



Mandau Symbolism: Spirituality, Aesthetics, and Social Ethics in Contemporary Dayak Culture

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Abstract

Background: Dayak culture preserves the Mandau as a symbol of spirituality, identity, and morality. However, modernization has transformed its sacred role into a cultural commodity, highlighting the need to reexamine its philosophical and spiritual significance.

Objective: This research aims to uncover the symbolic meaning of *Mandau* in the context of cultural identity, ornamental systems, and its social and ethical functions in contemporary Dayak society.

Methods: This study employs an interpretive qualitative approach based on cultural semiotic analysis of literary sources, museum artifacts at the Balanga Museum (Palangka Raya), and secondary ethnographic data from published field studies. Data were analyzed using Barthes' cultural semiotics framework with source triangulation to ensure interpretive validity. Additionally, participatory observation, in-depth interviews with artisans and traditional leaders in Kapuas and Palangka Raya, and artifact analysis at the Balanga Museum were conducted to enrich the ethnographic data.

Results: The findings indicate that *Mandau* functions as a moral and spiritual medium connecting humans, nature, and ancestors; its material structure and ornamental motifs embody the principle of cosmic balance (duality); and its social functions affirm *Mandau's* role as a medium for ecological ethics and cultural resilience. Despite functional transformations under globalization, the symbolic meaning of *Mandau* persists in contemporary Dayak society.

Conclusion: Preserving the Mandau requires safeguarding both its physical form and cultural meaning. Collaborative efforts among academics, indigenous communities, and cultural institutions, supported by digital education and documentation, are essential to sustain its ethical and spiritual values across generations.

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INTRODUCTION

The culture of the Dayak community in Kalimantan is one of the living heritages that depicts the integration between humans, nature, and spirituality (Andreastuti, 2025; Halim et al., 2021). In the dynamics of modernization and globalization, cultural artifacts such as *Mandau* face new challenges—from sacred symbols to tourist commodities and collectibles. However, amidst these changes, *Mandau* continues to play a central role in expressing the identity, morality, and cosmology of the Dayak people (Bella et al., 2021). Its existence not only represents the history of civilization but also strengthens the spiritual relationship between humans, ancestors, and the natural environment. In the Dayak people's worldview, nature is not merely a physical space but an entity imbued with sacred values and a reciprocal relationship with humans. These values are manifested in various forms of cultural expression, one of which is through traditional artifacts

such as *Mandau* (Magiman et al., 2025).

Mandau transcends its function as a traditional weapon to become a symbol of identity and a medium of spiritual communication, embodying inherited moral and ecological values transmitted across generations. This study demonstrates that *Mandau* holds multidimensional symbolic values—spiritual, social, aesthetic, and ethical—that continue to sustain Dayak cultural identity in the contemporary era. Empirical data support this concern: according to the Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) Central Kalimantan (2023), cultural tourism in Palangka Raya grew by 34% between 2018 and 2022, accompanied by a 58% increase in *Mandau* souvenir production recorded by local craft cooperatives (Dinas Perindustrian Kalimantan Tengah, 2022). These figures indicate a significant shift in *Mandau*'s primary function—from sacred ceremonial object to market commodity—underscoring the urgency of this study.

Literature reviews indicate that research on *Mandau* has been conducted through diverse perspectives—anthropology, fine arts, and semiotics, for example—but still largely views ritual or material functionality in isolation. *Mandau* serves as an important environmental preservative of visual forms and symbols of Dayak civilization Santosa (2016), and while Yuwono (2023) notes that *Mandau* is a kind of visual language reflecting the moral and spiritual values of society. The study by Cosido (2025) concurs with this view but further outlines *Mandau* as a social identity and a means of expressing modern spirituality. Research on the revitalization of *Mandau* design with Zhang (2025) emphasizes aesthetic innovation as an effort to preserve symbolic values. This study takes a distinctive position in this regard, as it embodies the spiritual, social, and ethical aspects of *Mandau* as a living symbolic system by linking cultural and contemporary aspects of Dayak society.

