tourists. The continuity of SIDS' *Ajat Indu* may seem to look assured for the time being as it has been included and documented in the syllabus of dance subject in Sekolah Seni Malaysia to be taught to the future generation. However, the future generation may see this style as the only style of *Ajat Indu* and may be ignorant of the existence of numerous other styles practiced at the *ruai*.

Moreover, there are numerous factual errors in the textbooks, particularly in the facts of the history of origins of *Ajat Indu*. For example, in the syllabus, the standardized version is called as *Ngajat Iban Sri Aman* but contrasted with the evidence that it originated from the Ensebang basin while Sri Aman is in the Engkari basin. This case scenario shows us that the representation and sustainability of the individual dance forms in *ruai* is questionable in the advent of much-hyped up SIDS' style.

### Conclusion

SIDS is the authoritative association that dominates the interpretation of the Iban communities' culture and has reinvented a new form of *Ajat Indu* as the dance that represents the Iban identity. As a vehicle of hegemony, SIDS influences the *Ajat Indu* as the form of contemporary dance of the Ibans, making the culture within the Iban community homogenous to outsiders, although varied styles exist. The reinvention of the institutionalized *Ajat Indu* becomes the medium of preservation, pedagogy, and urban, national, and international performance to represent the Iban communities. Hegemonizing the Iban's intangible cultural heritage, the *Ajat Indu* in Sarawak becomes complicated due to the existence of various styles of *Ajat Indu* in the rural area practiced by subgroups of the *rumah panjai* communities. While SIDS' version becomes the benchmark for the local choreographers, dance educators, and urban dancers, it is hoped that the subgroups' styles of *Ajat Indu* will be preserved and practiced in the *rumah panjai*. By losing the individual style of *Ajat Indu* means losing one's identity because dance is seen as a marker of sub-Iban group identity.



## Endotes

1. The first author went for the fieldwork and conducted the fieldwork, while the second author (supervisor) worked on framing the layout for this article and the organization of the content. The first person's account is from the perspective of the first author, and the theorization and analyses are done extensively with the guidance of and co-writing with the second author.

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