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Ikigai and *Urip iku Urub*: A Comparative Study of Japanese and Javanese Philosophy

R. Arief Toto Purwandaru[1]*, Suhartini[2]

[1] MTs Mu'allimin Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta
[2] Universitas Teknologi Yogyakarta
*Corresponding Author: arieftoto1@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: Japanese and Javanese societies are deeply alike in their respect for hierarchy, manifesting through disciplined manners, deference to elders, and sophisticated linguistic registers. Furthermore, both cultures possess a rich philosophical heritage; for instance, Japan has *Ikigai*, while Java has *Urip iku urub*. The fundamental similarity between the two is their shared emphasis on the importance of leading a meaningful life.
Objectives: This study compares both philosophies by analyzing their similarities, differences, and practical applications in daily life.
Method: This study employs qualitative research methods. Qualitative research is an investigative process aimed at understanding social or human issues. This approach involves constructing complex and holistic descriptions through words, reporting detailed views from informants, and conducting research in natural settings.
Result: These two perspectives share a common emphasis on meaningful living, asserting that life transcends physical existence to encompass core values that demand dedication. The primary distinction lies in their focus: *Ikigai* prioritizes the balance between passion, expertise, and personal financial satisfaction. In contrast, the *Urip iku urub* focuses on altruistic goals, emphasizing the welfare of others and act of providing communal benefits.
Conclusion: The philosophies of *Ikigai* and *Urip iku urub* intersect to provide a holistic framework for achieving a meaningful life. Both are universal and can be applied across cultural boundaries.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Kridalaksana and Kentjono (as cited in Chaer, 2011), language is a system of sound symbols used by social groups to cooperate, communicate, and identify themselves. It serves as a vital intermediary for both individual and collective interaction, functioning fundamentally as a tool for human communication (Tarigan & Tarigan, 1987).

The latest Ethnologue report (Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons, 2026) indicates that over 7,000 languages are spoken globally. Two of them are Japanese and Javanese. Japanese is the official language of Japan and belongs to the Japonic language family, while Javanese is a stable indigenous language of Indonesia and belongs to the Austronesian language family. Japanese is spoken by the Japanese people, who live on the Japanese archipelago in East Asia—a region with a climate that varies from temperate to subtropical, while Javanese is spoken by the Javanese people, who live mainly in Central Java and East Java in Southeast Asia, which has a tropical climate (Suhartini & Purwandaru, 2026).

Although Japanese and Javanese belong to different language families, both possess complex systems of speech levels (Hartati, 2017) and are rich in philosophical values. Philosophy is a collection of assumptions, ideas, and inner attitudes held by individuals or communities (Moeljadi et al., 2016). One of the well-known philosophies in Japanese is *Ikigai*, while in Javanese it is *Urip iku urub*.

The philosophy of *Ikigai* has been studied by Triyadi (2023), Aris et al. (2023), and Priventa et al. (2024). In his research, Triyadi (2023) examined *Ikigai* from YouTube channels and found that the concept encourages Japanese people to be more enthusiastic, disciplined, and hardworking in their daily activities. Aris et al., (2023) examined the principles of *Ikigai* derived from three books on the subject, categorizing four key principles practiced by the Japanese: (1) perseverance in life, (2) contributing to society, (3) healthy living, and (4) living in harmony. Priventa et al., (2024) studied *Ikigai* with the aim of introducing it to Generation Z and found that 65% of participants were able to understand the presented concept**.**

In line with the philosophy of *Ikigai*, the philosophy of *Urip iku urub* has also been extensively researched, including by Dianto (2016), Amala & Dewi (2022), and Alamsyah (2025). In his research, Dianto (2016) analyzed the interpretation of the Javanese philosophy *Urip iku urub* through the figure of Semar, finding that participants' views aligned with Semar's principle of being useful to society. Amala and Dewi's research on the Sukorejo Indah community in Kediri suggests that the Javanese philosophy of *Urip iku urub* drives group cohesion, thereby maintaining neighborly harmony and collective unity within the housing complex. Alamsyah (2025) explored the philosophical meaning of *Urip iku*

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urub by involving the *Sedekah Rombongan* volunteers, academics, and Javanese cultural experts as key participants. His findings show that *Urip iku urub* operates as a normative-affective framework that encourages pro-social actions—such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), social concern, and self-sacrifice—which are transmitted transgenerationally through family, social practices, and religious teachings.