Given these empirical and theoretical investigations, this research aims to answer three primary questions. First, how does *Mandau* represent the cultural identity and spirituality of the Dayak people in the modern context. Second, how do the material structure and ornaments of *Mandau* contain philosophical symbols that describe the worldview and ecological ethics of the Dayak people. Third, how does *Mandau* function as a social, aesthetic, and ethical medium that maintains cultural cohesion amidst rapid social and economic change. These questions form the foundation for understanding *Mandau* not only as a historical artifact but as a cultural text that continues to transform and remain relevant in contemporary society. The novelty of this study lies in its integrative approach, simultaneously examining the cultural semiotics, ecological spirituality, and social ethics of *Mandau* as a living symbolic system in contemporary Dayak society—bridging material culture studies with indigenous environmental ethics in a manner not previously undertaken in existing literature.

Based on the analysis and discussion, this study proposes three main analytical propositions. First, *Mandau* is a symbol of collective identity that is not only rooted in history but also serves as a moral and spiritual guide for the Dayak community. Second, each physical element and ornament of *Mandau* functions as a semiotic system expressing the balance of the cosmos and the relationship between humans and nature, in accordance with the principle of sacred ecology. Third, the social and aesthetic functions of *Mandau* contribute to cultural resilience by serving as a medium for internalizing chivalric values, ecological ethics, and spirituality in modern Dayak society. By examining these three analytical propositions, this study is expected to make a novel contribution to the study of material culture and spiritual symbolism of indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia.

Literature Review

Mandau as a Symbol of Identity and Spirituality

Previous research confirms that *Mandau* is a symbol of the identity and spirituality of the Dayak community, representing the relationship between humans, nature, and ancestors. Yuwono (2023) stated that *Mandau* functions as a "visual language" that regulates the norms, ethics, and collective consciousness of the Dayak community through symbols embedded in metal materials, carvings, and the rituals associated with its use. Meanwhile, Santosa (2016) highlight the function of *Mandau* in the context of ceremonies such as *melas*, *plulukng pruku*, and *kwangkai*, which illustrate the continuity between the physical and spiritual worlds. *Mandau* can be understood as a cultural text mediating moral values, courage, and cosmic harmony. This sacredness affirms that the Dayak people regard objects as spiritual instruments rather than

merely material artifacts, serving to maintain cosmic balance.

In a global context, these findings align with Eliade's (1959) view of sacred objects as the axis mundi, the center connecting profane and transcendent life. Makianggung (2020) Expand on this by demonstrating that *Mandau* is not only a spiritual symbol but also an instrument of Dayak social identity and ethnic pride in the modern era. Another finding from the study Cosido (2025) shows a functional shift: *Mandau* serves both as a working tool and a pop culture symbol, yet at the connotative level retains its magical significance. This functional transition, alongside its religious relevance, reflects how *Mandau* conceptualizes spiritual values while adapting to new sociohistorical contexts. Therefore, prior research highlights both the continuity of *Mandau*'s sacred value and its flexibility in responding to cultural dynamics.

A Symbolic System of Material and Ornamental Structure

Studies on the structural and ornamental aspects of *Mandau* reveal that every component carries philosophical meaning. As Santosa (2016) note, the *Mandau* handle, carved to resemble a hornbill's head, symbolizes nobility and the connection between spiritual humans and sky symbols, alongside dragon motifs and plant tendrils representing cosmic harmony. Yuwono (2023) adds that the concept of duality—the mother *Mandau* and *isaau* (child)—represents gender duality, fertility, and the regeneration of life. This illustrates that Dayak symbolism is ecocosmic, representing the ethical relationship between humans and the environment, as explained by Berkes (2017) in the concept of sacred ecology. Consequently, the visual symbols on *Mandau* serve both as aesthetic expression and ecological ethics shaping the Dayak worldview.

Mandau designs with *Djata* motifs to strengthen spiritual value and community identity through contemporary design. The study demonstrates that symbolic aspects of *Mandau* can be revitalized through artistic innovation without losing their original meaning. Conversely, caution that simplifying ornaments in modern production risks eroding their philosophical and spiritual significance. Here, the principle of material semiotics Latour (2005) is relevant, as objects act as active cultural agents carrying values and social relations. The practical structure and ornaments allow *Mandau* to function not only as a source of meaning but also as a visual knowledge system integrating tradition, spirituality, and collective identity.

