

BIDAYUH ETHNIC MATERIAL CULTURE: A VISUAL DOCUMENTARY AND NARRATIVE STUDY OF INDIGENOUS HERITAGE AS NEW IDEAS FOR CONTEMPORARY FASHION DESIGN

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Abstract. This paper presents a visual and narrative study on how Bidayuh material culture, mainly focused on art and craft, representing one of the rich ethnic groups in Sarawak, Malaysia, inspires contemporary design, with a focus on sustainability, innovation and cultural storytelling. While the existing literature on Bidayuh culture primarily documents aspects such as language, music and food, there is a noticeable lack of research on its unique handicrafts, traditional costumes and indigenous beadwork techniques. This study examines how traditional artistic expressions can be creatively incorporated into contemporary design to help preserve this rich heritage. Through interviews with eight Bidayuh designers and artists, supported by visual documentation, a unique aspect of this paper, this research examines how traditional crafts and techniques, deeply symbolic and rooted in community values, are being reimagined in modern design contexts. These practices not only express cultural identity but also act as a bridge for intergenerational dialogue and heritage preservation. The study also highlights key challenges while simultaneously pointing to promising opportunities for cultural revival through ethical fashion design and cross-disciplinary collaboration. Ultimately, this paper contributes to ongoing conversations about decolonizing design and promoting culturally grounded sustainability by positioning indigenous knowledge within the framework of contemporary design.

Keywords: *Bidayuh material culture, contemporary design, indigenous craftsmanship, cultural sustainability, ethical fashion, decolonizing design.*

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1. Introduction and related literature

The Bidayuh, one of the indigenous communities in Borneo, specifically in Sarawak, possesses a deep-rooted artistic identity that remains underrepresented in contemporary design spaces. Bidayuh material culture, comprising traditional costumes, weaving, beadworks, handicrafts and symbolic motifs, embodies centuries of indigenous knowledge, artistic expression and cultural identity in Sarawak, Malaysia. Their creative expressions are distinguished by elaborate patterns and motifs, inspired by the elements of flora and fauna reflected in their natural environment, serving both aesthetic and symbolic purposes. The intersection of culture, traditional art and fashion design has gained renewed attention as designers strive to create meaningful, identity-driven garments and promote sustainable practices in response to the homogenization of fast fashion. Yet, while these cultural elements are well documented in ethnographic and historical studies, they are rarely explored as design resources for contemporary sustainable fashion. This disconnect contributes to the risk of cultural erosion as younger generations increasingly adopt globalised styles and as artisanal skills decline. Indigenous communities possess rich artistic traditions that offer valuable insights into

sustainable practices, storytelling and heritage preservation. Despite the cultural wealth of Bidayuh's artistic expression, a notable lack of integration remains between Bidayuh craftsmanship and contemporary product design. Many of these rich heritage risks are being forgotten in the face of rapid modernization and limited documentation. This presents a critical gap in preserving and translating Bidayuh art and craftsmanship into contemporary design that remains authentic, relevant and sustainable.

Addressing this gap, this study investigates how Bidayuh ethnic material culture can be creatively reinterpreted as a foundation for sustainable contemporary fashion design. The research seeks to preserve cultural heritage while fostering innovation and ethical design practices through collaboration between artisans and designers. Specifically, this study aims to document and analyse key visual, material and symbolic elements of Bidayuh material culture relevant to fashion design, as well as exploring how designers and artisans conceptualise and negotiate the integration of these elements into contemporary fashion while maintaining cultural integrity. By centring the voices of Bidayuh artisans and designers, this paper contributes to a growing discourse on cultural sustainability, positioning fashion as a platform for cultural storytelling and ethical innovation. It argues that heritage can function not as a static reference to the past, but as a living and adaptable design resource for the future. These efforts contribute to cultural sustainability by bridging traditional knowledge with contemporary design innovation, ensuring that Bidayuh's artistic heritage thrives in modern creative industries.

1.1. Bidayuh art and craftsmanship

Bidayuh is an ethnic group living in Sarawak, Malaysia. They are part of the *Austronesian-Malayo-Polynesian* group and share cultural and linguistic similarities with indigenous communities in Indonesia, the Philippines and Madagascar (Campbell & Mikeng, 2019). Chang (2004) stated that the term “Bidayuh” stems from “*Bi*”, signifying “belongs to” and “*Dayuh*”, meaning “land”, collectively conveying the essence of “People of the Land”. The cultural development of the Bidayuh, rooted in their ancestors, plays a crucial role in shaping and expanding their identity. Examining the mythical motifs and symbolism in the objects broadens our knowledge of traditional culture and illuminates the cultural exchanges that have influenced their distinctive legacy. The cultural heritage of the Bidayuh community in Malaysia dates back hundreds of years and has been shaped by its rich artistic expression and traditions. This history and tradition are influenced by colonialism and migration. Central to the Bidayuh people's identity is a rich cultural heritage, encompassing a range of vivid cultural crafts. However, modernism and the younger generation's lack of interest increasingly challenge the survival of these craft traditions. Chen and Suwanthada (2024) noted that examining the mythical motifs and symbolism found in Bidayuh material culture reveals cultural insights that reflect the unique relationships among people within their legacy. Consequently, it is both timely and essential to continue efforts in studying, preserving and celebrating this cultural history.