Unlike the studies mentioned above, this research aims to compare the philosophies of *Ikigai* and *Urip iku urub*. This comparison is intended to offer relevant alternatives for cross-cultural understanding and provide a foundation for the collective well-being of Indonesian society.

METHODS

This study employs qualitative research methods. Creswell & Creswell (2017) defines qualitative research as an investigative process of understanding a social or human problem. This approach involves building a complex, holistic picture formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducting the study in a natural setting.

The data collected is descriptive in nature, obtained through literature reviews and interviews related to the philosophies of *Ikigai* and *Urip iku urub*. In this framework, the literature review serves as a theoretical basis for analyzing concepts, history, and previous findings from scientific sources such as journals and books. Once the theoretical foundation was established, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with two key informants regarded as experts in their respective fields. This technique aims to explore subjective, detailed, and current primary data that may not be found in existing literature. This direct interaction allows researchers to explore personal perspectives, unique experiences, and the complex dynamics of the subjects in a flexible yet focused manner.

The results from these two techniques are then integrated through a rigorous data analysis process to identify connections or differences between the two philosophies: *Ikigai* and *Urip iku urub*. The researchers compare findings from the literature with information from expert informants to produce credible and in-depth conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Philosophy derives from the Greek word *philosophia*, a compound term consisting of *philein*, meaning 'to love', and *sophia*, meaning 'wisdom'. Etymologically, philosophia literally means 'love of wisdom'. Thus, it can be

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interpreted that philosophy is the result of human reason seeking and contemplating truth in its deepest form (Sesady, 2019).

Philosophy is also understood as a worldview (Moeljadi et al., 2016), which serves as a foundation for shaping individual attitudes, behaviors, and life objectives. Furthermore, the study of philosophy refines logical, abstract, and critical thinking skills, enabling the effective communication of ideas. This research specifically explores the Japanese philosophy of *Ikigai* and the Javanese philosophy of *Urip iku urub*, both of which are prominent and exert a significant influence on their respective speech communities.

The Philosophy of Ikigai

According to Mitsuhashi (2018), the origin of the word *ikigai* dates back to the Heian period (794 to 1185) (Mitsuhashi, 2018). Clinical psychologist and leading expert on the evolution of *ikigai*, Akihiro Hasegawa, released a research paper in 2001 noting that the suffix -*gai* comes from the word *kai*, which translates to 'shell' in Japanese. Shells were extremely valuable during the Heian period, so the association of value remains inherently present in the word today.

Ikigai is written in Japanese as 生き甲斐, combining 生き (iki), meaning 'life' or 'to live', with 甲斐 (gai/kai), which translates to 'value' or 'worth'. While the book interprets the constituent characters of kai (甲斐) symbolically—associating 甲 with 'number one' or 'taking initiative' and 斐 with 'beautiful' or 'elegant'—it is important to note that these characters are historically *ateji* (phonetic symbols) (García & Miralles, 2016).

Linguistically, the term *kai* is believed to derive from 貝 (shell), which held great value in ancient Japan, thus defining ikigai as 'the value of being alive'. This term can also be interpreted as ‘the reason for living each day’. In Japan, *ikigai* refers to a sense of purpose found in both small daily joys and major goals; it is a casual, everyday term that exists independently of professional success (Mogi, 2018). This concept was further formalized by Mieko Kamiya (1914-1979), a psychiatrist renowned for her seminal research in *Ikigai ni Tsuite* (On the Meaning of Life) (Honda, 2023).

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To make ikigai easier to understand, Marc Winn (as cited in García & Miralles, 2016) created a Venn diagram where several sections intersect to form a central core, which represents ikigai. The balance in this concept stems from a combination of values that individuals can use to align and guide their lives. This concept is one of the secrets to the longevity and happiness of the Japanese people, empowering them to enjoy life and stay vibrant even in old age. The following image illustrates the ikigai diagram.

Figure 1. The concept of "Ikigai" in a Venn diagram

The *Ikigai* Venn Diagram above illustrates the concept of a 'meaningful life' through the intersection of four primary dimensions: what you love, what you are good at, what the world needs, and what you can be paid for. According to this model, true *Ikigai* is found at the very center, where your passion, mission, vocation, and profession align perfectly. While the diagram provides a practical framework for finding a balanced career that offers both personal fulfillment and financial stability, it differs from traditional Japanese philosophy by placing a significant

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emphasis on economic reward and professional success as essential components of one's purpose.

