

## The Iban's Belief towards the Meaning of Pua Kumbu's Motif

Mohamad Maulana Magiman<sup>1\*</sup>, Alexander Chelum<sup>2</sup>, Anna Durin<sup>3</sup>, Connie Lim Keh Nie<sup>4</sup>, Ahmad Nasir Mohd Yusoff<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1,5</sup>Department of Social Science, Faculty of Agriculture and Food Sciences, University Putra Malaysia Bintulu Campus Bintulu, Sarawak

<sup>2,3</sup>Department of Liberal Art, Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia

<sup>4</sup>Department of Performing Arts and Production Technology, Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia

### \*Corresponding author

Mohamad Maulana  
Magiman

### Article History

Received: 02.07.2018

Accepted: 11.07.2018

Published: 30.08.2018



**Abstract:** This article emphasizes on the findings on the level of knowledge and perception of Pua Kumbu in young Iban generations. This includes the uses, meaning of motif and rituals related to this fabric. Factors contributing to the declining belief in using Pua Kumbu in their traditional practice were also explained. The knowledge in traditionally weaving the Pua Kumbu was mainly reserved to certain class of woman in the long house. The chosen motif was dependent on illustration that appeared in their dream, where they believe that this was a sign or omen. The rules of weaving motif were also explained. There were three significance motifs with its own hidden meaning found in Pua Kumbu; the *ular* (snake), *antu engkeramba* and *baya* (crocodile) which became the belief of the Iban people. This study suggests that the lack in knowledge and interest in the Pua Kumbu may come from factors such as relocation away from the long house, modernization, religion and generation gaps.

**Keywords:** iban belief, pua kumbu, textile, motif, traditional.

### INTRODUCTION

Sarawak is one of the states in Malaysia but is situated in the Island of Borneo with its estimated population of 2,471,140 people in the year 2010. It is made up of 27 indigenous ethnic groups with the Iban as the largest ethnic group with an estimated population of 713,421 people [1]. This contributed to almost 30 per cent of Sarawak population. Iban people is categorize under the Malay Pronto group which is the same as Sumatera Malay and Peninsular Malaysia [2].

By tradition, the Iban are the riverine people, majority of them are still living in longhouse communities located along the main rivers and small streams of the rested interior [3]. They live as subsistence shifting cultivators with rice as their main crop, a culture which was maintained until this day. The record on the rice cultivation was reported as early as 1955 by Freeman [4] and Padoch [5]. They illustrated the traditional Iban shifting cultivation system in details. According to Kedit [6], the Iban people are originally known as the Sea Dayak. This is because the Iban people use the river or sea as a mode of transportation and also to differentiate them to another ethnic group, the Bidayuh or the Land Dayak. Thus, the Iban uphold the pride of them being great wanderers when they able to discover each and every river trail. To these days, the Iban are skilled trackers in the forest as the knowledge never cease and was passed down from one generation to another.

Globalization and modernization has changed the world and it has truly made the world a smaller place in social, political and economic scene. It has

affected individuals everywhere including the Iban community in Sarawak. As an outcome, the Iban community had experienced the change in time and space in their ethnic identity. Part of their history is now found in literatures, as gone are the days when the elders teach the younger generation of their culture and traditions. One of the tradition is the making of a traditional clothing called Pua Kumbu. Pua Kumbu are designed and weaved by the ladies at the landing of the long houses, and it is during this time they taught the younger generation on the technique of weaving. These days, more and younger generations pursue their studies away in the city or seeking jobs in the city, relocating from the long houses and settling in a city life. This has indirectly influenced their knowledge towards the making of Pua Kumbu's and the meaning of its motif.

According to Richards [7], Pua Kumbu is defined as a blanket made by *ikat* (tie) or *kebat* (dye) processes that was used as a ritual textile. The pattern on Pua Kumbu was created through warp *ikat* which involves resist dyeing the warp threads prior to weaving. *Ikat* or *kebat* was known as the principal

technique employed by the Iban to create the pattern on Pua Kumbu. Its vital role in ritual is undeniable. Rituals performed by the Iban have two main objectives that call for the use of this cloth [8]; to show thanks to God (*petara*) and to cast bad luck or to propitiate malevolent spirits (*antu*). *Piring* ceremony is the most common rituals that used the Pua Kumbu. In Malay language *piring* means 'plate'. If under a circumstance that the cloth was not used, it was believed that it will triggered the fury of the God and it will bring punishment to the offender (*mati busong*). It is believes that Pua Kumbu has its power called *guna* and *bisa* which originated from Sanskrit word. *Guna* means 'quality' and *bisa* is 'magic', or more accurately 'effective' or 'powerful' [9]. Keeping this tradition and having the knowledge of Pua Kumbu is essential amongst the Iban as it is seen to have strong influence in keeping a healthy social harmony, strengthen ethnic identity and preserved as one of Sarawak unique culture heritage. However, no study was ever conducted to look into on how far this knowledge is being preserved and understood among the younger generation.