Bidayuh Traditional Attire: Traditional Bidayuh attire is more than just regular wear; it is an essential receptacle, particularly for ceremonies and celebrations. These outfits represent complicated cultural meaning as much as a visual display. According to Campbell and Mikeng (2019) and Magiman and Salleh (2017), the importance of conserving heritage is highlighted through the pride displayed in wearing traditional outfits during harvest festivals (*Hari Gawai*), religious ceremonies and cultural events. These garments act as tangible representations of cultural identity. Bidayuh women's

traditional costume consists of a short-sleeved or sleeveless *jipo* (shirt) combined with a *jomuh* (skirt), typically accompanied by ornaments such as a *selapai* (shawl), *pangiah* (beaded necklace), *porik* (copper/metal belt) and *sipiah* (headgear) (Henry, 2014). Henry (2014) illustrated that the *sipiah*, crafted in three colours, black, red and white is embellished with beads, sequins and silver coins. Usually composed of black satin, the skirt is embellished with a red sash; silver belts are occasionally used as waist embellishments. According to Henry's (2014) study, the men's costume includes a *jipo Boyuh* (sleeveless vest) fashioned from tree bark and a necklace of bear teeth, as well as *sigah* (headgear), which is a square piece of fabric folded into different forms depending on the wearer's locale. Black is the predominant colour of traditional Bidayuh clothing, representing strength and authority (Henry, 2014). Henry's study (2014) showed that warriors and the *Kitua Gawai* are given special clothing, emphasizing their unique position in the community.

Rosanti et al. (2020) revealed that during the dance, the Bidayuh priest and priestess wear traditional costumes. White, red and black hold significant meaning in Bidayuh clothing: white symbolizes peace and purity, red represents courage and black denotes power and protection. Moreover, this study (Rosanti *et al.*, 2020) showed that the fern motif in Bidayuh costume symbolizes that humans cannot live in isolation. They must work together, help one another and provide mutual protection. Essentially, it reflects the fundamental principle that humans are inherently interdependent. Additionally, the *pucuk rebung* (bamboo shoot) motif guides the path of righteousness, symbolizing that humans should live straight and virtuous lives. In other words, humans should not embody negative traits or behaviors, as life should be led with goodness and on the right path (Rosanti *et al.*, 2020). Based on the statement above, Bidayuh's cultural costumes embody a community's history and customs that their ancestors passed down.

Weaving Handicraft: Cultural products, including handicrafts and ethnic items, are deeply rooted in community and generational traditions (Jalil *et al.*, 2024a). These products hold significant potential due to their unique features, serving as symbolic representations of their respective cultures. Handicrafts are among the most compelling heritage and tourism products, valued for their cultural identity. They attract domestic and international tourists seeking aesthetic experiences, cultural richness and historical significance. Weaving is a traditional craft that connects numerous strands of rattan, bamboo or similar materials to create intricate items (Jalil, 2025a). Rattan is integral to the Bidayuh community's daily life and cultural practices, serving as the primary material for crafting diverse woven items tailored to specific functions. From household essentials to sacred ritual tools, rattan products like *kasah* (mats) and *juwah* (baskets) fulfill the needs of farming, harvesting, storing rice, collecting produce and ceremonial purposes, particularly during *Gawai* celebrations (Teo *et al.*, 2024). Weaving *kasah* and *juwah* is a task traditionally performed by women, serving as a drying surface for rice, seating mats during communal gatherings and protective flooring. However, nowadays, men are equally skilled in this craft (Shaik Hussain & Abdullah, 2022). The *kasah* mat, made entirely of rattan and bound with durable bark from the *baiyuh* tree, showcases the Bidayuh's ingenuity and reliance on natural resources. The crafts represent cultural pride and are a legacy passed down through generations. Teo et al. (2024) stated that historically, the Bidayuh traditional mat with *kebuk* motif was prepared by the husbands for their pregnant wives to enhance blood circulation.

Bidayuh Beadworks: According to Munan (2005), beads hold cultural, spiritual and practical significance for the Bidayuh people, who regard them as valuable and

resilient items. In rituals, ceremonies and rites of passage, beads are durable and retain their texture and colour even when other materials decay. Beads are considered powerful tools for the Bidayuh people. Magic, warrior, ritual and fighting beads are ordinary in Bidayuh. The ritual Bidayuh necklaces are highly powerful, featuring spherical glass beads, boar tusks, bear claws and frog head bells. Warrior beads are believed to transfer their potency to their owner when worn, especially around the neck, a vulnerable spot in the era of head-hunters (Munan, 2005). Known as *taya bubut*, a distinctive necklace combining boar tusks, bear claws, cowrie shells and blue glass beads, is passed down through generations. The *manik berawan* (fighting beads) are exclusively used for healing purposes, never for ornamentation and are hidden when not in use. It consists of a collection of pea-size opaque red, black or blue and white or yellow glass beads, with a few long carnelians, animal teeth and claws, roughly perforated rock crystals, brass bells and Chinese coins, silver rings or coiled brass wire and any other items bestowed upon the shaman through their dreams or spiritual guidance (Munan, 2005). Their colours serve specific purposes: blue or black for curing fits, red for warding off spirits and pests, yellow for healing crop diseases and green or blue for maintaining health. Munan (2005) illustrated in her book another version of *manik berawan*, worn by a Bidayuh priestess during healing, agricultural or general ceremonies, which consists of a shell disc bead belt with vertical rows of monochrome glass beads.

