

## MANDAU: A TRADITIONAL WEAPON RICH IN SYMBOLISM AND SPIRITUAL MEANING

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### Abstract

This study explored the cultural, symbolic, and spiritual significance of the Mandau, a traditional weapon deeply rooted in the heritage of the Dayak people in Kalimantan. More than a tool for hunting and self-defense, the Mandau represented profound values such as bravery, communal unity, and respect for ancestors. By employing qualitative descriptive methods combined with semantic analysis, the research investigated the intricate symbolic meanings behind each part of the Mandau. Data collection involved interviews with skilled Mandau craftsmen and respected cultural leaders, along with a thorough review of existing literature on the subject. The findings revealed that the Mandau held a central role in Dayak culture, symbolizing identity, protection, and spiritual connection. Additionally, the research demonstrated the Mandau's potential as a teaching medium in English language education, particularly in fostering contextual understanding and promoting cross-cultural awareness. This study underscored the value of incorporating local cultural elements into global educational frameworks, highlighting how culturally meaningful artifacts could serve as powerful tools for language learning and cultural exchange.

**Keywords:** Mandau, Dayak Culture, Symbolism, Semantic Analysis, Cross-Cultural Awareness

### INTRODUCTION

Mandau is a cultural creation of the Dayak people, showcasing the highest level of craftsmanship in metalworking. It reflects the crystallization of the character and values that form the identity of the Dayak people across the island of Kalimantan. Mandau contains symbolic values encompassing various aspects of Dayak life, such as philosophy, spirituality, social structures, myths, magic, and others. The Dayak people even regard Mandau as a visual language for norms, ethics, customs, and the identity of all aspects of their life.

For the Dayak people, Mandau is a symbol of brotherhood, chivalric character, guardianship, responsibility, maturity, social status, cultural identity, and more. From a spiritual perspective, Mandau's presence is considered vital and must be present in every traditional ceremony, such as *Melas* (birth), *Plulukng Pruku* (marriage), *Balian* (healing), *Kwankai* (death), *Besara* (justice), and *Antang*

(traditional fines), among others. The central role of Mandau in the life of the Dayak people positions it as an essential part of their lives, always by their side. Mandau has thus become ingrained in the minds and behaviors of the Dayak people throughout history (Rendy, Interview 2024). Mandau is a traditional weapon of the Dayak people in Kalimantan, which not only serves as a tool for hunting or self-defense but also carries symbolic, cultural, and spiritual values.

In semantics—the study of meaning—local cultural elements such as Mandau can be used to teach how symbols and meanings are conveyed in different language contexts. This research explores how the symbolic meanings and values of Mandau can be integrated into English language learning through semantic analysis. The research findings, derived from interviews and surveys, are transformed into a narrative text that can be used as a teaching material for English, particularly for writing

and reading. The text identifies the symbolic meanings of Mandau and how these symbols can be represented in English. This study only explores trustworthy sources, particularly from Mandau craftsmen, to validate the analysis results within the Mandau narrative text, without testing the narrative text media.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research used a qualitative descriptive method, focusing on semantic analysis to interpret the data. The research focused on understanding the symbolic and cultural meanings of the Mandau, examining its significance in Dayak society. It also explored how these meanings could be integrated into English language learning to enhance cultural understanding. The data collection techniques used in this study included:

1. Interviews with Mandau Makers and Cultural Leaders

The first technique involved in-depth interviews with artisans who crafted the Mandau and local cultural leaders. These interviews aimed to uncover the symbolic meanings of the Mandau, as explained by its creators and those knowledgeable about its role in Dayak culture. Through these interviews, the researcher gathered authentic narratives and insights into the spiritual, social, and cultural functions of the Mandau, which formed the foundation for understanding its significance.