In the context of daily life, the *Ikigai* conceptual framework—as illustrated in the aforementioned Venn diagram—can be observed through an interview with YA, a 77-year-old resident of Gifu Prefecture, Japan. YA identifies familial bonds as his primary source of passion and life satisfaction. This was recently demonstrated during his wedding anniversary celebration, an intergenerational gathering involving his children and grandchildren, where they shared an enjoyable dinner together.

In light of his current age of 77, he has adopted the concept of 'healthy life expectancy' as his personal mission to the community, referring to a state of functional independence and optimal health. At 77, he has notably exceeded the national average life expectancy in Japan, which is statistically recorded at 73 years for males and 75 years for females.

As a retired Japanese civil servant, YA has achieved financial stability, ensuring that his daily subsistence needs are fully met. Consequently, he has transitioned beyond the necessity for professional labor (vocation and profession), allowing him to focus exclusively on the enjoyment of his golden years. Regarding his leisure activities, he engages in various low-impact pursuits such as walking and horticulture, emphasizing that meaningful engagement does not require grand-scale actions. From his perspective, maintaining a tranquil lifestyle characterized by the transcendence of materialistic desires constitutes the fundamental implementation of *Ikigai*, which he identifies as the key determinant of his current longevity.

The Japanese improve their quality of life by integrating the *Ikigai* principle through four fundamental values. First, Life Perseverance is demonstrated by an exceptional commitment to living and a resilience that has been proven over time, enabling them to adapt effectively to both natural and human-induced disasters. Second, Social Contribution is practiced by viewing work not merely as a job, but as a meaningful vehicle for achieving life’s broader goals. Third, Holistic Health is achieved through a deep awareness of physical well-being, maintained by consistent exercise and mindful dietary choices. Finally, Harmonious Existence is pursued through a constant effort to ensure that all personal actions remain in balance with nature, the environment, and society at large.

The Philosophy of *Urip Iku Urub*

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According to Siswanto (2019), the Javanese language is deeply rooted in etiquette and symbolism, often conveying its messages implicitly through subtle metaphors. This profound philosophical depth is what defines the Javanese language, often expressed through subtle symbolism—most notably embodied by the iconic wayang figure, Semar. Semar is a central figure in Javanese puppetry, whose origins trace back to the Majapahit-Demak transition in the 15th century. Semar and the *punakawan* were potentially introduced by Sunan Kalijaga as tools for Islamic proselytization.

Based on the results of interviews with informants, this supports the hypothesis that the name 'Semar' is derived from the Arabic word 'mismar,' which means a nail or a tool for reinforcement. This etymology aligns with Semar's role as a wise and witty guardian who strengthens and advises the Pandawa knights, while simultaneously serving as an embodiment of local wisdom.

From the perspective above, it can be understood that the character Semar is actually a fictional figure in *pewayangan* (Javanese puppetry) created by Sunan Kalijaga for the purpose of Islamic dakwah (proselytization). Despite being fictional, Semar remains symbolically influential within the spiritual atmosphere of Javanese society. His presence in *pewayangan* carries profound meanings and life lessons, such as the philosophy of *Urip iku urub* which is examined in this research.

In the book titled *Urip Iku Urub, Untaian Persembahan 70 Tahun Profesor Peter Carey* (Domini, 2019), it is mentioned that when spelled out one by one, *urip* means life, *iku* means that, and *urub* means 'flame'. Thus, *Urip iku urub* signifies that 'Life is a flame'. Within this philosophy, the 'flame' is a metaphor implying that one's life should be a source of light and bring benefits to fellow human beings. In a figurative sense, *Urip iku urub* likens human existence to a lit lantern that dispels darkness. This luminosity serves as a symbol of altruism and the positive impact an individual has on their community and environment, as illustrated in figure 2 below.