Furthermore, *Mandau* should not only be perceived as a finished symbolic object in terms of material structure and ornamentation; it should also be understood as a cultural-communicative medium. From a communication perspective, *Mandau* conveys nonverbal symbolic language, transmitting collective values, norms, and identity across generations. According to Clifford Geertz, culture is an inherited system of symbols interpreted through social interaction.

Thus, in the cultural context of Dayak society, *Mandau* is an artifact that preserves the story of life; each ornament is not only "read" aesthetically but also interpreted through social practices and rituals. *Mandau* functions as a symbolic medium of communication connecting humans, ancestors, and the cosmos. Meaning is constructed through social interaction, traditional ceremonies, family practices passed down across generations, and daily life.

Similarly, revitalizing local wisdom through participatory communication requires community involvement. The community is not only the custodian of objects but also the producer, reinterpret, and disseminator of cultural meaning. This approach ensures that revitalization originates from local experience rather than being a top-down effort. Following the material semiotics perspective Latour (2005), *Mandau* and other cultural objects do not act passively; they enact social relations. Changes in the structure and ornamentation of *Mandau* influence both aesthetic aspects and the meaning system and collective identity of society.

***Mandau* in the Present: The Social, Aesthetic and Ethical Functions**

Many studies recognize that *Mandau* serves a multidimensional role in Dayak societies. *Mandau* functions as a social-status symbol, a marker of maturity indicating adulthood, and an indicator of a customary legitimate weapon used in major ceremonies or customary courts. *Mandau* is also regarded as an art object, souvenir, or daily tool that continues to transmit traditional values (Noer & Nurbaizura, 2016). Building on this concept, Yuwono (2023) highlights

an aesthetic dimension of *Mandau*, inseparable from spiritual discipline, in which the process of crafting it is a moral act. Thus, *Mandau* is both tangible cultural heritage and a medium for socio-cultural life, embodying noble values such as chivalry, responsibility, and social integrity.

Nonetheless, modernization and globalization pose challenges to the survival of *Mandau*. the commodification of *Mandau*, showing how it is used to market tourism and popular culture items. Coupled with the culture of valuing material goods, this can lead to a transition from sacred to secular meanings. Sustainability of traditional weapons is at risk, successful initiatives exist when active group participation spans generations. Therefore, *Mandau* should be interpreted not merely as a relic of primordial culture but as an evolving entity, continually renewed as a medium for morality and cultural education amid modernization.

METHOD

This research employed an interpretive qualitative approach grounded in cultural semiotic analysis. Rather than conducting field-based participatory ethnography, the study drew on systematic analysis of published literary sources, museum artifacts at the Balanga Museum in Palangka Raya, and secondary ethnographic accounts from previously conducted fieldwork documented in the scholarly literature. This approach was appropriate given that *Mandau* functioned as a complex living cultural text whose symbolic dimensions, spanning material structure, ritual context, and social function, could be rigorously examined through hermeneutic interpretation of existing cultural and ethnographic records. The study was rooted in a constructivist paradigm, holding that cultural meanings are socially constructed and historically situated Creswell (2016), and foregrounded an emic perspective in reading the symbolic logic embedded in Dayak material culture.

The primary purpose of this research was to document and re-analyze the values of local wisdom that had begun declining in the era of modernization, especially among the Dayak community in Central Kalimantan. Surveys were conducted in Kapuas Regency and Palangka Raya Regency, both of which had retained elements of *Mandau* as part of traditional ceremonies and cultural identity. Research informants included four categories: (1) traditional *Mandau* craftsmen (*panyampe*), (2) traditional and spiritual figures (*basir*), and (3) academics or museum curators who understood Dayak history, culture, and symbolism. A purposive sampling technique, based on prior relevant knowledge, cultural experience, and spiritual expertise, was applied in selecting subjects. Given this geographical focus, the research aimed to examine differences in the meanings of *Mandau* among Dayak *Ngaju* and Dayak Ma'anyan traditionalist sub-ethnicities.

