



The Iban Textiles

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ABSTRACT

The Iban traditional textiles are very well decorated with beautiful motifs. Some motifs are small and simple but some are complex (Durin, 2011). Both the simple and complex motifs are embedded meaning and symbols which depict the Iban traditional culture especially their traditional beliefs. This research aims to relate the motif of the Iban Textile and their traditional belief. Secondly, this research is also to analyse the usage of Pua Kumbu traditionally and currently. The data collection are carried out through observation and interviewing the experts in Iban textiles weaving in Kuching, Betong and Bintulu. The analysis method is used for the data collection is content analysis. In the research finding it is proven that the usage Pua Kumbu currently is not only confined to ritual purposes but also for the daily used as decorative accessories. It's also proven, not only the Iban community weave the Pua Kumbu but few communities also weave the Iban's textile motif. For example, Azmeer Sharkawi in Betong.

Keywords: *Iban traditional belief, meaning and symbols, traditional culture, Iban textiles, motifs.*

INTRODUCTION

The Iban traditional textiles are very beautifully decorated with motifs and those motifs were created through the environment where the Iban lives. Some motifs were made through the inspirations of animals, reptiles and plants. Some motifs are even inspired by the traditional belief and so those motifs have ethics such as taboos. The textiles which really has motifs with taboos is the one that is made for ritual purposes such as "Pua Kumbu". As culture change, not only the Iban community weave the Pua Kumbu but few communities also weave the Iban's textile motif. The usage of the Pua Kumbu also for ritual but also for daily used such as table cloths, curtain and bag.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Iban's Traditional Textile were decorated with beautiful motif. All this motif reflects the environment and the traditional belief of the Iban community. One of the Iban traditional textile called Pua Kumbu. Pua Kumbu traditional where was used for ritual purposes. Issues of this research is about the symbols and motif of the textile. Secondly, it's also about the usage of the Pua Kumbu both traditionally and currently.

OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH

1. To relate the motif of the Iban Textile and their traditional belief.
2. To analyse the usage of Pua Kumbu traditionally and currently.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data collection is carried out through observation and interviewing the experts in Iban textiles weaving in Kuching, Betong and Bintulu. The observation was carried out at Sarawak Cultural Village, Tun Jugah Foundation, Betong and Bintulu. The informants for the interviews were Baling anak Anggi (2012) Daya anak Jelikan (2012) Amboh anak Masing (2012) and Sandine Benedict (2015), Azmeer Sharkawi (2015). The data collection was analysed by using “content analysis methodology” so the discussion and findings were divided into two main themes. These themes were created through the objectives of this research such “symbols and meanings of motifs” and “The Usage of Pua Kumbu Traditionally and currently.

Research Material

Books and journal for the literature review.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Iban community is the largest ethnic group in Sarawak. Iban people is categorize under the Malay Pronto group which is the same as Sumatera Malay and Peninsular Malaysia (Freeman, 1995:6). According to Sather, (1984), the Iban, formerly known as 'Sea Dyaks', are vigorous, outwardly expansive people of West-Central Borneo, approximately 400 000 people in Sarawak. Despite the increase number towards urban migration, the majority of the Iban still live in Longhouse settlements along the main rivers and smaller streams of the interior and subcoastal districts. Most of the Iban who live in the longhouse still practice shifting hill-rice agriculture, supplemented by the cultivation of perennial cash crops, most notably rubber (Sather 1994: 66). As they made up of majority of Sarawak's population, today, the Iban could be found over the Sarawak state. The Ibans, whose majority still reside in the longhouse (Gana, 1998:17). By tradition, the Iban are the riverine people, living in longhouse communities located along the main rivers and small streams of the rested interior. Here they live as subsistence shifting cultivators with rice as their main crop.