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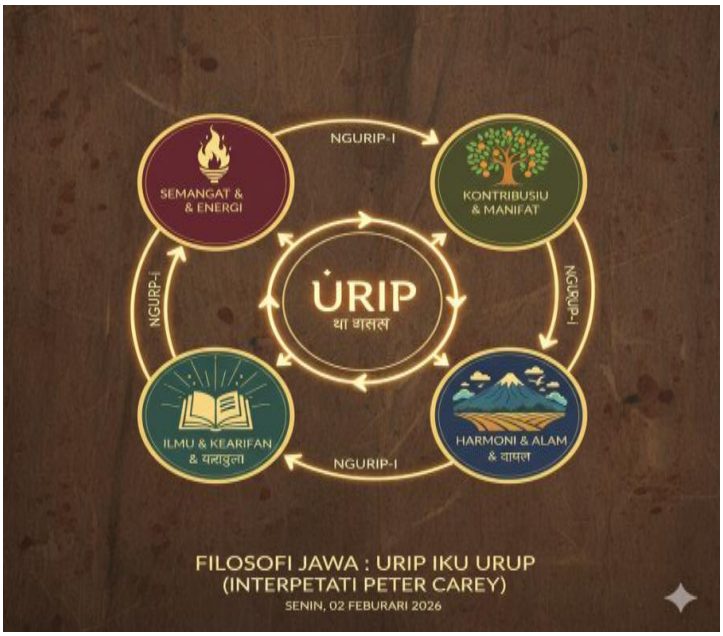

Figure 2. The Concept of *Urip iku Urub*

Based on an interview with an informant named YW (42 years old, from Bantul, D.I. Yogyakarta), YW agrees that life must be useful to the surrounding environment, even if it requires sacrifice. He also recalled a recent case of an Indonesian student of Javanese descent studying in the United States, who, during a commencement speech, stated that they steadfastly uphold the philosophy of *Urip iku urub* in their life.

In daily life, YW frequently practices the philosophy of *Urip iku urub* by providing assistance to those in need—during both prosperous and challenging times—as well as participating in community service, neighborhood (RT) meetings, and serving as a local preacher. Furthermore, YW sets an example for his children that life must be beneficial to others, as his Islamic faith teaches, based on a *hadits* of Prophet Muhammad SAW: '*The best of people are those who are most beneficial to others*' (H.R. Ahmad, Ath-Thabrani, & Daruquthni). This signifies that a Muslim's nobility is not measured by wealth or position, but by the extent of their positive contributions, assistance, and knowledge shared with others.

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By steadfastly upholding the philosophy of *Urip iku urub*, YW believes that a living environment will become more harmonious as the community collaborates in doing good (*fastabiqul khairat*). Conversely, if the philosophy of *Urip iku urub* is abandoned, individualism will prevail. Everyone will only prioritize themselves, causing the spirit of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) in society to gradually fade, leading to a decline in harmony and leaving life feeling empty.

Ikigai, defined as 'the value of being alive' or 'the reason for living each day,' and Urip iku urub, meaning 'life must be a flame' or 'be beneficial to others,' are profound life philosophies. Ikigai balances passion, mission, expertise, and income (for example, a photography hobby that generates earnings), whereas Urip iku urub focuses on providing benefits to fellow human beings (for example, helping neighbors). These two philosophies teach a balance between personal satisfaction (Ikigai) and social contribution (Urip iku urub). In other words, Ikigai serves to emphasize the reason to wake up in the morning, focusing on the equilibrium between what we love, what we are good at, what the world needs, and what can be produced financially for the life of the soul. Meanwhile, Urip iku urub emphasizes the effort to make oneself beneficial to others and the environment

CONCLUSION

The philosophy of 'Ikigai' is literally derived from the Japanese words *iki* ‘life’ and *gai* ‘value/benefit/reason’, signifying one's 'reason for being' or 'reason to wake up in the morning.' This philosophy represents a quest for life balance, harmonizing what an individual loves, what they excel at, what the world requires, and what provides financial stability. It is widely considered the secret to the happiness and longevity of the Japanese people.

Literally, the philosophy of *Urip iku urub* means 'Life is a flame.' Metaphorically, this philosophy teaches us the importance of being a blessing and a benefit to others. By providing benefits to others, we can also experience happiness as it fosters a sense of gratitude. In other words, this philosophy focuses on social connections and emphasizes external goals. The philosophy of *Ikigai* is popular in Japan, while the philosophy of *Urip iku urub* is deeply rooted in Java. Both offer profound moral teachings for daily life, aiding in the attainment of a meaningful quality of existence. Although these two philosophies originate from different cultures—Japanese and Javanese—the moral values they convey are universal. These philosophies complement one another; while one emphasizes internal goals (the reason for living or mindfulness), the other focuses on external goals (the quality of contribution and social benefit). Consequently, these principles

can be applied by anyone, regardless of the language they speak or the community they belong to.

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