2. Literature Study

The second technique involved a thorough literature review on the function of the Mandau within Dayak culture, along with a study of semantic theory in English. This aspect of the research examined how symbols in the Mandau were interpreted, particularly from a linguistic perspective. The study of semantic theory provided a framework for analyzing how these symbols could be represented and conveyed in English, making them suitable for inclusion in language teaching.

Through these methods, the research explored the symbolic meanings behind the Mandau and identified ways to incorporate these meanings into English language teaching, particularly in reading and writing. By using qualitative approaches such as interviews and literature review, the study offered a culturally rich perspective on how local traditions and their symbols could enhance the learning experience of English learners.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Introduction to the Mandau's Cultural and Spiritual Significance

The Mandau, a traditional weapon of the Dayak people in Borneo, is not merely a tool for survival but a symbol rich in cultural and spiritual significance. Rooted in the deep spiritual traditions of Indonesia's indigenous communities, the Mandau holds a revered place in Dayak culture. It is regarded as possessing supernatural powers and is believed to embody absolute metaphysical strength, a belief that ties into the pantheistic traditions that dominate many indigenous belief systems in the region. As Sumardjo (2002) highlights, the Mandau's significance transcends its physical form, as it is seen as a bridge between the human and spiritual realms.

Historically, the Mandau was crafted as a vital tool used in spiritual ceremonies, hunting, and self-defense. However, over time, it evolved into a powerful symbol of the Dayak people's identity, resilience, and connection to their ancestors. The Mandau is indispensable in many traditional rituals, with its presence considered essential to the authenticity and success of such ceremonies (Renten, Tirih, Interview 2014). It reflects the Dayak's enduring respect for their cultural heritage and ancestral spirits, with each piece of the Mandau meticulously crafted to honor these traditions.

Through its physical design, the Mandau embodies the philosophy of duality, symbolizing a balance between opposing forces such as life and death, good and evil, and the relationship between nature and

humanity. This spiritual dualism is integral to the Dayak worldview, emphasizing harmony and interconnectedness. The Mandau, is a profound cultural artifact that encapsulates the values, beliefs, and cosmological understanding of the Dayak people.

### **Symbolism of the Mandau in Dayak Culture**

The Mandau, beyond its role as a weapon, is a potent symbol of the Dayak people's identity, values, and spiritual beliefs. Each component of the Mandau is imbued with deep cultural and spiritual significance, reflecting the Dayak's intricate relationship with nature, their ancestors, and the cosmos. The symbolism woven into the Mandau highlights the duality of existence, where life and death, good and evil, and the material and spiritual worlds are seen as interconnected forces.

The handle of the Mandau, often ornately carved in the shape of sacred animals like the hornbill, symbolizes wisdom, strength, and protection. The hornbill, in particular, is considered sacred, embodying spiritual guidance and a connection to the divine. This connection is vital in Dayak culture, as the hornbill's wisdom is believed to offer protection and spiritual insight, which can be metaphorically conveyed through terms like "wisdom" and "power" in English.

The hilt of the Mandau, traditionally made from bone or hardwood and wrapped in rattan, is a symbol of courage and stability. The rattan binding reinforces the idea of unity and interconnectedness, emphasizing that strength is found not only in the individual but also in the collective, whether it be within the community or in the relationship with nature and the spiritual realm.

The sheath, or Sarung, serves as a protector, both physically and symbolically. It is a safeguard for the blade but also represents preservation and harmony, protecting the values and traditions the Mandau embodies. The rattan binding used in the hilt further symbolizes the bonds that unite individuals, families, and the broader Dayak community.

The various charms and decorative elements, such as the Blawit or Krayang, serve as spiritual amulets, providing protection and bringing good fortune. These charms emphasize the Dayak belief in the supernatural, the importance of ancestral spirits, and the role of these spirits in safeguarding the community's well-being. The Mandau's symbolism thus represents a broader worldview where humans are in constant interaction with the spiritual forces around them.

