

***Gawai Dayak* as an Instrument of Cultural Diplomacy and Cross-Border Acculturation between Indonesia and Malaysia**

Magista Pangestu Singka

Universitas Airlangga, Indonesia

Email: magista.pangestu.singka-2024@fisip.unair.ac.id

Abstract

Gawai Dayak is a harvest festival of the Dayak people, celebrated in Sarawak (Malaysia) and West Kalimantan (Indonesia). Beyond its cultural significance, Gawai Dayak serves as a medium for cultural diplomacy and fosters acculturation across the Indonesia–Malaysia border. This paper examines how Gawai Dayak functions as an instrument of cross-border cultural diplomacy and social integration. To analyze the role of Gawai Dayak in bridging communities across national boundaries and promoting mutual understanding. A qualitative approach is used, including literature review of prior studies and analysis of cross-border Gawai events. Gawai Dayak celebrations create shared identity and unity among Dayak communities of both countries, facilitating people-to-people diplomacy. The festival encourages exchange of cultural practices, language, and values, evidenced by cross-border participation in Gawai events and government-supported cultural programs. These interactions strengthen social bonds and contribute to tourism and goodwill. Gawai Dayak transcends its ritual roots to become a strategic cultural diplomacy tool, enhancing Indonesia–Malaysia relations at the grassroots level while preserving indigenous heritage. It exemplifies how shared culture can reduce inter-nation tensions and build a sense of common identity in a borderland context.

Keywords:

*Gawai Dayak;
Cultural Diplomacy;
Acculturation;
Cross-Border;
Indonesia–Malaysia*

INTRODUCTION

Gawai Dayak is a traditional harvest festival celebrated by the indigenous *Dayak* peoples of the island of Borneo, particularly in the state of Sarawak, Malaysia, and the province of West Kalimantan, Indonesia. The term "*Gawai*" means festival or ritual in the Iban language, and "*Dayak*" is a collective name for the diverse native ethnic groups of the island. *Gawai Dayak* is observed annually in late May and early June to mark the successful completion of the rice harvest and to express gratitude for the blessings received during the year. In Sarawak, *Gawai Dayak* has been an official public holiday since 1965, celebrated on 1–2 June with great festivity. In neighboring West Kalimantan (Indonesia), *Dayak* communities likewise celebrate *Gawai* around the same period, though it is not a formal public holiday in Indonesia. This shared festival is unique to Sarawak and Kalimantan, reflecting a common cultural heritage that transcends the Indonesia–Malaysia international boundary (RECODA, 2015).

The Indonesia–Malaysia border on Borneo splits the ancestral homeland of the *Dayaks* into two national territories. Despite the political separation, cross-border ethnic and cultural ties remain strong. Many *Dayak* subgroups (Iban, Bidayuh, etc.) reside on both sides of the

border, often maintaining kinship ties, speaking mutually intelligible languages, and observing similar traditions. *Gawai Dayak*, as a pan-*Dayak* celebration, has become a symbol of unity and identity for these communities. It is regarded as a celebration of unity, aspiration, and hope that is integral to *Dayak* identity (Pakpahan, 2025). Notably, the late Sarawak Chief Minister *Tan Sri Adenan Satem* lauded *Gawai Dayak* as "a symbol of unity for all the communities in Sarawak," underscoring its role in fostering social cohesion in a multicultural society (RECODA, 2015). This symbolism extends across the border: the festival serves to unify *Dayaks* of Indonesia and Malaysia, reinforcing their sense of shared heritage and solidarity despite living under different national flags (BNPP RI, 2024).