This study was also carried out to address the gap between the symbolic meanings of *Mandau* in academic studies and their significance in contemporary community settings. Today, *Mandau* is often construed merely as an art object or a tourism product, which, in turn, has led to the reduction of its spiritual and ethical values. Therefore, this research was designed to address this issue by collecting direct data from traditional stakeholders and artisans who still produced *Mandau* using ancestral techniques. Additionally, observations were conducted on *Mandau* artifacts in the Balanga Museum, Palangka Raya, and in private collections held by traditional leaders to examine characteristics and ornaments, particularly symbols related to Dayak cosmological values. This endeavor was intended to provide an overview of the relationship between worldly and nonmaterial values in Dayak culture.

The research proceeded through three stages: (i) systematic literature review and source triangulation, (ii) semiotic and symbolic analysis, and (iii) interpretive synthesis and validation. During the first stage, relevant academic publications, ethnographic reports, and museum documentation on *Mandau* and Dayak culture were systematically gathered and reviewed. Data were subsequently coded and organized according to four key thematic domains: spirituality, cultural identity, aesthetics, and social-ethical function.

For the data analysis phase, triangulation techniques (sources and methods) were employed to validate the findings. Results from interviews with indigenous leaders were compared to observations and literature studies from both classical and contemporary sources on Dayak symbolism. All data were validated via focus group discussions among local cultural artisans and researchers. The analysis was performed inductively, beginning with empirical observation followed by theoretical interpretation, enabling an understanding constructed from the Dayak people's perspective (emic). The results of the analysis were subsequently integrated

with prior studies to develop a theoretical synthesis that enhanced the constructs of cultural symbolism and spiritual ecology.

In the final stage of research, the dissertation presented the findings through narrative visualizations, stylistic narration, and symbolic analysis characterizing thematic interrelations between humans, nature, and ancestral spirits via *Mandau*. Interpretations were clarified with data visualizations, including photographs, decorative sketches, and symbolic inquiries. Findings were then analyzed within a theoretical context, grounded in the dialectical relationship between symbols and social life through interpretive cultural analysis (Marcus & Fischer, 1999). Finally, the findings were structured around three axes: the underexplored knowledge of identity and spirituality; the metaphysical system of ornaments; and the social-ethical functions embedded in these artifacts, which were discussed in the conclusions. This methodical approach ensured that the research was interpretative rather than merely descriptive, providing a critical and contextual articulation of the lifeworld inscribed in these artifacts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

***Mandau*: The Symbol of Cultural Identity and Spiritual Power**

Initial results indicate that *Mandau* can not only be used as a weapon but also symbolizes the cultural identity and spirituality of the Dayak people. It connects daily practices and traditional rituals, fusing material skills with cosmological beliefs. *Mandau* serves as an intermediary between the physical (the so-called tanum plot) and another world inhabited by ancestors. This integration positions *Mandau* as a sacred object representing the courage, maturity, and moral responsibility of Dayak men. In social life, *Mandau* conveys a sense of unity between material prowess, aesthetic values, and cosmic beliefs. It is inseparable from the system of meaning embedded in society; hence, *Mandau* can be understood as a symbolic cultural artifact.

Documentary evidence from the Balanga Museum collection (Palangka Raya) reveals that ceremonial *Mandau* specimens consistently incorporate three distinct ornamental registers: (1) the hornbill head handle motif (*sangkoh tingang*), representing authority and spiritual protection; (2) dragon and serpent engravings (naga) along the blade spine, symbolizing cosmic power; and (3) plant tendril motifs (*sulur*), representing regeneration and the ecological bond between humans and the natural world. According to Kanyan (2022), these three ornamental registers are consistently interpreted by Dayak cultural practitioners as an integrated cosmological statement rather than mere decoration.

Within the cultural identity, *Mandau* functions as a marker of social differentiation that distinguishes Dayak people from other cultural groups. Such identity does not exist in a vacuum but is reproduced continuously through cultural practices, including the use of *Mandau* in ritual contexts, permeating historical forces of contemporary social life. In addition, *Mandau* serves not merely as a symbol of identity but also as an instrument for the preservation and negotiation of that identity in the process of globalization. However, modernization and social transformation challenge the symbolic function of *Mandau*. This shift from sacred object to cultural commodity can dilute the spiritual discernment it represents for some. Cultural communication strategies are essential for *Mandau* to remain sustainable as a vehicle of symbolic meaning. Strategies rooted in community involvement and cultural literacy offer a means to maintain traditional values.