This study was conducted with an aim to investigate the level of knowledge towards the inner meaning to Pua Kumbu's motif among the Iban younger generation. The objectives include, to assess the perception of younger Iban generation on Pua Kumbu and to determine and described the factors that contributed to the diminishing beliefs of Pua Kumbu's and its traditional practice. The findings from this survey and collection of accounts were then described.

#### A note on method

The period of this was from 2014 until 2015. It was carried out in Kapit District (1.9951° N, 112.9331° E), prominently populated by the Iban. Several methods were carried out to described and determine the perspective of young generation on their beliefs. The first method used was by conducting a survey via interview in related to the uses of the Pua Kumbu in the Iban's daily activities. The period of fieldwork comprised three phases. An initial brief orientation in March/April 2014, was followed by research study from Jun, 2014 through January, 2015. The emphasis during this period was on the life of rural Iban communities where residents were actively engaging in the creation and ritual use of *ikat* textiles. A third period March 2015, through Jun, 2015 was included to cross-check and elaborates on findings revealed through analysis of the data. Main method of data collection was through observation and participation in technical textile work and ritual ceremonial life as these events occurred in the courses of daily life. We visited four long houses and interviewed three weavers. The motifs shown to us were further illustrated into drawings (as shown in figure 1-3).

#### Background: Animism belief among Dayak community in Sarawak

Looking from the view of their belief, they are still holding on to their traditional animism belief which was inherited from an elder generation to another generation [10]. Before the arrival of Christianity, the Iban do not have any religions as they are seen practicing in their pagan belief and they strongly belief their lifestyle are closely related to the cosmology [11, 12]. As once summarizes by Appell [13], the Iban World incorporates both humans, gods and spirits in a relatively seamless fashion and different aspects of this world are perceived through changing levels of consciousness. Sather [14] described the lifestyle of Iban community as closely related to the life of the natural world in which nature is referring to the birds and 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 overlapping categories of *mensia* (human) and *antu* or *petara* (spirits). The interaction between the human and spirit occurred constantly in *burong* (augury), *piring* (sacrificial acts), and *mimpi* (dreams). Majority of the Iban had converted to Christianity over the past decades [11,12] but they still carry on their tradition in customs, ceremonies, oral traditions and functional rituals in the longhouse socio-cultural contexts [15, 16]. Although the wave of modernization [17, 13], had brought economic growth and rural development [17,18] the animism's belief is still strongly embedded in the Iban's lifestyle.

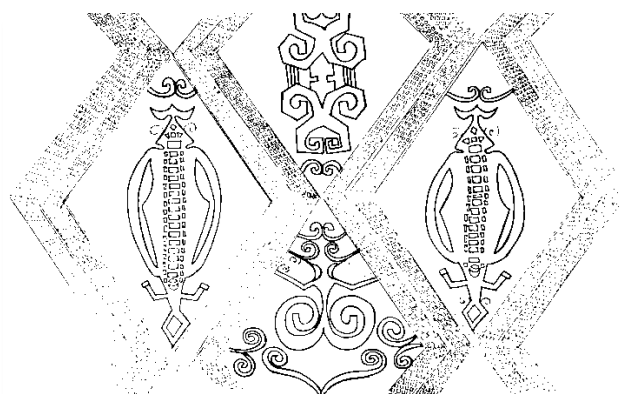
Viewing from the perspective of animism belief, the Iban's spiritual belief is strongly associated to the living things such as the birds, animals, insects and plants which are closely related to the spirit world. The movements of these living things in relation to their spirits are always being observed as a sign, a warning, an indication of inquiry and an invitation from the deities or spirits. Therefore, it is not surprised to see the form of these plants and animals embedded into the motif of the Pua Kumbu. The motifs itself brings many related meanings to the cosmology and become the basis of their spiritual belief. The motif had turn into a symbol in their animistic belief as stated by Korq [19] as "a symbol usually has no physicals at all to justify its abstract meaning". A few symbols in Pua Kumbu were acquired by the gifted weaver through their own imagination and as well as emotional and intellectual experience. Thus, the accounting of the psychology and sociology of human soul is one of the vital parts in acquiring the unique pattern and to maintain its authenticity. In the context of community, the symbol had become a sign, a characteristic, a symbol or a symbolic emblem comes with abstract meanings which convey a message to a scenario or an idea to a person.