In the context of international relations, cultural diplomacy refers to the use of cultural expressions and exchanges to promote mutual understanding and goodwill between nations. It involves sharing aspects of culture — such as traditions, arts, and values — to bridge differences and build relationships (Saaida, 2023). As one study explains, cultural diplomacy can be interpreted as the exchange of information, ideas, arts, and other cultural aspects to create mutual understanding in fostering interactions with other groups (Yusriadi, Ruslan, Hasriyanti, Mustolehudin, & Shin, 2021). In the Southeast Asian region, Indonesia and Malaysia have historically experienced periods of tension, often fuelled by political disputes or rivalry over cultural claims. In this light, people-to-people contacts and cultural exchange programmes are crucial for softening misperceptions and enhancing bilateral relations (Ulyana & Salleh, 2018). *Gawai Dayak* presents an opportunity for cultural diplomacy at the grassroots level — it is a celebration in which citizens of both countries can participate and take pride, highlighting their common roots and fostering cross-border friendships.

Another important concept in this discussion is acculturation, which refers to the cultural modifications and exchanges that occur when different cultures come into continuous direct contact. Along the Kalimantan–Sarawak border, acculturation occurs naturally as communities interact for instance, through intermarriage, trade, migration, and shared festivities (Damayanti, 2023). *Gawai Dayak* functions as a conduit for such cross-cultural interactions. During *Gawai Dayak* people from various regions visit each other's longhouses and villages, partake in rituals, and share food, dance, and music, thereby learning about each other's local customs. This mutual exposure can lead to the gradual blending or adoption of cultural elements, strengthening a hybrid borderland culture while also reinforcing a collective *Dayak* identity (Yusriadi, Ruslan, Hasriyanti, Mustolehudin, & Shin, 2021).

Despite the evident importance of *Gawai Dayak* in the socio-cultural life of Bornean communities, limited scholarly attention has been paid to its role in cross-border diplomacy and integration. Previous research on the Indonesia–Malaysia border has often focused on issues such as security, economics, or conflict, or on the internal social capital within border villages (Herlan & Elyta, 2020). Few studies have specifically examined how a traditional festival might serve as a diplomatic bridge and acculturative medium between nations. Therefore, this paper aims to address that gap by analyzing *Gawai Dayak* as an instrument of cultural diplomacy and acculturation across the Indonesia–Malaysia border. It explores the ways in which the festival promotes intercultural understanding, examines its impacts on cross-border relations, and investigates how it contributes to the social cohesion of border communities. In doing so, the study highlights the potential of indigenous cultural heritage in enhancing international harmony at the local level.

This research gap is significant and urgent to address for several reasons. First, Indonesia–Malaysia relations have experienced periodic tensions over issues such as border disputes, cultural claims, and labor migration. In such a context, identifying and strengthening grassroots mechanisms that promote mutual understanding and goodwill is crucial for long-term bilateral stability. Second, as both countries are members of ASEAN and are committed to building an ASEAN Community, understanding how shared cultural heritage can contribute to regional integration is of strategic importance. Third, indigenous festivals like *Gawai Dayak* are increasingly recognized as valuable assets for cultural diplomacy and soft power, yet their potential remains underexplored in the academic literature. Without systematic research, policymakers may overlook the diplomatic value of such cultural events.

The *kebaruan* (novelty) of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, bridging international relations and cultural anthropology to analyze *Gawai Dayak* as a dual instrument of cultural diplomacy and acculturation. Unlike previous studies that focused on internal social dynamics, this research explicitly examines the cross-border dimension, drawing on recent empirical examples of transnational participation in *Gawai* events. It also introduces a conceptual framework that integrates Nye's theory of soft power (through cultural attractiveness) with theories of acculturation and borderland studies. In doing so, this study offers a fresh perspective on how traditional festivals can serve as vehicles for international cooperation and social integration.

The purpose of this research is to analyze the role of *Gawai Dayak* in bridging communities across the Indonesia–Malaysia border and promoting mutual understanding. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) identify the mechanisms through which *Gawai Dayak* facilitates cross-border cultural exchange; (2) examine the festival's contribution to cultural diplomacy between Indonesia and Malaysia; and (3) analyze the acculturative processes that occur through *Gawai* celebrations. Theoretically, this research advances scholarly understanding in the fields of cultural diplomacy, border studies, and indigenous heritage preservation. Practically, the findings are expected to provide recommendations for policymakers in both countries on how to leverage cultural events to strengthen bilateral relations, as well as for local communities in sustaining and developing their cultural heritage for the benefit of cross-border harmony.