Thus, *Mandau* is positioned as a physically tangible object and also a metaphysical one that guides people's moral and spiritual path toward harmony with nature and their ancestors. One of the main characteristics reflecting the spiritual dimension of *Mandau* is its role in rituals for traditional ceremonies such as *melas* (birth), *plulukng pruku* (marriage), and *kwangkai* (death). Its presence in these rites confirms the notion of a "third space," existing between life and death. *Mandau* is a double-edged sword in Dayak cosmology: it serves as both a guardian of humanity from threats and a purifier of humans from spiritual contamination. This majestic hidden symbolism reflects the Dayak worldview, which balances the material and mystical realms (the contribution of the invisible to survival) as key concepts for existence. Hence, *Mandau* is a physical embodiment of Dayak cosmology, illustrating humans in harmonious relationships with nature and divine beings.

Symbolism Contained in the Material Structure and Ornament of Mandau

The second finding is that every aspect of *Mandau*, the blade (*isin/bell*), handle (*home*), and *sarong*, carries layered meanings that symbolize the Dayak philosophy of life. Aspects of majesty, leadership, and “man-to-sky” are conceptually expressed in the handle, often shaped from deer horns or carved from hardwood into a form resembling the head of a hornbill. The sacred hornbill symbolizes guardianship of life and bravery. From an operational perspective, this aligns with Clifford Geertz’s idea of symbols as vehicles for shaping and representing cultural reality.

The moral order of the cosmos and connection to spirituality are found in dragon carvings, plant tendrils, and geometric shapes, demonstrating that Dayak carving art is not merely aesthetic. Ornamentation functions not only as decoration but also as a symbolic ladder (cosmogram) conveying ethical and ecological principles of Dayak society. Dragons symbolize nature and the life cycle, while plant tendrils signify growth, sustainability, and the eco-biological relationship between humans and the natural world. Repetitive geometric patterns indicate a system of order and harmony. Thus, the ornamental variety in *Mandau* can be considered a visual cosmogram depicting a constellation of integrated aesthetic, moral, and spiritual worldview.

Made from iron, brass, and nickel, the *Mandau* blade is thought to carry ancestral power within its metal. The barbed tip (*boetn ekeq*) represents bravery, while dot carvings (*mataq*) along the blade signify journeys it has undertaken through war or ritual over time. The relationship between the mother *Mandau* (large) and child *Mandau* (small knife) symbolizes dual unity, fertility, and cosmic balance.

The symbolic significance also extends to *Mandau sarongs (kumpang)*. Functioning as blade shields, *kumpang* are adorned with rattan carvings and weaving that reflect the group’s craft skills and identity. In this perspective, the *kumpang* serves as a vessel of meaning complementing the entire *Mandau* symbolic system. The integration of blade, handle, and *sarong* establishes a cohesive bond, uniting them as one tangible *Mandau*.

Moreover, the symbolism of *Mandau* reflects a holistic worldview of the Dayak people, wherein beauty, function, and sacredness are inseparable. Art in Dayak culture is not solely aesthetic but also a medium for reaffirming values and moral ties to nature, aligning with the concept of sacred ecology that emphasizes ethical interconnections between humans and nature. The results confirm that, for the Dayak, beauty, function, and sacredness are integrated; a work of art is regarded not only for its aesthetic appeal but also for its moral, spiritual, and ecological significance.

Therefore, the material structure and ornamentation of *Mandau* can be interpreted as a complex, multilayered symbolic system. It embodies the aesthetics of Dayak culture while functioning as a medium for communicating spiritual, social, and ecological values. Consequently, *Mandau* becomes an embodiment of the Dayak worldview, promoting harmony, balance, and continuity of life.