#### Pua Kumbu motifs and their meaning

The Ibans believes that the crocodile motif (figure 1) is powerful as it protects the paddy

cultivation. They believe the crocodile are incarnation of their relatives or ancestors. As a result, Iban community is forbidden from hunting or killing any crocodiles. They believe that if they kill the crocodiles, then this will trigger an attack from the other crocodiles by killing and hunting their bloodline from generation to generation. The crocodile is said to have some sort of spirit which can understand and hear if somebody might say something or *puni*. *Puni* is one of animistic belief. It is a situation when someone who faces danger or losing their lives due to their failure to consume any food or drink that they wish to take. To avoid themselves from *puni*, the Ibans will make sure they touch on the food or

drink they wish to eat before they do any activities such as fishing, gardening, travelling, bathing and etc. Even just take a few grain of rice and just a sip of coffee and say “*udah aki ini*” (already done grandfather and grandmother) indicating that they has abide to their ancestor advise. 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 in the form of an animal and therefore thinks that the human are for catching and eating. It is for these reasons that the crocodile’s motif is considered a dangerous motif so not many weavers dare to weave it.

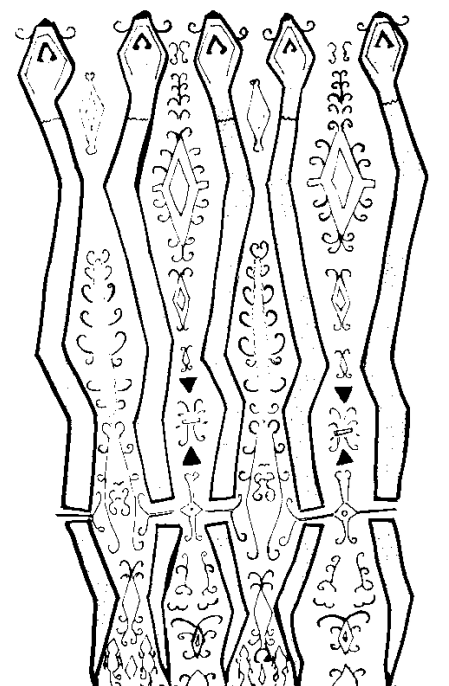


**Fig-1: Crocodile Motif (Motif Baya)**

The belief on the snake motif (figure 2) is just like the crocodile motif as it belongs to a fierce reptile. The snake motif is usually associated with the gigantic python which the Ibans called *nabau*. Sometimes these gigantic python is depicted as a very dangerous creature and can causes harm to human being. Apart from the gigantic python, other snakes such as small python or cobra are sometimes used to name the Iban textiles motifs. As both are dangerous reptiles, the rites to protect the weavers are the same with the crocodile motif where the food motifs are firstly weaved only then to be followed by the reptile’s motifs.

The *engkaramba* (doll) motif (figure 3) 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 entity which will attack their paddy field, other plantations and the residents in the longhouse. Usually, only the wife or daughter of the

longhouse headman is allow 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 was mentioned above, only those who has been blessed by the goddesses or deities are given the protective charms against the bad spirit, are allow to weave them. Although these motifs are considered dangerous but when respected it can gives good and helpful protection. Respect is shown through rites and actions, where it all depends on how human treat or handle them. These are one of the reasons why not any woman are allowed to weave such motif. They have 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.



**Fig-2: Snake Motif (Motif Ular)**



**Fig-3: Engkaramba Motif**

Traditionally, the Pua Kumbu is used in the ritual ceremonies related to God, Goddess or Deities. Today, the usage of Pua Kumbu textile has changed. It is now become more for decorative accessories, as a piece of art work displayed on the wall, table cloth, bag and other newly invented artwork solely for decorative usage. This is merely to promote tourism in Sarawak. Among the evolution of the Pua Kumbu textile is now used as modern apparel in fashion such as scarf, clothes, headband, and skirt, dress and head gear. If we were to

compare the function between traditional and the contemporary context, the function and the usage of Pua Kumbu textile has changed very much. Sadly, many do not know the meaning of these motif used in Pua Kumbu textile which portray the belief of the creator especially with the high motif. 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. To an extent, some still belief using this without permission from the gods and



conducting suitable rites, it will bring bad luck and illness. The forbidden rules are known as *mali*.