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative, descriptive case-study approach. The primary focus is on the cultural phenomenon of *Gawai Dayak* in the border context, examining its implications for diplomacy and social exchange. Data were collected through literature review and document analysis. Relevant scholarly articles, government reports, news releases, and other credible sources were gathered to provide both historical context and up-to-date information on *Gawai Dayak* celebrations and cross-border participation. For instance, academic works on *Dayak* social structures and borderland culture were reviewed to understand internal community dynamics, while media reports from government agencies were analyzed to capture recent events such as cross-border *Gawai* festivals and official statements.

The scope is interdisciplinary, drawing from anthropology, international relations, and sociology. Given that *Gawai Dayak* is an ongoing annual event, the study also notes recent developments to keep the analysis current. This methodological approach combining literature-

based analysis with case examples is suitable for exploring the contextual significance of *Gawai Dayak* without intervening in the communities. One limitation of the method is the lack of first-hand ethnographic data; however, the use of multiple documented sources mitigates this by providing rich descriptive accounts and varying perspectives. Thus, the method allows for an exploratory yet informative inquiry into how a cultural festival can function as a tool of diplomacy and social integration across national borders.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Shared Festival, Shared Identity

Gawai Dayak's celebration in both Indonesia and Malaysia provides a common cultural platform that naturally brings people together across the border. The festival's core rituals such as family reunions, ancestral thanksgiving prayers, traditional music and dance performances, and the preparation of special foods like rice wine *tuak* and rice cakes are nearly identical on both sides of Borneo, making visitors feel at home whether they join *Gawai* in Sarawak or in West Kalimantan. This shared experience reinforces the notion of a larger *Dayak* community that is not confined by political boundaries. During *Gawai*, many Sarawak *Dayaks* working in Peninsular Malaysia or overseas travel back to their home longhouses, and similarly *Dayaks* from Indonesian cities return to their home villages, underlining the festival's role in strengthening ethnic identity and family bonds (RECODA, 2015). Increasingly, these homecomings have taken a transnational dimension for example, *Dayak* individuals from Sarawak have been known to visit relatives or friends in Kalimantan during the *Gawai* season and vice versa, effectively re-establishing cross-border kinship ties during the celebrations.

A salient feature of *Gawai Dayak* is its emphasis on unity and inclusivity. The festival is often open to friends from other ethnic groups and religions, fostering interethnic understanding within each country. In Sarawak's urban *Gawai* open-house events, one can find Malay, Chinese, and Indian attendees celebrating alongside *Dayaks*. Likewise, in West Kalimantan, Javanese or Malay neighbours may participate in local *Gawai* events (Widiyanto, et al., 2023). This inclusive spirit also extends across the international boundary. In recent years, delegations of *Dayak* cultural troupes and community leaders have exchanged visits during *Gawai*. Such interactions serve a dual purpose: they allow the sharing of cultural expressions and they symbolize goodwill between Malaysia and Indonesia at the people-to-people level. The common cultural ground that *Gawai* provides can reduce prejudices and foster a sense of kinship between Indonesians and Malaysians, especially important given past diplomatic frictions. Indonesia–Malaysia relations enhancing cultural diplomacy helps reduce tensions among the public and improves bilateral ties, as evidenced by growing exchanges in education, tourism and the performing arts (Ulyana & Salleh, 2018). *Gawai Dayak* exemplifies this dynamic by showcasing a positive, shared heritage that both sides can be proud of, thereby mitigating the narrative of competition over cultural ownership that has sometimes strained Indonesia–Malaysia relations.