In Dayak culture, the Mandau is not just a weapon; it is a living symbol of the community's values, beliefs, and the enduring strength of their spiritual and cultural heritage, embodying deep connections to their traditions and identity.

### **Semantic Analysis of the Parts of the Mandau**

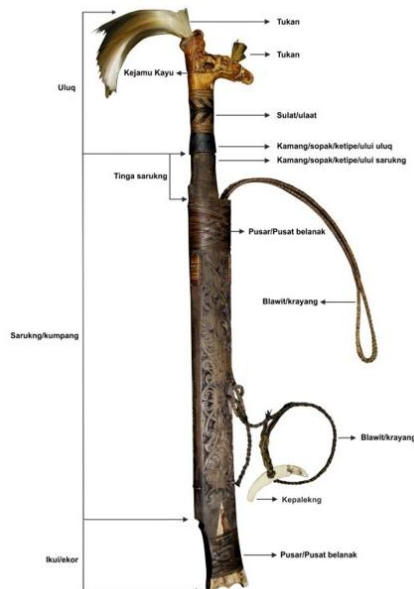
To truly grasp the cultural and spiritual depth of the Mandau, a thorough analysis of its individual components is necessary. Each part of the Mandau carries a unique symbolic and cultural significance, reflecting the traditions and worldview of the Dayak people. The blade, handle, and decorative elements are carefully crafted to represent various aspects of Dayak life, such as their connection to nature, spiritual beliefs, and social hierarchy. By examining these components, people can gain a deeper understanding of the Mandau's role as more than just a weapon—it is a symbol of identity, status, and power within Dayak culture.

The design and craftsmanship of the Mandau go beyond functionality, serving as a means to communicate the values and beliefs of the Dayak people. Every detail in its creation reflects a rich cultural narrative that connects the past to the present. For example, the intricate carvings and materials used in the handle and blade often represent ancestral spirits, natural elements, and sacred rituals. This semantic analysis explores how each part of the Mandau embodies key elements of Dayak traditions, providing insight into how these symbols can be integrated into English

language learning to foster a greater appreciation of cultural diversity and heritage.

To begin, let's take a look at the visual representation of the Mandau, highlighting its various parts and intricate design.

**Picture 1.** The Mandau and Its Components



Picture 1 illustrates the various parts of the Mandau, highlighting their intricate design and cultural significance. Now, let's delve into the significance of each part of the Mandau.

### 1. *Kejamu Kayu* (Handle Ornament)

The *Kejamu Kayu*, or the ornament on the handle, is often carved in the shape of sacred animals like the hornbill. This part of the Mandau symbolizes wisdom, strength, and protection, with the hornbill specifically representing spiritual guidance. In English, the literal translation would be “wood ornament on the hilt,” but the connotative meaning stretches far beyond the material. It is a visual reminder of the presence of ancestral spirits and the protective power they bestow upon the wielder of the Mandau.

### 2. *Hulu Mandau* (Hilt)

The hilt of the Mandau is traditionally carved from bone or hardwood, materials chosen for their symbolic meaning of strength and endurance. Wrapped in rattan for durability, it represents courage, stability,

and resilience. While the English term “hilt” may appear to denote only the part of the weapon used to grip, its deeper significance within Dayak culture emphasizes bravery and the importance of a stable foundation. It is a symbol of unwavering resolve in the face of adversity.

### 3. *Sulat/Ulaat* (Binding Cord)

The *Sulat*, or *Ulaat*, is the cord that binds the various parts of the Mandau together. Its role is not only to hold the components together physically but also to symbolize unity, integrity, and the strength of social bonds. In English, it may be referred to as the “binding cord,” but its true meaning reflects the interconnectedness of individuals within the Dayak community. This binding is a reminder that strength is derived from unity—whether that bond is between people, nature, or the spiritual realm.