Table 2. Glossary of Key Dayak/Local Terms Used in This Study

Local Term	Pronunciation	Meaning/Cultural Significance
<i>Mandau</i>	man-dau	Traditional bladed weapon of the Dayak people; sacred and multi-symbolic artifact
<i>Panyampe</i>	pa-nyam-pei	Traditional <i>Mandau</i> craftsman/smith
<i>Basir</i>	ba-sir	Dayak spiritual leader/priest
<i>Kumpang</i>	kum-pang	Sheath/scabbard of the <i>Mandau</i>
<i>Isaau</i>	i-sa-au	Small companion knife carried alongside the mother <i>Mandau</i>
<i>Tanum</i>	ta-num	The physical/earthly realm in Dayak cosmology
<i>Sangkoh tingang</i>	sang-koh ti-ngang	Hornbill head motif; symbolizes nobility and spiritual guardianship
<i>Melas</i>	me-las	Birth ceremony in Dayak tradition
<i>Plulukng pruku</i>	plu-lukng pru-ku	Marriage ceremony

<i>Kwangkai</i>	kwang-kai	Death/mortuary ceremony
<i>Mataq</i>	ma-taq	Dot engravings on the <i>Mandau</i> blade recording ritual history
<i>Boeetn ekeq</i>	bo-eetn e-keq	Barbed tip of the <i>Mandau</i> blade; symbol of bravery

***Mandau* Social, Aesthetic, and Ethical Functions in the Context of Dayak Community Life**

The *Mandau* functions simultaneously across three principal social dimensions—spiritual, social, and technological—and the interrelationship among these dimensions contributes to the Dayak society's belief in its cohesive forms. As a spiritual object, the *Mandau* serves as a medium to connect with ancestral power; as a social symbol, it signifies hierarchy, maturity, and chivalric values; and as a technologically utilitarian tool, it is used in daily activities across entire ecosystems of hunting and farming. The *Mandau* is deeply rooted in social life and differentiates a public identity profile that conveys information about a person's origins, status, and dignity. This multifunctionality aligns the *Mandau* as not only a functional object but also as a cultural mechanism, ensuring harmony between individualism and societal structures. Its role encompasses the spiritual, social, and technological dimensions concurrently, each intertwined to generate social cohesion and operate as a system of cultural values.

As a spiritual object, the *Mandau* also serves as a channel of communication with ancestors, establishing the relationship between humans and the transcendental world. This function situates the *Mandau* within ritual practices that preserve the cosmological balance of society.

Social dimension: In the social dimension, the *Mandau* manifests identity and social stratification. Owning and utilizing a *Mandau* reflects not only one's skills but also social status, age, and ethical values. Symbols are markers of social identity or status within a hierarchy, where cultural objects become symbolic capital identifying social position (Honneth, 1986). Under these conditions, the *Mandau* carries both utilitarian value and an identity that reinforces social acceptance within the Dayak community.

The *Mandau* also embodies aesthetic and ethical dimensions, representing a pinnacle of artistic achievement while simultaneously conveying spirituality and defining individual characteristics as a spiritual identity of the Dayak people. It is crafted with technical expertise and inner discipline, illustrating the oneness of humankind, nature, and ancestral spirits. Explicit taboos and rites accompany each stage of its creation, signifying that beauty and morality are inseparable. Despite modernity, the *Mandau* continues to remind the community to preserve their culture, reflecting an indigenous epistemology where art is a path to inner and ecological balance. Therefore, the *Mandau* is not only tangible heritage but also ethical and aesthetic guidance embodying universal human values.

From a cultural communication perspective, the multifunctionality of the *Mandau* positions it as a form of cultural performance, where its use and representation in social life are essential in reproducing values. This illustrates how culture is both transmitted and continuously produced through meaningful social practices. In the case of the *Mandau*, it links individual expression to collective responsibility, reinforcing social solidarity.

The *Mandau* demonstrates the artistic achievement of the Dayak people. Its ornaments are visually appealing and adhere to aesthetic standards, while the proportions and details of its carvings carry symbolic meanings. Its creation requires both high technical skill and deep understanding of cultural values, confirming that aesthetics in Dayak culture are inseparable from their surrounding system of meaning. Ethically, the *Mandau's* production follows norms, taboos, and rituals, reflecting the harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and ancestors. This aligns with Hans-Georg Gadamer's perspective that understanding cultural works involves ethical and historical dimensions. Thus, the beauty of the *Mandau* resides not only in form but also in the moral values embedded in its creation.

In the context of modernization, the aesthetic and ethical functions of the *Mandau* face challenges from commodification and the simplification of meaning. Market-oriented mass production risks eroding its philosophical significance. However, communities and cultural actors

have adapted creatively, maintaining the relevance of the *Mandau* through initiatives such as integrating traditional designs with modern media.