1.2. Contemporary fashion design trends and cultural preservation

Contemporary fashion design trends have a significant influence on shaping trends, style and consumer preferences. Incorporating traditional artistic elements has become an essential trend in contemporary fashion design, reflecting a broader movement toward cultural revival and innovation. Traditional costumes have a profound influence on contemporary fashion, enriching design practices and ethnic identities (Kong *et al.*, 2024). Utilizing traditional cultural materials in contemporary products and services enhances aesthetic appeal and promotes values of cultural sustainability, ensuring that heritage practices remain relevant within modern contexts (Qilu *et al.*, 2024). According to Yao and Inchan (2024), a key feature of this design style is the use of traditional silhouettes, culturally relevant colours and symbols, all structured in ways that connect with classical cultural expressions. However, current fashion does not just copy classic designs. Instead, it reinterprets and modifies them, combining traditional aesthetics with contemporary design principles to cater to the lifestyle and tastes of today's customers, as stated by Jalil *et al.* (2024b). The values, beliefs and artisanal skills passed down through the centuries are embodied in traditional clothing, language, traditions and folklore, all of which are essential components of cultural heritage (Le *et al.*, 2024). Through characteristic design elements, including colours, symbolic motifs and patterns, fabric and materials, specific forms and accessories, ethnic costumes embody this identity (Rahmi *et al.*, 2021; Shukla & Park, 2023; Singh, 2024).

Designers can draw inspiration from the visual aspects, workmanship and metaphorical connotations found in cultural crafts. However, using traditional clothing's pattern motifs and shape structures in contemporary designs does not necessarily result in aesthetically pleasing creations (Gu & Lu, 2021). Drawing inspiration from these traditional cultural materials presents significant potential for creativity in various product categories (Rahmi *et al.*, 2021; Shukla & Park, 2023; Singh, 2024). Moreover, applying cultural values and traditional crafts production methods can contribute to environmental sustainability by potentially reducing environmental impact through the

use of locally sourced natural materials and artisanal techniques, aligning with sustainable practices (Jalil *et al.*, 2024a). Moreover, fashion that integrates traditional cultural values can convey a story, guiding the market and promoting traditional culture as transferable cultural capital, thereby providing opportunities for the sustainable development of native, traditional cultures at risk of disruption (Kong *et al.*, 2024; Le *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, integrating traditional culture into design requires innovative design. This involves finding design solutions that optimize the service's functionality and aesthetics while appropriately applying traditional elements and implementation techniques.

Traditional costumes, language and folklore are integral to cultural heritage, embodying values, beliefs and artisanal skills that have been passed down through generations (Le *et al.*, 2024). Costumes are viewed as cultural artifacts and living representations of community identity and craftsmanship (Gu & Lu, 2021). However, as Gu and Lu (2021) stated, simply incorporating traditional clothing patterns and shapes into modern designs does not guarantee aesthetically pleasing outcomes. Although preserving authenticity is critical for cultural conservation, achieving widespread market appeal is equally essential for ensuring the ongoing significance of traditional forms in modern cultures (Le *et al.*, 2024). As a result, current designers confront a twofold challenge: preserving heritage while introducing innovation (Jalil *et al.*, 2024b). Numerous designers have adopted similar approaches by breaking down, reconfiguring and merging the essential elements of traditional clothing with contemporary materials, refined sewing techniques and the latest fashion styles. This produces fresh interpretations that honor traditional craftsmanship while aligning with modern sensibilities (Le *et al.*, 2024; Jalil *et al.*, 2024b). According to several recent studies, traditional culture is a significant source of inspiration for modern textile and fashion design (Jalil, 2025a; Chen & Suwanthada, 2024; Yao & Inchan, 2024). These pieces illustrate how designers reinvent cultural symbols, clothing and beliefs to fashion new wearable identities. According to Jiang *et al.* (2019), this leads to fresh and creative interpretations that respect traditional craftsmanship while appealing to contemporary sensibilities.

Gao and Yezhova (2023) proposed three strategic methods to achieve this equilibrium. The first method involves updating classic aesthetics by reinterpreting elements of historical clothing designs through a contemporary lens, such as silhouettes, structures and patterns. The second approach focuses on revitalizing cultural heritage by extracting the cultural essence of traditional garments and creatively blending it with modern aesthetics to align with contemporary lifestyles. The third strategy utilizes digital technology to provide immersive, interactive and educational experiences that resonate with younger audiences, fostering a greater understanding and appreciation of traditional clothing styles and cultural customs. Hartono *et al.* (2025) investigated how motif invention, influenced by local landmarks (*pepadun and payan mas*) and natural resources in *lampung tapis* cloth, demonstrated how patterns change through modification, reduction, simplicity and colour enhancement. Furthermore, scientific and technological breakthroughs have led to the development of sophisticated techniques that enhance traditional methods (Gao & Yezhova, 2023). Jalil *et al.* (2024a) investigated the application of laser cutting techniques to incorporate the *Orang Ulu* motif into contemporary ethnic garments within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Sarawak. The research demonstrated how traditional designs are thoughtfully integrated into modern apparel, supporting and elevating cultural preservation while maintaining

market relevance. Le et al. (2024) examined the impact of the *Nhat Binh* robe on sustainable fashion in Vietnam. This study (Le et al., 2024) demonstrates that co-design, a collaborative approach involving fashion designers, artisans and consumers, is proposed as a key strategy for sustainably incorporating cultural elements while meeting contemporary needs. Even seemingly specific elements like dried wildflowers (Le et al., 2024) or the dragon motif in *Slavic* mythology (Yakymchuk et al., 2017) can inspire modern collections. Indeed, cultural sensitivity and authenticity are crucial, often requiring collaboration with artisans and cultural experts (Jalil et al., 2024b).