Looking from the view of their belief, they are still holding to their traditional animism belief which inherited from one generation to another generation (Umbat 1998). Before the arrival of Christianity, the Iban do not have any religions as they are seen practicing their pagan belief and they strongly belief their lifestyle are closely related to the cosmology. As once summarized by Appell (2001), “The Iban World incorporates both humans and gods and spirits in a relatively seamless fashion and different aspects of this world are perceived through changing levels of consciousness”. The life in the nature word is refered to the birds or omens. In the other hand, the Iban also belief their life are closely related to the world of God known as menoa petara. The Iban cosmos was divided into the overlapping categories of mensia (human) and antu or petara (spirits). The interaction between the human and spirit are occurred constantly in burong (augury), piring (sacrificial acts), and mimpi (dreams).

Majority of the Iban had converted to Christianity over the past decades and they practice their traditional customs, ceremonies, oral traditions and functional rituals in the longhouse socio-cultural contexts (Kedit, 1980; Pringle, 1970). Although the wave of modernization had brought economic growth in Iban society, but the belief of animism's belief is still strongly embedded in Iban's lifestyle.

Viewing from the animism belief, the Iban belief system is related to the living things such as the birds, animals, insects which are closely related to the spirit world. Therefore, the movements of these living things related to their spirits are always being observed as a sign, warning or as an indication of inquiry and invitation from the deities or spirits. Therefore, it is not surprised the motif uses in Iban textile are based on the nature resources such as the animals and plants. The Iban believes that these motifs are embedded with specific meanings related to the cosmology. In the context of community, the symbol had become a sign, a characteristic, a symbol or symbolic emblem comes with abstract meanings which convey a message to a scenario or an idea to a person.

Durin (2014), has done a research on Iban Bemban Mat which were woven with beautiful motif. The motif of the bemban mat are similar to the motif of the Iban traditional textile. Both the complex motif which bemban and Iban textile have taboos. Although her research has done on motif and the taboos, it didn't cover on the textile motif and their taboos and also changes of the usage of Iban textile from traditional and current usage which are emphasis in this research.

DISCUSSION AND FINDING

The usage of Pua Kumbu traditionally

In the olden days, the Iban textile especially Pua Kumbu is used in the ritual ceremonies related to God, Goddess or Deities. In the past, it is a must in the Iban community for every household (*Ruang Bilik*) or a family to own at least one piece of *Pua Kumbu*. This is because *Pua Kumbu* is indispensably important for ceremonies such as marriage (Nikah), death (Mati), baby-born ceremonies (Nyambut Nembiak Baru Ada), Gawai celebration and ritual. *Pua Kumbu* plays an important role during the wedding ceremony. During the wedding ceremony, Pua Kumbu was used to decorate the compartment space. The bride and groom will sit on a *Gong* under the canopy of Pua Kumbu and be ready to accept the blessing from elder. When there is a relative who passed away, the Pua Kumbu will be gang as a curtain to protect the dead soul. In addition, Pua Kumbu is also used as a *Pandong* to store the gift in a sloping ceremony. Commonly, for important ceremony, *Pua Kumbu* weaved with complex motif is used to perform the ritual.

It is seen that the Pua Kumbu plays a significant role in the traditional society. It is used in various ceremonies and ritual such as wedding ceremony, festivals, child bathing ceremonies, funeral rituals, agricultural rituals and etc. During the ritual Gawai Batu, the Pua Kumbu is used to wrap the stone known as *Batu Basah*. During the funeral ritual, Pua Kumbu will be used as *sapat* to protect the dead body. Besides, Pua Kumbu also used as a *pandong*, which is a place to put the sacrifices during the paddy planting ceremony. During the wedding ceremony, the Pua Kumbu will be used to decorate the space known as *tempat bersanding*, where the bride and bridegroom seated. The couple will be seated on top of the gong under the Pua Kumbu canopy and ready to receive the blessings from the elderly.