Notably, local governments and cultural organizations have recognized the value of *Gawai Dayak* in preserving heritage and promoting unity. In Sarawak, the state government and *Dayak* associations have officially supported *Gawai* festivities since the 1980s, providing funding and organizational help (Hasegawa, 2018). This support has transformed *Gawai* from village-based celebrations into larger festivals that attract tourists and participants from afar.

Similarly, in West Kalimantan, *Dayak* cultural councils (Majelis Adat *Dayak*) and authorities have, since 1986, organized the “Pekan *Gawai Dayak*” (*Dayak* Festival Week) in the provincial capital Pontianak. This annual event gathers *Dayak* groups from across the province and international guests to showcase rituals, arts, and games. The multicultural showcases not only preserve traditions but also contribute to regional tourism. By maintaining and publicizing *Gawai Dayak*, these efforts implicitly serve cultural diplomacy. They invite members of the other country to witness and celebrate the culture, sending a message of openness and fraternity. It is a grassroots complement to official diplomatic discourse, reminding both Indonesians and Malaysians of their deep cultural interconnectedness (BNPP RI, 2024).

***Gawai Dayak* as Cultural Diplomacy in Action**

Cultural diplomacy is often exercised through exchanges and mutual celebrations, and *Gawai Dayak* provides a clear example. During *Gawai*, cross-border visits surge in certain areas of Borneo. For instance, in May 2024, more than 300 Malaysian *Dayaks* from Sarawak crossed into Indonesia via the Aruk border post (Sambas regency) to attend the 38th annual *Dayak* Festival Week in Pontianak (BNPP RI, 2024). These visitors from Malaysia joined tens of thousands of Indonesians in the week-long festivities at the Rumah Radakng, which included cultural performances, competitions, and rituals. According to Indonesia’s National Border Management Agency (BNPP), the influx of Malaysian attendees to Pekan *Gawai Dayak* had a positive impact on tourism and even the local economy of West Kalimantan. More importantly, the agency highlighted that although the visitors came from a different country, they share the same *Dayak* heritage (“*masyarakat Sarawak... mayoritas adalah suku Dayak sebagaimana di Kalimantan*”), even speaking the same dialect in some border areas. Such official acknowledgment underscores how cultural events like *Gawai* can blur the lines of division and emphasize *serumpun* kinship between Indonesians and Malaysians. In the words of one Malaysian traveller attending the Pontianak *Gawai*, improved roads and border facilities now make it easy to reunite for this important festival, which is “mandatory to attend... to preserve culture and as a moment to forge unity among *Dayak* people” (Arifin et al., 2024). This sentiment captures the essence of cultural diplomacy using a shared cultural celebration to build unity and mutual appreciation.

Beyond individual travel, there are also organized cross-border cultural events around the *Gawai* season. One notable example is the Gawia Sowa International Cross-Border Festival held in the border district of Jagoi Babang, West Kalimantan. This festival, scheduled around *Gawai* time, explicitly aims to foster cross-border friendship by uniting indigenous communities from West Kalimantan and Sarawak, Malaysia. Supported by both Indonesian and Malaysian local authorities, it features joint cultural showcases such as Bidayuh *Dayak* traditional rituals, music, dances, and traditional games with participants from both sides. By branding the event as international and welcoming attendees irrespective of nationality, *Gawia Sowa* functions as a form of Para public diplomacy, where local culture-bearers and governments collaboratively promote goodwill (KEMENPAREKRAF, 2024). The existence of such events indicates a strategic leveraging of *Gawai*’s appeal it not only strengthens cultural pride but also serves as a neutral meeting ground where political differences recede behind the atmosphere of festivity. Even security or border officials become facilitators of cultural exchange during these times for example, Indonesian border posts extend courteous services

to Malaysian visitors coming for *Gawai*, reflecting a shift from a control mindset to a hospitality mindset, however briefly, in line with diplomatic cordiality.