### 4. *Sarukng/Kumpang* (Sheath)

The sheath of the Mandau, called the *Sarukng* or *Kumpang*, serves both a practical and symbolic function. It protects the blade of the Mandau but also represents the concept of preservation. The sheath symbolizes protection, safeguarding not only the weapon but also the cultural values and spiritual power it carries. In English, the word “sheath” refers to the protective cover, but within Dayak culture, it represents the safeguarding of traditions, ancestral wisdom, and the integrity of the community.

### 5. *Pusar/Pusat Belanak* (Center Ornament)

The *Pusar* or *Pusat Belanak* is a central decorative element on the sheath, often seen as the focal point of the Mandau. It symbolizes balance and harmony, both in the weapon itself and in the life of the Dayak people. While the English term might simply translate to “center ornament,” the cultural connotation is much richer. It speaks to the Dayak’s understanding of equilibrium,

where every part of life must be in balance to ensure peace and well-being.

6. *Blawit/Krayang* (Decorative Cord with Charms)

The *Blawit* or *Krayang* is a decorative cord adorned with charms such as tusks or beads. These charms serve as amulets, believed to provide spiritual protection and bring good fortune. In English, the translation might be “decorative cord with charms,” but in the Dayak context, it is a powerful symbol of the supernatural forces that guide and protect the community. The charms represent the Dayak belief in the importance of spiritual guidance and ancestral protection in everyday life.

7. *Kepalekng* (Tusk or Charm)

The *Kepalekng*, often crafted from animal tusks or bones, symbolizes strength and bravery. It represents the courage required to face the challenges of life and the endurance to overcome obstacles. In English, it may be referred to as a “tusk or charm,” but its deeper meaning within the Dayak context is that of fortitude and resilience in the face of adversity. It is a constant reminder of the bravery needed to protect the community and uphold cultural values.

8. *Iku/Ekor* (Tail of the Sheath)

The *Iku* or *Ekor* is the tail of the Mandau’s sheath, often adorned with motifs representing good fortune. While its literal translation is “tail of the sheath,” symbolically, it signifies the completion of a journey and the fulfillment of an endeavor. It also reflects blessings for future travels, ensuring that the wielder of the Mandau is safeguarded and guided on their path. The *Ekor*, therefore, is a representation of hope, future prosperity, and the continuation of the Dayak legacy.

Each part of the Mandau is not only a physical component but also a carrier of profound cultural and spiritual meaning. By understanding these symbolic elements, we can gain deeper insight into the Dayak worldview and their connection to the forces

of nature, spirituality, and community. Through this semantic analysis, it becomes clear that the Mandau is far more than a weapon; it is a living testament to the Dayak people's beliefs, values, and cultural heritage.

### The Role of Semantics in Understanding Contextual Meaning

The study of semantics plays a crucial role in understanding how language conveys meaning, particularly when it comes to cultural and symbolic expressions. In the context of the Mandau, the meaning of its parts extends beyond their literal definition, carrying deeper cultural and spiritual significance that enriches the understanding of the Dayak people's worldview. This duality between denotative (literal) and connotative (cultural) meanings allows for a richer exploration of how language reflects traditions, values, and beliefs.

Semantics helps students appreciate the difference between the two levels of meaning. For instance, when we examine the term “hilt,” its literal meaning refers to the part of the Mandau that serves as a grip. However, in Dayak culture, the hilt is much more than a functional part of the weapon. It symbolizes courage, stability, and the endurance required to face life's challenges. Through this understanding, students can gain insight into how language can carry multiple layers of meaning, depending on the context in which it is used.

By using the Mandau as a teaching tool, educators can highlight how the cultural context shapes the meaning of words and phrases. For example, the word “hornbill” in English simply refers to a type of bird. However, within the Dayak culture, the hornbill carries connotative meanings of wisdom, spiritual strength, and protection. This distinction between denotative and connotative meanings is an essential concept in semantics, which enhances students' ability to interpret and understand words in various cultural contexts.