According to recent research by Yao and Inchan (2024), traditional *Hanfu* clothing is characterized by its textile elements, symbols and motifs, which are reinterpreted in contemporary designs. Similarly, in another ethnic research (Gao & Yezhova, 2023), it is demonstrated that major designers, not just Chinese designers, are incorporating traditional Chinese symbols and motifs into contemporary apparel by modifying their form and colour to create ensembles rich in cultural significance. In examining contemporary Chinese-themed fashion design, Ma and Bian (2020) introduced the notion of aesthetic distance, emphasizing intangible cultural resources such as spiritual values, ancient philosophies and symbols. Their research encompassed ideas like design form, which aims to balance modernity and traditional conservatism; design confirmation, which aims to balance form and spirit; and design motivation, which draws inspiration from the *Yin-Yang* philosophy and the five elements to create minimalist, abstract designs that represent cultural balance (Chen & Suwanthada, 2024). Traditional Chinese motifs have begun to appear in collections by international companies such as *Gucci*.

According to research by Kong et al. (2024), there is also a rising trend to merge *Li* ethnic clothing with contemporary fashion, emphasizing customized design components while preserving *Li* cultural characteristics. This research has demonstrated several new experimental applications for *Li* brocade designs and their materials. However, ensuring that these designs transcend mere imitation and genuinely reflect the cultural essence was essential. Chen and Suwanthada's research (2024) emphasizes how elements of Qiang clothing are borrowed and transformed into contemporary objects, such as dinnerware and keychains, in the *Maoxian* region. To simplify and modernize historic components for contemporary appeal, the design approach works closely with the community while prioritizing respect for the *Qiang* people's cultural heritage. Furthermore, Khodary et al. (2025) examined the impact of the ancient *Maya and Aztec* civilizations on modern cloth printing and fashion, highlighting the ongoing importance of historical cultural features as sources of stylistic and symbolic inspiration. Traditional concepts are an invaluable source of inspiration for designers and artists, who create distinctive and meaningful products that celebrate cultural diversity and heritage (Jalil, 2025b). These examples illustrate how traditional craftsmanship and cultural elements are being increasingly incorporated into contemporary designs worldwide. Balancing the honouring of history with contemporary aesthetics and practical needs often requires collaboration, cultural sensitivity and innovative design choices. Factors such as usability, production costs and the potential for cultural appropriation must be carefully examined to ensure a respectful and enduring integration. The goal is to develop products that resonate with today's consumers while preserving cultural significance. By incorporating traditional materials and practices into contemporary design methodologies, societies can safeguard their heritage, promote cultural sustainability and enrich modern expressions of identity.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews to investigate the role of Bidayuh craft practitioners in preserving and adapting traditional cultural themes and symbols for contemporary design. The goal was to get in-depth insights into the life experiences, artistic techniques and opinions of Bidayuh artisans. Eight experienced designers and craftspeople were interviewed between January and March of 2025. The participants were identified through purposive sampling to ensure they had direct involvement in or experience with Bidayuh art and craftsmanship. Each interview lasted 2 hours and involved in-depth discussions and observations of their collections. Their expertise varied, contributing to a broad and intergenerational perspective on craft culture and utilizing interview content that focused on innovation, adaptation and observations of crafts applied in clothing design forms. In addition to the interviews, direct observations of the artists' workspaces, collections and crafted items were conducted to document the aesthetic qualities, motifs and materials used in their practice. Data collected from the interviews and observations were analysed using thematic coding, where patterns and recurring themes were identified, grouped and interpreted. A narrative review of the related literature further supported the findings, situating the voices of these practitioners within broader cultural and design contexts.

This study adopted a purposive sampling strategy to ensure the inclusion of participants with substantial knowledge and experience in Bidayuh cultural arts and fashion-related practices. A total of eight participants were selected, comprising four senior Bidayuh artisans (specialising in weaving, beadwork and traditional costume-making) and four fashion designers actively engaged in integrating indigenous elements into contemporary design. Although the sample size is small, it aligns with the in-depth, exploratory nature of qualitative research, prioritising rich cultural insights over numerical representation. These participants were considered cultural knowledge holders whose expertise and lived experience reflect the broader practices and values of the Bidayuh community. Data from semi-structured interviews and field observations were analysed using thematic analysis.

Interview transcripts were coded inductively, beginning with open coding to identify recurring ideas, followed by axial coding to group related codes into broader themes. Emerging themes were then refined through constant comparison across participants to ensure internal consistency and cultural validity. To enhance credibility, member checking was conducted by sharing thematic summaries with selected participants for feedback and verification. This iterative approach enabled the study to capture both shared cultural values and individual creative perspectives, providing a robust basis for interpreting how Bidayuh material culture can inform contemporary sustainable design.