Another dimension of *Gawai Dayak* as cultural diplomacy is its role in showcasing the cultural soft power of Indonesia and Malaysia. Both nations often engage in a friendly rivalry and mutual borrowing when it comes to cultural heritage. *Gawai Dayak*, being celebrated in both countries, is a shared asset (RECODA, 2015). By opening up *Gawai* celebrations to international tourists and foreign dignitaries, each country can project an image of cultural richness and communal harmony. For instance, the Sarawak state periodically holds an official *Gawai* open-house event sometimes attended by foreign diplomats and tourists to demonstrate Malaysia's multicultural unity. Indonesia, on the other hand, through events like Pontianak's *Pekan Gawai*, signals that it upholds and celebrates the diverse cultures of its people, including those it shares with its neighbour. These parallel efforts are complementary rather than competitive; together they enhance the visibility of *Dayak* culture globally and underline a message that the two countries have much in common culturally (Rengat, Ronaldo, & Hexano, 2022). As Nye's theory of soft power suggests, cultural attractiveness can improve a country's influence and foster better relations. In this case, the mutual celebration of *Gawai* by Indonesia and Malaysia builds a reservoir of goodwill. It reminds policymakers and the public that beyond disputes, there is a foundation of common heritage and interpersonal connections that can be harnessed to maintain peace and friendship.

The efficacy of cultural diplomacy via *Gawai* is evident in anecdotal outcomes. Participants often report greater mutual understanding after attending cross-border events. Many Sarawak visitors to Pontianak's *Gawai* festival, for example, return with stories of the warm hospitality of their Indonesian hosts, correcting any negative stereotypes and vice versa. Academic analyzes echo this, noting that cultural exchange initiatives help reduce tensions among the society over past issues in Indonesia–Malaysia relations. While high-level diplomatic issues require political solutions, grassroots cultural diplomacy builds a supportive environment for those solutions by humanizing the other. *Gawai Dayak*'s role in this context is subtle but powerful it operates through celebration rather than negotiation, yet achieves the diplomatic end of bonding communities. It is important to note, however, that such positive outcomes depend on continued openness and support. Travel restrictions, if imposed, or politicization of cultural events could easily hinder these exchanges. Fortunately, both governments have shown increasing appreciation for cultural diplomacy. The promotion of cross-border tourism events like *Gawai* is aligned with broader policies in ASEAN encouraging people-to-people connectivity and cultural cooperation. Thus, *Gawai Dayak* stands as a model of cultural diplomacy in practice, one that could inspire similar approaches with other shared cultural elements in the region.

Cross-Border Acculturation and Social Integration

Gawai Dayak not only connects people temporarily during the festival; it also has more enduring effects through acculturation in the border regions. Acculturation here refers to the reciprocal exchange of cultural traits resulting from sustained contact between the Indonesian and Malaysian communities. The long-standing interactions along the Kalimantan-Sarawak border have given rise to a blended cultural zone, where lifestyles and customs are influenced by both nations (*Dayak Daily*, 2025). The *Gawai* festival, occurring annually, reinforces this

by providing a recurrent venue for interaction. For example, in *Sajingan Besar* (West Kalimantan) and the adjacent *Biawak* area (Sarawak), which lie directly across the border, residents share not only *Dayak* ethnicity but often familial ties and language/dialect. When *Gawai* is celebrated, villagers from *Biawak* may cross over to join their kin in *Sajingan* and vice versa. Through these visits, they exchange news, songs, stories, and even material culture. Over time, this has led to a high degree of cultural convergence in those communities a cross-border acculturation was, for instance, a particular *Gawai* ritual or dance might incorporate styles from both sides. One study in *Sajingan Besar* found that the local *Gawai* ceremonies have unique elements like the *ba'aek* and *ba'komo* rituals that constitute a unique social capital for that community. These rituals are rooted in *Dayak* tradition yet are specific to that locality, having evolved in a border context somewhat distinct from versions of *Gawai* elsewhere (Herlan & Elyta, 2020). Their existence alongside more widespread *Gawai* practices shows how acculturation can produce localized cultural innovation without eroding the overall shared identity. In essence, the border *Dayak* communities have enriched *Gawai* by adapting to their cross-border reality, creating new practices that still resonate with *Dayak* values of cooperation and gratitude.