According to Iban belief, *Selampandai* refer to the ladies spirit incarnation from a frog. *Selampandai* is known as a spirit with a power of creating a baby. The *rimau* (tiger) and *tikus kasturi* (mouse) motifs are often created in an abstract manner. It is believe that people who wear this textile are crowned with the title of bravery and courage. The birds are believed as a good signal, promises and sign. The textile that weaved in reference to the bird are believed to have 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 brings success and good luck during the hunting. The insect's motif like spiders, fireflies, scorpions and centipedes are often used in Pua Kumbu weaving.

In the Iban society, the Pua Kumbu motif is divided into two categories which are 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 print-art 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 even if they are skillful Pua Kumbu weaver. She added, if a weaver would like to try to weave the high status motif which is not from her delusion from dream, no one else but only 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 that are hardly woven 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 *Kumang* motif.

Laterally *mulung merangau* means the very old sago palm which has bear 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 supernatural power and can help the weavers to create very beautiful and complex motifs. It was seen that the

Pua Kumbu plays a significant role and function in the traditional society. It was used in various ceremonies and ritual such as wedding ceremony, festivals, child bathing ceremonies, funeral rituals, agricultural rituals and etc.

During the ritual of Gawai Batu, the Pua Kumbu is used to wrap a stone known as *Batu Basah*. During the funeral ritual, Pua Kumbu was used as *sapat* to protect the dead body. Beside, Pua Kumbu was also used as a *pandong*, which is a place to put the offerings during the paddy planting ceremony. During the wedding ceremony, the Pua Kumbu was used to decorate the space known as *endur bersanding*, where the bride and bridegroom seated. The couple will be seated on top of the gong (*tawak*) under the Pua Kumbu canopy and ready to receive the blessings from the elderly.

The motif which comes with power is the one that carries the name of dangerous creature like the crocodile (*baya*) motif as mentioned above. As the crocodile and snake (*ular*) motif are believed to be dangerous, 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 motif is fed by food motif, it will not disturb the weaver. The food motif is the motifs of small creatures such as house lizard or even fruits such as motif *kembayau* which are food for the hornbill (*burung kenyalang*) 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 keep both of them occupied and busy so that they will not bother or disturb other people such as the weaver. If these taboos are not observed, it was believed that the weaver herself will be eaten. She will then become weak in spirit (*alah ayu*), sooner or later she will fall sick and die.

#### **The perceptions of the younger Iban generation towards the inner meaning in Pua Kumbu's motif**

Majority of the Iban embraced Christianity when Sarawak was colonized by the British. From our survey, it was found that, although seldom practice, the belief and honoring the Pua Kumbu in occasion such as during the rice harvesting festival Gawai and during funeral is still in practiced among the Ibans today. Rituals using the Pua Kumbu are still a custom in places like Lubuk Antu, Saribas and Betong. The Iban community in these three locations practices specific ceremonies that they called as *begawai*, when someone has a bad dream about the Pua Kumbu.

This study found that the younger generations recognized the Pua Kumbu as a unique cultural heritage of their ethnic group. However, the meaning of the

motifs and the procedure in the rituals are not well understood. Most of the younger generation has the replica of Pua Kumbu in their homes as decorations which were bought from the gift shops. Having this decoration also symbolized their ethnicity but many other races also use the Pua Kumbu as decorations. The main factor that contributes to the declining knowledge of the uses of Pua Kumbu and the meaning of the motifs are due to generation gaps. The younger cohort was not told by their parents as their parents themselves has moved away from their long houses, leaving the older generation and the knowledge died along with the older generation as no documentation was done. This indicates the importance of documentation for all the traditional knowledge for each ethnic in Sarawak in order to archive these knowledges. Although they have strong faith in religion, they recognized that the role of Pua Kumbu in the Iban community is important. Perhaps, a future study is required to elucidate the perception of the younger generation of the motifs when they are aware of its meaning with hope that they will keep the culture forward. The Pua Kumbu sold as souvenir are not weaving according to tradition and in fact are factory produced. Some, motif are stamps on a piece of blank cloth. Therefore, the technique how it was traditionally weaved should also be documented and preserved. Apart from religion, the reason why the younger generation did not understand and belief in the meaning of the motifs is due to lack of documentation. Therefore, records from this study aim at providing such information.