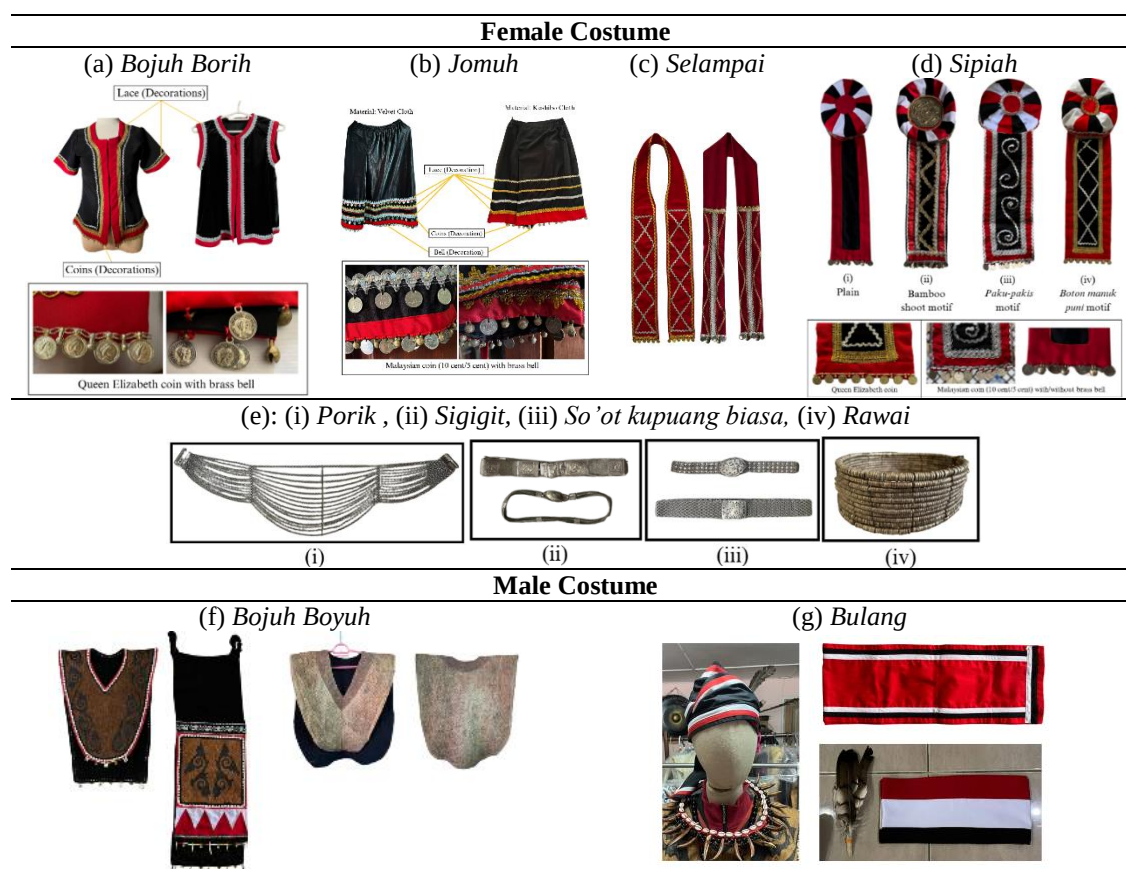
This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research practices. Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses and no personally identifiable information was collected or disclosed. The data gathered were used solely for academic and research purposes. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines and regulations of the researchers' institution.

3. Results and findings

3.1. Uniqueness of Bidayuh costume and its profile

As shown in Table 1, all interviewees stated that the Bidayuh traditional costume is most often worn during the *Gawai Dayak* festival, rather than in everyday use. It is also worn at other significant events such as dinner functions, official ceremonies, Bidayuh pageant competition and weddings. Depending on the occasion, both modern and traditional styles may be adopted. All interviewees agreed that the Bidayuh costume (Table 1) consists of *bojuh borih*, *jomuh*, *selampai* and *sipiah*, which is significant for females. In contrast, for males, it consists of *bojuh boyuh*, *tawop* and *bulang*. The materials are mostly *koshibo* or occasionally velvet for female attire, whereas male attire traditionally uses bark from the *boyuh* tree. The female outfit is primarily black, featuring a red hem and may be designed with or without sleeves. The *selampai* (Table 1c) is made from red cloth, worn over the neck, parallel to each other.

Table 1. Uniqueness of Bidayuh costume and its profile



3.2. Bidayuh weaving and crafting beauty

The *ga'at* (Table 2a) is a traditional carrying basket made from rattan, featuring a wooden plank that rests against the carrier's back. Durable woven rattan flaps are attached to both sides of the plank, creating flexible storage space. The Bidayuh people traditionally use the *ga'at* to carry large quantities of fruits, such as durians. The *sajuo* (Table 2b) is approximately 1.4 metres tall and is used to carry processed paddy grains,

capable of holding up to 45 kilograms. The *subuoy* (Table 2c), also made from rattan, is used to hold offerings for the spirits during *Gawai* rituals. The *jumuo* (Table 2d) is a cylindrical (approximately 30 cm x 15 cm in size) open-top basket made from woven rattan, traditionally used by women to carry personal belongings. A smaller variant, the *jumuo simongi* (Table 2e), shares the same cylindrical, open top form and is made from woven rattan. I2 explained the spiritual use: “*It is used to hold paddy spirits during Gawai, covered with a white cloth and brought to the Gawai house for ritual purposes*”. There are four common types of armlets or bracelets shown in Table 2f, *golang uwi*, *golang Jaka’*, *sitotoh* and *berad*, traditionally worn by the Bidayuh, each crafted using natural materials, the *golang uwi* (Table 2f-i), which is made from woven rattan. The *golang jaka’* (Table 2f-ii) is distinct for its yellow colour and unique origin. As described by I2, “*The Jaka’ bracelet is yellow. It is made from a plant called Jaka’, which grows on the branches of tall durian trees. The material can only be harvested once the durian branch has decayed and fallen to the ground*”.