Additionally, exploring the Mandau’s symbolic components provides a valuable

opportunity to develop students' cross-cultural communication competence. Understanding how the Mandau's parts symbolize unity, protection, strength, and wisdom allows students to reflect on how language and culture are intertwined. This understanding fosters cultural awareness, helping learners better interpret not only the English language but also the broader cultural and spiritual significance of words from different linguistic backgrounds.

In sum, semantics offers a powerful lens through which we can examine not only the literal meanings of words but also their broader, cultural significance. Through the Mandau, students can explore how language functions to convey deeper messages and values, enhancing their understanding of both the English language and the cultural heritage of the Dayak people.

### **The Mandau in English Language Learning**

The Mandau, with its rich cultural and symbolic meanings, serves as an invaluable tool for teaching English, particularly in enhancing students' understanding of both language and cultural nuances. By examining the Mandau and its components, students can explore the distinction between literal and connotative meanings, enriching their vocabulary and comprehension of English. This approach helps students not only learn new words but also gain insight into how language can reflect cultural values, social identity, and spiritual beliefs.

Through the Mandau, students can learn to differentiate between the denotative meaning of a word and its deeper, cultural connotation. For example, terms such as "hilt," "blade," and "sheath" carry functional meanings in English, referring to parts of the Mandau. However, within the Dayak culture, these components symbolize far more than mere physical attributes. The hilt, for instance, represents courage, while the blade signifies strength and protection. Such connotative meanings provide a richer understanding of language, helping students recognize the importance of context in interpreting words.

Additionally, the Mandau serves as a bridge for cross-cultural learning. By examining the symbolism behind elements like the hornbill or the rattan binding, students can better appreciate how the Dayak people perceive values such as wisdom, unity, and ancestral connection. This cultural exploration enhances students' understanding of English terms like "wisdom," "unity," and "spirituality," offering a more profound perspective on language and its connection to cultural identity.

Using the Mandau as a teaching tool encourages students to think critically about how words carry different meanings depending on their cultural context. This approach fosters cultural awareness and sensitivity, essential skills in today's interconnected world. Moreover, it provides students with a deeper appreciation of the power of language to convey not just information, but also complex ideas, emotions, and traditions.

In conclusion, the Mandau offers an engaging and meaningful way to teach English while also promoting cross-cultural understanding. By exploring the symbolism of the Mandau and its parts, students gain a richer understanding of both the English language and the Dayak culture, which enhances their overall language proficiency and cultural competence.

### **Stories from Experts about the Mandau's Cultural Role**

In-depth interviews and stories from Mandau makers and cultural experts reveal the deep cultural and spiritual significance of the Mandau in Dayak society. These personal narratives offer invaluable insights into the symbolic role the Mandau plays in the lives of the Dayak people, shedding light on its historical importance, spiritual connections, and societal functions.

According to one Mandau maker, the crafting of the Mandau is not merely a physical act but a sacred ritual that connects the present generation with their ancestors. The process of making a Mandau is steeped in

tradition and ritualistic practices that honor the spirits of their forebears. The Mandau is seen as more than just a weapon; it is a vessel for ancestral wisdom and spiritual protection. As one expert described, "Each Mandau carries the spirit of our ancestors, a reminder of the strength and unity that have sustained our people through generations."

The Mandau's cultural role extends beyond its use in warfare or hunting. It plays a central role in significant life events such as births, marriages, and funerals, symbolizing the connection between the physical and spiritual realms. Experts highlight that during traditional ceremonies, the presence of the Mandau is indispensable. It is believed that a ceremony without the Mandau would be incomplete, lacking the spiritual protection and guidance it provides.

Through these stories, we understand that the Mandau is not just an artifact but a living part of the Dayak cultural identity. It teaches values such as courage, unity, and respect for the ancestors, with each carving and ornament telling a story of the Dayak people's deep connection to their environment and heritage. The Mandau, as shared by experts, is also a powerful symbol of the community's unity and collective strength, reinforcing social bonds and cultural pride.