## CONCLUSION

Over the years, the Ibans culture has changed and their ritual textile such as Pua Kumbu has changed its function from ritual's materials into decorative traditional art and also for souvenir. Most of the younger generation lacks the knowledge on the symbols that the motifs represent and their meaning. A few stated that they are interested to learn in weaving of the textiles. The influence of animistic belief still exists and this contributes to the problem of extinction of the complex motifs which carry the names of dangerous creatures. Documentation is vital in preserving the identity of the Pua Kumbu and its importance in the Iban communities. Through documentation, this knowledge can be passing from one generation to another hence closing the knowledge gaps. It is also a way to entice the interest of the younger generation and to give a better understanding of traditions and religion. It is through the sharing of traditional knowledge within the community that can ensure harmony and their ethnic identity be preserved. With normal globalization, this knowledge is also seen as the gateway to make the Iban internationally known. As for the Pua Kumbu itself, knowing the historical background, the traditional uses, the meaning of the motif and the ritual that comes with it, is vital so that it will earn the respect as an ethnic heritage and not to be taken lightly.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the collaborators in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UMS) and the Tun Jugah Foundation.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## REFERENCES

1. King VT, Parnwell MJ. Environmental change, local responses, and the notion of 'development' in Sarawak. *Rural Development and Social Science Research: Case Studies from Borneo*. Borneo Research Council Proceedings Series. 1999;6:159-91.
2. Freeman D. Iban agriculture: a report on the shifting cultivation of hill rice by the Iban of Sarawak. HM Stationery Office; 1955.
3. Ngadi HG. Iban rites of passage and some related ritual acts: a description of forms and functions. Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka; 1998.
4. Freeman D. Iban agriculture: a report on the shifting cultivation of hill rice by the Iban of Sarawak. HM Stationery Office; 1955.
5. Padoch C. Migration and its alternatives among the Iban of Sarawak. NY, 1978. Facs. microfilm-xerography: Ann Arbor, Mich., University Microfilms International; 1978.
6. Kedit PM. *Iban Berjalai*. Kuala Lumpur: Ampang Press. 1993.
7. Richards WF, Lo Y, Harrison D. An improved theory for microstrip antennas and applications. *IEEE Transactions on antennas and propagation*. 1981 Jan;29(1):38-46.
8. Masing M, Baranauskas K, Mickevičius E. New data on bats of eastern Lithuania from summer 1995. *Myotis*. 1997;35:95-101.
9. Chang TM, Coffey JF, Barré P, Gonda A, Dirks JH, Levy M, Lister C. Microcapsule artificial kidney: treatment of patients with acute drug intoxication. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. 1973 Feb 17;108(4):429.
10. Umbat J. *Adat Resam Masyarakat Iban*. Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional, Jabatan Perdana Menteri. 1998.
11. Varney P. The modernization of Iban Eschatology: Iban Burial Ritual and Afterlife Belief in Contemporary Kuching. *Borneo Research Bulletin*. 2012; 43, 143-161.
12. Varney P. *Iban Anglicans: The Anglican Mission in Sarawak 1848-1968*. Singapore: Trinity Theological College. Robert McCorquodale, and Richard Fairbrother, "Globalization and Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly*. 2013; 21 (1999): 735-736.
13. Appell GN. Iban Studies: their contribution to social theory and the ethnography of other Borneo societies. *The encyclopedia of Iban Studies: Iban history, society and culture*. 2001:741-85.

14. Sandin B, Sather CA. Sources of Iban traditional history. Sarawak Museum; 1994.
15. Kedit PM. Modernization among the Iban of Sarawak. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia; 1980.
16. Pringle R. Rajahs and rebels: the Ibans of Sarawak under Brooke rule, 1841-1941. Universiti Malaysia Sarawak; 1970.
17. King VT, Wilder WD. The modern anthropology of South-East Asia: an introduction. Psychology Press; 2003.
18. Mertz O, Christensen H. Land use and crop diversity in two Iban communities, Sarawak, Malaysia. *Geografisk Tidsskrift-Danish Journal of Geography*. 1997 Jan 1;97(1):98-110.
19. Kato M. Report on psychotherapy in Japan. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*. 1959 Jun;5(1):56-60.