Table 2. Bidayuh handicrafts



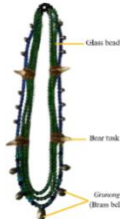
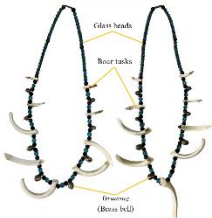
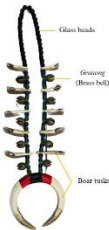
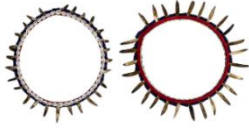
Another type, the *sitotoh* (Table 2f-iii), is a black rattan bracelet or armlet. I2 explained, “*Sitotoh is more accessible as it grows abundantly in crop farms and is easier to obtain. All these rattan bracelets are woven by hand*”. Lastly, the *berad* (Table 2f-iv) is also crafted from the woven rattan and is traditionally worn by men. I2 noted, “*Men’s bracelets are called berad, which can also be worn on the ankles and are typically used*

by warriors or common men”. The *tipuruok* (Table 2g), as described by I1, is “a bottle made from bamboo, specifically a yellow variety called *borak* (in the Bidayuh *jagoi-Bau* dialect). It is often tied around the waist during hunting trips to quench thirst”. The *utap* (Table 2h) is primarily wood, with some versions crafted from rattan. Its surface features motifs that are either intricately carved or hand-drawn, showcasing Bidayuh artistic traditions. The *jepor* (Table 2i) and *asuar* (Table 2j) are both Bidayuh weapons used primarily for hunting. The *stagi* (Table 2l) is also worn by females and is made from coiled silver.

3.3. Beadworks as a Bidayuh rich identity

Pangieh, *sombon* and belt are the most common accessories that Bidayuh women wear. *Pangieh* (Table 3a) is a Bidayuh necklace made of opaque beads, strung with bear claws, brass bells, ancient Chinese coins and brass wire coil. *Sombon* (Table 3b) comprises three-layered translucent glass beads (light blue, dark blue and green), bear claws and *grunong*. According to I1, “The common bead colours are blue and green. Green symbolizes plants, blue symbolizes the sky and yellow is sometimes added, representing ripe paddy. Only women can wear bear claws on the *sombon*, which is considered ‘cool’. Women are not allowed to wear wild boar tusks because they are considered ‘hot’ and aggressive”. It is worn diagonally across the body over one shoulder, resembling a sash.

Table 3. Bidayuh beadworks

Female Accessories				
(a) <i>Pangieh</i>	(b) <i>Sombon</i>	(c) <i>Golang</i> (Bracelet/Anklet)		
				
Male Accessories				
(d) <i>Pimulang</i>	(e) <i>Nunguak bobot</i>	(f) Anklet	(g) Armlet	(h) <i>Sirambuk</i>
				

Golang (Table 3c), worn by females. It can be used as a bracelet or an anklet. *Pimulang* (Table 3d), worn by men, is typically worn as a pair crisscrossed over the shoulders. Made from glass beads (black, blue, red, green, yellow), *grunong* and boar tusks/teeth. *Nunguak bobot* (Table 3e) is a male U-shaped boar tusks necklace. Composed of boar tusks, glass beads and *grunong*. An anklet (Table 3f) worn by the

Bidayuh men consists of a *grunong*, attached to a piece of red cloth, while the armlet (Table 3g) is made from alternating boar tusks and glass beads affixed to an elastic cloth base. *Sirambuk* (Table 3h) is a distinctive Bidayuh warrior neckpiece, made from glass beads, shell, boar teeth or tusks and *grunong*, all strung together on rattan wrapped in red cloth.

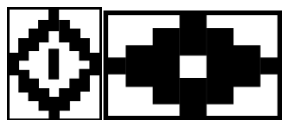
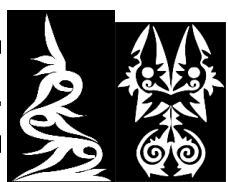
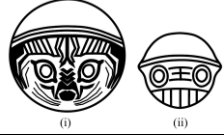
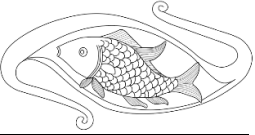
3.4. Bidayuh significant symbols, motifs and their uniqueness meaning

The cultural essence of Bidayuh art is deeply rooted in the community's close relationship with nature, spirituality and social unity. Bidayuh patterns are generally categorized into two main motif types: floral and animal. Floral motifs are based on the shapes and patterns of flowers, leaves and other plant forms. The floral motifs in Bidayuh feature ferns, bamboo shoots and leaves, durian thorns, paddy and piper betel. According to I2, "*These motifs are mostly inspired by nature, especially local plants. The motifs do not have specific symbolic meanings. They generally reflect nature and the surrounding environment*". These motifs reflect the Bidayuh people's traditional reliance on forest resources, with paddy symbolizing their primary agricultural livelihood. Animal motifs are based on the shape and pattern of birds, fish, dragons and tigers. The *boton manuk puni* (Table 4a) and *pucuk rebung* (Table 4b) are the most prominent Bidayuh motifs mentioned by all interviewees, often appearing on garments and accessories. Bidayuh design inspired by the *button manuk puni* shown in Table 4a as a *pangieh* and bracelet. *Pucuk rebung* was inspired by the design of male attire, as shown in Table 1f. I6 further elaborated on a motif known as *rojak dien*, describing it as "*an up-and-down zigzag like bamboo shoots. But bamboo shoots are sharper and narrower*". A design inspired by this motif is evident in the rattan bracelet or armlet shown in Table 8c. I2 and I6 note the bamboo leaf motifs (Table 4d) and they appear in the design for the lampshade (Table 2k) and *utap* (Table 2h-i). *Paku-pakis* (Table 4e), mentioned by most interviewees, is most featured in garment design, such as *sipiah* shown in Table 1d-iii. Paddy motif noted by I1 is mainly found in Bidayuh female garments. Table 4 presents two variations of the tiger head motif. The first, shown in Table 4g-i, is inspired by the large *grunong* shown in Table 3f, which serves as a male anklet. The second draws inspiration from the smaller *grunong* shown in Table 1a to Table 1d, commonly used as decorative elements on the Bidayuh female costume. The *ikan koi* motif (Table 4h) is incorporated into the women's belt shown in Table 1e-iii. The floral motif (Table 4i) is inspired by the design shown in Table 1d-ii, as *sipiah*. The *daun sireh* (Piper betel) motif and Bidayuh motif are shown in Table 4l and they are features from the design of *utap* (Table 2h-iv). Notably, two motifs combine floral and animal elements. One design combines a dragon and *paku-pakis*, as seen in Table 2i as *jepor*. Another integrates a parrot and floral motif, represented in the belt design shown in Table 1e-iii.