Overall, the social, aesthetic, and ethical functions of the *Mandau* demonstrate that this cultural artifact is more than a material object; it is a value system governing the life of the Dayak community. The *Mandau* integrates spiritual, social, and practical aspects into a cohesive whole, playing a crucial role in sustaining culture and reinforcing collective identity.

Discussion

***Mandau* as a Symbol of Dayak Identity and Spirituality**

The finding that *Mandau* manifests cultural identity and serves as a spiritual medium for the Dayak community corroborates Musta'ina (2017), who explain the *Mandau* as a symbol of identity, protector, and ancestral connection. *Mandau* functions not only as a symbolic tradition but as an ethical tool that molds people's moral axiology, an aspect neglected in prior studies. While Santosa (2016) and Yuwono (2023) suggested that the meaning behind *Mandau* tends toward ritualization and social symbolic functions, this study extends the meaning to moral responsibility and collective consciousness—an ongoing and socially symbolic life process without hierarchy, emphasizing how informal traditional education takes place. This account aligns with Lizardo (2016) theory of cultures as a system of meaning expressed through material symbols. Thus, *Mandau* is not only a cultural relic but also the embodiment of moral and spiritual values in Dayak society.

Conversely, research on "Denotation and Connotation of *Mandau*" (2025) by the Kanayatn tribe revealed that in denotative terms, *Mandau* is a multifunctional machete used as a daily tool, while its connotation still encompasses symbolism and magical philosophy. These findings suggest that the shift of *Mandau* utilization from ritual to quotidian contexts could diminish its sacramental meaning if cultural practices are not maintained. Yet, the evident persistence of symbolic significance, particularly in identity and spirituality, reflects a culture resilient enough to withstand technical articulation. Hence, this research concludes that the *Mandau* values to be preserved include its functional dynamics (relating to the balanced order of prosperity) and the continuity of symbolic meaning as a safeguard in reimagining progress in a changing era.

Material and Ornamental Structure as a System of Signs

The conclusion that all *Mandau* parts (handles, blades, sheaths) are imbued with symbolic content aligns with recent studies on the revitalization of *Mandau* design using *Djata* motifs, which advocate for symbolic aesthetic dimensions of protection and strength. This approach reaffirms that ornaments are not mere adornments but visual writing with cosmological layers of stories and ecological values. We further expand on these findings by asserting that the mother-and-child *Mandau* duality implies cosmic balance and regeneration, a philosophical aspect rarely discussed in *Mandau* literature. Our efforts to bridge material symbolism and theories of material semiotics in contemporary anthropology (e.g., matter conceptualized as cultural discourse) underscore its contribution to the field of contemporary material culture studies.

However, in "*Mandau: A Traditional Weapon that has Significant Symbolic Value and Spiritual Meaning*," point out that some modern craftspeople prioritize manufacturing ease over preserving symbolic fidelity in materials (Santosa & Bahtiar, 2016). This contrasts with the symbolic ideals reflected in ornament complexity, which consist of integral elements. This gap highlights a tension between conventional aesthetic values and the expectations of modern production. Our research indicates that controlling for symbolic complexity is critical to prevent "cultural cosmetics," where richness of meaning is lost during the production process.

***Mandau* in contemporary life: 2. Social, aesthetic and ethical function**

The finding that the *Mandau* functions simultaneously in spiritual, social, and technological spheres presents a complex picture when field anthropologists document traditional weapons, as observed in the literature on the indigenous peoples of this archipelago. Noer (2016) supports this, noting that *Mandau* has become an art object, a souvenir, and a daily practice tool, repurposed for hunting or gardening (Source: Neliti). Furthermore, the study emphasizes that *Mandau* also fulfills aesthetic and ethical purposes: bound to cultural impact, it serves as a medium for preserving ecological and moral values, a relatively underexplored

dimension of traditional weapon studies. This perspective contributes to a cultural conservation narrative that protects both material objects and the ideas behind them.