The usage of Pua Kumbu currently

Today, the usage of Iban's textile had changed. It had become decorative accessories, a piece of art work displaying on the wall, table cloth, beg and other newly invented artwork solely for decorative usage. Among the evolution are the Iban textiles are now used as modern apparel in fashion and scarf. If we were to compare to the traditional usage, today, the function of usage has change very much. In the pessimistic side, many do not know the meaning of these motif used in Iban's textile are portraying the belief of the creator. These motifs are often related to their animistic belief and taboos. For example, the animal motifs used are crocodile, snake, frog, tiger, mouse and insects. As culture change, not only the Iban community weave the Pua Kumbu but few communities also weave the Iban's textile motif. For example, Azmeer Sharkawi in Betong who is an expert weaver. What causes the worries is the current generation only uses the Iban's textile as a decoration and apparel but they do not know the inner meaning of it. Therefore, they may not be able to appreciate the value as well as premium quality of textile weaving as a product which is seen in the past.

Motif and traditional belief of the Iban community

According to Iban belief, *Selampandai* refer to the ladies' spirit incarnation from a frog. *Selampandai* is known as a spirit comes with a power of creating a baby. The tiger and mouse (*tikus kasturi*) motif is often created in an abstract form. It is believed that people who wear this textile are crowned with the title of Bujang Berani, which mean a man who have the qualities of bravery and courage. The birds are believed as a good signal, promises and sign. The textile that weaved with the bird are believed having the power to heal the sick and it will bring wealth, good fortune and prosperity in whatever jobs a person is involved. The dear motif will bring success and good luck during the hunting. The insect's motif like spiders, fireflies, scorpions and centipedes are often used in Iban textile especially in Pua Kumbu weaving

In the Iban society, the Iban's textile motifs are divided into two categories which is the high motif and the low motif. Usually, the high-status motif embedded with meaning and beliefs of Iban society. Based on Daya Jerlikan, a Pua Kumbu weaver, the primary design or Pua Kumbu motif are inspired from dream which is the high-status motif. Not every lady in the Iban society is capable to weave the high motif and not all ladies are inspired by dreams although they are skillful Pua Kumbu weaver. She added, if a weaver would like to try to weave the high-status motif which is not her delusion from dream, the weaver who started the weaving will have to finish the Pua Kumbu.

Normally, to complete a high-status motif is a complicated task. If the weaver are not capable to complete the Pua Kumbu, the Iban society believe that the weaver will be weak in her spirit (*alah ayu / layu semengat*), she will then fall sick and sooner or later she will die. This is one of the reasons that Pua Kumbu brings a significant meaning to the Iban community and the Pua Kumbu textile is highly respected by the community. It is not surprise only the low motif such as the insects, flora and fauna motif are used in Pua Kumbu today. As the influence of animistic belief are still practiced by some of the Ibans, the motifs that carry the names of dangerous creatures such as tiger, gigantic python (*nabau*), and crocodiles are hardly weave in this modern day. Apart from these dangerous creatures, there are some motifs are hard to weave by the contemporary weavers such as motifs which carry the name of animistic ritual and deities. Among the example of these motifs are the ceremony tree known as *Mulung Merangau* and motif *Kumang*. Laterally *Mulung Merangau* means a very old sago palm which is productive, and it has beared lots of fruits but in this context, it means the ceremonial tree for the animistic ritual for those warriors who are going to war or *ngayau*. *Kumang* is the most beautiful deity who has the supernatural power and it can help the weavers to create very beautiful and complex motifs.

The motif which comes with power is the one that carries the name of dangerous creature like the crocodile motif as mentioned above. As the crocodile and snake motif are believed dangerous so the motifs must need to be fed with food (*pemakai*) motif. This is to ensure that it is not hungry. It is also believed that when the dangerous motifs are fed by food motif, it will not disturb the weaver. The food motifs are the motifs of small creatures such as house lizard or even fruits such as motif *kembayau*, food for the hornbill motif. In this context, the food motifs are placed either in the mouth or in front of the mouth of the dangerous motifs.

Besides putting the food motifs, another option is to weave the dangerous motifs in pair with the position of confronting each other. This may depict that the pair is discussing something or even arguing in order to kept both of them occupied and busy so that they will not bother to disturb other people such as the weaver. If these taboos are not being observed, it is believed that the weaver herself will be eaten. She will then become weak in spirit (*ayu*), sooner or later she will fall sick and die. As the Iban had embraced Christianity, these beliefs are still being kept but it is seldom being practiced by the Iban today. There are some places in Lubuk Antu, Saribas and Betong are still practicing the custom of Pua Kumbu until today. The Iban community in these three places practices the specific ceremonies only (*begawai*), if there is someone who received a bad dream about Pua Kumbu.