Translating traditional Bidayuh designs into contemporary forms involves a careful and respectful reinterpretation of motifs and materials, as shown in Tables 1-6. I8 added that motifs are rooted in nature, reflecting "ferns, bamboo or mountains" and are therefore deeply symbolic. Regarding silhouettes, she stated, "*In my design, the silhouette should be modern, but the motifs are derived from traditional elements*". Based on the interview results, the process begins with identifying the main elements, such as specific motifs or weaving techniques that carry cultural significance. These elements are reinterpreted using contemporary materials, silhouettes and applications to endure relevance in today's fashion landscape. As I3 noted, "*In my view, contemporary Bidayuh fashion includes styles made for modern occasions like dinner events with slits, belts or flared skirts, like*

wedding gowns. The colours remain the same and the Bidayuh elements are still present; only the style has evolved. Now there are many variations and interpretations in Bidayuh fashion". For example, as shown in Table 4, traditional motifs can be integrated into contemporary silhouettes through embroidery or digitally printed fabric. At the same time, woven patterns may inspire structural elements in fashion accessories or interior decor. The reinterpretation does not replicate traditional designs but seeks to distil their essence and express them in new, wearable formats. This adaptive process maintains the visual integrity of the original motifs while aligning them with current design trends. Designers emphasize the importance of collaborating with artisans. I6 stated, "Collaboration ensures heritage is not diluted but evolves responsibly with contemporary values". Then, integrating Bidayuh craftsmanship into contemporary fashion also supports sustainable design practices. Moreover, I7 emphasized collaboration with artisans, not appropriation: "There are some traditional pieces that I will ask artisans to do for me... we have to refer to them... for example, certain accessories should be placed on your head, you shouldn't put it in your shoe".

Table 4. Bidayuh motifs Illustration (by the researchers)

(a) Boton manuk puni (Pigeon's Eye)	(b) Pucuk rebung (Bamboo shoot)	(c) Rojak dien (Durian thorn)	(d) Bamboo leaf
			
(e) Paku-pakis (Fern)	(f) Paddy	(g) Tiger head	(h) Ikan Koi
			
(i) Flora motif	(j) Dragon + paku-pakis (Fern)	(k) Parrot + flora motif	(l) Daun sireh (Piper betle)
			

I8 emphasized preserving motif integrity and fostering community engagement. I8 stated, "I buy directly from the maker... and ask them what's the name of the motif, what should I do with this... because they still believe in taboos". She consults with community members and senior dancers to ensure cultural appropriateness. I7 clarified her design philosophy: "Usually I maintain the original (motif), I don't replicate it 100%, I change the placement". The interviews caution against superficial imitation of cultural elements, urging a deep understanding of the significance and symbolism of traditional attire. I4 emphasized that "in the case of Bidayuh culture, misapplication of cultural motifs risks distorting their cultural significance". Most designers believed that modern clothing and fashion design, inspired by tradition, often revolved around reinterpreting silhouettes to strike a balance between traditional structure and modern practicality. I5 stated, "I think if designers adjust collars, sleeves, proportions and layers, blending elements from

garments like the bojuh borih with simplified, wearable forms". Indeed, designers can modernize traditional garments into lightweight, comfortable and modular forms that are suited for daily wear while maintaining their iconic shapes. Moreover, all designers believed traditional patterns and colour palettes could embed meaning and cultural memory into modern clothing. I1 stated, *"Digital tools are leveraged to remix motifs, while modern colour contrasts and sustainable fabrics are used to bridge the old with the new"*. I2 stated, *"Patterns and colours are not just decorative; they act as cultural codes. The integration of these elements must respect their origin stories while appealing to modern aesthetics"*. Furthermore, designers emphasized the importance of designing for a contemporary lifestyle without sacrificing cultural meaning. Cost was another concern; I7 stated that *"Traditional fabrics are expensive, especially handwoven or hand-embroidered pieces"*. She also noted that cutting through meaningful motifs in fabrics can feel disrespectful: *"We must cut it carefully and ideally, the fabric should be fully utilized, respectfully"* (I7).

4. Discussion

4.1. New ideas for contemporary design inspired by art, craft and heritage

This study reveals three interconnected strategies through which Bidayuh heritage can inform sustainable contemporary fashion: material authenticity, symbolic storytelling and collaborative co-design. These strategies emerge from the participants' perspectives and reflect a shared commitment to sustainability, cultural continuity and creative innovation. Material authenticity was consistently emphasized as an ethical foundation for design. Participants framed traditional handicrafts and beadworks (Tables 2-3) as inherently sustainable because they rely on handwoven textiles, natural dyes and locally sourced materials. This approach aligns with global slow-fashion values, where ecological responsibility intersects with cultural heritage. By sourcing materials directly from indigenous artisans, designers not only reduce environmental impacts but also strengthen rural livelihoods through fair collaboration and equitable payment systems. This strategy reframes traditional crafts from decorative embellishments to vital components of sustainable production ecosystems (Le *et al.*, 2024).