These narratives from Mandau makers and cultural experts underscore the importance of the Mandau in preserving the Dayak way of life. By listening to these stories, students and learners can appreciate the Mandau's profound significance in Dayak culture and its continued relevance in maintaining cultural identity in the modern world.

### **The Mandau as a Bridge between Cultures and Languages**

The Mandau is more than a traditional weapon; it serves as a powerful symbol of cultural identity, spirituality, and unity. Through its intricate design and profound symbolism, the Mandau reflects the values and beliefs of the Dayak people, connecting them to their ancestors and their natural environment. It embodies virtues such as

courage, wisdom, protection, and social solidarity, making it not only an essential artifact in Dayak life but also a cultural heritage that is deeply revered.

This study highlights how the Mandau transcends its role as a weapon, becoming a vessel of cultural significance and a symbol of heritage. Examining the Mandau's symbolism and spiritual values provides insight into the Dayak worldview, where every component carries deep meaning and purpose. Each part of the Mandau symbolizes more than its physical form, reflecting the cultural beliefs, traditions, and values of the Dayak people. The Mandau bridges the gap between the physical and spiritual realms, reflecting the balance, unity, and reverence for ancestors that are central to Dayak culture, embodying their deep cultural and spiritual values.

In the context of English language learning, the Mandau provides a unique opportunity to explore the intersection of language and culture, allowing students to gain insights into cultural values while enhancing their language skills. It enables learners to engage with both literal and connotative meanings, enriching their understanding of words and concepts, while promoting greater cross-cultural competence and appreciation for diverse cultural perspectives. The study of the Mandau serves as a gateway for students to explore the richness of language and culture, emphasizing how symbols, meanings, and cultural values vary across different societies and traditions.

Ultimately, the Mandau serves as a powerful testament to the Dayak people's resilience, identity, and deep spiritual connection to their environment and cultural traditions. The Mandau offers a powerful example of how cultural symbols can bridge different cultures, fostering understanding and appreciation between diverse communities. By sharing the Mandau's story, the researchers honor the Dayak heritage and highlight the significance of cultural preservation. This work encourages a deeper respect for cultural diversity, identity, and the value of learning from different traditions.

### Limitations and Recommendations

This research focuses on exploring the symbolism of the Mandau and its potential as a material for English language teaching. It examines how the Mandau's cultural and spiritual meanings can be integrated into lessons. However, the study does not assess the practical effectiveness of using the Mandau in classroom settings.

Further research is necessary to assess how integrating Mandau stories and symbolism into lessons influences students' reading comprehension, writing skills, and overall language proficiency in the classroom. Future studies could examine whether this approach enhances comprehension, writing ability, and cross-cultural understanding in the classroom.

### CONCLUSION

The study on the art of crafting the Mandau in Central Kalimantan reveals that the Mandau is not merely a traditional weapon but carries profound symbolic, spiritual, and cultural meanings. For the Dayak people, the Mandau symbolizes identity, courage, unity, and reverence for ancestors. Each element of the Mandau—from the blade and handle to its intricate carvings—holds deep symbolic value that can be translated into both literal and connotative concepts in English. Using qualitative descriptive research methods and semantic analysis, this study has successfully uncovered the rich symbolism of the Mandau, which is an integral part of Dayak culture. Beyond its cultural significance, the Mandau also serves as a valuable medium for teaching English, particularly in understanding both literal meanings and connotative interpretations. Through stories gathered from interviews, this research provides valuable teaching materials that promote cross-cultural awareness and enhance contextual language comprehension. Ultimately, the Mandau is more than just a symbol of traditional art; it acts as a bridge that connects local cultural values with global learning, fostering a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity and the role of symbolism in language.

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**ATTACHMENT**

Interview with Mandau Craftsman Kahias Atei Rendy in Central Kalimantan,