The Iban Motifs and Symbols of Iban Traditional Textiles which carries meaning as belief by the Iban community



Figure 1: Undup Baju Buri: Crocodile Motif (Motif Baya)
(Sources: Melaka,L., Heppell, M. & Usen,E. (2005: 70))

The Iban believe that the crocodile motif (see Figure 1) is powerful as it protects the paddy cultivation. They believe the crocodile are incarnation of their relatives. As they believe some of their ancestors are once long time ago reincarnated into crocodiles, they do not want to kill the crocodiles. They believe that if they kill the crocodiles, the living crocodiles will attack and kill them too. Another Iban beliefs of the crocodile is that it has spirit which can understand and hear if somebody might say something or *puni*. *Puni* is the main reason the Iban's who are still practicing the animistic belief must take food or drink before they do any activities in the river such fishing or bathing. Even just take a few grain of rice and just a sip of coffee and say "udah aki ini" This phrase means to tell the spirit of the crocodile that he or she has taken the food so he or she is not *puni*. If the person is *puni*, the crocodile might see him or her look like animal so it will catch him or her. It is for these reasons that the crocodile motifs are considered a dangerous motif so not many weavers dare to weave it.

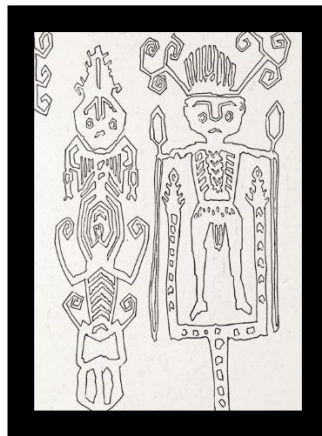


Figure 2. Engkaramba Motif
(Source: Illustrated by Chelum, A. (2017))

In Iban society, the *engkaramba* motif (see Figure 2) is among the motif embedded with inner meaning in Pua Kumbu weaving. They believe that this motif is the most powerful motif to protect them from natural disaster or bad entiti which will attack their paddy cult and other plantations and residents in the longhouse. Usually, only the wife or daughter of the longhouse headman is allowing to weave the *engkaramba* motif. Apart from *engkeramba* motifs, there are some other anthropomorphic motifs which depict the spirit, gods, goddess or deities. Those motifs are considered high class motifs and not all women are eligible to weave them. As it is mentioned above, only those who have been blessed by goddesses or deities as they have been given the protective charms from the bad spirit are allow to weave them. In the Ibans traditional beliefs, these motifs are dangerous though sometimes they

are good and helpful. It is all depending on how human treat them. These are one of the reasons that any woman who wants to weave such motif has to perform special rites to seek for blessing and protection from the deities such as *Kumang* or *Indai Abang*, and also from the soul of their dead ancestors such as their great grandmother who was a skillful weaver during her life time.

CONCLUSION

Over the years, the Ibans culture has changed and their ritual textile has changed its function into decorative traditional art for commercial purposes. Most of the younger generation does not bother to learn about the symbols of what the motifs represent and only few are still interested in weaving the textiles. The influence of animistic belief is still existed and this contributes to the problem of extinction of the complex motifs which carry the names of dangerous creatures. For those Iban who had embraced Christianity may probably view these sacred motifs in different perspective which portray the art as well as artistic values in Iban culture in sustaining the beautiful complex motifs. As we are living in the 21st century with the advancement of technology, we could utilize the digital technology as a tool to bridge the gap between the old and young weavers as well as the younger generation Iban who lives in the urban area. Perhaps, the future researcher could insert the pua kumbu motif into digital imaging, from there it can create and develop an application for people who are interested and eager to know more about the meaning embedded behind the motif to explore the journey behind the sacred textile

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