Symbolic storytelling represents a second key strategy. The Bidayuh design vocabulary, symbolic colours (Table 1), nature-inspired motifs (Tables 2-4) and traditional silhouettes encode narratives about ancestry, unity and the preservation of land and peace. Participants argued that these symbols must be thoughtfully reinterpreted rather than superficially replicated. For example, translating traditional lines and motifs into modern prints, embroidery or garment structures enables contemporary clothing to convey heritage-based stories while meeting present-day consumer expectations for wearability, which aligns with the findings of Hwui and Jalil (2025). This reframing shifts the role of cultural elements from ornamental to communicative, positioning garments as carriers of meaning rather than just aesthetic artifacts. Collaborative co-design emerged as a third, integrative strategy. Participants described how working directly with Bidayuh artisans ensures cultural accuracy and prevents the trivialization of heritage. Such collaboration facilitates knowledge transmission while enabling innovation that maintains cultural integrity. This approach addresses a central tension identified in the interviews: designers want to modernize traditional elements yet fear cultural dilution. Co-design offers a pathway to balance these competing imperatives by embedding cultural respect into every stage of the design process. It also positions artisans as co-

creators rather than suppliers, challenging hierarchical design models and reinforcing community-based production structures. Taking together, these findings suggest that incorporating Bidayuh cultural heritage into sustainable fashion is not merely a matter of borrowing visual motifs. Instead, it involves integrating material ethics, cultural narratives and co-creative processes into holistic design frameworks. This synthesis contributes to ongoing debates on how traditional knowledge systems can inform sustainable innovation while safeguarding intangible heritage.

4.2. Challenges and opportunities in drawing inspiration from cultural heritage

While these strategies offer promising avenues, they also expose significant tensions and contradictions that must be navigated carefully. Participants and prior studies (Le *et al.*, 2024) noted that traditional motifs are often highly intricate, making them challenging to translate into modern design without losing cultural meaning. This raises a key dilemma: should designers simplify and adapt these elements to meet contemporary market needs or preserve their full complexity even if it limits commercial viability? Another challenge involves the risk of cultural appropriation. Designers expressed concern that superficial replication could commodify sacred symbols and erode authenticity. They advocated for rigorous cultural research and respectful reinterpretation to avoid “copycat” reproductions that strip traditional attire of its cultural depth (Kong *et al.*, 2024). This underscores the importance of contextualizing motifs within their cultural narratives rather than using them as decontextualized decoration. Such cultural sensitivity is crucial in protecting indigenous intellectual property and ensuring equitable representation.

At the same time, participants highlighted consumer expectations as a barrier. The labor-intensive nature of Bidayuh handicrafts often conflicts with demands for cost efficiency and fast turnaround. Some proposed a modular design to reconcile this tension, enabling elements like detachable beadwork or interchangeable panels that preserve cultural meaning while meeting lifestyle needs for versatility and convenience. This aligns with sustainable design principles that emphasize durability, reusability and reduced waste. A further opportunity lies in aligning Bidayuh-inspired fashion with the eco-fashion movement. Integrating sustainable materials and ethical production practices can enhance the market positioning of these designs, allowing them to appeal to environmentally conscious consumers while reinforcing community-centered values. This dual focus on ecological and cultural sustainability reframes heritage not as static tradition but as a dynamic resource for innovation. Ultimately, the study shows that integrating Bidayuh cultural elements into contemporary fashion is both an aesthetic and ethical undertaking. It requires designers to balance preservation and evolution, authenticity and innovation, cultural respect and market relevance. The future of Bidayuh-inspired design thus lies in co-creation, ethical storytelling and culturally grounded sustainability models where garments become not just products but narratives of shared heritage and identity.

5. Conclusion

This study contributes new knowledge to the fields of indigenous art and sustainable fashion design by moving beyond documentation to propose an integrated conceptual framework for reinterpreting Bidayuh material culture within contemporary design practice. Unlike prior literature, which primarily documents Bidayuh culture

through dialogue, music or food, this research demonstrates how traditional artistic expressions, costumes, weaving, beadwork and motifs can serve as active design resources that are both culturally grounded and adaptable to modern contexts. By foregrounding the voices of Bidayuh artisans and designers, the study advances a co-design model that reframes artisans as co-creators rather than suppliers, ensuring cultural accuracy, equitable collaboration and the ethical use of indigenous knowledge. This approach not only safeguards intangible heritage but also embeds sustainability principles, such as slow production, natural materials and community-centered practices, within the design process. In doing so, the paper positions fashion as a medium for cultural storytelling and sustainable innovation, enabling garments to carry living narratives of ancestry, identity and ecological stewardship. These contributions offer a new pathway for designers seeking culturally authentic, ethically produced alternatives to mass-market fashion and for educators developing curricula that connect sustainability with indigenous knowledge systems. Future research should extend this framework through applied design projects and collaborative educational models that pair local artisans with emerging designers, thereby bridging generational knowledge gaps and reinforcing culturally rooted sustainability practices. Ultimately, this paper argues that Bidayuh cultural heritage should not only be preserved as static tradition but actively reimagined as a dynamic design resource, one that strengthens cultural continuity while inspiring sustainable, innovative fashion for the future.

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