Nevertheless, modernization and globalization present challenges: *Mandau* can become a touristic commodity traded without understanding its cultural significance. Using *Mandau* in schools as cultural material offers an opportunity to transmit sacred meanings through reflective teaching, though the selection of pieces can affect the depth of engagement (Wati et al., 2022). These findings demonstrate that contextual transformation can alter the functional meaning of *Mandau*. Education on its noble meaning should therefore be strengthened in preservation policies, ensuring that *Mandau* remains a symbol of cultural sanctity rather than a mere aesthetic attraction.

Table 3. Comparison of Current Research Findings and Previous Studies

Aspects/Dimensions	Current Research Findings	Previous Studies / Sources	Similarities / Differences
Symbols of identity and spirituality	<i>Mandau</i> as a medium of morality and collective identity	Paramarta (2024) mention the symbol of identity, protection, ancestral connection of the University of Palangka Raya	Similar in identity symbols, but this research adds an ethical dimension
Ritual vs practical function	The symbol persists even when used in everyday activities	Denotation & Connotation on Kanayatn looks at the practical function transfer	Demonstrate symbolic resistance to functional transformation
Ornaments & visual symbols	Dual meaning, cosmological aesthetics	Revitalization of <i>Mandau</i> motif	This research expands the meaning of ornaments into a complete semiotic system
Contemporary vs traditional production	Production efficiency pressures can reduce symbolic complexity	the simplicity of ornaments in the current production of the	Showing the conflict between symbolic preservation and economic reality
Modern social & aesthetic function	<i>Mandau</i> as a media of ecological and cultural ethics	Noer (2016) mentions the functions of art, souvenirs, practical tools of Neliti	This research expands its function to become a contemporary moral medium
Risks of cultural commodification	The potential for the reduction of meaning into visual icons	Use in the Context of Teaching Popular Culture	Highlighting the importance of symbolic value education so that it is not reduced

CONCLUSION

Results of this study showed that *Mandau* is a cultural object, although in the form of a traditional weapon, that carries spiritual, social, and aesthetic meanings. For Dayak society, *Mandau* functions as an identity marker, an ethical medium, and a representation of the cosmological bond between humans, the natural environment, and ancestral spirits. The study

reveals how material structures, ornamental motifs, and ritual practices intertwine to form a semiotic system that remains dynamically alive. *Mandau* is considered to have lost its original function as a weapon or practical tool but has gained significance as a symbol of identity, while still retaining its sacred value. Hence, *Mandau* can be interpreted as a pictorial manifestation of Dayak local epistemology, reflecting oneness, the unity of spirituality, elegance, morality, and integrity within sustainable cultural systems.

This study contributes to the field through its multidimensional approach, integrating cultural semiotics, visual anthropology, and ecological spirituality to illuminate the symbolic dimensions of *Mandau*. This approach bridges the material and immaterial aspects of Dayak cultural heritage in a manner consistent with the study's interpretive qualitative methodology. The principal limitation of the study is its reliance on secondary literary sources, published ethnographic accounts, and museum artifact documentation, without primary field data from *Mandau*-making communities. Future studies should incorporate direct participatory fieldwork to complement and extend these findings.

In addition, rapid social and economic changes in Kalimantan have led to new variations in the form and function of *Mandau*, which have not been fully mapped. Therefore, generalizing the results of this study should be done cautiously, considering the contextual differences among Dayak sub-ethnicities. Future research should employ participatory ethnography and digital heritage documentation to explore the processes of crafting, rituals, and transmission of *Mandau* values in contemporary Dayak communities. Researchers are also encouraged to develop interdisciplinary studies by integrating visual technologies such as 3D scanning and AI-based pattern analysis to more accurately reconstruct the symbolic meaning of ornamental motifs. Furthermore, examining the role of *Mandau* in character education and cultural ecological preservation, as part of national cultural sustainability policy, is critical. Collaborative efforts among academics, indigenous communities, and cultural preservation institutions will strengthen *Mandau's* status not only as tangible heritage but also as a source of ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual values relevant to Indonesia's human development in the modern era.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Aquarini: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data collection, formal analysis, writing—original draft preparation, and correspondence. Junaidi: Literature review, validation, supervision, interpretation of findings, and writing—review and editing. Lisnawati: Data curation, visualization, manuscript editing, and final review. All authors contributed substantially to the study, approved the final manuscript, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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