A key aspect of *Gawai*-related acculturation is the strengthening of social cohesion and trust that transcends nationality. During the festival, collective activities like preparing the feast, performing reciprocal dances, or participating in friendly competitions involve teams and audiences from both countries. These interactions build interpersonal trust and familiarity. e *Gawai Dayak* form of social capital that binds individuals in friendship, cooperation, togetherness and mutual care. The implications extend to cross-border relations as people from Sarawak and West Kalimantan repeatedly help each other and celebrate together at *Gawai*, they develop a habit of cooperation and a shared social network (Syafrita & Murdiono, 2020). For example, joint problem-solving occurs when coordinating cross-border visits, often with local authorities facilitating. This can spill over into other communal initiatives a Sarawak *Dayak* community might invite their Kalimantan counterparts for a reciprocal event such as a post-harvest thanksgiving or a *Dayak* youth conference, or they might cooperate on border trade fairs that include cultural showcases (Herlan & Elyta, 2020). Thus, *Gawai* acts as a springboard for ongoing collaboration, knitting the communities tighter. In times of need, this social solidarity has tangible benefits; for instance, *Dayak* villagers on one side have raised donations for disaster relief or community projects for those on the other side, reflecting a cross-border solidarity reinforced by festival camaraderie.

Acculturation through *Gawai* is also evident in the realm of language and education. *Dayak* languages do not follow national borders, and *Gawai* gatherings encourage their use and preservation. When Indonesian and Malaysian *Dayaks* meet, they often communicate in their native tongue rather than Indonesian or Malay, especially in informal settings. This practice helps keep those languages alive and encourages younger generations to learn them, even as national languages dominate formal education. Additionally, cultural exchange during *Gawai* has inspired some young people to seek education across the border for example, a Sarawak *Dayak* student might attend a university in Pontianak or an Indonesian *Dayak* youth might enroll in a Malaysian college, facilitated by friendships made through cultural events (Bahri, 2015). Such educational migration further deepens acculturation, as individuals immerse in each other's society for extended periods. Over the long run, these cross-border

linkages produce a cadre of culturally versatile individuals who can act as bridges between Indonesia and Malaysia. They might become cultural ambassadors, translators, or organizers of future exchanges, thereby institutionalizing the people-to-people diplomacy initiated by events like *Gawai*.

It is important to note that acculturation here does not imply loss of distinct national identities or any dilution of patriotism. Rather, it manifests as a dual sense of belonging. *Dayak* border communities take pride in both their nation-state and their transborder ethnic culture. *Gawai Dayak* reinforces the latter by celebrating what is common among them. From a sociopolitical perspective, this can actually stabilize border relations. When citizens feel that their culture is respected and shared across the border, they are less likely to view the neighbouring country with hostility. Instead, they may act as a constituency that advocates for friendly relations. Indeed, Indonesian policymakers have recognized that empowering border communities culturally can strengthen national resilience by facilitating *Gawai* celebrations and cross-border cultural traffic. Indonesia helps ensure that its border citizens remain connected to the nation while also being goodwill ambassadors to Malaysia. Malaysia too benefits, as positive interactions help counteract the historical narrative of border skirmishes or competition. In short, the acculturative influence of *Gawai* seen in shared language, adapted rituals, intermarriages, and collaborative networks contributes to a more integrated and peaceful border society, which is a desirable outcome for both countries.

