

**A SEMINAL STUDY OF IBAN ALPHABET**



**PREPARED BY**

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## Abstract

The Iban of Sarawak do not possess any form of writing system that can be used universally within its large community. There was however some interesting individual effort at inventing some forms of writing system. One known writing system is that invented by Duning anak Gunggu, acknowledged in the Encyclopaedia of Iban Studies (2001). This Iban Alphabet is not an ancient system of writing as the inventor lived well into the mid-80s. The alphabet manifests the dynamism of a modern alphabet suitable for practical inscription. It comprises syllabic writing and alphabetic writing symbols. The former consists of syllabaries, representing syllables in the Iban language. The latter comprises *true* alphabet of consonants and individual vowels or vowel clusters. As a seminal work, the researcher categorised the alphabet into alphabetical writing symbols and phonetic/syllabic writing symbols for practical inscriptional purposes. The seminal research also involved “re-alphabetising” of several Romanised Iban language manuscripts and texts.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction

Writing system is one of the cardinal inventions in the history of mankind. Writing has played an all-penetrating if not an unobtrusive part in all the great and complicated fields of human life. As Staples (1953) (in Diring, 1977) put it, “The written word is the lifeline of our civilisation. This wonderful gift of being able, by written symbols, to convey thoughts, not only to one another, but from generation to generation, has made possible our way of life, our law, our science, and our literature.” While it is undeniable that a writing system is a “lifeline” of one’s civilisation, the **Iban** (*plural term in itself, similar to the usage of the term “chinese”*) of Sarawak have lost most of their customary and literary riches during the pre-literacy era because these riches were left undocumented where a writing system was unheard of, and only salvaged by means of oral tradition. The Iban alphabet was only invented by an Iban individual named Duing anak Gunggu in mid 20<sup>th</sup> century which scholars like Vinson and Joanne Sutlive (2001) view as “idiosyncratic schemes”. Although these “idiosyncratic schemes” are incomprehensible symbols to them, they do acknowledge that the schemes are some forms of alphabets. Appropriately then, the schemes created by Duing anak Gunggu be known as *the Iban Alphabet* since Duing’s written schemes (Alphabet) is the only known Iban system of characters for writing thus far.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### 2.1 Introduction

This research warrants a seminal investigation into the philosophy of the Iban alphabet in terms of its evolution and its ethnography. As far as its evolution is concerned, some of the characters within the alphabet suggest a symbiotic relationship between man and his natural surroundings. It is its creation, evolution and ethnography within the modern context that will be the major concerns of this study. As this research is seminal in nature, it is not really possible to review any relevant literature. In fact, there is only one properly documented manuscript (samples in Appendix 1) compiled by Duning's adopted son, Mr. Bagat anak Nunui (a former primary schoolteacher). The starting point of this work relies heavily on the manuscript.

#### 2.2 Structure of Iban Language

The Iban language like any other natural language has regional dialects. However, the differences are slight and are mainly phonological (Asmah Omar, 1983).

##### 2.2.1 Phonology

###### *Phonemes*