Challenges and Future Outlook

While *Gawai Dayak* clearly has strengths as a tool of cultural diplomacy and acculturation, there are challenges and considerations to ensure its positive impact endures. Logistical and administrative barriers can sometimes hinder cross-border participation. For example, passport and visa requirements, if not managed flexibly, could limit the ease with which people cross for the festival. In the past, remote border communities used *jalan tikus* (informal paths) to visit relatives during *Gawai*, which posed legal risks (BNPP, 2023). The establishment of official border crossings like the *Aruk–Biawak* and *Entikong–Tebedu* posts, along with facilitated entry during festival times, has greatly improved this situation. Continued governmental support is needed to simplify procedures so that attending each other's *Gawai* is affordable and convenient for ordinary villagers.

Another challenge lies in maintaining the authenticity and communal spirit of *Gawai* amid its growing popularity. Commercialization and politicization are potential risks. As tourism agencies promote *Gawai* as an attraction, there is a fine line to walk to avoid turning a sacred cultural observance into a mere spectacle. Both Indonesian and Malaysian authorities should prioritize community leadership in organizing *Gawai* events, ensuring that the customs and values are respected (Noor & Roslan, 2025). Likewise, politicians should refrain from co-opting *Gawai* for narrow agendas; instead, they should appear in support of unity and respect the non-partisan nature of cultural diplomacy. If handled properly, the increased profile of *Gawai* can actually amplify its diplomatic impact for instance, inviting delegates from other ethnic groups or international observers to *Gawai* open houses can further spread mutual understanding.

Finally, looking ahead, there is untapped potential to expand on the model that *Gawai Dayak* provides. Inter-cultural dialogue forums could be held in conjunction with the festival,

where community representatives from Indonesia and Malaysia discuss common social issues in a friendly environment. The arts exchanges that happen during *Gawai* could be formalized into ongoing collaborative projects. Such initiatives would deepen the diplomatic value of the festival beyond the days of celebration. Additionally, scholars and educators might use the occasion of *Gawai* to hold workshops on history and culture for youths of both countries, emphasizing shared ancestry and encouraging empathy. By educating the younger generation through the festive context, any latent prejudices or misinformation can be addressed early on, cementing a foundation of goodwill.

In summary, the results of this study indicate that *Gawai Dayak* plays a multifaceted role in the Indonesia–Malaysia borderlands: it is at once a cherished cultural tradition, a vehicle for diplomatic exchange, and a catalyst for social integration. It transforms the border from a line of separation into a meeting point of cultures. The discussion highlights real-world evidence of these roles from hundreds of Malaysians streaming across to celebrate in Pontianak, to government-endorsed festivals uniting communities, to subtle shifts in local social fabrics driven by annual interactions. While challenges exist, they are largely surmountable with supportive policy and continued enthusiasm from the community. *Gawai Dayak* thus stands as a case study in successful cultural diplomacy, illustrating how a deeply local indigenous event can contribute to international harmony and how cultural acculturation at the borders can reinforce national and regional stability.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that *Gawai Dayak*, the *Dayak* harvest festival celebrated in both Indonesia and Malaysia, functions as an effective instrument of cultural diplomacy and cross-border acculturation. Through a qualitative case study approach and thematic analysis of diverse sources, the research reveals that *Gawai* facilitates meaningful interactions between Indonesian and Malaysian communities, thereby strengthening mutual understanding and goodwill at the grassroots level. The festival's power lies in its ability to highlight a shared identity: when *Dayaks* and their neighbours come together for *Gawai*, they are reminded of common values, traditions, and kinship that transcend the political boundary between the two nations. In doing so, *Gawai* serves as a counterweight to historical tensions and diplomatic rifts, nurturing a sense of camaraderie and empathy that formal agreements alone cannot achieve. The findings confirm that people-to-people connections forged during *Gawai* create durable social bonds manifested as friendships, networks, and even family ties that link communities across the border. The acculturative aspect of *Gawai* the exchange and blending of cultural practices further cements these ties by reducing the perception of "otherness." When Malaysian and Indonesian *Dayaks* join in each other's dances, taste each other's traditional cuisines, or participate in each other's rituals, they internalize a message of unity in diversity. Over time, this process builds cross-border social cohesion that can act as a buffer against future conflicts or miscommunications between the countries.

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